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All Creative Being: Interview with Anna Bella Geiger

Sarah Poppel *

Abstract

In the following interview with Anna Bella Geiger (b. 1933 in Rio de Janeiro), the Brazilian artist talks about her trajectory and various influences, which have always been deeply marked by the social and political dynamics of Brazil, especially during the dictatorship (1964-1985). In what follows, Geiger details her affiliation with abstract art at the beginning of her artistic practice in the early 1950s, traces her development in the Brazilian art scene during the 1950s and 1960s, and discusses her topographic works and pedagogical experiences from the 1970s to the present.

Resumo

Nessa entrevista com Anna Bella Geiger (nascida em 1933 no Rio de Janeiro), a artista fala sobre a sua trajetória no Brasil e várias influências, sempre profundamente marcadas pelas dinâmicas sociais e políticas no Brasil, especialmente durante a Ditadura Militar (1964-1985). Em seguida, ela detalha sua afiliação com a arte abstrata no começo da sua prática artística, no início dos anos 1950, traça o seu desenvolvimento no cenário artístico brasileiro nos anos 1950 e 1960 e discute seus trabalhos topográficos assim como experiências pedagógicas à partir de 1970 até hoje.

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Anna Bella Geiger's technical and material experimentation over the last six decades has remained in an impressively constant state of flux. It might be said that the artist's trajectory consists of a process of permanent re-invention. Born in 1933 in Rio de Janeiro, Geiger embarked upon her artistic career in the early 1950s by attending the free classes given in drawing, painting and engraving by Fayga Ostrower (1920-2001) in Rio de Janeiro. At the same time, she studied Anglo-Germanic linguistics and literature at the Faculdade Nacional de Filosofia (UFRJ – Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro). Following Ostrower's lead, Geiger established her own variant of informal abstraction and participated in the *I Exposição Nacional de Arte Abstrata* (First Exhibition of Abstract Art), held in the Hotel Quitandinha in Petrópolis in 1953. By then, abstract tendencies were only practiced by few individuals or artistic groups in Brazil, but were about to undergo a substantial boom by the end of the decade. After the rise of the dictatorship in 1964, the artist turned to expressive depictions of the human body and internal organs (her so-called *fase visceral*, or visceral phase, between 1965 and 1968). She embraced a broad range of media and printing techniques in the 1970s while pioneering video and conceptual approaches in Brazil. Always attentive to and concerned about the cultural and political issues of her home country and with ideological and geographical questions more generally, she ultimately produced an extensive body of work around the topic of maps and cartography, which she has continued to explore up through the present day.

Geiger has participated in numerous exhibitions and biennials in Brazil and worldwide, among them the Biennials of Sao Paulo (since 1961, she has participated in the 6th, 7th, 8th, 9th, 16th, 18th, 20th, 24th and 25th editions), Venice (1980), Havana and Porto Alegre (1997). In 2014, her work was included in the group exhibitions *América Latina: 1960-2013: Photographs*, at Fondation Cartier (Paris) and Museo Amparo (Puebla, Mexico), in *Concept after Concept: Before Normal* in the

Museum of Contemporary Art, Roskilde and in *Artevida* (Artlife) at the Museum of Modern Art and other venues in Rio de Janeiro. Also in 2014, the gallery Aural in Alicante (Spain) gave Geiger a retrospective, *CIRCA MMXIV: Ni más ni menos* (CIRCA MMXIV: No More, No Less). She is represented in major collections like Centre George Pompidou (Paris), MACBA (Barcelona) and MoMA (New York).

In February 2014, Geiger attended a conference about Hanna Levy Deinhard organized by the German Exile Archive in Frankfurt. Geiger's contribution focused on her friendship and study experience with the German-Jewish art historian, whom she had known during her childhood in Brazil and later in New York, where she resided in the years 1954-1955 and again in 1969. I interviewed Geiger on this occasion about her trajectory, various influences, and the situation in Brazil under the dictatorship. In what follows, she details her affiliation with abstract art at the beginning of her artistic practice in the early 1950s, traces her development in the Brazilian art scene during the 1950s and 1960s, and discusses her topographic works and pedagogical experiences from the 1970s to the present.¹

SP: At the beginning of the 1950s, you studied engraving with the artist Fayga Ostrower (1920-2001) and opted for an abstract language in your own art.² What did it mean to you to work with abstract forms? Was it a matter of having to decide between figuration and abstraction? Within abstraction, was there a conscious choice between one tendency or the other?

ABG: No, it was a much more experimental flow without clearly defined options, because nothing was yet set. The artists were in processes of production and transformation of ideas. For example, you spoke of Fayga [Ostrower] who

¹ The conversation was originally held in Portuguese and translated into English by the author.

² Born in Lodz (Poland), Ostrower grew up in Germany and after a short passage in Belgium, came to Rio de Janeiro in 1934, where she was formed as an artist, specialized in graphical techniques and became a pioneer of informal abstraction in Brazil. See Roberto Pontual, *Dicionário das artes plásticas no Brasil* (Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, 1969).

