

Approaches to the Personal Archives and Memory of an Artist

Professor Silvana Seabra Hooper Ph.D

Graduate Program -Education, Arts and History of culture
Mackenzie Presbyterian University
São Paulo - Brazil

Ana Cristina Barral Mariani Passos

Ph.D. Candidate
Graduate Program -Education, Arts and History of culture
Mackenzie Presbyterian University
São Paulo - Brazil

Abstract

This paper describes the research work and the organization of the collection of photographs of Reny Golcman, a jewelry artist, who participated in the Art Biennial in São Paulo Biennials from 1969 to 1975. The essay presents the main features of the collection, describes the interviews, places of work and exhibitions. Beyond that, it discusses the main methodological issues that were faced in handling the collection, focusing on the specific characteristic of Golcman's personal and professional features. The research intends to look into her personal artistic archive, and, as a consequence to make a contribution to the history of jewelry.

Keywords: collection, art, jewelry, methodology

1. Introduction

Three notebooks, three so called “modesty albums,” six boxes containing 1,800 slides, a work space full of tools, objects, and raw materials, specialized publications, as well as many personal memories, and an enormous sense of willingness to record them. This was the working material presented us by Reny Golcman, for the organization, recording (photos)¹, and in the, the production of a book about her artistic life. If at first, this archive suggested a work of a more artistic character – as far as the material referred to is, in fact, an artistic production of jewelry - we were faced with issues of the archival field throughout out the process, especially those concerned with personal collections (Cook, 1998). The material the artist offered to develop this work revealed both private aspects, labeled as auto biographical, and public interest, as a contribution to the history of Brazilian art, particularly in the context of jewelry. As such the work aroused a further interest for the field of research on memory.

In fact, the artist has notably done research to organize and show her artistic material. This concern seems to be part of a greater, more social movement, which qualifies the personal memory as important and necessary. Regardless of the possibility of considering these actions labeled as *ego document*², it is part of a wider phenomenon, in a true “archival fever” (Derrida, 1995). Thus, if the choice and the definition of the collection had been enclosed within the personal demand of the artist, which excluded the discussion about its relevance, the encounter with the material promoted a reflexive requirement on the collection and its insertion in the field of art, especially for the field of fine jewelry. Jewelry, especially in Brazil, is still an unclear domain as to its effective acceptance as an form of art. Although it is not a new subject, jewelry is not normally the subject of study, and only a few that go beyond mere catalogues are devoted to it. In Europe, the theme already deserves a reasonable prominence being related to the personal adornment and to material culture, being, as they it is, element of social distinction³. In this case, it is related to the field of memory and the composition of personal collections.

¹Photographer José Terra was responsible for the photographs taken not only throughout the research but also in the editing of the final work “As joias de RenyGolcman” (2015).

²The term was defined by historian Jacob Presser (1958) and refers strictly to personal documents such as letters and diaries, which concern feelings and issues apparently related only to herself. The historiography of the last decades, however, has shown that the boundaries between personal and collective are difficult to define.

³For seminal works about adornment, see Simmel (2009).

In this work, we will consider the encounter between the researcher with a material entirely devoid of specialized treatment in the field of either arts, archiving, or history. The account follows the work over the course of a year through conducting interviews and reading and organizing existing material. In addition, there were a photographic record of the collection and a production of a book.

2. *The modesty albums*

The first few months of work, which was carried out at Reny Golcman's studio, made it clear that the initial design was not appropriate to neither the material nor the intentions of the artist. Not even the familiarity with the craft of jewelry ensured a course without surprises and difficulties. The dive led to deep waters. Preliminary interviews for the initial purpose of "digging" into the studio showed that it was not a simple organization of the work of the jewelry artist. The first discovery was that, at the time, she would complete 50 years of her career working with precious metals, which still had been unnoticed or not concluded. The second was that the material initially identified was only a small portion of the universe of the artist that was available for study.

