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interview to Ellen Shapiro for  
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**Have you lived in Sao Paulo your whole life?**

I have always lived in Sao Paulo, but during 1979 I studied life drawing at the ART STUDENTS LEAGUE in New York.

**When and where did you go to art school?**

I have always had a strong relationship with art. When I was 6 or 7, I used to go to a School of art and painting in a museum close to home. When I was young, drawing and painting were always my favorite activities. I always had an artistic ambience

at home. After this school at the museum, my next training was in high school at drawing class. In College there was elective disciplines: cinema, music, photography, and visual communication (was what I decided on). During those 2 years I had this introduction to visual communication, but had already decided to study architecture (there was no Design school at that time in São Paulo, so me and most designers from my generation studied architecture). I studied at Faculdade de Arquitetura e Urbanismo at USP (University of Sao Paulo) from 1976-1982. FAU at that time was one of cultural effervescence – with courses in visual programming, product design, landscaping, architecture and urbanism. It also had a photography laboratory a typographic studio for wood and metal engraving and a 4 color printing machine which was used to produce educational material for the school that we eventually had access. We had also a studio for model construction in wood and metal. The majority of the students did not end architects but were ballerinas, film makers, designers, photographers, musicians, cinematographers. Only 10% of 150 continued with a career in architecture. USP had professors that were architects, fine artists, set designers) etc. The classes were a very eclectic mix of people, and Architecture was just a reason to get us all together. At that time I had a group of Brazilian music in which I played acoustic guitar. The library was a great star. My first readings were Van Gogh's Letters to Theo, and a book on color theory by Joseph Albers of the Bauhaus. I was halfway through the course when I left for NY. The ambience at home was very supportive. My family had a photography and cinema store called Fotoptica, founded in 1920 by my grandfather, who designed the first company logo. (afterwards he and my father called Bernard Rudowsky, a famous Belgian designer in the 40's to design a new logo. In the 60's Alexandre Wollner redesigned the logo. So it was a big responsibility for me to renew the company identity in 1984).

**Who were some of the greatest influences on your work?**

My parents were always heavily connected to culture and had an amazing library and archive of music, full of wonders. Besides all kind of images covering the walls of the house. There, I had my first encounter with Saul Steinberg, who was a huge influence (the books *All in Lines* and *Passport* were just waiting on the bookshelf for someone to read them). There I saw the wonderful cover that Paul Davis did for the also marvelous album by Thelonious Monk called *Solo Monk*. At home I also encountered jazz, which turned into, together with MPB (music popular of Brazil) my audio companion to creation. Miles Davis, John Coltrane, Bill Evans – the covers of Blue Note... On the walls there were prints by Vasarely, and originals by Edward Weston – books of Valentina, (of Crepax), Barbarella. Art books of Skira, and many other treasures. My father also subscribed to *Graphis* magazine- which he had been collecting since the 60's, alongside with photography and advertising annuals from even earlier (maybe collected by my grandfather) They are in my power now!

My father was a photographer himself and my two brothers are very good professional photographers. (Pedro is a director of photography in cinema, and João worked for majors magazines in Brazil and is now publishing his second book) they used to go overnight in the lab, and I remember it to be very boring for me... I remember when I was a boy, 15 or 16 years old, I saw the book "One" by Ken Ohara that blew me away, which was re-released recently. Parallel to all this information that came from abroad, I also had lots of contact and inspiration from Brazil. Every vacation we would take a family road trip by car (Mom, Dad and 4 kids – I am the youngest) It was the 60's and we would visit Ouro Preto, (Brazilian Baroque/rococo) - Brasília - The Northeast (street fairs, very tasteful, colorful and yet so poor and minimal...) - Amazon - Rio Grande do Sul (the Pampas), etc. My father was producing documentary films at this time about the reality of Brazil, and many times I would accompany him with the planning and filming when I was very young, about 12 to 16 years old. With all this, you could say that my education was always a mixture of Brazilian roots and international culture.

The major influences

- Saul Steinberg: the magic of lines, and fine irony
- Quino: the master of drawing
- R. Crumb: the dirty and delightful drawings about "hot girls"
- Roy Lichtenstein: graphic and colors
- Heinz Edelman (yellow Submarine!): a lysergic dream
- TinTin: Precision and clarity
- Push-pin Studio: a discovery of illustration
- Miró: like Steinberg, an illusionist
- Picasso: perfect, unattainable, and yet so human
- Matisse: discovery of reflexion in art
- Klee: childhood mysteries and dreams revealed
- Van gogh: a use of color, capable of making a chair purple and green, yet look absolutely natural.
- Tadanori Yoko: the japanese barroque covers Miles Davis' Agatha album
- Kazumasa Nagai: Synthetic and Graphic
- Roman Ciezlevitz: Strong silk-screen and collages
- The posters of the Sternberg Brothers
- Paul Rand: What marvelous drawing associated with a stunning sense for colors

### **How many people work at Maquina Estudio?**

There are 4 of us:

- Myself;
- Elisa, my assistant and right arm;
- Caio, Intern;
- Andréa, Secretary.