derived her own version of informal abstractionism primarily on the basis of German Expressionism, coming to Brazil from a school in Germany. In the same vein, in Rio de Janeiro, there was also the art of Oswaldo Goeldi (1895-1961), Lívio Abramo (1903-1992) and Lasar Segall (1891-1957).³ It is a story of an art ideologically linked to socialism, that is, to socialist thinking, which in this very moment was totally present. Within this situation, the transformation of Fayga's approach occurred quickly between 1951 and 1952. Her work began to change from a more German expressionist figuration when, in Rio de Janeiro, she started to pick up constructions of the *favelas*: the shapes, the rhythms and the people. This was the commitment of German Expressionism—to be engaged in social consciousness—including the human figure as the main concern. When Fayga turned from figuration to abstraction, she had a terrible argument with Oswaldo Goeldi, who was a wonderful artist, but said that he could not understand why she was doing this, these lines [see for example Ostrower's abstract compositions from around 1950] . . . She did not understand either, in the sense that it is hard to explain when you suddenly renounce the ideologically informed thinking that you had been so used to, not wanting to obey anymore or be loyal to the very same ideas. It is striking that this development had its parallel in the United States with artists like Jackson Pollock (1912-1956), Mark Rothko (1903-1970) or Philip Guston (1913-1980). But we knew nothing of each other, not due to ignorance, but because practically nobody was traveling. Therefore, the issue of abstraction in Brazil is not properly posed by seeing it as a mere adoption from somewhere else. In contrast, it was alive, also the artists were still alive and in the 1940s some refugees were coming from Germany,

for example Axl Leskoschek (1889-1976)⁴ and the art historian Hanna Levy Deinhard (1912-1984).

SP: What was your relation to Hanna Levy Deinhard?

ABG: I studied with Hanna Levy at the New School for Social Research in New York in 1953 and 1954. Being still quite young, as a woman, all by myself, it was very hard to leave Rio de Janeiro for New York. At this stage, I would say my relation to her was a kind of alibi: Hanna Levy was a good friend of my family and had known me in Rio de Janeiro when I was a child. She knew that I was in the arts, studying with Fayga and working with abstraction by 1953. She wrote to my mother not to worry. In the Metropolitan Museum and then in the New School, she would later lecture on her concept of a "Sociology of Art." This is something that was hardly studied, these interrelations between art and sociology.⁵ Hanna Levy had studied in Munich and Paris and worked extensively on Heinrich Wölfflin.⁶ She was a philosopher. Moreover, in the late 1960s she was teaching at the New School during more or less in the same period as [the German philosopher] Hannah Arendt . . .

SP: Did Hanna Levy Deinhard influence your development as an artist or your understanding of art? Is there a link in your work to the idea of a "Sociology of Art?"

ABG: I would not necessarily cobble together the pieces in such a deterministic way. I studied a little of what she was beginning to unveil then in 1954, but I was not an eager reader of her books. She wrote about the Baroque—which is very interesting for Brazil—Baroque churches and religious art. But I think that the issue of your "philosophical nature" is informed by a very European influence, which comes from Fayga, who

³ These three artists are considered among a first generation of the Brazilian *Modernismo*, officially initiated in 1922 with the *Semana de Arte Moderna* (Modern Art Week) in Sao Paulo. After this initial phase in the 1920s, the artists adopted the socialist ideology of the 1930s, culminating in the implementation of the Vargas Era and dictatorial regime (1937-1945). Consequently, the artistic production fell under a content-based primacy of the "Brazilian reality" (Antônio Cândido), leading to a socially engaged figurative style, par excellence embodied by Segall, Goeldi and Abramo – the latter two, mainly in the field of engraving. See Aracy Amaral, *Arte y arquitectura del modernismo brasileño* (Caracas: Biblioteca Ayacucho, 1978).

⁴ Born in Austria, Leskoschek emigrated to Brazil in 1939 and remained there until 1948. During his stay in Rio de Janeiro, like other artists fleeing from Nazism in Europe, e.g. Arpad Szenes (1897-1985), Leskoschek taught a considerable number of young Brazilian artists. See Frederico Morais, ed., *Cronologia de Exposições sobre Arte no Rio de Janeiro. 4. Axl Leskoschek e seus alunos: Brasil 1940-1948*, exh. cat. (Rio de Janeiro: Galeria de Arte Banerj, 1985).

⁵ See Hanna Levy, *Meaning and Expression: Toward a Sociology of Art* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1970), originally *Bedeutung und Ausdruck. Zur Soziologie der Malerei* (Neuwied und Berlin: Luchterhand, 1967). See also Levy, "Reflections on Art History and Sociology of Art," *Art Journal*, Vol. 35, No. 1 (Autumn 1975): 29-32.

⁶ In 1936 she defended her doctoral thesis, "Henri Wölfflin. Sa théorie. Ses Prédécesseurs" at the Sorbonne in Paris.

was much younger than Hanna Levy. This was an idea about art that began in the 1950s with the idea of society, the importance of society and the human figure—it has so many facets. And in a certain way I could experience this transformation in Fayga's work from my position on the periphery. She was connected to the thinking of Expressionism, but contemplating what that meant in a different context like Brazil, with its specific landscape, light, color and abstract thinking. By the time I was studying with Hanna Levy in the late 1960s, I was no longer attached to any school. I had already independently developed my work and a trajectory that would transform within the contexts of my lived situation and the time of the dictatorship in Brazil beginning in 1964. This year did not portend anything—nobody had expected such a turn in the politics of the country and simply did not know what to do when they changed so dramatically. Only a few years later the artists began to rethink their work in a sense of having something to say about current events—not because you are somehow obliged, but because you are participating, you are threatened, you are witnessing the loss of all rights of citizenship. It was not a thing you could tolerate; even as an abstract artist reflecting on the situation, you were willing to take action. In 1968, I participated in the boycott against the São Paulo Biennial. Artists who had participated in various biennials since the beginning of 1960s, initiated the boycott, suddenly throwing the opportunity to the wind; that was a huge sacrifice.⁷

SP: From the 1960s until today, you have dedicated yourself to teaching. How has pedagogy enriched your artist practice?

