

“THINKING IS A REVOLUTIONARY ACT”: ARTIST’S PUBLICATIONS BY MARIE ORENSANZ

ABSTRACT — After beginning her career as a painter in the 1960s, Argentine artist Marie Orensanz published various artist’s publications in the 1970s and 1980s, in parallel to her sculptural and painterly work, which remain relatively unknown. This essay examines a selection of these artworks that formally consist of printed matter. Against the backdrop of oppression and political violence by a dictatorial government in Argentina in the 1960s and 1970s, there was a strong need in Argentine art to address communication and its systems as one of the fields of art. Orensanz shared this desire, and her publications, which range from manifestos to posters and brochures to books, sometimes appearing in editions and sometimes as original works, draw on this impulse, enriched by diverse influences from her long stays in various European cities.

“In 1977 I put on an exhibition with flowers,
all of them poisonous;
only a few people noticed.”
Marie Orensanz¹⁾

— Marie²⁾ Orensanz was born in Mar del Plata in 1936, the third of four children of a Spaniard and an Argentine of Italian and British descent.³⁾ Her father was in the real estate business but took an interest in art history and culture. In the early 1950s, the whole family spent nine months on a cultural tour through several European countries. It was the exposure to the history of Western art in their many visits to museums during that trip that triggered in Orensanz, who was seventeen years old at the time and planning to pursue a career in law, the desire to devote herself to art instead. For as she discovered then, art had the potential to become a transformative element in the world. Back in Argentina, the Orensanz family moved to Buenos Aires, where she began to learn painting in the studio of the painter Emilio Pettoruti. She studied with Pettoruti for five years, after which she felt very confident of her technical mastery, but at the same time thought that she had not yet found her own artistic language. For this reason, she moved on to join the studio of painter and sculptor Antonio Seguí, who had just returned to Argentina after a long stay in Mexico. According to Orensanz, it was in Seguí’s studio where she learned that freedom was “an indispensable condition for action” in art. (Buccellato 2007: 20)

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Marie Orensanz, ca. 2002, handwritten notes reproduced in *Marie Orensanz. El fluir del pensamiento*. Buenos Aires: EDUNREF Centro de Arte Contemporáneo, 2023, 55. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are by the author. This essay is a lightly revised version of a text previously published in Spanish in *Umática: revista sobre creación y análisis de la imagen*, no. 8, devoted to “The Arts at the Intersection: Hybridizations and Intermedia Approaches in Contemporary Art”, 2025. Online: <https://dialnet.unirioja.es/revista/26457/A/2025>, last accessed May 19, 2026.

2)
Originally, “Mari,” diminutive of “María” in Spanish. Orensanz added a final “e” to her first name when in 1972, shortly after settling in Milan, when the buyer of one of the paintings with which she was participating in a gallery exhibition decided to return it when he realized that the author was not a man but a woman.

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I am extremely grateful to Marie Orensanz for sharing with me in conversation these and many other biographical details, as well as numerous aspects of her work. Unless otherwise stated, the information contained in this essay draws on her generous comments during our personal encounters in 2024 and 2025.

— Orensanz's artistic training continued with a stay in Paris in 1964, during which one of her works—an expressionist painting titled *¿Dónde estoy?* (Where do I stand?), showing a woman prostrate on the ground being trampled on by a male figure—was awarded the first prize at the Union of Women Painters and Sculptors competition in the foreign artists category. Shortly after receiving the prize, Orensanz returned to Argentina with her partner, the French salesman Patrick Audras, with whom she went on to have three daughters. Long-distance moves with her family were far from over with this change of setting: moving between different cities and countries on either side of the Atlantic has remained a constant throughout her life, helping her to forge a nomadic condition that, in her own words, continues to be one of her most characteristic personal traits.

