

A MAVERICK LIFE: EXPLORING THE RADICAL ART OF REGINA VATER

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DECEMBER 11, 2018 AT 9:11 AM BY CYNTHIA GARCIA*

The radical art of Regina Vater is in a revealing retrospective at Galeria Jaqueline Martins, in São Paulo, through January 2019. For five decades Vater has been creating experiences in performance, painting, sculpture, mail art, photography, installation, film and video, many of them using her own body to emancipate women from their status as an object to a self-determined subject. It is no easy task to nail a standard definition on her multimedia avant-garde ART, in uppercase, the same way the Rio-born artist has stamped the three-letter word and titles of her groundbreaking provocative researches.

“I am a maverick, I always have been totally independent,” confesses the seventy-five-year-old pioneer in experimental art who enacted her first performance on the sands of Rio’s Ipanema beach in 1970. Six years later “Tina América” (1976) became one of her iconic works. Before the advent of Cindy Sherman, the photo polyptych of herself dressed up as stereotypical women questions her own identity both as a woman and a Latin American artist. It is on show at Galeria Jaqueline Martins and recently was at the Pinacoteca in “Radical Women: Latin American Art 1960–1985,” one of the most significant exhibitions to reach Brazil in 2018, organized by the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles. The artist also participated in “Feminist Avant-Garde of the 1970s,” organized by Sammlung Verbund Collection in Vienna.

In 1982, Vater curated a Brazilian Super-8 show at the Millennium theater in Manhattan with the participation of Paulo Bruscky and Ana Maria Maiolino, for which she received a Guggenheim Fellowship, followed by the New Jersey Council for the Arts Fellowship and an honorable mention from the American Film Institute of California in 1985. Five years later, under the curatorship of English art-critic Guy Brett, she participated in “Nine Latin American Artists,” at the Ikon Gallery, in Birmingham, UK.

The artist showed twice at the São Paulo Bienal, in 1969 and 1976, the latter the same year she participated in the Venice Biennale. Her work is in important private and public Brazilian collections, such as MASP and MAC/USP, and in Rio at the MAM and Museu Nacional de Belas Artes. She is represented in the Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris; Sammlung Verbund Collection, Vienna; Latin America Collection of the University of Essex, UK; and Centro de Artes Y Comunicación (CAyC), Buenos Aires. In the States, her work is found at the department of prints of New York’s MoMA Collection; the Blanton Museum of Art, Austin; the Rockefeller Alley of the San Antonio Museum of Art; Artpace Foundation, San Antonio; Marvin and Ruth Sackner Visual Poetry Archives, Miami; and the Long Beach Museum of Art in Los Angeles. Vater has been published in magazines such as Art in America, Heresies and Art Journal, and in books by American art and design educator Phoebe Farris-Dufrene.

In 1985, Regina Vater moved to Austin, Texas, where she lived with her husband, pioneering American video-artist Bill Lundberg until 2012, when the couple moved to Rio where they have lived since then.

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Regina, in your trajectory as an artist you have experimented in several media. What is the core concept that guides you?

For me, art has to do with several things such as freedom, imagination, awareness of the world around you, experimentation, a critical sense of existence, a poetical view of life and your cultural foundation. So, I use several different media in different works because I try to apply the proper media for such and such subject matter or the kind of discourse I intend to deliver with such and such a work.

Besides video-artist Bill Lundberg, who was influential in your work?

Well, Bill is my husband and I think that it is obvious that as a couple we both have influenced each other very much. But in spite of that we never lost the fundamental substance of our individual artistic personalities. I think that we all are a product of the people we encounter throughout our life. One of my ambitions in life besides to do the best in my art, and to grow as a decent human being, is always to meet the richest people in terms of character, cultural awareness, and sensibility. Life made me very fortunate, giving me the opportunity to be very close friends with Lygia Clark, Hélio Oiticica, Mario Pedrosa, Mario Schenberg, Quentin Fiori, Augusto de Campos, Guy Brett and John Cage. I not only learned a lot about life and culture from them, but I also always received from them a very positive appreciation of my art.

I thought "Tina América" was only a (stunning) polyptych composed of a series of twelve self-portraits, but it was also a performance according to the catalog of the "Radical Women" exhibition at São Paulo's Pinacoteca. Tell us about this work.

The Tina América performance took about three to four hours in my apartment in São Paulo putting on all the clothes I had. I first presented this work as an artist's book in my individual show at the Museum of Modern Art of Rio de Janeiro in 1976. In 1977, I intended to show it as a part of a big work together with a film installation when I was invited to the São Paulo Bienal. However, at the last minute before its opening, the Biennial had technical problems and I cancelled my presentation. I gave the book to Fatima Bercht as token of our friendship and in appreciation for a introductory text she wrote about my work for the first important Latin American show in Los Angeles held at the Fisher Gallery of the University South California in 1992. Sergio Bessa showed the work in a Manhattan gallery in the eighties but I cannot remember which gallery. In the early eighties I did a bi-dimensional version of this work sold to an American writer who collected works by Latin American female artists. After he died, his widow sold the piece for about US\$23,000 dollars through Sotheby's. Recently, gallerist Jaqueline Martins made a very small edition of this piece chosen by Adriano Pedrosa for a show he organized in Rio a few years ago. I also made an extra-large digital-print version on canvas that was shown in my individual exhibition at the Oi Futuro Flamengo in 2012. The work was shown in other occasions that I am not aware of. It is interesting that perhaps because of the fact that I made this piece before Cindy Sherman, everybody likes it, and I am starting to become an artist of a single piece in spite of the fact that I have live my life trying not to repeat myself.

