



Eduardo Costa and John Perreault: *Tape Poems*, 1969, audio tape, printed box, and introductory text, 5½ by 11 inches. Courtesy Cosmocosa, Buenos Aires.

# Costa's Conceptualism

by Bartholomew Ryan

PATRICK GREANEY, ed.

## Conceptualism and Other Fictions: The Collected Writings of Eduardo Costa, 1965–2015

Los Angeles, Les Figues Press, 2016; 150 pages, no illustrations; \$17 paperback.

This selection of Eduardo Costa's writings (some available in English for the first time) includes essays, stories, interviews, reviews, radio pieces, proposals for works, memorials for dead friends, letters, and manifestos. Produced between 1965 and 2015, the one hundred and thirty-three texts are arranged chronologically in a volume of just one hundred and fifty pages, a paradoxically generous-feeling arrangement that invites readers to move quickly from each short piece to the next, following one strand of the author's thinking after another. Cumulatively, the book presents a complex portrait of Costa as artist and critic, as well as an alternative genealogy of his times—one that draws directly on his relationships, travels, and artistic experiments.

Costa has lived in Buenos Aires, New York, and Rio de Janeiro and been friends with such figures as Cuba's Ana Mendieta, Brazil's Hélio Oiticica, and the US's Scott Burton. The book engages a fascinating range of movements

and moments, with Costa always positioned as an astute participant-observer whose keen insights and deftly timed art projects function as both history and historicization.

Born in Argentina in 1940, Costa studied literature at the University of Buenos Aires, where he counted among his professors Jorge Luis Borges. Influenced by Lacanian cultural theorist Oscar Masotta, the artist was also steeped in the structuralism of Roland Barthes and the media critiques of Marshall McLuhan. Most of his early projects were created at the Instituto Torcuato di Tella, home to some of the country's most progressive tendencies in 1960s art. Throughout the volume, Costa manifests a desire to reveal the systems that undergird cultural production.

One vital early project was his authorship, along with artists Roberto Jacoby and Raúl Escari, of "A Mass Media Art (Manifesto)" in 1966. Modern information consumers, they argued, are less interested in the actuality of an event than in its mediated representation. In contrast to Pop, which pulled aspects of the mass media into contemporary art, the work proposed in the manifesto would be constituted "inside the media itself." The collaborators announced that they would create various accounts of a Happening that never really took place and distribute the false evidence to reporters, thereby prompting "the thematization of the media as media."

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## Costa once stated that he did not see his work as “‘conceptual’ in the stupid sense of the frequently boring things done with words.”

This manifesto is now perceived as a canonical early text in media art and critique, appearing with increasing regularity in anthologies. In Costa's collected writings, it is supported by other texts that foreshadow and flow from it. For example, the very next piece recounts the “documentation” of the fictional event, along with its coverage in various publications in Argentina. In order to fool reporters previously “moderately informed” about their work, the artists came up with a suitable theory for the event, a “myth” that Happenings (already an established art form in the US and Europe) were primarily participatory events.

The sophistication of this project is perhaps due in part to the artists' position outside acknowledged contemporary art centers like New York and Paris. Rather than simply accept a status as *always already derivative* of developments elsewhere, Costa and others turned their displacement into an advantage in the creation of new artistic forms. It is, after all, no coincidence that the artists chose as their subject one of the most hyped of all US artistic trends. Costa's persistence in this strategy led the book's editor, Patrick Greaney, a professor of German studies and humanities at the University of Colorado Boulder, to title his introduction “Eduardo Costa: Creator of Genres” (a term first applied to Costa by art historian María José Herrera). Indeed, the book abounds in aesthetic innovations, including such projects as “Oral Literature” (1966) and “Tape Poems” (1969, with artist and critic John Perreault), recorded readings and storytellings; “Useful Art” (1969, with Scott Burton), which involved replacing lost New York street signs and painting a subway station; “Talking Paintings” (1994, with artist Marta Chilindron), flat, wall-mounted voice pieces that directly address the viewer; and “Volumetric Paintings” (1994), three-dimensional objects made entirely of paint.

