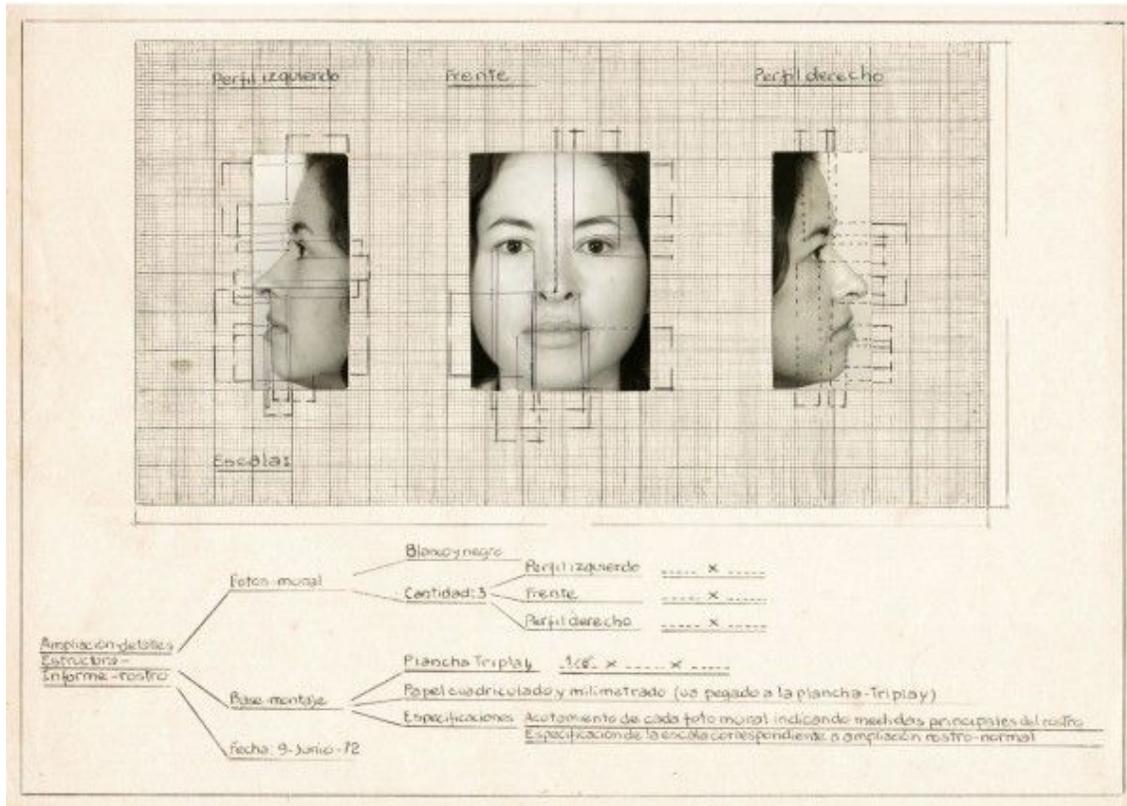


Coding Language, Datifying the Self: "Teresa Burga, An Artist or a Computer? Conceptual works from the 1970s" @ S.M.A.K., Gent, Belgium