The third concerned the difficulties inherent in the exercise of processing information that required handling memories, narratives, and personal and artistic identities. Although Reny Golcman had been immediately available, the size of the collection she created was very large: a true "sea" of jewels, objects, stories, pictures, drawings, scrapbooks, and notebooks. Studying all this material and her life not only changed deeply our perspective on many aspects of her artistic work, which were challenging, but also demanded a better understanding of collections with cultural history and questions of memory. In addition to the almost technical sorting based on a timeline, it was still necessary to find and even "produce" meaning for many of the elements, which seemed to be part of that collection even when dispersed. Accordingly, the initial talks were redesigned in form of non-structured interviews, which would enrich the information in general. As a consequence, on the one hand, the new form of conversation narrowed bonds of friendship, but, on the other hand, concerns grew as regards to the care that must surround objectivity in gathering information. Moreover, the use of oral history techniques were necessary to enhance the recollections of the artist in a joint effort with the researcher.

In fact, a project of this type combines feelings and expectations. For each object in the collection, a selection of value takes place, and that is not necessarily made aware to its full extent to the collector. Without doubt, the intention of such gestures, which include saving, collecting, or even accumulating, has a direct relationship with the desire to validate and perpetuate, which could include even some process of nostalgia. However, this is a process that occurs in layers, with temporal meanings, not always similar. In other words, before they are excluded, they overlap in gestures of decisions in order to maintain, store, or dispose. In this case, there was a desire for self-perpetuation that combined with the urgency to produce retrospective meaning to the activity of a group of contemporary artists to Reny Golcman.

Indeed, in all processes of personal narrative created around a collection or through letters and diaries, there is a desire to produce an affection *for themselves* either by contemporaries or by future experts. In this sense, the collector is not only an individual but also a *persona* who seeks to model its image for posterity. This is the principle that arises in Golcman's "modesty albums" which, even far from being sparse notes, carry the possibility to demonstrate an entire lifetime of hard work and dedication. In any case, even if the relationship with the researcher is the initial affection, that is not the only feeling. Inspired to tell a "story of itself," the author (artist, collector) often finds himself (herself) in a strained relationship with the researcher, since the latter may always represent another possibility of history that is not its own.

Even in a reduced scale, it is possible to understand this process as the one described by Greenblatt as *self-fashioning*. Although the concept is originally related to studies about Shakespearians, it is still quite suggestive, to the extent that it presupposes the world of theater as a background. In that context, Greenblatt refers especially to the identities resulting from copyright processes (performance) in comparison with models and social norms. Even internally, for the one who "speaks of himself," it is not possible to say that there is only one story to be told. There are at least two dimensions at stake: an "I" (self), and another one that is his character. Through telling his/her story, it will constitute a possible given unit by the narrative itself. The process of social interaction requires the subject to tell more than a story of itself amidst the production. It produces inevitably a node in a network of different narratives.

Accordingly, throughout the research it became clear that the meanings attributed to the material under study were still being reassessed and even produced along the conversations and interviews, in opposition to what one could expect. The study aimed to consider the reasons and past intentions, but also to put under the same perspective the needs of the present moment, as it was equally essential.

This is the time when the participating action of the researcher on using techniques of remembering, may give rise to a whole other possible story: the use of interview techniques always suggests that a different story could have been told.

When putting together all the information obtained from reading the documents, interviewing third parties, long conversations with the artist and many hours of observation, the certainty of a multiplicity of issues raised becomes effective both for the artist / collector, as well as for the researcher. A certain *encounter of selves* takes place in the relation with each other, establishing necessarily an identity of narrative, which is not always created only with the assertiveness and wholeness of the narrator.

In order to respect the subject's own personal timing, however, it is necessary to allow for time in seeking memories, winning trust, and developing discourse. The moments of forgetfulness are (and were, in our case) recognizable in that they may not only be memory failures - in the sense of simple distance in time - but also a conscious or unconscious clearance of memories. As taught by psychoanalysis, the resistance of the mind to remember can relate to pain. The questions that are being raised by the researcher are often directed toward a moment of trauma and do not result in a *remember, repeat and elaborate* formula, as it was put by Freud (1990). Most of all, it is critical to understand that the narrative borne out of a job like this creates order and meaning, and it does not belong only to those who are narrating the memories: it also belongs to whoever is in charge of its preparation. This narrative must ultimately meet the needs of the present, although its meanings may also reside in reminiscences of the past.