ABG: First of all, I am not educated in the arts. Although I studied with Fayga and later with Hanna, I have no diploma. In the early 1950s, I studied linguistics, phonetics and literature at the Faculdade Nacional de Filosofia (National School of Philosophy), where I enrolled in Anglo-

Germanic Language and Literature. I already knew a little English from school and I knew French because I had studied at a French *lycée* (high school). My choice for the course was not grounded in a desire to learn other languages or literature, but in my interest in the field of linguistics. I had a family that came from Europe, and it was not easy for my sister and I to study and to have a future. Hence, my choice was this school, and indeed, when I entered the university in 1952 I had already been studying with Fayga for several years. It was very difficult to get into these national universities because they were run by the government and had a limit of admission of thirty students maximum and sometimes not even that. On the other hand, there was an abundance of teachers coming from the literary field: writers, philosophers, and linguists. Around this time the study of linguistics was beginning to take root in Brazilian academies. So I studied until I stopped in order to travel to New York in 1953, and believed I would never return to the university, the thought of which quite embarrassed me. When I returned in the following year, I changed my mind, and enrolled in university again. Still, I was not married, and had no plans of being a wife. When I came back from New York and resumed my studies at the Faculdade Nacional de Filosofia, I provided myself with an interesting background for future work. I felt like I would fall apart, because I had to study all English literature and language, all German literature and language, all Latin literature and language, all Brazilian and Portuguese literature in the university's degree program. There were endless lists of books to read on a daily basis, presentations every two days . . . So, academic life was a hurry, which I did not choose for myself. After I got married and my first child was born in 1956, everything came together in a messy totality. This forces you to administrate your mind very well and to resist distractions. While I complained about all these study materials, I kept telling to myself: "If I do not go through it, I will never finish." Finally I put an end to it and finished the Faculdade Nacional de Filosofia, which licensed me to teach at the

⁷ The boycott was supported by many international artists, who refused to participate in the event and after a meeting in the Musée d'Art Moderne in Paris in 1968 expressed their dissent in a written letter. See "Non à la Biennale de São Paulo" (dated June 16th 1969), typed manuscript, Julio Le Parc Archive, Paris.

university. Afterwards I had nightmares that I was reading I do not know which books about verb tenses or semantics. Back then I did not suspect how much the knowledge of linguistics and phonetics would inform my artistic endeavors from the 1970s onwards, when they suddenly started to rise in my imagination and the word desired to enter my work (Fig. 1). Until the last moments of my abstract work this did not enter in any way, although I had studied cubism very rigorously with Fayga. The final two years of study focused on didactics for background in education—the ability to transmit what you had learned. One of my teachers was Anísio Teixeira (1900-1971), an advocate of Progressive or Active Education who introduced what he called “special didactics” to Brazil. The anthropologist Darcy Ribeiro (1922-1997) was one of Teixeira’s students.⁸ Ribeiro’s new curriculum at the University of Brasilia embraced all these new approaches to teaching that I became involved with at the Faculdade Nacional de Filosofia.

SP: When I think of the 1950s in Brazil I have the impression that it was a period strongly preoccupied with education in and through art. There is Mário Pedrosa (1900-1981) and his theoretical texts of the time. Moreover it was a highly important issue for artists like Ivan Serpa (1923-1973), who came to teach at the *Escolinha de Arte* (Little Art School) of the Museum of Modern Art in Rio de Janeiro.⁹ Like Ostrower, he had studied with Axl Leskoschek, who was an important mentor in artistic as well as pedagogical matters. Do you think that there is a special tradition of artistic education in Rio de Janeiro?

ABG: Some years ago, someone contacted me in the context of a thesis on Hélio Oiticica and Lygia Pape he was writing. I told him that Pedrosa was mostly interested in didactics and the pedagogical field, and that it was Maurice Merleau-Ponty who

influenced Pedrosa at a certain time. What is very little known, however, is that Pedrosa also read an English author named Herbert Read (1893-1968). During my very serious study of education with Fayga in the 1950s, she assigned us Read’s texts and lent me his book *Education Through Art* (1943/ 1954). This vein of art pedagogy was later very diluted. Pedrosa studied these ideas and passed them on to Oiticica and Lygia Pape. We can actually observe the generative effect of this information in their work, which is concerned with a question that is too extensive to discuss here but, in short, has to do with the relationship between education and leisure. By this I do not mean “leisure” in the sense of a pleasure, but in the sense of “I will rest and disperse . . .” It is very interesting to look at Hélio’s works to which he applied the idea of “creleisure” (a combination of “creativity” and “leisure”).¹⁰ These concepts of “creativity” and “all creative being” are totally exhausted nowadays, but they had a very special meaning in the late 1940s and in the 1950s because back then this was a more anthropological approach which was not common in the world of creative production. With respect to Ivan Serpa [a teacher of Oiticica and close colleague of Lygia Clark in the 1950s], he was a very intuitive person, but in this case not an initiator. He was also informed by Pedrosa, who was the source, who had been politically committed since his anarchist writings in the 1930s until the conception of the PT (Partido dos Trabalhadores, or Worker’s Party) in 1980. He had this curiosity for the peculiarities of the art of children and also of the mentally ill, a line of research that became his vocation.

SP: I think there is an eminently interesting issue in Pedrosa’s thinking, which is the notion of sharpening the mind through the understanding of artistic form.¹¹ It does not matter if the child

⁸ Ribeiro was an anthropologist with a special interest in the indigenous population of Brazil, whom he actively supported, and for education in Brazil more generally. He and Teixeira founded the University of Brasilia in the early 1960s.

