

DANCING WITH COPELLO

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My first encounter with the legacy of the artist and performer Francisco Copello was in 2014, while I was doing a professional internship at the Visual Arts Documentation Center (CeDOC) when it was still located at the Palacio La Moneda Cultural Center. There I began my specialization in the field of organizing and researching visual artists' documentary archives. In that context, I was handed a box full of more or less loose papers—a few paper clips and staples were the only devices providing any semblance of organization—and I was asked to broadly identify, classify, and provide an initial structure for this collection of documents, which had not been reviewed to date. These papers consisted of Copello's writings, typewritten documents, and mostly manuscripts. Having only just begun to get to know this artist through this request, I very soon discovered two things: 1) his biography is intricate and circular; he comes and goes from places, constructs characters and alter egos, has more than one personality, takes passages from his real life and then fictionalizes them; and 2) his handwriting is as curly and difficult to read as his own biography.

I was greatly surprised when, a decade later, at the Die Ecke Contemporary Art gallery, Paul Birke asked me to begin research work on Francisco Copello—of whom he had several handwritten notebooks—and to see how they could be showcased with the aim of exhibiting a series of his pastel drawings at the gallery. There I learned of Die Ecke's connection to the Copello Norero family and the vast collection of documents and works they preserved. Once again, I found myself reading Copello's convoluted handwriting, and this time my entry into the study of his life and work was deeper and more complex. Because to read Copello, one must understand it as an invitation to forget the rules of traditional writing and approach the act of reading as if it were a rehearsal for a dance piece.

Reading Copello's manuscripts presents, in my opinion, two challenges to consider in order to truly engage with them. The first, that his handwriting is particularly difficult to decipher, as he wrote in an exaggeratedly rounded script, resulting in words that take the form of continuous loops. This requires a sort of paleographic exercise to learn to identify certain letters, as well as to recognize personal abbreviations and spelling or grammatical errors, especially when he wrote in Italian or English. That is why reading Copello is a slow process, as it involves a technical exercise in recognizing the written text that often requires rereading a paragraph or a page more than once.

The second issue has to do with repetition, and this is where it is important to understand Copello's writing as a *rehearsal*, in the sense of a prolonged repetition over time of a particular exercise—mental, manual, artistic—that is captured on paper. Both in his individual writings preserved at the CeDOC and in the sketchbooks from Die Ecke, Copello repeatedly writes the same passages from his biography or conceptualizations of his artworks over and over again. He rewrites chapters with multiple or minimal variations, and juxtaposes previously

written paragraphs to create new texts in the form of written collages. It is then that Copello the writer is revealed to us in all his dimensions; just as he prepares and rehearses a performance, he does the same with the written text. Copello does not capture his daily life and his art out of a mere desire to chronicle; the sketchbooks cannot be understood solely as diaries. What he does is to create drafts, works to be eventually presented to the public. He even repeats in the sketchbooks what he wrote by hand, which he then types out and later pastes those sheets onto the pages of his notebook, indicating in the diagram's layout the spaces for future images. Given the meticulous approach with which Copello prepared his literary drafts, it is regrettable that he managed to publish only two books during his lifetime: the libretto for an operatic performance titled "The Printer" in 1972, and the first part of his memoirs: "Performance Photography: An Autobiographical Analysis of My Performances" in 1999.

Copello's texts flow like a stream of consciousness, even in the way they are arranged on the page. He writes about various episodes of his life, jumping from one to another without apparent explanation, just as memories flow in the mind. To do this, he sometimes writes using enormous letters that fill the entire page, or in tightly packed lines that are barely legible, and even leaves many pages untouched. He writes from top to bottom or vice versa and begins a new narrative on the final pages of his notebooks, for which one must hold the notebook upside down. He mixes written text with diagrams of movement, timing, and musical arrangements for performances, as well as sketches. In a literal (literary) sense, he is rehearsing on paper, exercising movements of the imagination, testing combinations of narratives, dancing with the written text back and forth. When reading the collection as a whole, it is possible to roughly reconstruct a general chronology; however, since many of his performances deal with passages from his life, the text also becomes a collage of past memories invoked both in the work and in the text.

For me, the first access key to Copello's universe is to understand that he is, above all, a *multifaceted* being. Identity is, perhaps, the great dilemma of Copello's life. He himself said that, having been born under the sign of Gemini, he was determined by the duality of his "competing twins," pulled by two opposing forces that he could only sometimes balance; often he could not, and hence the constant struggle that gives rise to his works. For Copello sought his identity in a vocation, in a lifestyle, in a country, which was always insufficient. He began by trying to become a lawyer, then worked at his father's pasta factory, which was neither sufficient nor stimulating. He traveled and earned a degree, with a major in Painting, from the Academy of Fine Arts in Florence, but soon abandoned painting to specialize in printmaking. He became a master printer at the Pratt Graphics Center in New York in the late 1960s, where he mastered contemporary and experimental printmaking techniques but, again, it wasn't enough for him. His body became his art, and he devoted himself fully to performance and body art. During his second stay in New York in the 1980s, he said he was an engraver by day and a performer by night, as well as a custodian and receptionist at his friend Sandro Chía's studio. By day he practiced tai chi, yoga, and qigong with

discipline, focused on the health and vitality of his body and maintaining a healthy diet; by night he went out to parties that embodied all the boldness and uninhibitedness that characterized the underground sex-dissident scene of the Forbidden Apple.