ANNA BATTISTA | MARCH 11, 2018



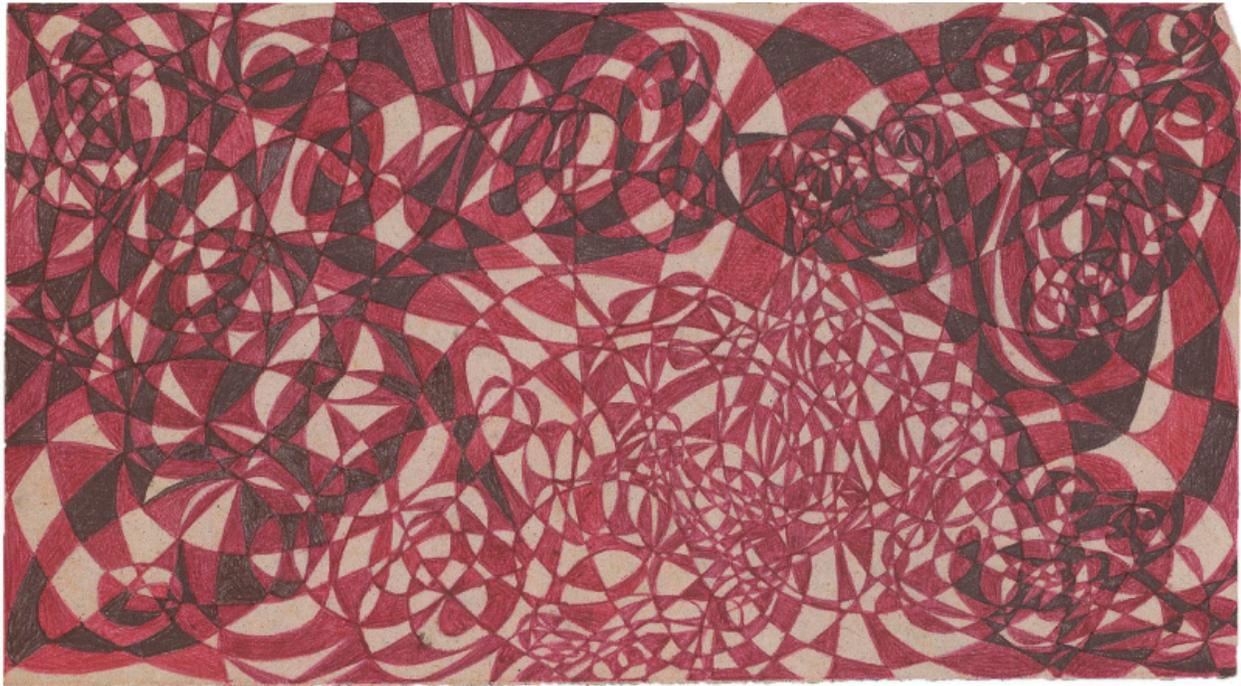
In the last two posts we looked at themes such as fashion and [future/technology](#), so let's continue the thread looking at artworks with a scientific or technological twist about them via the work of multimedia artist Teresa Burga, a precursor of media art and technology-based art.

Born 1935 in Iquitos, Peru, Burga studied painting at the Pontifical Catholic University of Peru, graduating in 1965. In the 1960s, she became a member of the group Arte Nuevo (New Art, 1966 - 1968), known for introducing avant-garde movements such as Pop and Op Art in the Peruvian context.

She attended the School of the Art Institute of Chicago between 1968 and 1970, developed an interest for technological progress and mass culture and started approaching art as a science.

Burga returned to Peru after her studies, but at the time the country was under the military government of general Juan Velasco Alvarado and her experimental proposals weren't supported by the government. She started working for the Peruvian customs department and eventually managed to organise two ambitious large-scale multimedia installations at the gallery of Instituto Cultural Peruano Norte-americano in Lima, "Autorretrato. Estructura-Informe 9.6.72" (Self-portrait. Structure-report) in 1972, and "Cuatro mensajes" (Four messages), in 1974.