⁹ From the late 1940s, Serpa dedicated himself passionately to artistic education. It is worth mentioning that the group Frente (1954-1956), out of which the Neonconcrete movement in Rio de Janeiro emerged, was formed by some of Serpa’s students of the time, among them Aluísio Carvão (1920-2001), Carlos do Val (1937), Décio Vieira (1922-1988), Lygia Clark, Lygia Pape, Hélio Oiticica, his brother César (1939) and the poet Ferreira Gullar (1930).

¹⁰ In a text titled “Crelazer,” Oiticica writes, “Not to occupy a specific place, in space and time, as well as to live pleasure or not to know the time of laziness, is and can be the activity to which the creator may dedicate himself. . . . Is Creleisure creation of leisure or belief [crer = to believe] in leisure? I don’t know, maybe both, maybe neither. The dumbos can quit at this point, because they will never understand: it is stupidity which predominates in art criticism.” See Guy Brett, ed., *Hélio Oiticica*, exh. cat. (Barcelona: Fundación Antoni Tapies, 2010), 132-135.

¹¹ See Mário Pedrosa, “As duas alas do modernismo” in *Inaugurado ... o novo edifício da Sul América terrestres, marítimos e acidentados: sucursal do Rio de Janeiro*, exh. cat. (Rio de Janeiro: Of. Gráf. da Ed. Sul Americana, 1949), 34-40. Additional texts from Pedrosa about education and art include “A força educadora da arte” (The



Figure 1. Anna Bella Geiger, *Correntes culturais (Cultural Currents)*, 1976, graphite, ink and typewriter on paper, 21 x 31 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

becomes an artist or not in the end, so long as he or she somehow learns to awaken his or her perception.

ABG: Exactly, and also his or her feelings. Yet the interpretation has to be done by someone like the doctor and psychiatrist Nise da Silveira (1905-1989), who knew that the meanings of [his patients'] drawings are not to be understood from an artistic point of view but are nonetheless related to creativity.¹² At that time there was also Read and the German scholar [Leopold] Löwenfeld (1847-1924), specifically dedicated to the teaching of children and in which all people of the Bauhaus were very interested in. During World War II in

England, Read was concerned about the children, who had experience the war firsthand. He devised a way to entertain them. Of course, you can occupy their time by having them craft something, but in Read's ideal it should be something more symbolic, more open.

SP: In 1941 there even was an exhibition with the art of children at the Museu Nacional de Bellas Artes in Rio de Janeiro and organized by Herbert Read...

ABG: I did not know... You see, they were like a puzzle to me, Oiticica's words. I even gave a class with him and Pape in which he talked about "creleisure," and it jolted my memory... I remembered by Read books on education and surrealism. Read was just a brilliant person. The unfolding of these ideas about creativity surprised me in this book about the education through art. The other day I was reading an excerpt in which he referred to the meanings of creativity as

educational force of art) (1949) or "Crescimento e Criação" (Growing and Creation) (1954).

¹² In 1946, Nise da Silveira founded a therapeutical department in the psychiatric hospital Pedro II, located in the district Engenho de Dentro. An essential part of this new endeavor was a painting studio, installed and supervised by Almir Mavignier (b. 1925). The studio was frequented by the artists' friends Pedrosa, Serpa and Abraham Palatnik (b. 1928); all of whom were fascinated by the art of psychiatric patients. See Gláucia Villas Bôas, "O Ateliê do Engenho de Dentro como espaço de conversação (1946-1951). Arte Concreta e Modernismo no Rio de Janeiro," in André Botelho, Elide Rugai Bastos and Villas Bôas, eds., *O modernismo em questão: A década de 1950 no Brasil* (Rio de Janeiro: Topbooks, 2008), 137-167.

understood by the Jewish religious philosopher Martin Buber (1878-1965).¹³

SP: If we go back to your artistic development, by the mid-1960s you took another path and began to use an expressionist figuration, the so-called *fase visceral* (visceral phase), in which sometimes forms seem to be more figurative, sometimes more abstract . . .

ABG: I think they are all abstract, but not in the sense of the kind of abstraction that I was familiar with. I think at that time, in 1965, my drawings—in gouache, painting and especially engravings—began to turn against me. I began to realize that abstract construction provided no challenge anymore; there was no further point. With respect to the discussion of space, form or rhythm, it was just empty. “To give up abstraction” for me was counter-intuitive, however, because at that moment my abstract work was already quite well known and award-winning. For example, in 1962 I won the price at the *Primer Concurso Latinoamericano de Grabado* (First Latin-American Contest of Engraving), organized at the Casa de las Americas in Havana. Interestingly, I won with an abstract work (Fig. 2), because the jury was not ideologically rigid like one might expect and not at all comparable to that of the Soviet Union. There was another dynamic; it was Cuba, a phenomenon of its own. Socialist ideas were still very strong, but Cuba was so interesting despite this decline, there was a sophistication in terms of the freedom of art. I remember that they were producing independent films. It was also not like Maoism in China. The Cuban people did not believe very much in these things. They had their independence and their music; they were not going to repeat socialist canons. The general tenor was less obedient and more free. In any case, my abstract works were well accepted in São Paulo Biennials

and internationally. Suddenly things turned upside down: my work had become what Mário Pedrosa called *fase visceral* (visceral phase). People were not, and never are, modest when they speak of a “phase.”