But since nothing ever seemed enough for him, Copello cannot be reduced to mere duplicity. He said that the Noreros, his maternal family, had an instinctive tendency toward mysticism and had the traits of mediums. Copello perhaps inherited from them a psychic ability to embody other characters, using his body and mind to represent other beings, including other versions of himself: men and women, animals, spiritual beings, politicians, people from other cultures, and those in other states of mind. In that sense, Copello learned that his body was a vehicle to allow himself to be, and to let himself drift into other possible existences. He was Little Star the Martyr Queen, he was the traveling mime Alivioli, he was an angel, a harlequin of the *Commedia dell'Arte*, he was the son of Italian immigrants in Chile at the beginning of the 20th century, Checco Copello and Luisa Norero. He was the husband of American socialite Susan Stevenson; he was the assistant to the star of the Italian Transavantgarde, Sandro Chia. He was an old and weary performer, he was a poorly made-up doll, he was Lana Turner. He was Francisco Copello.

Participating in this project meant revisiting my first experience studying Francisco Copello, and this time the complexity lay in the amount of material that had to be reviewed, since we not only had to become experts on the documents held at Die Ecke, but we also had to study (almost) all of the material from the artist's other existing public collections.

Thus, our team's work process consisted, broadly speaking, of the following stages:

First, we conducted a survey and review of the extensive documentary collection of the Copello Norero family, which holds approximately 1,050 photographic slides, as well as writings, magazines, catalogs, leaflets, sketchbooks, audio tapes, personal objects, and other items, in addition to original artworks; as well as material from Copello's personal library, which included books, vinyl records, and cassettes. From this entire universe of documents and works, a selection had to be made regarding which material would be included in the so-called "Copello Norero Collection" and which documents and objects would be excluded—given the technical impossibility of having an all-encompassing new archival collection, as well as considering the element of personal privacy inherent in certain documents, which deems them unnecessary for public consultation.

In particular, identifying the collection of photographs was a process that took a significant amount of time due, for example, to the lack of information regarding some recorded performances, or the aesthetic similarity between several of them (especially the "psycho-patriotic"

performances of the 1970s). Thus, this process focused primarily on recognizing various performances and identifying their chronology.

Likewise, the project included a professional conservation component, for which acid-free cardboard boxes were purchased to store the paper-based material—magazines, sheets, catalogs, etc.—while for the collection of photographs, two clamshell boxes were acquired where the slides and photos on film and paper were stored in acid-free polypropylene folders. In addition, acid-free paper and a fixative spray were purchased to preserve the collection of dry pastel drawings from the original series “The Little Prince and the Circus” (1985–86), which forms part of this collection, in order to provide proper storage for the drawings, which shed dust due to the fragility of their material. In this way, we achieved our goal of providing the best possible physical protection for a variety of materials that originally lacked any form of preventive protection.

In addition, a selection was made of the most artistically and documentarily significant material, which included most of the photographs and the collection of sketchbooks, all of which were professionally digitized. This provides a high-quality digital backup of the material considered most relevant in the collection, ensuring a copy is available in the event of physical loss, and allowing the material to be reviewed in digital format, thereby minimizing handling and reducing the risk of further damage.

All of these previous work processes were accompanied throughout by a study of the bibliography on Copello, with a view to better managing and understanding the material in the collection. A highlight of this information-gathering effort was the interview conducted with Giovanna Dal Magro, an Italian photographer who collaborated with Copello for over a decade in Italy, documenting some of his most iconic performances. This is how we cleared up a series of doubts regarding the authorship of certain photographs from the 1970s, while also understanding the context in which they met and what the dynamics were like during the photo sessions at Dal Magro’s studio.

Once the entire phase of recognition, identification, categorization, and physical organization of the documentary material was completed, we moved on to the phase of creating the digital repository for the Copello Norero Collection. The main objective is for this bilingual website to be intuitively available for visitors, with the image, text, and audio materials chronologically organized in a timeline.

This website aims to cross-reference information among the three collections of Francisco Copello’s work that exist in Chile: 1) the video and image repository belonging to the National Museum of Fine Arts, 2) the documentary collection of writings and documents housed at the Visual Arts Documentation Center, and 3) the Copello Norero Collection housed at Die Ecke Contemporary Art gallery. Thus, this new web repository brings connections between documents from the three different collections, helping to reconstruct the network of meaning within the documentary material bequeathed by the artist. In this way,

one can find an artwork by the artist from the Copello Norero Collection, accompanied by a text available at the CeDOC and/or a link to a video from the National Museum of Fine Arts, all brought together in the same place. The purpose of creating these cross-references is to enable researchers, curators, artists, historians, and others to navigate Copello's archives in an interdisciplinary manner, discovering pathways to explore the connections between materials and documents.

The objective of this project was to make this new documentary universe—which had remained unpublished and safeguarded by the Copello Norero family—publicly available through the digital repository, with the aim of contributing new knowledge to his artistic legacy and broadening the scope for its future study and understanding. We hope that this contribution will directly help in the appreciation of his work, so that it can be exhibited and understood on a larger scale, both nationally and internationally.

Finally, it is worth noting that within the one-year timeframe established by the grant awarded to carry out this work, new written and photographic documentation was discovered that could not be fully reviewed; it has been organized for future review and inclusion in the web repository.