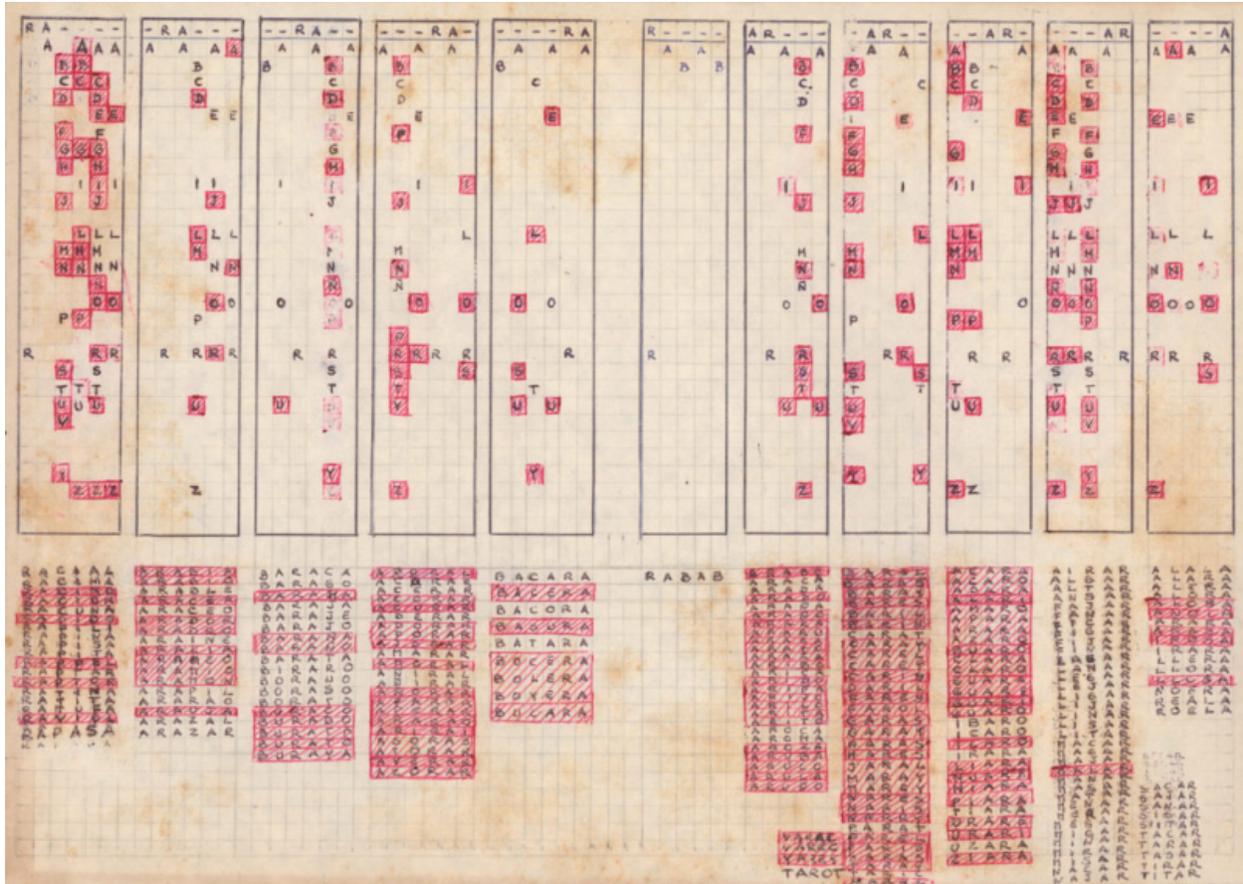
In the early '80s she created with psychologist Marie-France Cathelat a multidisciplinary investigation entitled "Perfil de la mujer peruana" (Profile of the Peruvian Woman), that analyzed the status of women in Peru.



Her work was rediscovered around 2010 when she was invited to take part in several solo and group exhibitions. [The Museum of Contemporary Art](#) (S.M.A.K.; Jan Hoetplein 1, 9000 Gent, Belgium) in Gent has currently got an intriguing exhibition on celebrating Burga (until 13th May).