In the case of Reny Golcman, it was the trauma of the destruction of one of her first pieces that triggered the need for all others to be recorded in notebooks. This preventive attitude allowed her artistic production to be classified with precision in the "modesty albums" (Photo 1), which enabled this story to be recollected in detail. The affectionately named "modesty albums" gathers various mementos, such as invitations for exhibitions, catalogs, newspapers and magazines, fashion editorials, interviews and photos of the periods from 1968 to 1974, 1975 to 1992, and 1993 to 2015. In addition to this given objective, the facts accurately recounted there operated as a record of their own professional and public importance. They function as a demonstration of what "really happened" and as a tool to ensure the confirmed vision of herself, in addition to the mere personal opinion of the story's narrator. This resource reveals an individual's modern consciousness. It signifies a deep understanding of the use of tactics required to establish a "field of truth." As in any story where the truth is required, proof of what is said should be given.

In the case of this study, these instruments were also used. Without a doubt, the albums have a story in addition to the own artist's and tell the story of the last 50 years of artistic jewelry in São Paulo. Together with the notebooks, several other objects such as raw materials, tools, the library present in the workplace, and the thought-provoking notes of the jeweler are taken into account. However, the photographs of the artist's personal collection and those taken along the work that most reveal the artistic universe and probably are the objects that offer the greatest impact in the presentation of the overall production of the artist.

3. The artist Reny Golcman: Genre and jewelry

Reny Golcman is among the pioneers of artistic jewelry. As a woman, she was a forerunner. She was among the first to perform all her training in artistic jewelry in Brazil. She was and still is an artist who, from the start, aspired to do rather different from all that she knew, and was successful. Rebellion is intrinsic in Reny's work. Her desire is to subvert the universe of jewelry, even when working with noble metals and traditional typologies. She always experimented and had the ability to take ownership of everything that fell into her hands, be it material, tools, works, or ideas. In addition, there was a character of accumulation in her studio: everything could be turned into a new job.

An award-winning artist with 65 exhibitions in her resumé, she studied painting at the National School of Fine Arts (Escola Nacional de Belas Artes) and selected artistic jewelry as her form of expression to which she had dedicated herself continuously since 1965. Throughout her career, she has already produced more than 1,800 pieces, with emphasis on cutting-edge jewelry with which she participated in the Art Biennial of São Paulo from 1969 to 1975, when the jeweler had a place in this event. In 1971, she won first prize in her Changeable Jewelry (Photo 2) at the Biennial. In 1972, she moved the display to the side of the wrist, thus creating the Krono jewel (Photo 3). In 1975, she made vestments for Torah (Photo 4), an activity prohibited to women then. Since then, her jewelry pieces have been appreciated and recognized in Brazil and abroad. A necklace with the jaw of a fish (Photo 5) has been part of a traveling exhibition of contemporary jewelry since 2011 in museums throughout America and Europe.

Aware of her position in jewelry art, she considers it her duty to encourage new talent. Therefore, she is generous with information and materials, believing that by teaching what she has learned, she will form part of a chain of people who are dazzled with the universe of jewelry. She does not hide her emotion when her work is recognized by other younger jewelers. She is interested in discussing commitment, seriousness, and, above all, love of the craft and the bench. Anyone who wants to listen to her will learn of the need to keep records of all jobs.

The first jewel that Reny made in gold was melted by the customer shortly afterwards. Upon hearing this, she began to register devotedly all her work. The possibility of other losses was almost unbearable. The melted piece was on the first page of her notebook, almost as a reminder that anything could happen with her work after it succeeds in the world. The knowledge that her creation had been dismantled (literally) resulted in the decision to create detailed records. For each jewel or object, she made notes on her books of a small outline of form, their typology, the metals, gemstones, and other materials used; at times, the notes included information on weight, the completion date, and the owner of the piece. All parts were numbered.

4. The collection “as is”

However, such dedication to register her work did not become the exploitation of private collections of most of the clients. It was necessary to abandon this precious source as it would be too painful to discover that certain parts had been destroyed, sold, stolen, lost, or given to someone else. Although the jewelry of the artist forms part of several private collections, only family members, clients, and close friends were approached to give access to their collections. It is important to recognize the underlying emotional aspects when dealing with the work of an artist and jewelry, which is art on a more personal level, displayed on the body, creating interaction between people, and revealing identities and beliefs. They occupy the undefined border between pure and applied arts; more importantly, they are carriers of affection.