### **What year did you open the studio?**

In 1989.

### **Can you describe the studio's mix of clients and projects?**

The Maquina (Machine) studio began as an in house studio of Fotoptica, where I had previously been working. I started in the institutional / cultural part and then the promotional section that had a chain of 50 stores. Fotoptica had a gallery, photography magazine and we also promoted a festival called "Video Brazil. " So I always had invitations, posters, Christmas cards, event

programs, etc. So by doing this work, we started to have a concentration in this type of cultural work. Shortly we diversified our portfolio by doing more institutional work like Annual Reports, print design for banks, Christmas cards, small logo projects etc. Also we made promotional materials like packaging, labels, calendars, and some signage etc.

Since the early beginning I could develop a lexicon of graphic solutions and a way of getting things done, and that way include working with hands – drawing, cutting with shears and knife and to tear paper, painting collage, etc. I used all artistic background I had trained in my life and integrate that in my work. I believe most designers don't mix their "artistic" and "commercial" sides. Another point is that I was never afraid to be "naïf" or primitive or happy. I never cared not to look "intellectual" or intellectual or complicated "full of layers". Sometimes a job or a client needs a solution which is sober or elegant, but yet in these cases, I like to make it simple and clear. So, with time, naturally most of the clients the studio have now are tuned with this philosophy of work.

Another interesting thing about most of our clients is that there is always a person with which I discuss a job. A person who can decide to risk something, and not just do something that would not compromise. It's very hard to work for person/company who is afraid to be different or new. Good designers need good clients. This way, people started to look for me because they know what I do, and if they want that, then they come to me! Of course, nobody comes to me for soap packaging, or signage for a bus station, but they do remember me for a museum identity, a book or an art festival. In that process, even big companies like Unilever or Satista textil (1 US\$ billion per year revenue) hire me for the same vision and image I do for cultural jobs. Perhaps I could make more money if I did all kinds of stuff but I don't know if I would be satisfied.

Then the natural result was that the clients and projects that we handled were similar: galleries / art shows, cultural institutions, video festivals, museums, until arriving at OSESP in 2003. In parallel, starting in 1994 I did illustrations for children's books, and the books entered steadily into our workflow at Maquina Estudio, we have worked with practically all the good editors of Brazil. This type of work with books reflects my passion for paper. Books, posters, magazines, all kinds of print material. My love for paper began at the beginning of my professional career when I worked for a Newspaper in 1980, and afterwards I worked for magazines especially photography or cultural. This type of work forced me to do work that was very clear and precise, to value the content (photos / art). With this my work started to be more subtle and delicate, it was so subtle that one day, 2 years ago an editor told me that the work (a book) was so sophisticated that 99% of the people wouldn't understand it. (I think it was a criticism). One time we made a book for ALCOA (an aluminum company) that was called "cooking with aluminum paper". We decided that the book would be for engineers; so all the art was made with an industrial scheme. The photos were of *cartoocios* of aluminum and the typography was Helvetica. It was a wonderful contrast. Recently I have done all kinds of books for all the kinds of editors that I can.

Right now, I have been working on a book about the history of cinema – by Martin Scorsese that will be edited here. A new graphic project about the history of glass by a glass artist and another book about Tom Jobin, 10 years since his death. I think that by this time we have made over 40 books. We have the work for OSESP, constantly doing posters, concert programs, kids programs, national tour programs, institutional folders, Sao Paulo's Gallery programs, sites...

We have also been doing work for Unilever, a panel that is 3 X 15 feet for a reception room of theirs in Sao Paulo using packages of their products to create a magical drawing, surreal at the bottom of the sea. It's going to be cool! Besides these big projects, we are always working on a stray CD cover (right now, we have been doing Luciana Souza – a Brazilian singer who lives in NY and already won a Grammy) small folders etc.

### **Where did you work before that?**

In the beginning (1981) I worked at the editora April, the major magazine/book publisher in Brazil and I also worked for a public relations company. And shortly afterwards alone at home, then I stayed a year at Fotoptica (85/86) to apply the changes to the corporate identity. Soon afterwards Fotoptica created a House Design team where I took care of the institutional/promotional/cultural side. In 88/89 the House closed and I joined a friend of mine and we opened the MAQUINA ESTUDIO, that I'm still running after we split up in 1991.

### **Can you describe your philosophy of design?**

I am a very intuitive person (scorpio). My philosophy of design is very intuitive. I always consider that a project is a history needing to be told. It could be a short story like a logotype or more extensive like a book. I try to figure out the point (or points) more interesting and which is the best tone to tell. Some times a client has an a need and want to do a folder, and come to us with this idea, and after listenig to him we realize that what he needs is a Ad in a small magazine. What is important is to understand what the client need, and them how to work his massage in order to get the best results for the money involved.