— In parallel to her family project, Marie Orensanz began to exhibit her paintings in Buenos Aires in the first half of the 1960s, while making progress in her search for her own visual language. At the end of the decade, this search led her to gradually abandon figuration and focus on abstraction, in an evolution that sought to simplify images until they were reduced to the mere expression of ideas. The series *Primary Structures*, which Orensanz produced and exhibited at the Buenos Aires gallery El Taller in 1968, was the result of this shift: her own personal variant of geometric abstraction, which unfolded in drawings, paintings, and her first three-dimensional works. During those years, the Argentine art scene was undergoing a deep change in conjunction with the expansion of the conceptual regime that had begun to transform artistic practices from the 1960s onwards, bringing about an enormous interest in the artistic exploration of language, its potential, and its limits, not only on the visual level but also in terms of its semantic and expressive possibilities. American artist Adrian Piper recently recalled how in the 1960s many artists felt “drunk with the unlimited possibilities of language and other conventional symbol systems” (Osborne and Piper 2025: 12). This “drunkenness,” indeed, was not exclusive to a particular country or geographical area, but rather cut across the different conceptual drifts that occurred in the same period of time and in different places, with specific nuances in Europe, North America, and Latin America.

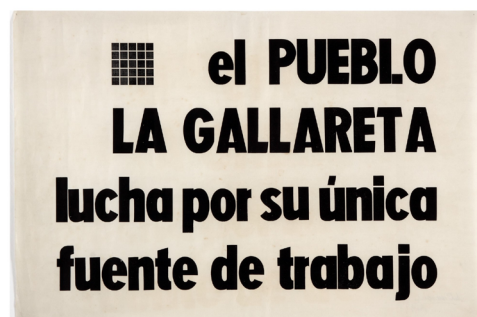
— In Latin America, the Brazilian precedent of Concrete poetry in the 1950s had placed language at the center of a research model that would prove particularly fertile and unfold in very diverse ways over the next two decades, at least. Language and, by extension, any system of symbols or communication, offered multiple creative pos-

sibilities that numerous Latin American artists did not hesitate to exploit, in exercises that often combined poetic and political intentions. The asemic writings of Argentine artists Mirtha Dermisache and Leon Ferrari, or the digressions on the fringes of visual poetry by Brazilian artists Regina Vater and Lenora de Barros, are just some of the many examples that illustrate this trend. The desire to address communication and its systems as a territory of art is explicitly reflected in the full name of one of the initiatives that, from the city of Buenos Aires, had the greatest impact on the dissemination and consolidation of conceptual practices in the Latin American region, namely, Centro de Arte y Comunicación – CAyC (Center for Art and Communication).⁴⁾ It is no coincidence, therefore, that one of the first exhibitions organized by CAyC, which was presented in Buenos Aires at the Museo de Arte Moderno in 1971, was entitled precisely *Arte de sistemas* (System Art).

— Among the artists who exhibited in *Arte de sistemas*—and at the various venues of this show that followed—was Marie Orensanz, whose practice, by then, had moved far away from her first painterly stage. In the gradual change that she had undergone as an artist, it was not only the evolution of the intellectual context in which she found herself that had an impact; so too did the violent political repression and conservative turn that Argentina was going through under the dictatorial government of Juan Carlos Onganía, who was in power between 1966 and 1969. A particular incident, which took place in 1969, illustrates the artist's clash with political censorship. Marie Orensanz and fellow artist Mercedes Esteves had been invited to exhibit at the Primera Plana gallery in Mar del Plata. Shortly before the installation of the exhibition, Orensanz witnessed a neighborhood protest during a trip: the small town of La Gallareta in the province of Santa Fe, in northern Argentina, had risen up against plans to reroute the railroad that ran through the town and guaranteed the subsistence of its inhabitants. So Orensanz decided that her project for the gallery would consist of covering the walls of the exhibition room with fifty copies of a protest poster, which she composed with a single typographic message that took up the demand of La Gallareta's residents: "El pueblo de La Gallareta lucha por su única fuente de trabajo" (The people of La Gallareta are fighting for their only source of work). [Fig. 1] The installation was completed with a few bags of sand and cement that Mercedes Esteves placed in the center of the space, symbolically alluding to the urban transformation that the city of Mar del Plata was undergoing, with old single-family homes

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Centro de Arte y Comunicación, founded in 1969 in Buenos Aires by the author, artist, and professor Jorge Glusberg, was an extremely active organization whose impact would radiate far beyond the borders of Argentina. CAyC supported and disseminated Latin American Conceptualism, promoted the use of new technologies in art, and encouraged debate on the identity of contemporary Latin American art.