In addition to the records in her three books, she always counted on the help of her husband who photographed almost all the pieces, first in chrome and nowadays with a digital camera. There were 1,800 slides and countless electronic files developed on the completion of each piece in a similar registration effort to the one required by the profession of a plastic surgeon or by admiration for her. Every piece was meticulously archived, each slide with the part number marked in pencil. The files on the computer were also organized. Both usually said that, in their country, there had not been much concern for the future, for the preservation of one’s memory. They may be right, but the records in the books and the pictures seem to reveal more. Both have the desire to create a narrative of their experiences to be able to enjoy them with more time, building marks, memories to be shared with their children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren and now, with all of us. In this sense, it is interesting to observe how a narrative of oneself is transposed to another.

As all special family occasions are marked with jewelry made by her, all special events of her career are recorded in three scrapbook albums (“modesty albums”). The dedication to save and preserve these materials and adding to the fact that Reny belongs to a group of true pioneers of Brazilian artistic jewelry make the albums an important record of the history of our fine jewelry. The publication resulting from this work brings together 395 images. To reach this number, more than 6,000 photos were taken; 309 pieces of jewelry appeared in the book alongside images reproduced from various sources. Many images illustrated the material present in the scrapbooks.

Family albums were also examined. Dozens of pictures of jewelry from professional photographers were at our disposal to fill the gap of those to which we had no access. The curatorial activity around the jewelry required great care since it did not involve only technical and aesthetic criteria. We were dealing with the works of an artist who was emotionally connected to her own production. There was jewelry of personal use belonging to those who kindly provided them for our records. Each piece speaks of its circumstances of production and use.

How can one treat pieces of enormous emotional charge as the series produced with gems that had belonged to the father of the artist and that, unlike almost all her work, received the name: “Aconchego Enrolador” (Rolling Coziness) shown in Photo 6? They speak of how a piece is designed and created by the hands of the artist. We chose to show the greatest number of pieces and the most diverse sides of her imaginary world. We seek to unravel the internal logic of her imagination and not dwell on passion and anecdotal, although we recognize that subjectivity being present in all of the selections.

The photos themselves also brought important issues. Should the pieces be photographed in their current state or cleaned or even polished? There was a whole discussion on the conservation of jewelry in museums; others say that the patina of time cannot be removed. These were not objects in museums; they were private collections and most of the pieces are still in use.

We decided to only clean the pieces without modification through repairing or polishing, thereby maintaining their conservation status. It is worth mentioning that a number of the best testimonies of the artist were obtained in these cleaning sessions when, in the physicality of contact, past experiences were evoked and details of the creation of many of them were revealed. In addition, it stood out as an important possibility of movement of circulation of images produced beyond the context of the publication. Although certain pieces had been placed in scenarios composed of objects present in the workshop, the majority of the images sought simply to present the jewel in the clearest possible manner for consideration of lay people and experts.

The studio as a space of materiality reveals much of the material dimensions of the memory. In this space where memory organizes the past and the projects organize the future, drawings of completed pieces and in their sketched form co-existed, an accumulation of objects collected in the most varied situations, pieces created in different eras, small collections of shells, wood, small boxes, and ethnic necklaces. An apparent chaos ended up revealing a large inner order. There was no hierarchy around intrinsic or affective value. Every piece was valuable; all was part of its identity. Unlike the “modesty albums” that were conspicuous by their chronological order, the objects did not have any visible sorting, but each one of them holds a memory that is often nostalgic. It was through them that we were able to understand more clearly the life story of the artist and her career.

It was also in this space that we could see the construction of the collection in this complex transit of memories and materiality. At times, it was possible to feel that the gears were in motion when observing the artist in her recollection inside the studio. All the time was time to create a new piece. Thus, for two months, we accompanied the birth of the jewel that illustrated the cover of the publication that followed this work. The journey was completed through interviews with other people and not the artist such as friends, colleagues, clients, and family members. More often than we would have wanted, most of the interviews were not recorded since we knew that this would change the involvement of the interviewee. A certain footage was made with the artist, but this material has not yet been sorted out. A documentary on the pioneers of Brazilian Jewelry, which is still being made, includes her testimony. Consulting her files with clippings from newspapers and magazines as well as invitations to and catalogs of exhibitions was essential to understand the receptivity of society and the market and its work, and to verify certain information around people and events.