For “Fashion Fictions,” begun in 1965, Costa creates one-off pieces of gold jewelry that are not meant for production and sale, but function solely as fashion-industry interventions. Shaped like small body parts or strands of hair, they are intended to demonstrate the fictional nature of all fashion advertising as a projection of “a world where only beauty and sophistication count.” The works have made their way into various publications, most notably the March 1968 issue of *Vogue* magazine, which featured a Richard Avedon photograph of model Marisa Berenson with Costa's 24-karat artificial ear covering her real ear. Costa observed that Conceptual art did not really entail a dematerialization of the artwork but rather “a displacement of materiality.” The *Vogue* issue is after all eminently material, an artwork in an edition of some 1.8 million, the magazine's circulation at the time.

COSTA ONCE STATED that he did not see his work as “‘conceptual’ in the stupid sense of the frequently boring things done with words.” Yet the work that probably marks his most brilliant artistic contribution is itself in verbal form: “A piece that is essentially the same as a piece made by any of the first conceptual artists dated two years earlier than the original, and

signed by somebody else.” The work was Costa's contribution to artist Athena Tacha's 1970 “Art in the Mind” project for the Allen Memorial Art Museum at Oberlin College in Ohio—a notebook compilation of proposals by sixty-five conceptually minded artists. Costa's piece behaves as a work of conceptual art, while also making clear that Conceptualism is just another system with its own codes and fictions. Against the powerful historicization of first-generation Conceptualists (North Americans Sol LeWitt, Joseph Kosuth, Lawrence Weiner, et al.) Costa posits a work that, by definition, always comes before the works that art historians (in their hunger for chronology) deem first. As Greaney puts it, the piece is “already on the move elsewhere, dressed up like a conceptual art work on its way to some other party.”

“Letter from New York” (1969) relates Costa's excitement about the avant-garde Central Park Poetry Events and the evolution of a new literary avant-garde rooted in performance. It's easy to imagine that Costa, during his first tenure in New York from 1968 to 1971, was keenly aware of the distinctions between US Conceptualism and the Argentine re-materialization from which he had emerged. These years in the city led to works and events produced with such fascinating figures as the “clairvoyant poet” Hannah Weiner.

Indeed New York almost becomes a character in his writings, both nurturing and coldly antagonist. For example, Costa notes that in the late 1970s Oiticica (whose addiction to cocaine was then at its height) understood he was being destroyed. However, “he didn't realize that the cause was New York, with its particular combination of promise and rejection, its shots of pleasure and its profound loneliness.” Of Mendieta the author wrote: “She believed . . . that some kind of American Dream would come true for her, especially if she was accepted first in Europe.” In fact, “career” is a theme throughout the book, perhaps one propellant for Costa's desire to discover new genres, but also for his reluctance to fully engage the art world. He observes, for instance, that “of the three major killers of artists [including sex and drugs], career is probably the worst. Art making is 95% safe; an art career kills.”

Costa's writing style is deceptive in its simplicity. I had to read his remembrance of Mendieta a few times before realizing that, in addition to giving a non-sentimental but loving account of her as a person and friend, it contains one of the most playful descriptions I've seen of her work:

Ana was primeval in her approach, techniques and aesthetics when she was working the earth, but she would become contemporary and technological at the time of dealing with the camera and prints. At work she was a prehistoric figure whose playing with nature was recorded many years later by the American tourist [Mendieta herself] in possession of all her gadgets.

To characterize Costa's own career as peripatetic would be to neglect the geopolitical and personal traumas that have shaped his production: the 1966 coup in Argentina, for example, which no doubt precipitated his departure for New York, or the loss of key friends such as Oiticica (1980, heart attack), Mendieta (1985, a mysterious thirty-three-story fall), and Burton (1989, AIDS).