// Figure 1

Marie Orensanz, *El pueblo La Gallareta*. . . , 1969

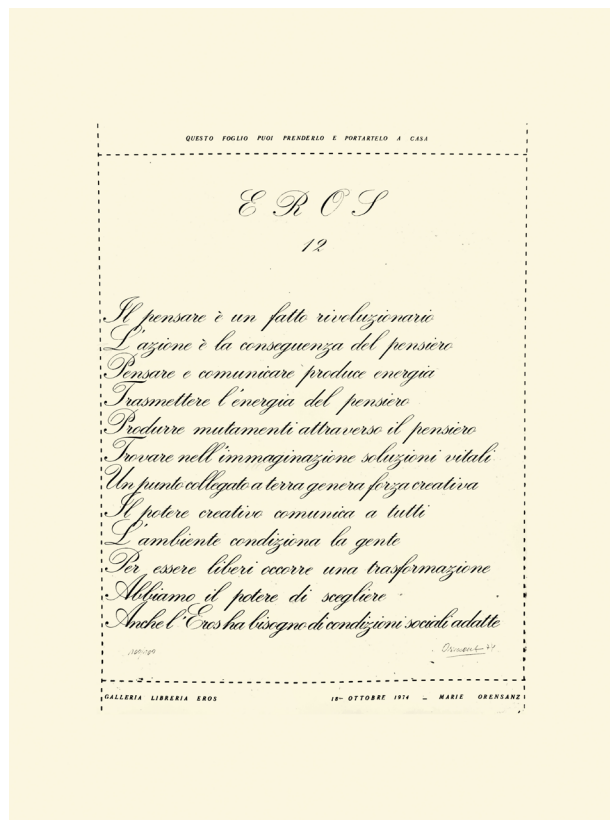
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being demolished to make room for new apartment buildings. The exhibition opened as planned, but was suddenly closed the following day. As Orensanz recalls, it was obvious that the gallery management was dissatisfied with the fact that her installation showed explicit support to a popular protest, but they justified the closure with an excuse that bore obscure patriarchal overtones, stating that, since the artists were two women, the expectation had been that they would both exhibit flowers rather than pieces with a political content.

Marie Orensanz herself acknowledges how important that personal collision with censorship and patriarchal structures was for her. The abrupt closure of the exhibition allowed her to assess the direct connection between art and life (politics, in this specific case), while consolidating her interest in language as a creative element and, by extension, in print media as a support for art. The seed that the incident left in her creative consciousness would germinate in different ways from then on, as can be appreciated in her decision to add verbal language to her plastic work, almost always in expressions of a poetic but also somewhat vindictive nature; in her persevering feminist militancy; and in her adoption of forms of writing, such as the manifesto, and printed formats, such as posters, brochures, and books.

Thanks to the awarding of the Francisco Romero Lahoja grant in 1972, the entire Orensanz family moved first to Rome and then to Milan. In Italy, Orensanz's artistic stance would continue to evolve, in a process in which the relationship between *thinking* and *doing* became increasingly close and inseparable for her, while the writing of aphorisms and, in general, the desire to appropriate signs and symbols from other types of languages—including scientific ones—so as to incorporate them into her plastic work, consolidated.

In 1974, in response to an invitation from the Italian art historian Lea Vergine to participate in a group exhibition entitled *Eros come linguaggio* (Eros as language) at the Eros bookshop and gallery in Milan, Orensanz contributed an artwork created especially for this occasion: the *Eros* manifesto. [Fig. 2] This was a poster measuring approximately 60 × 50 cm on which the artist printed, in a delicate italic typeface, a manifesto consisting of twelve postulates



// Figure 2
Marie Orensanz, *Eros* manifesto, 1974

in the form of short sentences, for example, “Transmitir la energía del pensamiento” (Transmitting the energy of thought), “La acción es la consecuencia del pensamiento” (Action is the consequence of thought), or “Incluso Eros necesita las condiciones sociales adecuadas” (Even Eros also needs the right social conditions).

— In its first presentation in Milan, the *Eros* manifesto was printed in an edition of one hundred copies which were hung on the gallery walls. By inviting the public to tear the posters off the wall and take them along, not only were the aphorisms written by the artist put into circulation, but the classic rules of behavior in a gallery were also challenged. **[Fig. 3]** Since then, Orensanz has reprinted this manifesto on numerous occasions in order to present it in other exhibition contexts.⁵⁾ The constant reactivation of this piece in the form of a multiplied work and in an unlimited number of copies underlines the relevance that the potential of the manifesto as an element of communication—similar to a pamphlet or a flyer—has for Orensanz, a potential that is rekindled with each reissue.