Figure 2. Anna Bella Geiger, *Untitled*, 1962, etching, 30 x 29 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

I thought that was amazing – how could they talk of a “phase”? I remember at the time “phase” I only heard of in relation to artists like Picasso, who had real phases, but I should have a “phase?” So they named it “visceral.” People used and invented terms at the time and a newspaper said I was “eviscerating” the human form. The works were really of the body, totally born from the organic, instead of, say, my abstract drawings. They emanated out of myself, because I had no one to talk to. It was not a shock, you know that we do everything quiet, in silence. The artist is alone. I came to realize that I could no longer obey the orders of abstract thought and abstract rigor that I had previously followed.

SP: In this period, did you feel somehow an absence of the human figure or the body in abstraction? How did the change mark your artistic and philosophical preoccupations?

¹³ “Buber begins by examining the concept of ‘creativity’ on which, as he says, modern educators rely so much. He shows that it was only fairly late in history that this concept, formerly reserved for the divine action of calling the universe into being, was metaphorically transferred to human activities, more especially to works of genius in the sphere of art. It was then recognized that this tendency to create, which reaches its highest manifestation in men of genius, was present, in however slight a degree, in all human beings. There exists in all men a distinct impulse to make things, an instinct which cannot be explained by theories of libido or will to power, but is disinterestedly experimental.” Herbert Read, *Education through Art* (London: Faber and Faber, 1958), 285.

ABG: No, I did not perceive as something painful. I felt it in the sense that the approach of each one exists totally and grows in you. In my case, this is true for the subjective part—the unconscious in addition to the conscious or objective. You ask yourself about your needs at a certain time and you start to think: “I have no more interest in abstraction, I just do not succeed with it anymore.” This is not a conscious process, it comes by itself. It is not a decision like “I do not want white coffee anymore.” It was more a “I do not know anymore”—a very terrible thing: not knowing any longer how to think abstractly, in philosophical terms. In contrast, I know how to teach the student, know how to guide his work but not in my own artistic work.

SP: In the text Fernando Cocchiarale wrote for the publication about your work, he cited philosophers like Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari or Friedrich Nietzsche . . .¹⁴

ABG: He had been studying philosophy when he wrote that. People get scared because his analysis fit perfectly with what I was thinking about the body, but not in philosophical terms. I saw my use of specific parts of the body as based on a questioning of these parts. There was a political inflection. I was not interested in the bones, but in the organs, the heart in all its meanings. So I made many works that I called “heart.” Then the liver, which even mobilizes the moods, resulted in several versions, for example one that was filled with all colors of the bile. And from there I went to scientific publications in order to see how the organs were located. The bodies I depicted were not invented in the sense of a monster, something ugly or something beautiful, or something that is only female or only male—another, for example, I called *Masculino-Feminino* (Masculine-Feminine) (1967; Fig. 3). In these works I still played with abstract principles of constructing something, but this no longer attracted me as such. By this point, when I looked at my earlier abstractions, it was like looking at the work of someone else. I judged

them as nonsense, leading nowhere. This is why I said goodbye to this approach. It is a process you cannot control.



Figure 3. Anna Bella Geiger, *Masculino-Feminino* (Male-Female), 1967, metal engraving, 83 x 66 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

Within the body series, I started to elaborate many ideas about the torso, and at one point, I had the idea that these works should be three-dimensional. I already had seen some plastic anatomical models that could be disassembled, but even though there must have certainly been some available, I did not have direct access to industry in Brazil. When I saw some advertising for Shell that featured plastic human figures, I thought they perhaps they had the ability to produce molds. The fact that I did not accomplish this also has to do with the situation in which I lived. The situation of the dictatorship really complicated things. I had four children, and my husband, who is a geographer, also was arrested due to his ideas and I lived in terror, preoccupied with the problem of providing for the family. Nobody would buy these works; there was no market at all. From time to time someone came to see the abstract works in the museum where they were exposed, but I had no gallery. For some artists, who were alone,

¹⁴ Anna Bella Geiger and Fernando Cocchiarale, *Anna Bella Geiger* (Rio de Janeiro: Funarte 1978).

without children to care about, the situation was somehow bearable. But I had four children, who had to study, who had to eat . . . this was much later the topic of *O Pão Nosso de Cada Dia* (Our daily bread) (1978; Fig.4).

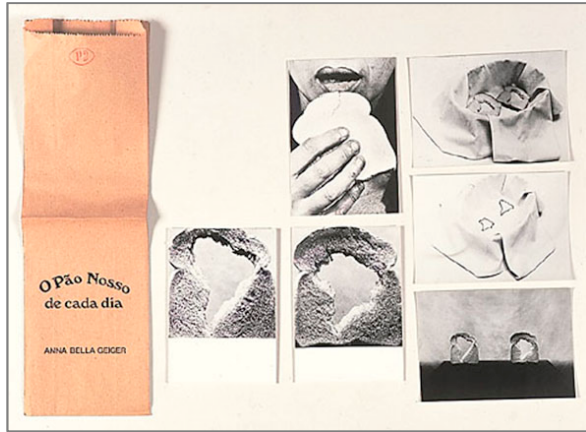


Figure 4. Anna Bella Geiger, *O pão nosso de cada dia* (Our Daily Bread), 1978, bread bag and six postcards, 17 x 12 cm each. Photograph Januário Garcia, courtesy of the artist.