Another biographical theme that has surely shaped Costa's vision is his perpetual de-centering of himself as artist through strategies of collaboration and (re)invention. This gem of a publication does a huge service in opening Costa's production to the world, revealing an artist whose very hybridity makes him crucial to the precarious present. ○

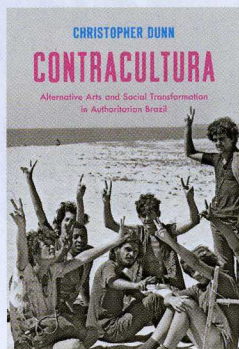
## Books in Brief



LYNN ZELEVANSKY, ELISABETH SUSSMAN, JAMES RONDEAU, and DONNA DE SALVO  
**Hélio Oiticica: To Organize Delirium**

This catalogue accompanies Hélio Oiticica's first US retrospective, which was jointly organized by the Art Institute of Chicago, the Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh, and the Whitney Museum, New York. Essays by US and Latin American scholars situate Oiticica's practice—from his Neo-Concrete paintings and sculptures to later installation projects—in relation to the music, literature, and sociopolitical climate in his native Brazil. Special focus is given to Oiticica's time in New York in the 1970s, when he connected with members of the city's downtown art scene.

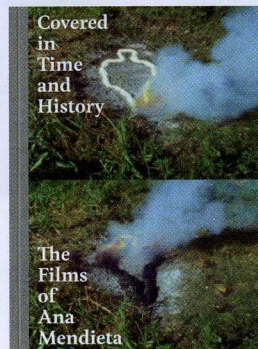
Munich, Prestel, 2016; 320 pages, 291 color illustrations, \$75 hardcover.



CHRISTOPHER DUNN  
**Contracultura: Alternative Arts and Social Transformation in Authoritarian Brazil**

Academic Christopher Dunn connects the beginnings of social justice movements in Brazil with the alternative artistic and literary activities that thrived under the country's military dictatorship in the 1960s and '70s. Dunn pays particular attention to *desbunde*, the Brazilian hippie movement. Inspired by the burgeoning of various countercultures in the United States and Western Europe, rebellious youths flocked to the state of Bahia, a hub of Afro-Brazilian culture. These radicals often explored identity politics, advocating social transformations under oppressive political conditions.

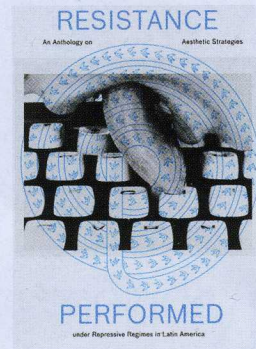
Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 2016; 272 pages, 20 halftone illustrations, \$85 hardcover.



HOWARD ORANSKY, ed.  
**Covered in Time and History: The Films of Ana Mendieta**

Cuban artist Ana Mendieta (1948–1985) produced drawings, installations, performances, photographs, and sculptures during her brief career. Her lesser-known films, however, are the subject of this catalogue, which supplements a traveling exhibition of her newly digitized Super 8 works. Illustrated with sequential stills from all of the artist's 104 films as well as related photographs created between 1971 and 1981, the book features essays by seven cultural historians and a comprehensive filmography.

Oakland, University of California Press, 2015; 272 pages, 327 color illustrations, \$65 hardcover.



HEIKE MUNDER, ed.  
**Resistance Performed: An Anthology of Aesthetic Strategies under Repressive Regimes in Latin America**

In this anthology, German curator Heike Munder surveys performance art as a mode of resistance in Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Peru, and Uruguay. Essays by curators and historians such as Miguel A. López and Nelly Richard examine the often risky strategies artists have used to defy dictatorial governments while exploring body politics, collective memory, and the ephemeral. The volume, spanning from the 1960s to the present, features work by midcentury figures as well as a new generation of artists like Martha Araújo, Carlos Motta, and Pedro Reyes.

Zurich, JRP|Ringier, 2015; 220 pages, 205 black-and-white illustrations, \$59.95 hardcover.

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