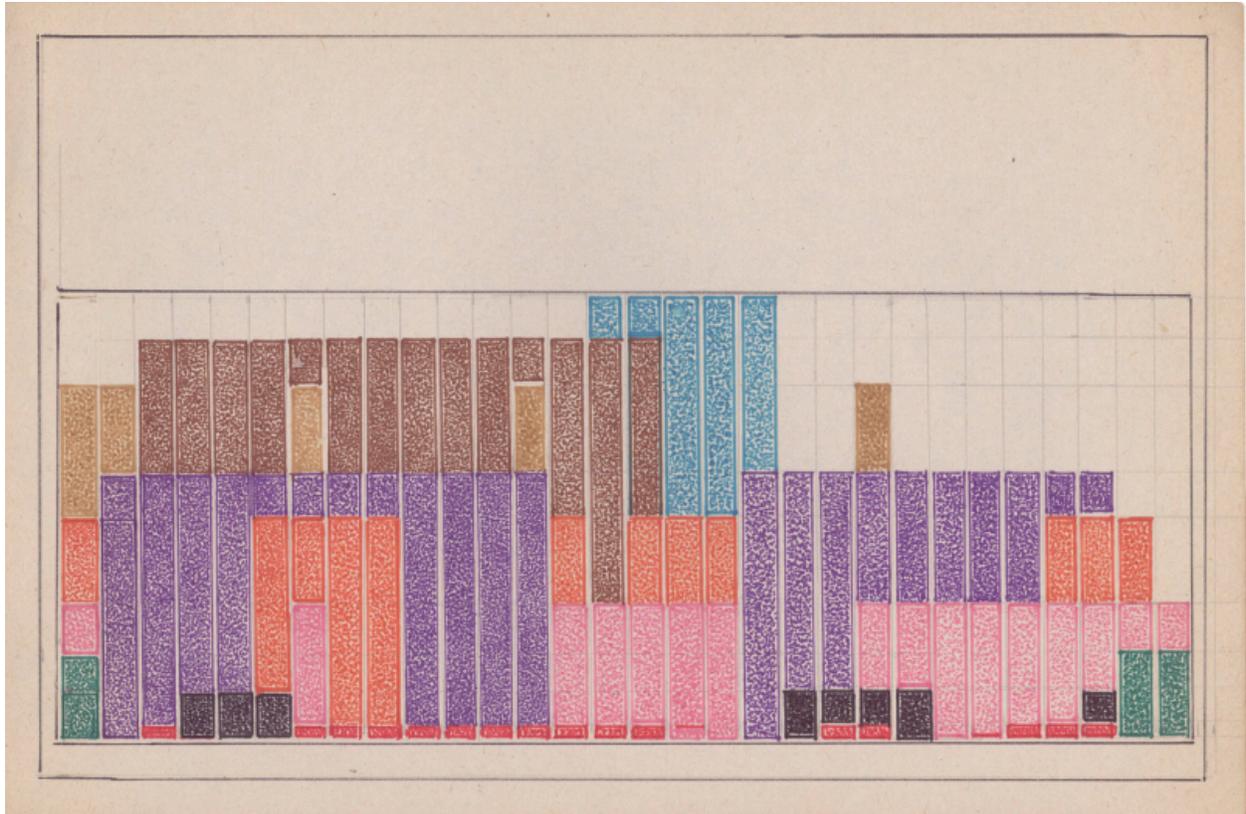
"Teresa Burga, An Artist or a Computer? Conceptual works from the 1970s" is set to analyse Burga's radical artistic position by means of the installations "4 Mensajes" (1974) and "Borges" (1974), as well as several conceptual drawings and objects from the 1970s.

Particular attention is paid to the experiments with the coded representation of language and projects based on the process and passing of time.



In "Borges", the artist rearranged the 1929 poem "La noche que en el Sur lo velaron" (Night-watch on the South Side) by Jorge Luis Borges to create an analytical-poetic installation of great visual power.

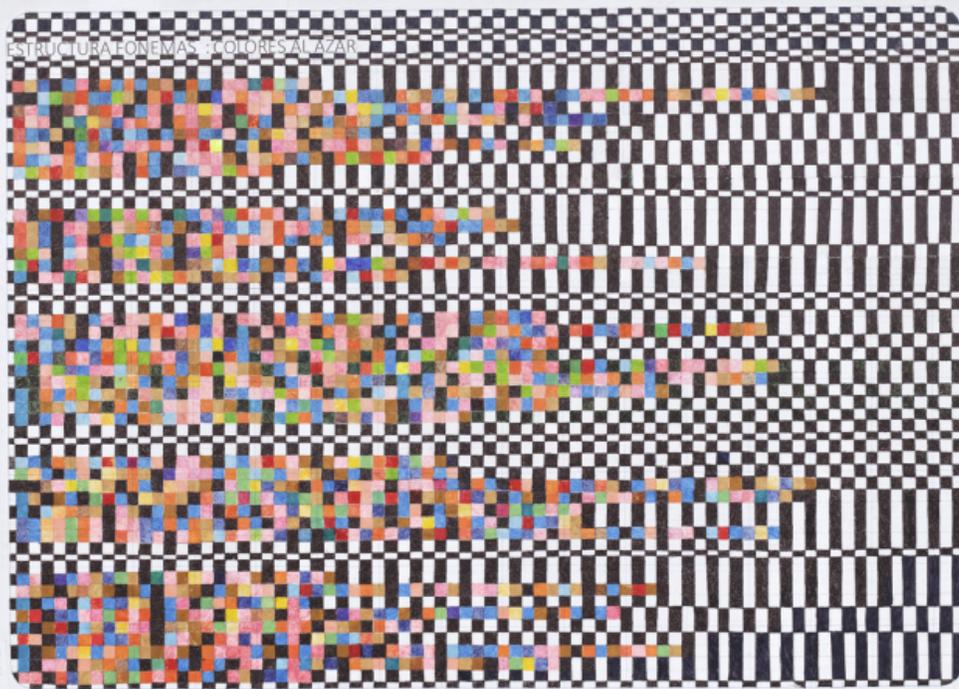
Burga dissected sounds and verses, drew grids on technical drawing paper, coloured them in with a felt-tip pen, made notes, copied, calculated and cut and pasted them, giving Borges' poem a bureaucratic aesthetic twist, and linking in her work social sciences, poetry and art.