— This is not, however, the only way in which the *Eros* manifesto has continued to “live,” so to speak, in Orensanz’s work: some components and features of this piece were to become constant elements in the artist’s work over the next two decades. The same cursive typography in which the manifesto is composed would reappear time and again in her drawings, sculptures, and publications; likewise, some of the postulates of the *Eros* manifesto would be taken up again on numerous occasions so as to form part of other pieces, in particular in the sculptures conceived by Orensanz for public spaces.⁶⁾ The first of these postulates, specifically, has periodically emerged in various works, becoming something of a motto that reflects and defines Orensanz’s vital and creative attitude: “Pensar es un acto revolucionario” (Thinking is a revolutionary act).

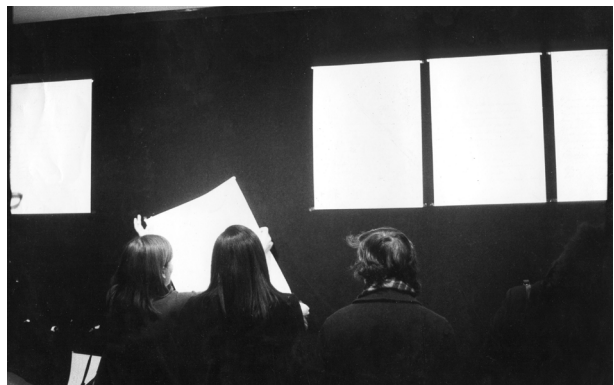
— The reuse of elements that are articulated over and over again, in different combinations and on different media, is closely related to the artist’s thinking. On the one hand, as already mentioned, she is deeply interested in verbal language understood as a system of symbols, a system to which Orensanz would gradually add other symbols taken from mathematics or the natural sciences. All of these systems are composed of pieces—the fragments into which each of these codes are broken down—that can be combined with each other in infinite ways, opening up new nuances of meaning in each new configuration. On the other hand, and as an extension

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For example, at the Museo de Arte Moderno in Buenos Aires, in September 2007; at the Caraffa Museum in Córdoba, Argentina, in May 2008; at the Maison de l’Amérique Latine in Paris, in May 2010; at the Sicardi Gallery in Houston, in April 2015.

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Such as, for instance, *Pensar es un hecho revolucionario*, conceived in 1999 and installed in 2010 in Parque de la Memoria, Buenos Aires.



// Figure 3

Marie Orensanz and Lea Vergine (from behind) taking down one of the *Eros* posters at the gallery and bookstore Eros, Milan, during the opening of the exhibition *Eros comme linguaggio*, 1974.

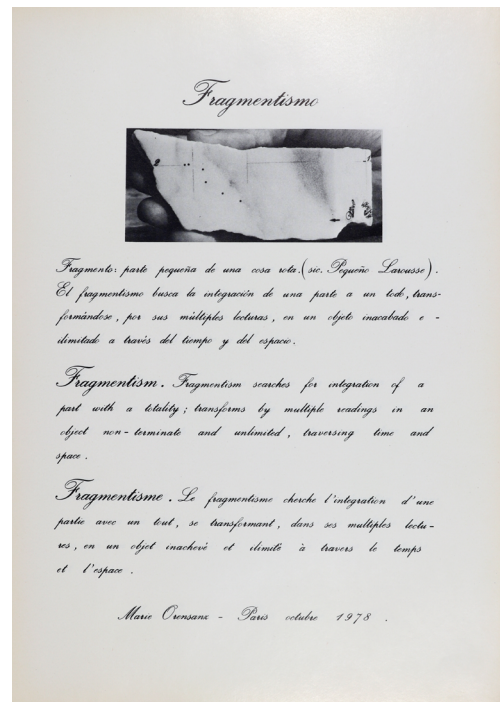
of her conceptualization of the world as a set of systems, Orensanz considers that any element whatsoever can be taken as a part, or fragment, of a greater whole. This conviction led, in 1978, to the publication of a new, very brief manifesto, descriptively entitled *Fragmentismo* [Fig. 4]:

El fragmentismo busca la integración de una parte a un todo; transformándose, por sus múltiples lecturas, en un objeto inacabado e ilimitado a través del tiempo y del espacio.

