

# The New York Times

## ART & DESIGN

### Educating Through Visual Poetry

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Antonio Sergio Bessa sitting beneath three drawings by Raymond Pettibon, Jason Fox's "Enhanced Focus" (2000) and a work (far right) by William N. Copley. Ivan Serpa's drawing is at bottom left. Credit 2017 William N. Copley/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; Fred R. Conrad for The New York Times

Antonio Sergio Bessa doesn't consider himself a big-time collector. Yet there's a blue-chip quality to the art on the walls of the apartment he shares with his husband, Ed Yanisch, in the Sugar Hill area of Harlem. There are museum-caliber names in the mix, like Raymond Pettibon, Kay Rosen, Ivan Serpa and Peter Saul. But it's the stories behind the works that give this intimate collection its richness — and bite. "The collection, well, it's an extension of me," Mr. Bessa said.

When the couple moved some of their more delicate pieces into their guest room, to reduce the exposure to sunlight, Mr. Bessa recalls Mr. Yanisch remarking on his "very strong taste." "I was like, 'Well, you know, it's not for the faint of heart.'"

Mr. Bessa, who goes by Sergio, is the director of curatorial and education programs at the Bronx Museum of the Arts (he organized, with Yasmín Ramírez, the acclaimed [Martin Wong exhibition in](#)

[2015](#)), but he came to art via the written word. His fascination with “the power of language” drew him to artists who use text in their works. He also translates poetry from his homeland, Brazil, and is so passionate about concrete, or visual, poetry that he focused his doctoral thesis on Oyvind Fahlstrom, the Brazilian-born Swedish artist known for his manifesto on that subject.

Mr. Bessa has gravitated to artists like [Mr. Pettibon](#), who adds handwritten phrases to his work, and the “outstanding” Jason Fox. In the 1990s, he scooped up drawings by both men, which hang on a wall, salon style, in his study. He sees the Fox painting “Enhanced Focus” (2000) as “a mix between Jesus and a delinquent,” with the pixilated blur evoking TV shows that need to disguise people.

Next up for Mr. Bessa: The exhibition “Gordon Matta-Clark: Anarchitect” (and its accompanying book), which arrives Nov. 8 at the Bronx Museum. Matta-Clark, who died in 1978, is best known for [his giant cut-outs in derelict buildings](#) in the South Bronx in the 1970s. Mr. Bessa also has a Matta-Clark in his collection: A mask from a show in Chicago. He paid \$100 for it. “But still,” he said, “it’s my Matta-Clark.” Here are edited excerpts from our conversation.

**Tell me more about how you came to concrete art and poetry in Brazil.**

It was a moment of cultural revolution in Brazil. You had the construction of Brasília [in the late 1950s], you had bossa nova, and you had concrete art and poetry. So there was a belief in form and that form could be revolutionary and could educate people.

**There’s a splash of color in the work you have by Ivan Serpa. Who was he?**

He not only was an amazing artist, but he was also an educator. There was a lot of that doubling in Brazil at the time. For such a country in development, you could not just be an artist and have a big house and a big studio — you had to be an educator. It’s very special, and I feel very lucky we’re able to have it.

**You also oversee education programs at the Bronx Museum of the Arts. What advice do you give young people?**

I ask my educators to use the ideas of collecting and curating as tropes with very young kids because collecting actually begins at a very young age when you have a stamp or button collection. It’s just about protecting and taking care of things.

**You are surrounded by art at work and at home. What do you get from each?**

The last few years I worked a lot on the museum’s collection, kind of thinking what is the kind of collection that makes sense for the Bronx. So I’ve created a narrative that has to do with the Bronx. A few years ago, I did an exhibition called [“Three Photographers From the Bronx.”](#) And I was so proud because two bodies of work from the exhibition ended up in the collection. So I’m very interested in how a collection tells a story about a community, but here [at home] it kind of tells a story about us.