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# Brilliant grey: the color of documentary resources at the Fundación Espigas in Buenos Aires\*

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Grey literature, documentation published outside traditional commercial channels, is not very often taken into account by art librarians in Argentina, judging by searches on online databases. However, experience with grey literature at the Fundación Espigas, the highly specialized Argentinian art information center in Buenos Aires, is changing this point of view. The Center's database offers access to a great corpus of such publications, especially to ephemera such as private view cards, pamphlets, auction catalogues, catalogues of solo and group exhibitions and posters. This 'minimal documentary information' has an important place as a resource, and would prove invaluable for any research project on Argentine art in the future. Indeed this material is not grey but unexpectedly brilliant at providing rich and hidden information.

## Introduction

In the universe of colors, 'if the intensity of the electromagnetic vibrations is strong, the light is White; if the intensity is less, the light is Grey; and if the intensity is zero, the light is non-existent or Black'.<sup>1</sup> In other words, grey is the color between white and black.

One can find the same colors of the spectrum in the publishing universe, depending on how publications are produced and disseminated: white describes those that are published and circulated by traditional means; black those with no editorial material at all; grey those publications that appear only in a very few copies that are produced and disseminated outside the channels of conventional commercial publishing.

## What grey literature is

The term 'grey literature' was chosen at the 1978 York Seminar,<sup>2</sup> when a definition was established for the kind of 'material which is not disposable and

cannot be acquired through normal sales corridors and [that] is difficult to identify and obtain'. Nineteen years later, in the 1997 *International grey literature conference (GL97)*, electronic formats were included in this definition for the first time, alongside print. The development of internet technology means that authors are now free to communicate their intellectual works without the need for conventional publication. This is probably why the term 'clear grey literature' is beginning to be used today.

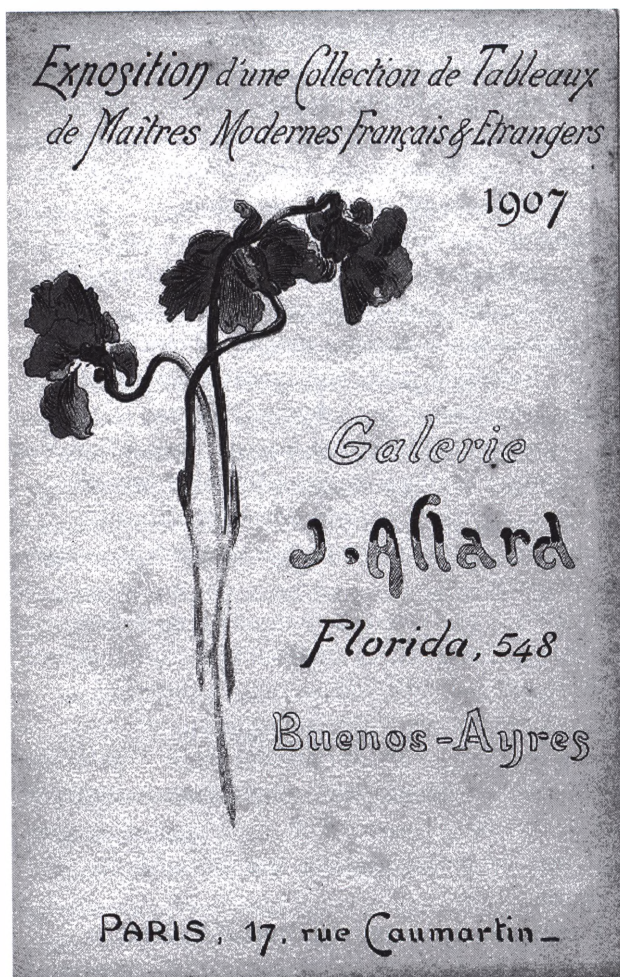
The term 'grey literature' appeared at the end of the 19th century and became much more common in the second half of the 20th century. It originates from the German term 'graue Literatur', and it is fascinating to learn that in most Western languages this material is referred to by color: 'grey (gray) literature' in English; 'letteratura grigia' in Italian; 'littérature grise' in French and 'cinzenta' in Portuguese.