The multimedia project "4 Mensajes" referred to the interference by the military regime in the Peruvian television network in the 1970s, but the soldiers did not take offence at it because they never grasped its meaning.

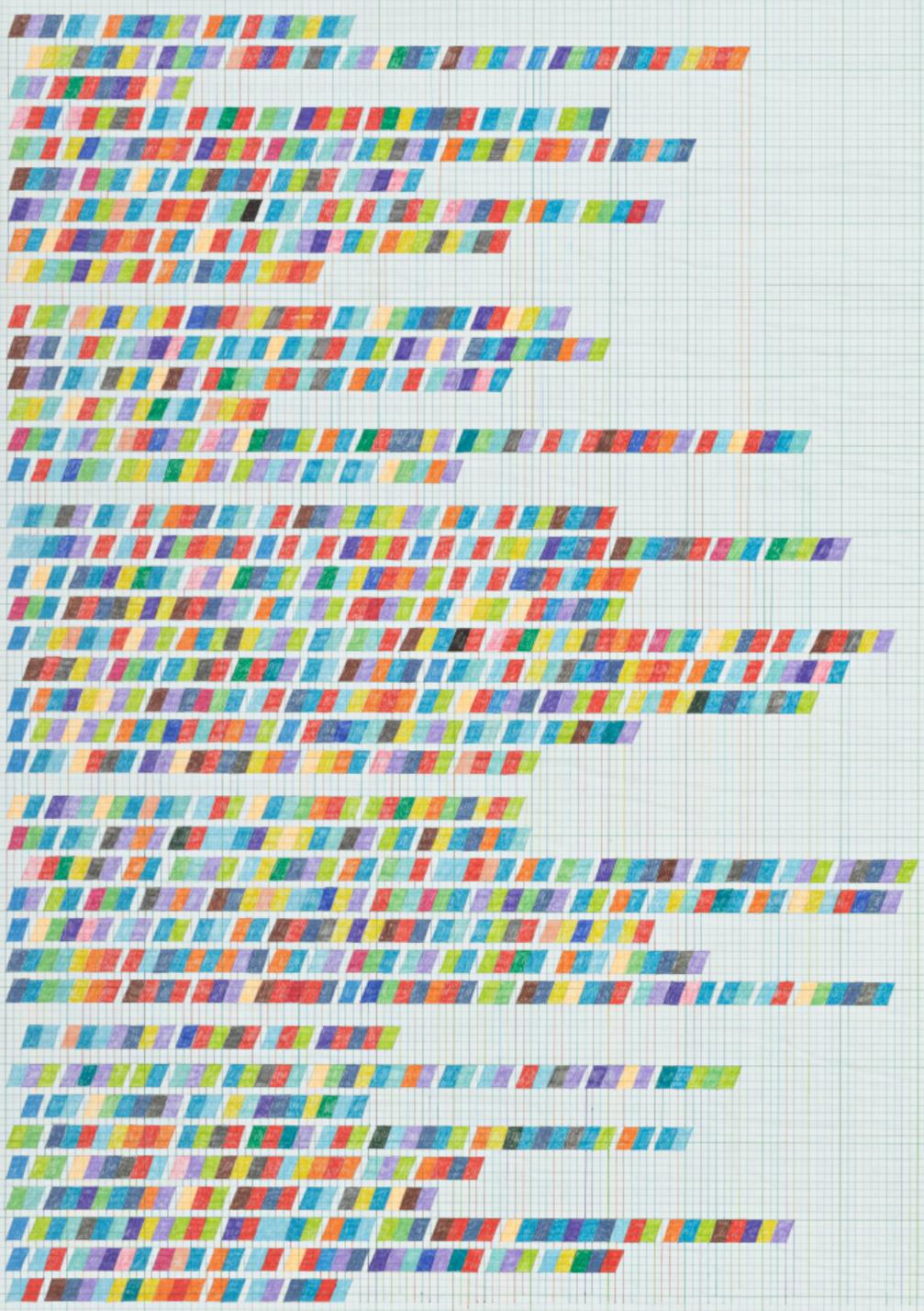
Burga picked 4 messages at random from the television on 27 December 1973: images of a calculator and a face, a text and a sound excerpt. Then she proceeded to break their language, sound and visual features on the basis of structures driven by information and radically rearranged them.