My children did well in public schools, helping them to study in the secondary and enter the contests for the public colleges, which relieved me in as much as I just had to think of practical things in the house where we lived. The living space was tight, with four children, two boys and two girls, and it required time for their entertainment. When they were little, I made toys for them. My father was a craftsman from Europe who made his own clothes and I learned from him, turning a can of Quaker Oats into little cars, this sort of thing. None of this corresponded with the principles of consumer society. I stayed with the children while they were at home and invented a few wooden toys, made small houses, which we built together. So they probably developed a different kind of imagination than their colleagues who were economically better situated. As I could not send the girls to any dance courses, I would put on the music of Miriam Makeba and make them dance. In the period of the dictatorship, travelling or leaving the country and staying abroad was not my husband's plan because he was a person totally involved with the political, social and economic issues in Brazil. So the challenge consisted in

coping with the situation, managing to work and be happy, too.

SP: There were also many artists who chose exile and abandoned the country . . .

ABG: We, the plastic artists, were abandoned. In comparison, musicians had many more resources. I am not saying this because I was considering myself a victim, but in truth I could not even fulfill my day-to-day needs. I had nothing, no car. I had the house where we lived in the Zona Sul (a Southern suburb of Rio de Janeiro). Then in 1969, when we went to New York so that my husband could teach at Columbia University. Everything happened very fast, with Pedro [Pinchas Geiger] teaching and me working as an artist. Yet the story remained the same, because I had to take care of the children. Therefore I went back to Rio de Janeiro later that year, and Pedro stayed a little while longer.

When I started with videos in 1974, I sacrificed my body, testing its endurance. For example, in *Passagens* (Passages, 1974; Fig. 5), I look tired – and I actually was. The video is a loop of me climbing the stairs, but in order to film it I had to repeatedly climb them. But soon after I realized that these videos did not really lead to what I wanted to capture. I began to work differently, questioning the medium of video itself. At this stage, the political situation also began to enter into my work in some way, with a certain humor.

In hybrids of drawing, video and painting, I continued my exploration of Brazilianness, an immersion that made research previous decades like the 1920s, which I myself had not experienced directly. I made a drawing called *Burocracia* (Bureaucracy) (1976; Fig. 6) that made people laugh, because I appropriated the women from an advertisement in a 1920s Rio de Janeiro magazine. That source was also used in an almost unknown video that will be included in a group exhibition in Denmark in May 2014.

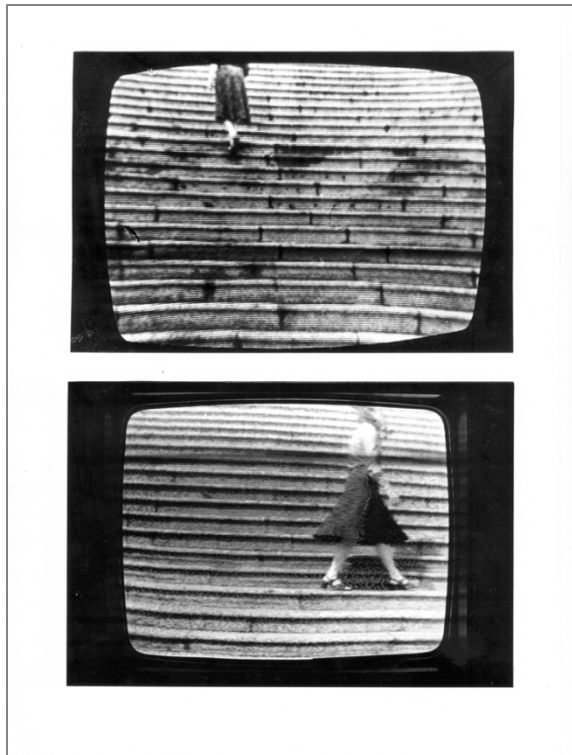


Figure 5. Anna Bella Geiger, *Passagens I (Passages I)*, 1974, still of 12 minute, black-and-white video filmed by J. T. Azulay. Courtesy of the artist.

SP: In the very moment your artistic endeavor was becoming more conceptually informed and delving into what you called Brazilianness, maps and cartographies appear as an essential element. Could you tell more about how your interests in maps and cartographies took root?

ABG: Within the visceral works of 1966-69, topological or topographic drawings began to emerge. Within the organs I started to draw projections, in some cases mountains, as there would be in a landscape—very weird. Topology itself appeared also in a series of 1978, in which I established connections between the contours of Brazil and a drawing of an amulet, and then anthropomorphized the resulting form (*Am. Latina*, 1977; Fig. 7). The distance allows us to see how my phonetic studies had a favorable effect upon a possible wordplay between "amuleto" (amulet), "a mulata" (the mulatto), "a muleta" (the crutch), and "Am. Latina" (Latin America). There was also the transformation of the amulet form



Figure 6. Anna Bella Geiger, *Burocracia (Bureaucracy)*, 1976, ink drawing, 20 x 25 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

into a map. The map was the most discussed topic at home with my husband Pedro, who is a geographer. We talked about the map not in its physical sense, but as it related to strange topics, like its regional divisions. Along with other geographers, Pedro determined the modern geography of Brazil as divided into three geoeconomic regions rather than the limitations of the 27 Federative Units.¹⁵ During his field research at the Institute of Geography, he explored very remote places, like the border of Maranhão.