It's interesting how an old work can influence another. The type in a book goes to a poster, whose illustration turns in to a trademark wich is multiplied goes back to another poster and so on... We are not afraid of mixing up everything, including the clients. (We have a client who has the biggest brazilian collection of 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century phtography. And we were working to OSESP to make our monthly concert programs, wich had no illustration, but some pages to spare. We managed to show the archive in this publication and the clients became partners. That's one thing important beeing a brazilian designer: sometimes you have to create jobs from nothing, and create conditions of doing things without money, just giving ideas and putting them at your service)

Usually we talk and figure out an idea that will be develloped. Some projects are develloped integrally by myself, and others by my assistants under my supervision. We try to create the best conditions for reading, (including subjectives) and let the reader delight... in posters and other materials I try to give my vision about the subject, and I take care of the elements as if it is being part of an artistic project - composition / harmony / chromatic value, equilibrium / movement etc. Not that I pretend that my work is artistic, I consider myself , before all, a technician- that's why my studio is named Maquina (Machine) studio. It is not my job to decide if the project is artistic or not. What I want to say is that for me, it does not matter if the element that I am manipulating is a phrase, a shampoo packaging, or a photo. I treat them all with the same consideration and with intention to create a page or whatever bidimensional space, as noble as possible. I always keep in mind, that the function is the most important element, but my way to achieve it is thru the same mecanism a painter evaluate the elements at his disposition.

### **Where have your travels taken you?**

I like nature very much- to observe landscapes, clouds, trees, oceans, flowers, and mountains. I have a special fascination about forms and rhythm of things, and especially light. The morning light, the crystal light of the winter and the ferocious summer where everything becomes saturated. I also like the streets and the things that people sell there, the food, fruits. (I like to speak and listen to different languages, amd believe that trhu languages one can know a people or a country). The markets. The color of the crowded ambiance of the big and small cities. I usually go to my place in the mountains, I like very much there because, among other reasons, there is no writem messages at view. (São Paulo is a very, very visually polluted envonement). I love to travel in airplanes, boats, cars, afoot. Changing the point of view. Go up to the hill that I usually go down, or come the opposite way on a street than usual.

When I lived in NY in 1979, one of the most incredible experiences that I had was just when the winter finished and spring started. I arrived in NY during the peak of winter in January. One day I was walking on 11<sup>th</sup> street, which I crossed everyday in the village, when I suddenly saw that tin he other side of the street (where the flowers had sun on them) trees had bloomed overnight! In Brazil, we don't have this abrupt difference between the seasons; here the change is subtler. It was very surreal for me. I like to watch a landscape, it can be the Grand Canyon, the snow, the forest, NY, the sea, Bahia, Italy, Paris, I like skiing in the snow, swimming in the ocean, take a bath in a waterfall.

**You have a wide range of talents: drawing, corporate design, use of color and pattern in more fine-art oriented work like the Orquestra Sinfonica posters. Do you have a favorite way of working, or favorite technique? Do you alternate between using the computer and using your hands?**

I like drawing very much, and whenever possible I use drawing in my work, sometimes I use scissors as well, that is very interesting. Lately I have brought things that I have found on the street, scanned them and later worked with them in Photoshop. I use a lot of illustrator to draw and use all kinds of manipulations possible. For work on books and folders I use Quark Express. To work free with the computer, I always try to buy the most powerful equipment that I can afford (last year I changed my machine, G4 800 MHZ for a G4 1.25 MHZ) now I am at the limit again with that machine and I intend as soon as possible to change that for a G5.) I am not a computer guy, and know nothing about fixing or if sistem 10 is better than 11, but I'm getting very comfortable using it and mixing softwares.

**What led up to the show I attended at Instituto Tomie Ohtake? Was it a coincidence that it opened during Design Week and the Fronteras conference, or planned that way?**

During my work with OSESP, many times I got frustrated because even I could not see the posters, they would only be on display for 1 week. I wanted other people to be able to see them and also myself to see the entire series. I had a feeling that the work was good, and I decided to find a place to exhibit the work. The Tomie Ohtake institute has a very good space dedicated to graphic design, the director was my friend, so everything happened. We chose the date to happen during ICOGRADA because the institute wanted to have a good show during the event...

**Those are one-of-a-kind posters, right? Were they for sale?**

To tell the truth, they were 2 of a kind, actually they were 3 (OSESP gives a poster as a present to the musician invited during that week.) They are available to order at the OSESP store.