ESTRUCTURA 1 FONEMAS : COLORES AL AZAR



The first message is based on fragmentary close-ups of a calculator projected on the wall in the form of slides. Burga developed the second from film material of a face making three silent movements.

ESTRUCTURA 4 FONEMAS : VOCABLOS EN EL ESPACIO COLORES AL AZAR



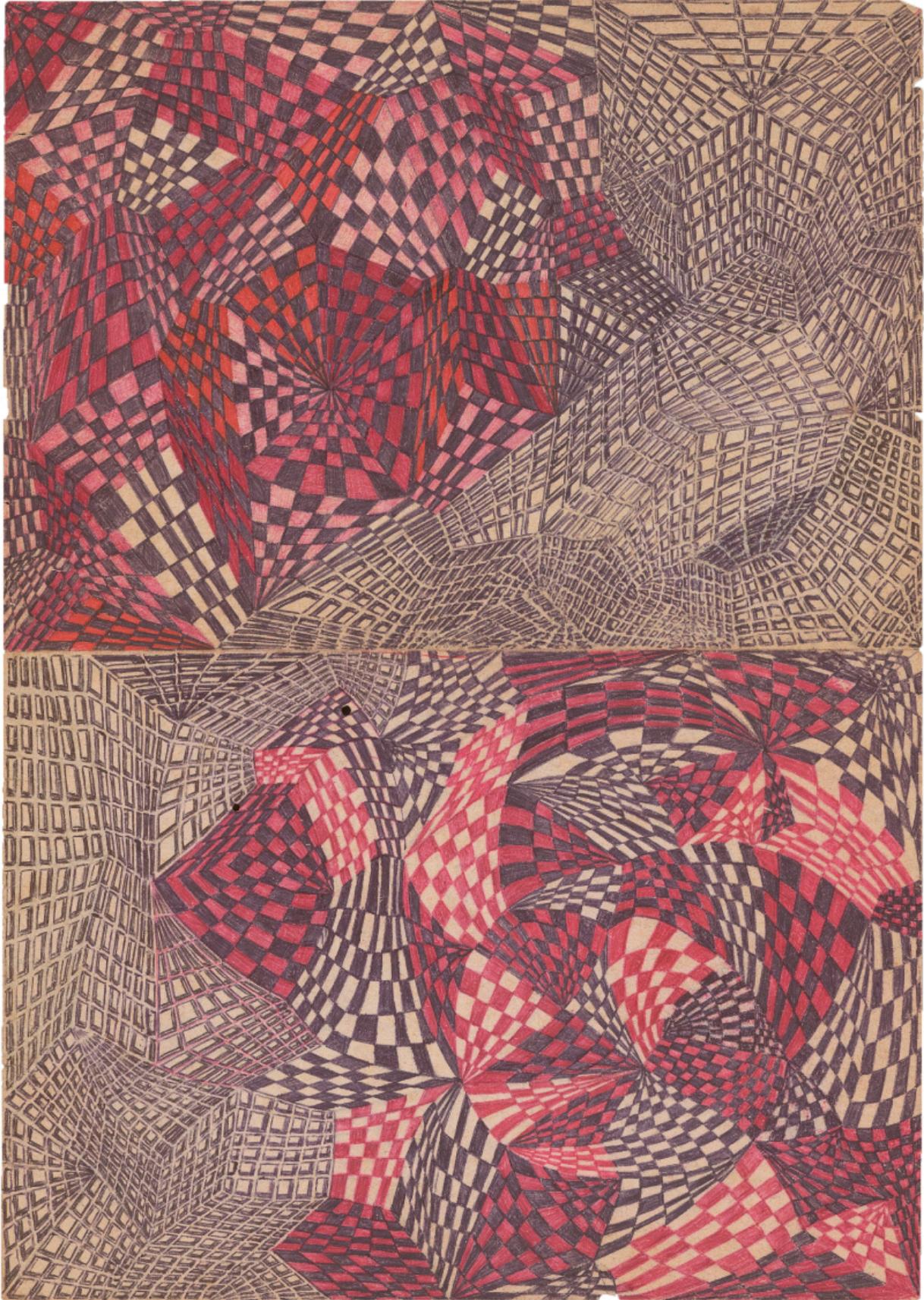
The third message is a visual and graphic transformation of a text about environmental pollution, a very relevant topic in our times as well: Burga deconstructed a text about encouraging people to fight against pollution and defend the green regions, the great lungs that purify the environment in which we breathe.