Many projects studying and managing grey literature exist: COSATI, EAGLE-SIGLE, GL, GREYNET, NTIS<sup>4</sup> are all organizations whose principal goals are to identify, retrieve, store, control



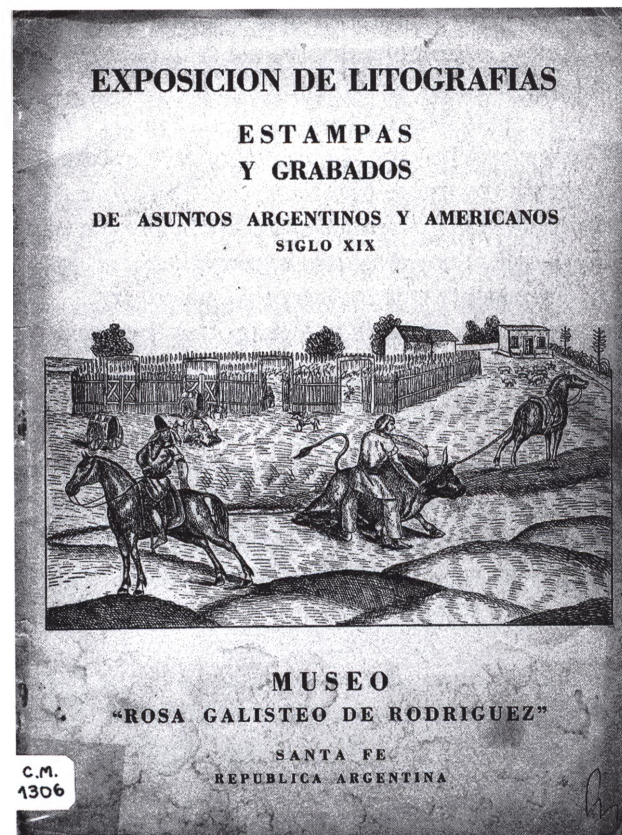
and access grey literature. But all of them refer principally to the technological-scientific domain. It is really difficult to find such organizations paying attention to the human sciences, especially to art.

Since, as many specialists agree, it is difficult and complicated to reach a uniform definition for grey literature, it is perhaps preferable to describe it instead of defining it. This is easiest using the contents of the documents and their format. In terms of content, a grey literature document is one containing highly specialized information, used by a small and expert public, existing only in a few rapidly disseminated copies and hard to find and access. In terms of format, specialists often speak of publications without brightness or attractiveness. Nevertheless, when looking at grey literature in the art domain one can find exhibition catalogues with appealing colors and designs such as vignettes and many other kinds of illustration. Colored postcards and attractively designed invitations to previews of exhibitions are proof enough that this sort of documentation is not so 'grey'.



Art nouveau vignettes from the catalogue of the exhibition of French artists at the Allard Gallery (Paris) at its Buenos Aires branch, 1907.

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REPUBLICA ARGENTINA

[Argentinian and American lithographs, prints and engravings from the 19th century], 1947.

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### Grey/ephemeral art documentation<sup>5</sup>

In Britain and America grey literature in which authors communicate progress in scientific research is known as 'report literature'.<sup>6</sup> But in most European countries the term also implies ephemeral or fugitive documentation. The adjective 'ephemeral' indicates something that lasts only for the duration of a day and, by extension, to something which does not have a very long duration.<sup>7</sup> Something that is ephemeral has its being in a particular moment or place, and loses its value and its reason for existence when that has gone.

Grey/ephemeral literature has an important rôle in specialized art libraries but has not yet taken its true place there. Most publications discovered when searching and browsing the databases of Argentinian art libraries are those produced by traditional means – mainly books and articles in journals. It is true that some references can also be found to institutional working papers and theses, government reports, or publications from art galleries and museums. But what OPACs never retrieve are those 'little pieces of paper' with minimal information, such as a private view invitation card, or the announcement of a new auction catalogue; an artist's pamphlet with his CV;<sup>8</sup>



a list of works of art in a museum or gallery exhibition; a pamphlet distributed at some event; or a special brochure on Argentinian art.