All this had not been in my imagination, and suddenly it was. Imagine this oddity: you have a land, a place that is undefined, and all at once it becomes defined. Of course, I already had a long trajectory of my artistic work and in the late 1960s I had also started to read a lot of Freud and Jung on the symbol and its significations. This was not about psychoanalysis, but more to pick up a certain reading. I was surprised that I made

¹⁵ Based on economic and regional historical aspects, in 1967 Pedro Pinchas Geiger proposed the regional division of Amazônia Legal (Legal Amazon), Centro-Sul (South-Central) and Nordeste (Northeast).

something cartographic that seemed to belong more to the field of, say, symbolic archetypes. This is not to say that I did not trace these topological forms accurately, but they nonetheless came to me by way of almost “pre-historic forces.” Then there was also the fact that I had studied the map a great deal in political and ideological terms. With my map works, I began to modify the material, and the question arose of how to formulate this mapping theme aesthetically. Such a form was certainly possible, but not easy to achieve successfully. For example, a map of the Renaissance is so lovely, so seductive. My distrust of the semantic claims of the map led to the conviction that its logic had to be understood from a contemporary point of view, the actuality I lived in (Fig. 8). Today I can talk explain this, but at the time, things were not so clear. I went to see maps of the Renaissance, scrutinizing their visual and written content. What situations can be found there? Even though they are painted according to the aesthetic and stylistic standards of the time, they were not conceived to be beautiful in the first place. Some 16th century Portuguese cartographers began to draw regions of the newly discovered Brazil in Renaissance style, and the modern map was born. In contrast, the map of the Middle Ages was not three-dimensional. In the 13th century the world is still flat and lacks the Americas—it is a world without America.

This transformation had to do with my former developments. My understanding of myself as an abstract artist and follower of an “-ism,” abstraction, changed in the 1960s, when my situation became too comfortable. The crisis in my work in 1965 occurred because I could have continued in this manner, but only as a copier of myself (I had already been working on it for over fifteen years). So I found myself in the chimera—through distrust in myself, in my own work. You have to have the confidence to go through; you must have willingness; you must have anger. If you have it, you have it, if you don’t, you don’t. Later, I imagined that the maps surrounded or were somehow approaching me. I was in this situation

of the archipelago, in which everything appeared as a map. Every time I saw a map I came to verify and see clearly what it was and had always been. . . it’s a strategy. There is no ingenuity in promoting a design that tries to designate regions, seeing land from above. And even there, in the maps of the Renaissance, when the great voyages began to take off, they also introduced faunas and floras and crops. Everything was delicately adorned yet at the same time informative—this too was a great strategy of the period. As early as the years between 1972 and 1975, my understanding of cartography began to undergo radical changes. I can see its effects in my work (Fig. 8), but also and especially in my teaching practice. Of course, I have a certain distance from my artistic work, but, in the end, I am on the side of those who devote themselves to pedagogy. There I can see myself most critically.

SP: In 1987, together with Fernando Cocchiarale (b. 1951), you published the book *Abstracionismo geométrico e informal: A vanguarda brasileira nos anos cinqüenta* (Geometric and Informal Abstractionism: The Brazilian Avant-Garde in the Fifties). It is one of the most fundamental compilations regarding the development of abstract art in Brazil, at the time only comparable with *Projeto construtivo brasileiro na arte* (The Constructive Project in Brazilian Art, 1977) by Aracy Amaral. In contrast to this earlier book, however, you pay tribute to both tendencies of abstraction practiced in your country.

ABG: At that time, Funarte (Fundação Nacional de Artes. the National Foundation of the Arts) was newly founded. The dictatorship’s regime was still in power, but looking back at the 1970s today, it is clear that the production of some artists remained very strong. When Funarte came into being in Rio de Janeiro, it gave artists urgency, encouraging them to explore what was happening in the contemporary art scene rather than perpetually starting with outdated styles like modernism.



Figure 7. Anna Bella Geiger, *Am. Latina*, 1977, frottage, crayon and color pencils on paper, 58 x 97 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

So they did some little books on four artists: one about my work, one on Oiticica, one on Arthur Barrio (*1945), and one on Rubens Gerchman (1942-2008). Funarte asked me to write the book based on my memories of the 1950s and 1960s. Fernando is much younger than me and was a student of mine. We decided to do a survey of all artists. At that point in the 1970s all of them were still alive. I say this because, for example, in the selection we had left Oiticica until the end, since he was younger than the others, yet suddenly he died (in 1979). We were totally shocked. We also included Pedrosa, who was an interesting figure, even though he was already aged, we succeeded in doing an interview with him.¹⁶ Finally we managed

¹⁶ Pedrosa initiated his critical work in the political line of Marxist and socialist ideas in the 1920s and 1930s. Since 1927 he stood in close proximity to both the Bretonian Surrealism and Mexican muralism. Due to his temporary affiliation to Trotsky, he was forced into exile with the establishment of the Estado Novo in 1937 and

to publish the compilation that became a key book in the universities, some of which soon requested permission to do reprints, as the first print run was quickly exhausted. We wanted to do another text besides those interviews, analyzing from an actual point of view the developments of the preceding decades. Although I am not a historian, the time that had elapsed allowed me to see some precise events that had marked the art in Brazil and in Rio de Janeiro at the time.

SP: I think it was the first book that actually focused on both tendencies of abstraction, geometric as well as informal.

subsequently lived in Paris, New York and Washington, where he worked among others at MOMA and published numerous articles in political and cultural magazines. When returning to Brazil in 1945, he became a strong supporter of geometric abstract tendencies. See Otilia Beatriz Fiori Arantes, *Mário Pedrosa: itinerário crítico* (São Paulo: Cosac Naify, 2004).