**What projects that you've done over the years do you care about the most, and why?**

- *Hermeto campeão* (champ), 1981:

Hermeto pascoal is a Brazilian musician/composer. He does music that is a mix between jazz and MPB (music popular Brazil) with strong roots in the northeast rhythms. He looks like a gnome, short, chubby, albino with a long white beard and extremely long hair. He makes music with whatever he has in front of him. A totally musical being. During that time (81) I was his big fan. When my father said that he was going to make a film about Hermeto, I included myself on the team (of 4 people) as a producer / driver and I spent a week in Hermeto's house. The result was a poster that I consider one of the best that I have done so far. It was all made manually, and I silk screened it myself .

- *Video Brazil*, 1987:

Every two years I used to make the graphic material for this video festival. By 1987 was the first time that I used a computer. I had limitations to scan and process, everything got pixilated. The final image that we chose was a toothless black person (a very typical figure from poor Brazilian folklore) that contrasted strongly with the "computerized" language we were using. This poster was

published in various media and international exhibits.

– *Infantry*, 1993/4:

A logotype for a toy store. During 1992 I had small kids and a drawing appeared after having watched my kids playing. It was also a very different logo from those that already existed by this time. It was also very flexible and I could play with the project in many different ways (not just the logo, but all the stores communication)

– *One Letter Pulls the Other*, 1994/5:

In 1991, shortly after I separated from my partner, I had a company with 8 employees (pre-computer) I closed the doors, fired everyone and I stayed alone, fed up of administration duties! I got my portfolio and went to show it to all the people that I used to admire. Everyone said the same thing, that my drawing was a some differentiation from others designers, and that I should make it more present in my work. One of these people was the editor/ art director of a publishing company who invited me to make this book “one letter pulls the other” (I had never illustrated a book before). The book became very pleasant and fruitions came out of it. But book illustration is too much work, and very little financial return, that’s why I cannot dedicate myself in this area of work.

### **Do you teach?**

I have already had some opportunities to teach classes and I like very much being in touch with young people, but my work process is very particular, and I prefer to teach when there is strong interest from the students and I feel free. In a traditional system I feel very limited by the curriculum. I think that I prefer workshops.

– *Museu de Arte Contemporanea – MAC* (Contemporary Art Museum), 1994-6

– *Architecture School*, Fine arts school, 1989-98

– *Miami Ad School*, 2002

### **Personally, are you married? Do you have children? Is your studio in or near your home, or in the business center of town?**

I am married for the second time, and my wife is an artist and art director as well as an architect. We work together sometimes. I have 3 kids from the 1st marriage, 22, 19, and 15 years old. My studio is close to home. The most interesting thing is that in my studio we all work in the same room, including the secretary. We see each others work all the time and there is a lot of interrelation between works. For me is very good because I can see everything at a glance. We talk about ideas and what is going on. We listen to music, we talk and we have fun. When the atmosphere turns tense, things get harder, but in general I don’t get too crazy with clients, I think that’s one of the advantages of being 46 years old, we are more relaxed at this stage of life.

### **What do you like to do when you’re not making art and design?**

I like to cook. I especially love this alchemy side of cooking of blending substances and see food transforming. I like to cook in the sitio, where I have an wood stove, and love to see the fire and the slow cook. I like very much to read, especially romances Dostoyevsky / Tolstoy / Gabriel Garcia Marques / Balzac / M.Vargas Llosa / João Ubaldo Ribeiro. I like to get involved, create the romance atmosphere, the voices, and the physical types. I travel in my imagination. I like cinema, all kinds, except for those that have an obvious script, gratuitous violence and horror movies. I like sports, especially archery. On Sundays I like to go to Garage Sales when people who are traveling sells everything, in Brazil, it is called “family sells all”. I like to see how people live – their music, books, silverware, and furniture. Eventually I buy a book or a cheap souvenir, one day I found a LP with an amazing cover, made by Saul Bass. I like very much to walk around the city and observe things. I am



very undisciplined (even though my assistant insists that this is not true) it makes me confused, and I lose my time. This has been a preoccupation of mine lately...

**What is special about being a designer in Brazil? In America Latina in general?**

Being a designer in Brazil is not much different from being a designer in Australia or in Japan. The difference is being a Brazilian. We have to improvise constantly. Being creative to solve problems in an emergency- the constant changes in our economy, the laws, the high cost of equipment (computers etc). We have to do everything, find work, create, attend, administrate, prospect... other than this, there are huge contrasts. There is a strong music culture in Brazil that connects with everything. The summer with women and beers. Sport is also very important to Brazilians. Advertising is important, but design is not. So being a designer in Brazil means working for the minority- once the designer understands this, then it's ok.

**Any interesting plans for the future?**

I would like to build a slightly bigger team, one or two more people creating, to be able to do more interesting work, and be more selective with the projects. I have desire to be an art director for younger designers. Maybe get more projects and make more money. I would also consider living outside of Brazil- working, studying or teaching in another country. Or maybe all together.