I agree with Marie Claire Debackère in her 1994 IFLA paper when she argues that grey literature is not very attractive to librarians<sup>9</sup> and that, while this type of documentation may actually be present in library collections, it is hard to retrieve and access. This is certainly true in Argentina, where art librarians have so much to manage that they have little time to dedicate to this category of material, which is at least as complex as other library documentation and demands thorough analysis, great precision and concentration if the valuable information it contains is not to be lost. While this type of documentation may actually be present in Argentinian art library collections, it is hard to retrieve and access.

Nevertheless this is the type of grey/ephemeral documentation to which we need to pay close attention. In 2001 Elizabet Maria Ramos de Carvalho, Manager of IFLA's Latin America and Caribbean Regional Bureau, listed several Latin American and Caribbean initiatives in the field of grey literature;<sup>10</sup> if she were speaking today her paper could also usefully mention the achievements of the Fundación Espigas, since its project has been deliberately changing the situation ever since 1995.

## The Fundación Espigas

The Fundación Espigas project is a clear example of a relationship constructed between the private and public sector and demonstrates how a private institution can, through non-profit activities, provide and ensure free access to information for all citizens interested in the documentation of Argentinian art history.

The main objective of the Fundación Espigas is the study and diffusion of the history of Argentine art. Although the project dates back to 1989 – it originated in an idea from Daniel E. Martínez, former director of the National Fine Arts Museum in Buenos Aires – the Fundación's activities really began in 1993, when the collection of the first art gallery in Argentina, the Salon Witcomb in Buenos Aires, was put up for sale; the purchase of that archive was the basis for starting the Fundación Espigas and its documentation center. A few years later, in 1994, and through contacts with national, provincial and regional public and private cultural organizations, such as libraries, museums, galleries, auction houses, art schools, antique dealers, universities, etc., almost 45,000 documents had been

acquired, and there were more than 200 donors (there are now more than 700) who provided bibliographical material. After this promising start, a system of exchanges was implemented to expand the collections. And ten years later, thanks to a very large number of donations, exchanges and purchases, Fundación Espigas has a total collection of 150,000 documents. All the publications are organized into different categories: almost 37,000 catalogues (solo and group exhibitions and auction catalogues); 30,000 photos; 800 art serial titles (journals, bulletins, monographic serials, workshops); 3500 books and pamphlets; 3100 videos; 32,000 press cuttings and an as yet uncounted collection of manuscripts which is in the process of being analyzed. Material published through conventional channels represents only 3.8% of the whole, and 8.33% of the grey/ephemera documentation.

The Fundación Espigas Documentation Center is probably one of the most important specialized archives in the country and its mission is to collect and preserve all documents relating to Argentinian art within the country and from abroad, as well as foreign art connected with Argentina. When the President of Fundación Espigas, Mauro Herlitzka, began making journeys all over the country, from North to South and from East to West, in order to search out, acquire, organize and store documentation related to Argentine art, he set a landmark not only in the country's art history but also in the development of its librarianship.

The Fundación Espigas staff who helped make the documentary collection available for use are the main Co-ordinator, the Library Database Co-ordinator, the Research Adviser (then a Fellow of the Fundación), the Computer Systems Adviser, almost 15 interns – advanced-level art, library science and communication science students – and the Secretary.

In 1995, I was given the impossible-to-refuse challenge of organizing the documentation that had been found and collected, so rich, so different, so difficult to analyse. From the beginning the main goal was to rescue all information about Argentinian art history, whatever the documents containing it.<sup>11</sup> It was necessary to extract all the data possible from each text, excluding nothing, and this analysis continues today.

I had to design a special database in order to recover all the data about the history of Argentinian art. The Espigas database was created with the UNESCO CDS/ISIS program and its subsequent developments for Windows and the internet. Although the program already includes several

database structures, it is possible to create new ones, or to adapt existing ones, in order to retrieve information for each artist and all the works that are listed in a document. In order to control the vocabulary a list of terms is used, according to the content needs of each item. Since 1999, the Fundación Espigas Documentation Center has been the leader in the Red de Investigación Artística (RIA, an artist research network), working with the libraries of the following institutions: the Academia Nacional de Bellas Artes, the Instituto de Teoría del Arte 'Julio E. Payró' and the Museo de Arte Moderno de la Ciudad de Buenos Aires.<sup>12</sup> Each year the Espiga OPAC (<http://www.espigas.org.ar>) receives more than 30,000 hits, and more than 1500 students and fellows visit the Fundación in Buenos Aires. At present, the Fundación Espigas database contains 80,000 records for its collection, a very large number of which refer to grey/ephemeral documentation.