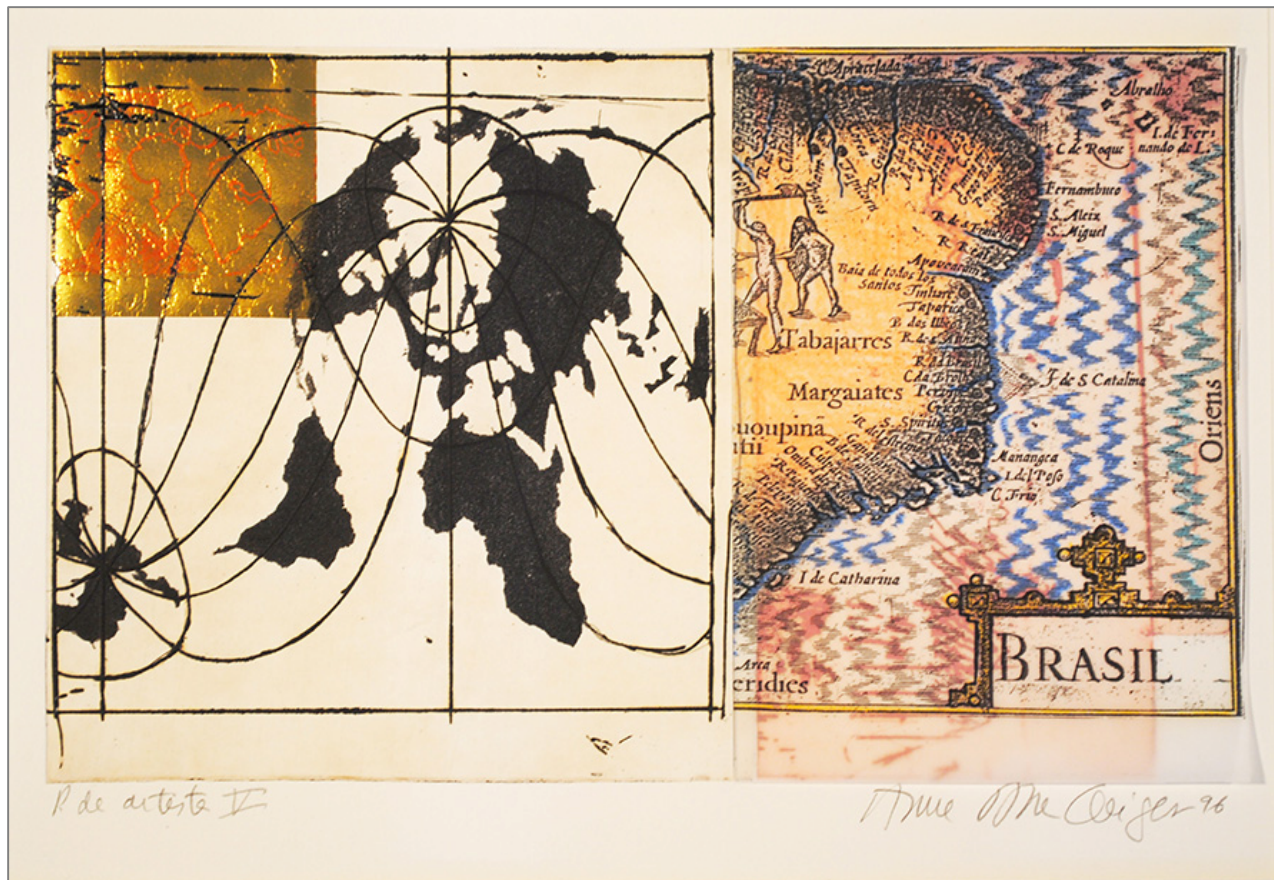


Figure 8. Anna Bella Geiger, *Brasil 1550-1995, 1995*, photoengraving on metal, serigraph, collage and color pencils, 30 x 67.5 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

ABG: I can say that it was. In the 1950s, the concretists and later the neoconcretists were very much against informal abstract artists, wanting to weaken their position, I would say, in a very unfair way. The neoconcretists in Rio de Janeiro had two amazing critics in Pedrosa and Ferreira Gullar (*1930), who turned the implications of [of Clark, Oiticica, Pape and others] into words. On many occasions, however, these same critics wrote against informal abstraction.¹⁷ It was not right. I had become an abstract artist through informalism, and I remember when they started calling it “tachism,” as if this was a bad word (perhaps because it was associated with German artists).¹⁸ Drawn from the French word *tache*,

¹⁷ Ferreira Gullar was author of the “Neoconcrete Manifesto,” originally published in the newspaper *Jornal do Brasil* in 1959, in which a conscious positioning against more dogmatic tendencies of concrete art. In the same year and newspaper, Mário Pedrosa published the article “Do ‘Informal’ e Seus Equívocos” (On the “Informal” and its equivocations), reprinted in Mário Pedrosa, *Mundo, homem, arte em crise* (São Paulo: Ed. Perspectiva, 1975).

¹⁸ The reference is to be made to artists like Henri Michaux or Hans Hartung, who worked in the kind of free abstraction employed by Wassily Kandinsky between 1910 and 1922 and which finally had evolved within the tradition of German Expressionism. See e.g. Michel Seuphor, *Knaurs Lexikon abstrakter Malerei. Mit einer*

“tachism” was yet not a common denomination for abstraction at that time. So, when I received the opportunity to write the book, I wanted to do justice to the intelligence of both sides, and how certain artists combined their insights. This is true for an artist like Mira Schendel (1919-1988), who in my reading has her origins in the informal, but cannot be properly placed on one side or the other. There was a critic in São Paulo who classified her as an informal artist, justified by some other principles as the volimeter, the measure of the volume. Some principles in Schendel’s work, as well as many other artists, have a rigor borne from gesture—a complex consolidation of both abstractionisms. Hence, the idea of the book was absolutely a must!

ausführlichen Darstellung der Geschichte der abstrakten Malerei (München: Droemer Knaur, 1957).