She then offered three graphic variations of this text, converting it into typed charts in which each letter of each word is repeated, giving rise to larger or smaller triangles which form a rhythmic whole that is highly visual and graphic, turning the text into squares and highlighting the various positions of each letter of the alphabet in the structure of the sentence and replacing each word in the original sentence by its dictionary definition. The fourth message consists instead of distorted sounds.



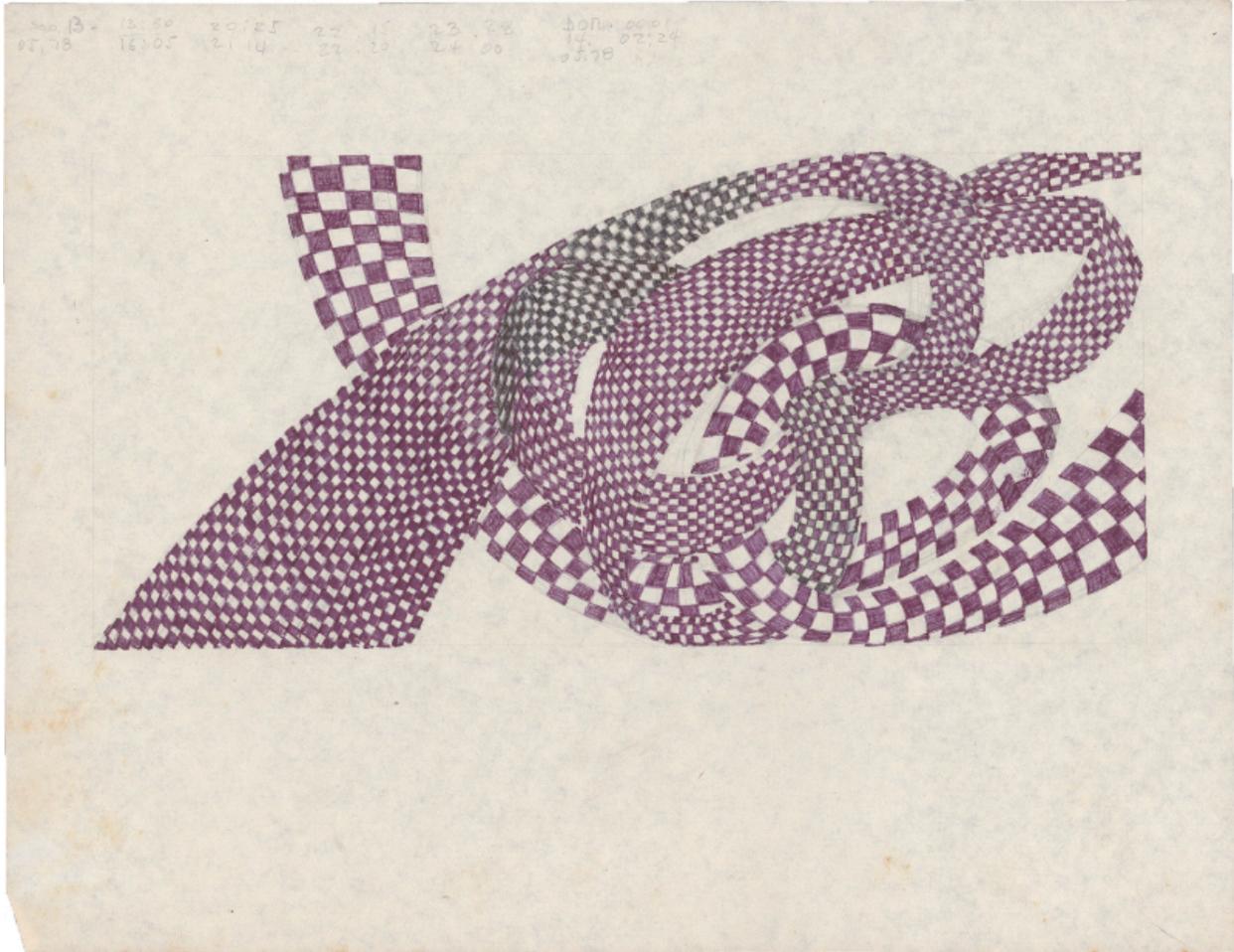
Language and its structures assume a vital importance in Burga's work, but so do time and process, key elements in her drawings from the 1970s.