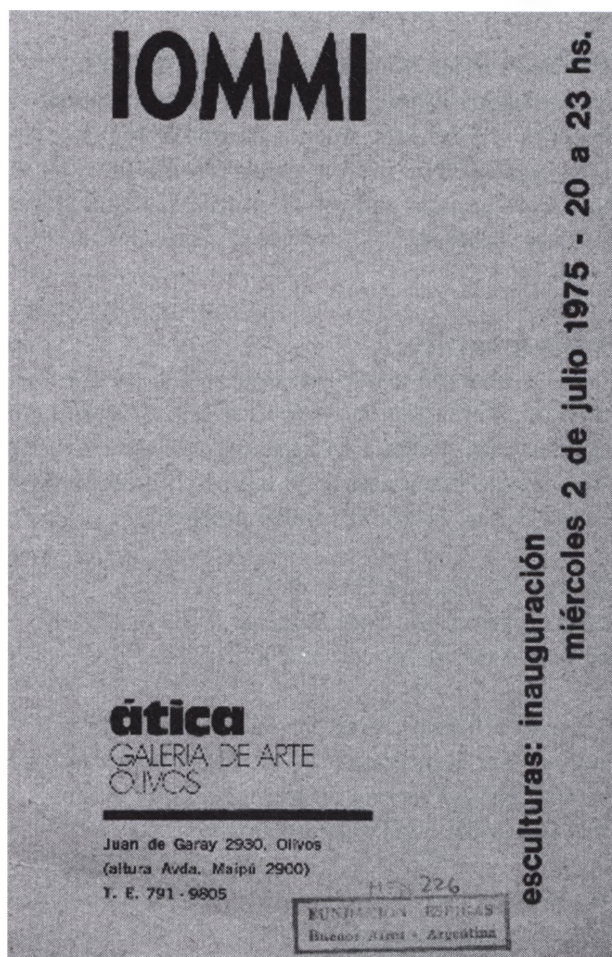
When Fundación Espigas celebrated its tenth anniversary in 2003, an exhibition was organised at the Museo de Arte Latinoamericano de Buenos Aires Costantini Collection (MALBA) and a catalogue was published. The exhibition set out to demonstrate the richness of the Fundación's documentary collection, round six main themes: art critics, collectors, artists, galleries, institutions and magazines. The catalogue highlighted the importance of Jorge Romero-Brest as an art critic; Francisco Llobet as art collector; Alfredo Guttero, an avant-garde Argentinian painter (none of these are now alive); the Witcomb, Pizarro and Bonino galleries, the first which were important in Argentina; and the unforgettable Instituto Torcuato di Tella<sup>13</sup> (none of these exist any longer either), and a very specialized corpus of art magazines which helped to emphasize their cultural importance. Most of the resources used for the research were taken from the grey/ephemeral documentation in the Fundación Espigas.

### From grey/ephemeral art documentation to 'brilliant' information

But of course grey/ephemeral documentation is not ephemeral at all. On the contrary, each apparently simple 'little piece of paper' could be the starting point of a story, the initial stitch to make a whole tapestry. When a research project begins or when previous data cannot be found, this type of documentation becomes of great value and can lay

the foundations for art historical knowledge in a particular area. It can illuminate artists' lives, art collectors' predilections, critics' thoughts, avant-garde gallery and museum displays – in a word, the whole artistic movement of a particular period.

Given this history, it is necessary to come back to the epithet 'grey' in order to contrast it with its antonym 'brilliant'. Because the information we have in this documentary collection is brilliant. And also brilliant are the research results, where something as simple and 'grey' as an invitation to an exhibition can serve as an information resource.