The survey that was conducted ranged between the orality of witnesses, materiality of the objects, and the register of the images. This way, the plot of a narrative was created gradually along with the artist, who was always trying to recognize the existence of multiple layers of meaning. With joy and surprise, the artist became aware of the long and fruitful journey during the research for this book, from the first individual exhibition to the conclusion of the jewel that illustrates the cover of the book. This understanding arises from the construction of narrative. At the age of 82, she is far from slowing down her pace. There is a new sense of urgency brought about by the birth of her grandchildren. Work is fundamental to Reny Golcman who does not want to retire.

5. Final observations

Due to their curatorial characteristics, the research processes of personal collections present a writing of oneself and others among its basic characteristics. However, this type of “collectionism” builds other memories that are more public in nature. In the case of Reny Golcman’s files, it is implied that her personal memories belong to the history of jewelry and Brazilian art in a wider perspective. The recorded and stored memories, in addition to her affective record, show the first steps of Brazilian modern jewelry as well as certain aspects of this profession’s feminine. In this sense, in collaboration with the artist, the research project has helped to present a sense of order as a kind of meaning constructed along the revelation of the archive of memories itself and the work of Reny Golcman.

The difficulty with the lack of a “great narrative”, which could have produced a sense of organization since the beginning, is also a big advantage of this type of research; in this way, it is perhaps also more suitable to the research on contemporary art, which takes place in this area of research with open options in *kairos time* of pure chance. If this is a truism for art, it is not as evident in the memory aspect of construction of the researcher who meets with any collection. The presence of the researcher with her stock of objective resources in organizing files is not enough. Subjective elements will also be constructed within the “owner or proprietary” subject of the collection. The desire to immortalize and bequeath her path to posterity gives way to strategies of *control strategies for themselves* and of their own *self*. On the one hand, our research on the collection and the artist are modern possibilities, as are personal journeys, and their small archives are important. On the other hand, the elements of negotiation, remembering and forgetting and what is visible and hidden, also belong to the same process of construction of the subject.

Inter and trans disciplinary efforts have been made in recent years to understand their role in our lives. Our research reveals an artistic life, but reminds us also of the possibilities of other paths, that without this glamour or apparent recognition, also present themselves as important testimonies.

References

- Cook, T. (1998). Arquivos pessoais e arquivos institucionais: para um entendimento arquivístico comum da formação da memória em um mundo pós-moderno. *Revista Estudos Históricos* [S.l.], 11(21), 129–150.
- Derrida, J. (1995). *O mal de arquivo*. Rio de Janeiro: Relume Dumará.
- Freud, S. (1990). Recordar, repetir e elaborar. In: S. Freud Edição standard brasileira das obras psicológicas completas de Sigmund Freud. v. 12 (pp. 189-203). Rio de Janeiro: Imago.
- Greenblatt, S. (2002). *Renaissance self-fashioning: From more to Shakespeare*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press.
- Passos, A. & Terra, J. (2015). *As joias de RennyGolcman*. São Paulo: Ana C.B.M. Passos.
- Simmel, G. (2009). *Sociology: Inquiries into the Construction of Social Forms*. Leiden, Boston: Brill.

Photo 1: Notebooks with personal notes on the work of the artist (Photo: José Terra)



Photo 2: Changeable jewel (Photo: José Terra)



Photo 3: Kronos Jewel: the artist's studio (Photo: José Terra)



Photo 4: Newspaper clipping (1975). Renny Golcman's personal records (Photo: José Terra)



Foto 5: Colar com mandíbula
(foto José Terra)

Photo 5: Necklace with a jawbone (Photo: José Terra)



Foto 6: Peça da Série "Aconchego Enrolador"
(foto José Terra)

Photo 6: A piece from the series "Aconchego Enrolador" (Photo: José Terra)