Fragmentism searches for integration of a part with a totality; [it] transforms by multiple readings in a non-terminate and unlimited object, traversing time and space.

Conceptually, this work condenses ideas that are at the basis of Orensanz's work, such as the integration of the parts into a whole, a system, the processes of transformation implicit—and necessary—in art, and the multiplicity of readings to which artistic objects are open. Formally, *Fragmentismo* is similar to *Eros*: a sheet printed on one side only, designed to be reproduced in an unlimited number of copies, with the text set in cursive typeface as well, the only difference being that, on this occasion, the text appears in Spanish, English, and French, the three languages in which the artist's daily life takes place.

Contrary to *Eros*, however, the *Fragmentismo* manifesto is illustrated: above the text, a photograph shows a piece of white marble held by the fingers of a hand, on whose surface a series of lines and arrows have been drawn, suggesting a plan or diagram of sorts. Shortly before the publication of this manifesto, Orensanz had had the opportunity to visit the marble quarries of Carrara, which aroused her interest in discarded pieces of marble, which, from then on, would become a recurring motif in her drawings, paintings, sculptures, and publications. The artist later declared: "My idea was to respect the material in its current state and transform it by using only thought. I did not sculpt it or treat it, I only drew and painted on those fragments of marble. [. . .] They are like found pages of a book" (Meisel 2022: 47). The pieces of marble that she found in the Carrara quarries offered the artist the potential to bring countless contrasts into play in her work: between intentional formal configuration and the unpredictability of readymades, between the hardness of marble and the softness of paper, between sculptural



// Figure 4

Marie Orensanz, *Fragmentismo* manifesto, 1978

monumentality and the modesty of residues, between the durability of stone and the ephemeral fragility of images printed on paper. And also, of course, between the three-dimensionality of marble and the two-dimensionality of printed media.

— A poignant feature of Orensanz's work is the constant flow of ideas and motifs between one work and another, one format and another, giving rise to atypical series that often share a title and a conceptual genesis, but consist of quite different materializations. Different *Fragmentismo* works attest to this: the postcard *Fragmentismo* [Fig. 5], published in 1981 by Orensanz, is illustrated with a black-and-white photograph of a piece of marble on which the artist has written several enigmatic textual messages, such as “acumulador” (accumulator), “la fuerza de la naturaleza prepara” (the form of nature prepares), together with a series of variously thick and differently positioned lines. The book *Fragmentismo*, in turn, published shortly afterwards in 1982 by Galerie des femmes in Paris, shows no references to marble: here, combinations of aphorisms and mixtures of words and symbols of all kinds are displayed on the pages.

— The syntagm “Fragments de pages trouvées” can be read, printed on a piece of marble in Orensanz's unmistakable cursive Letraset, in the image that appears on the cover of *Libro de mármol* (Marble Book) [Fig. 6] made by Orensanz in 1981. This book, of which the artist produced twenty copies by hand, consists of five sheets of stiff black cardboard, bound with a simple cord tied on the back cover. On the first four sheets, Orensanz glued black-and-white photographs of as many “sheets” made of fragments of marble polished on both sides, also bound to each other with a cord. In a way, therefore, the *Libro de mármol* reproduces itself, multiplying by twenty an original book made of stone, on the surface of whose pages are inscribed a number of words, lines, and certain signs—some real, others imaginary—whose meaning can only be speculated upon.

— Referring to her systems of symbols, the artist stated that “there are many, sometimes taken from the symbology used in Physics or Mathematics. I use them as artistic elements: they are graphic representations of thought” (Meisel 2022: 50). Orensanz has maintained the suggestive presence of these invented alphabets, often combined with legible language, in all the formats in which she has worked, including her sculptures for public spaces.⁷⁾ In the booklet *Transmitir la energía del pensamiento. Una conversación*

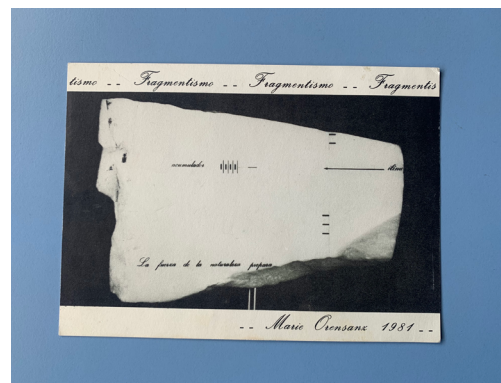
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Such as, for instance, *Untitled*, installed on the outside wall of l'Archevêché en la cour Saint-Jean, Besançon, in 1990.