Catalogue of the inaugural exhibition of Ennio Iommi's sculpture at Atica Gallery, Olivos, a Buenos Aires city neighbourhood, on Wednesday July 2, 1975 from 8-11 p.m.  
©Fundación Espigas Collection

That kind of information has great value, because it provides evidence about all the early Argentinian solo exhibitions; about foreign avant-garde influences in Argentina; about the history of art galleries; about painters' techniques; about the establishment of a new museum; or about the impact of an auction sale. It can also give us information on Argentinian artists working abroad or foreign artists visiting Argentina. So much data comes from these grey/ephemeral documents that it



is possible to organize the whole memory of the past, to know the present and to imagine the future.

I hope that, starting from now, Argentinian art librarians will accept the challenge of reconsidering the importance of this type of documentary information and will begin searching for, obtaining, analysing and managing grey/ephemeral documentation in their own libraries. Art librarians in Argentina are already working in co-operative networks such as Vitruvio<sup>14</sup> and the RIA network, and the new information technologies now offer improved ways to provide their users with the data they seek.

\*Revised version of paper presented at the IFLA Section of Art Libraries workshop at the National Museum of Fine Arts, Buenos Aires, 22 August 2004, organized by the Vitruvio network, the Fundación Espigas and the National Museum of Fine Arts Library.

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1. *Color*. Microsoft® Encarta® Encyclopedia 2000. © 1993-1999 Microsoft Corporation.
2. York Seminar (United Kingdom), organized by the European Communities Commission (now the European Union) and the British Library Lending Division (now the British Library Bibliographical Services and Document Supply Centre), 13 and 14 December 1978.
3. Cinzenta means the color of cinders, referring to the popular fairy tale *Cinderella*. In the domain of art librarianship, who cares about poor 'grey literature', when traditionally published material is so much more attractive?
4. COSATI (Committee on Scientific and Technical Information); EAGLE (European Association for Grey Literature Exploitation, with its data base SIGLE (System for Information on Grey Literature), GL (General Conference on Grey Literature); GREYNET, international network based in the Netherlands, whose main goal is to promote and support authors, researchers, librarians and information intermediaries working with grey literature (<http://www.greynet.org>); NTIS (the US National Technical Information Service).
5. Although ephemera has gained in importance separately from the grey literature universe (see [www.ephemerassociation.org](http://www.ephemerassociation.org)), I prefer to speak of grey/ephemeral documentation when referring to publications produced outside formal commercial corridors whose intention is to last for only a very short time.
6. Mason, Moya K. 'Grey literature: its history, definition, acquisition and cataloguing'. 2004 (<http://www.moyak.com/researcher/resume/papers/var7mkmkw.html>). In this paper the author argues that its greyness is probably the

- reason why grey literature is known by this name. It means knowledge produced by mankind that is the color of the human brain.
7. Definition taken from the Real Academia Española's *Diccionario de la lengua española*. Madrid: Espasa-Calpe, 1992, p.559. (Free translation by the author).
  8. At the Fundación Espigas these are given the category REPORT 0, and begin each artist's Special Dossier.
  9. Debackère, Marie Claire. 'Problèmes rencontrés pour obtenir la littérature grise'. Paper presented at the 60th IFLA General Conference, August 21-27 1994 ([www.ifla.org/IV/ifla60/60papers.txt](http://www.ifla.org/IV/ifla60/60papers.txt)). After reading this paper, I had to ask myself how we can communicate to others just how attractive we find a private view invitation card that is more than a hundred years old.
  10. Ramos de Carvalho, Elizabet Maria. 'La literatura gris y su contribución a la sociedad del conocimiento'. Paper presented at the 67th IFLA Conference, Boston, August 16-25 2001. This paper aims to demonstrate the way grey literature has contributed to the improvement of the knowledge society.
  11. This was how I got to know Marcelo Pacheco, former Executive Director of the Fundación Espigas, who was jointly responsible for the Fundación Espigas Project Initiative with Daniel Martinez. He left Fundación Espigas in 2002, to become Curator in Chief at the MALBA Costantini Collection.
  12. The National Academy of Fine Arts, the 'Julio E. Payró' Institute of Art Theory and the Museum of Modern Art of the City of Buenos Aires.
  13. The Instituto Torcuato di Tella was the key institution in Argentina reflecting the cultural avant-garde movement of the 1960s.
  14. Vitruvio's recent co-operative work has resulted in *Vocabulario de arquitectura, arte, diseño y urbanismo*, published 2004.

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