One of the characteristics of female Latin American artists during the dictatorships was the use of their own body parts in their works. Tell us about the female body in your work.

In 1966, as a result of my experiences as a female artist in an art environment dominated by men, I started to make drawings as a comment on what Freud termed as "The envy of the Uterus." In my 1968 series of Tropicalia, the naked women had no heads as they were forbidden to think. In 1972, I won a prize to travel abroad with big paintings of women suffocated by knots and when I came back to Brazil I used my body as a support of the "THE THREE CHINESE MONKEYS" performance, for the "TINA

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AMERICA” and for the film installation “”ADVISE FROM A CATERPILLAR,” both of 1976.

In the 1960s/1970s when your work got politically engaged did you shed “blood, sweat and tears”?

I think ART always reflects the times we live in. In my case, the 1970s series of drawings over photographs titled “NÓS” [which in Portuguese means both Knots and We], is a proof of that. I think if you had worked with culture in that time you always met somebody who’d been persecuted by the military. Although I went to the Passeata dos Cem Mil (Protest of the Hundred Thousand) in Rio I never was part of any group, even in the arts. I always had been a maverick even until today. The personal attacks I received in life, in various circumstances, were for being a woman in a very machista society, and also the cold shoulder my art received from several curators I guess were due to the fact they never could put me in a drawer.

The present exhibition at Galeria Jaqueline Martins shows works from your Tropicalia series. Tell us about them and your participation in the movement.

Although I met an enormous number of wonderful people throughout my life, as I said before, I am a maverick, and I always have been totally independent. The series is called Tropicalia because when I showed these drawings at the Petite Galerie In Ipanema in 1968 I was invited by the director of Phillips Records of Brazil to make the first record cover for the album Tropicalia. In the end, the band manager refused my drawing and decided instead to have on the cover a photo of the artists, who were not very popular at that time. Of course I loved Caetano [Veloso], and I think that my work was in tune with the new kind of “cultural anthropophagy” the group claimed for themselves. Influenced by my favorite painter at that time, pop American artist Tom Wesselmann, I was very into doing a kind of Brazilian tropical pop art.

In 1972 you were awarded a prize, moved to New York and produced a photo series on garbage.

The title comes from a concrete poem by Augusto de Campos which I just had discovered before my first trip to New York in 1973. The poem, LUXOLIXO, became a symbol of Manhattan to me because of the contrast of New York’s garbage with the luxury of its store windows. That series is composed of: My first artist’s book GARBAGE 1973 which I printed at the Pratt Institute; a small series of unique OBJECTS titled NEW YORK RECUERDOS; a few poem drawings using photos and pins; some photos of garbage I called SCULruPTURES; and the POSTALIXOS which I used for postal art and an audio visual work with which in 1976 I represented Brazil at Venice Biennial titled LUXOLIXO. The sound of this piece was made with Helio Oiticica with whom I became very good friends. In New York I also met Quentin Fiori, Dore Ashton, Beuys, Kinaston Mac Shine, Lucy Lippard, Wally Salomão, Guy Brett, Antoni Muntadas, Antoni Miralda, Frances Torres, Simoni Forti, and some other interesting people.

You also worked with Mail Art, did you exchange with Paulo Bruscky, for example? Tel us about your mail art period.

I did my first work of mail art in New York in 1974—the POSTALIXOS. When I stayed in Paris for six months in 1974, I made the PARRISSES, my second work in postal art. It was only when I came back to Brazil that Paulo Bruscky made contact with me and we started a long correspondence.

You are also a pioneer in video-art. Tell us about it. Have you worked together with your husband, pioneer video-artist Bill Lundberg?

I did my first video in Paris in October 1974, as a commission by Ruth Escobar. My second video, (MIEDO), was made in 1975 in Buenos Aires with the support and camera of Jorge Glusberg from CAyC (Centro de Arte y Comunicación, based in Buenos Aires). From that time on I also made a lot of Super-8 films. I have made, since then, more than thirty video works,

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all produced economically by myself. In many of them I counted on my husband's camera work. I love to edit, Bill is a fantastic photographer, so I use a lot of his camera for my ideas of discourse. It is very difficult for us to make a work together because Bill only needs my opinion when he shows me his drawings.

From 1985 to 2012 you lived in Austin and now you and Bill moved to Rio. What made you come back?

I am very satisfied with what I did in my life abroad. Besides to have participated in several group shows and made also individual shows in New York and Texas I have participated in so, so many things. I came back to Brazil because I missed very much my language and the exuberance of the Brazilian nature. For me there is no substitute for the warm feeling of being among my people and to be surrounded by the generosity of the Brazil simple people.

To wrap up what would be your closing words of wisdom for a young rebellious striving artist like you once were five decades ago?

If you really want to make real ART never think that you are doing it for money or fame. Real ART needs passion; determination to do the best at all costs; needs questioning the world around you and yourself; needs courage to experiment and making your voice being heard and needs lots of patience to endure a frugal life. If you are lucky, the financial reward will come sooner or later.

Regina Vater
Through January 19, 2019
Galeria Jaqueline Martins, São Paulo