// Figure 5

Marie Orensanz, *Libro de mármol*, 1981



// Figure 6

Marie Orensanz, *Fragmentismo*, 1981

entre Lea Vergine, Marie Orensanz y Gilo Dorfles, designed and illustrated by the artist, the Italian historian Dorfles noted that these signs “can enter into a discourse of ‘polysemic efficacy.’ [. . .] Their efficacy comes precisely from their polysemic charge and their semantic ambiguity” (Orensanz 1975). These enigmatic compositions build up a space which is always open to the interpretation of the viewer, a feature which is, according to the artist’s perspective, an inalienable part of her work: “I do not believe that art is, nor should it be, the vision of one person, the expression of one person. It should, instead, offer points of reference so that everyone can develop their own ideas” (quoted in Meisel 2022: 68).

— In 1990, the Belgian editor Guy Schraenen invited Orensanz to take part in his series *In Octavo*, consisting of ten publications conceived by different artists including, among others, Gianni Bertini, Henri Chopin, Peter Downsborough, Jiří Kolář, and Bernard Villers. Orensanz—the only woman on the initial list⁸⁾—accepted the invitation and conceived a booklet entitled *Communiquer. . .* [Fig. 7], in which, provocatively, textual information is completely absent, except for the title on the cover and the edition details on the inside of the back cover. The spreads of this book are illustrated only on the right-hand page, with different compositions of straight and curved lines, arrows and dots, with one peculiarity: each sheet is crossed by two horizontal sections at different heights, in such a way that the resulting fragments—and the illustrations printed on them—can be combined in countless arrangements that multiply the visual configuration and possible readings of the pages.

— Grasping the scope of these readings, or rather—which would be the same thing—elucidating the multiple levels of meaning contained in Orensanz’s published artworks, requires a certain effort and, at the same time, an attitude of curiosity and openness that does not conform to remaining on their—often delicate—aesthetic surface. An example illustrates what such an exercise in interpretation may unearth: Sometime after the cancellation of her exhibition on the La Gallareta neighborhood protest, in a kind of belated response to the offensive excuse with which the closure of the exhibition had been justified at the time, Orensanz produced a series of

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Later, Schraenen decided to expand the series beyond the ten books originally planned and invited German artist Nanne Meyer, among others, to participate.



// Figure 7

Marie Orensanz, *Communiquer. . .*, 1990

drawings solely depicting beautiful, delicate flowers, accompanied by their Latin names written in the same cursive typeface that the artist has consistently used throughout her career. The peculiarity of this series, entitled *Poisonous Flowers* (1977), lay in the fact that all the botanical species represented in the drawings are poisonous, a detail that only few observers realized, since it was not made explicit in the information given whenever they were shown. Similarly, most of Orensanz's publications can be searched for underlying messages or intentional, biting meanings which are not always obvious, not always univocal, and not always the same. But they are always there, even if, sometimes, they cannot be appreciated at first glance.

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Figures 1–2: Courtesy of the artist.
Figures 3–4: Courtesy of the artist. Photographer unknown.
Figures 5–7: Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Mela Dávila Freire.

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Mela Dávila Freire is an author, curator, editor and translator. Her research focuses primarily on art archives and archives in the field of contemporary art, as well as the genre of artist's publications. She is particularly interested in the feminist reappraisal of the history of artist's publications, the theoretical and practical intersections between archives and art collections, and the ideological biases inherent in archival structures. Her most recent publications include the books *Mission and Commission. Documenta and the Art Market, 1955–1968* (Barcelona: Polígrafa, 2022) and *Off-Register: Publishing Experiments by Women Artists in Latin America, 1960–1990* (New York: Center for Book Arts, 2023).

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