The drawings in the series "Ilusión Óptica" (Optical Illusion) consist for example of unexecuted mural drawings that Burga drew by hand but which appear to continue developing on the basis of an algorithmic system.



"Autorretrato. Estructura. Informe. 9.6.1972" (Self-Portrait. Structure. Information. 9.6.1972) is instead a fascinating combination of diagrams, documents, illustrations, objects, light, sound and medical documents.

First shown in 1972 in "Autorretrato" Burga deconstructs herself in a series of scientifically measurable elements. On 9th June 1972 she indeed had measurements taken of her heart, face, blood and other physical conditions.



Her facial features were measured so that she could then draw out the topography of her face; the chemical composition of her blood was examined and her heartbeat was charted on an electrocardiogram and a phonocardiogram.

Burga gave shape to this self-portrait in a light sculpture, which reproduces the rhythm and sound of her heart on the day the measurements were taken.

By giving material form to abstract data, Burga anticipated computer-generated art, while commenting at the same time about the dangers of control-based bureaucratic systems that suppress the subjectivity and individuality reducing everything and everyone to a pile of data. Sounds like food for thought for our data-crazed society,

while "Teresa Burga, An Artist or a Computer?" seems a great opportunity to step into the world of this unique artist and (re)discover her.

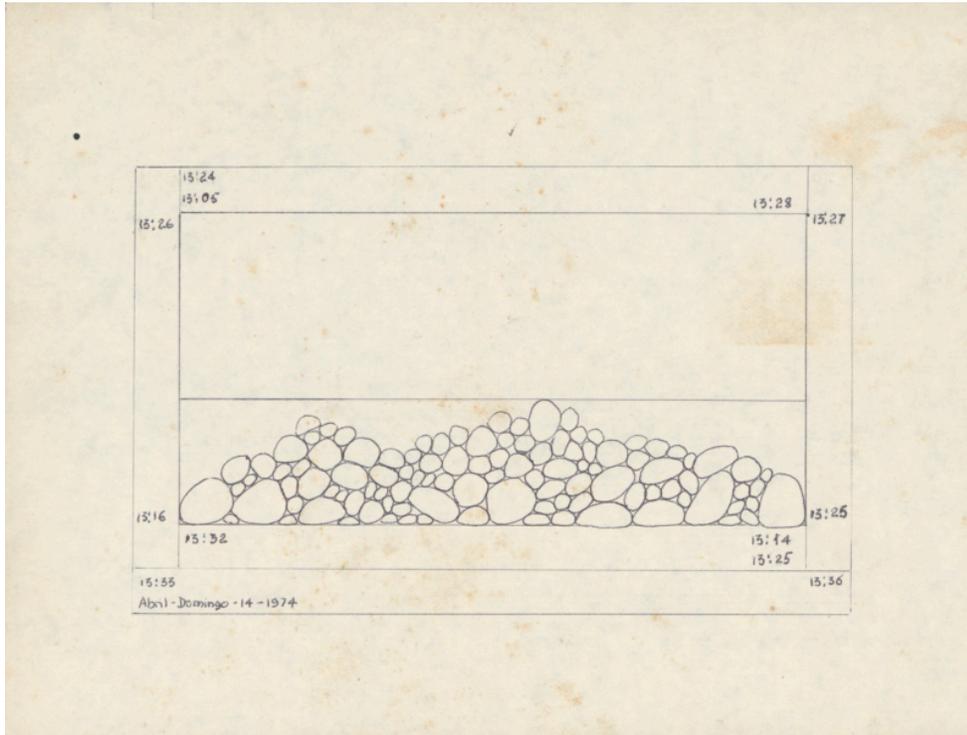


Image credits for this post

1. Teresa Burga, "Autorretrato. Estructura-Informe 9.6.72", 1972.
2. Teresa Burga, "Ilusión óptica", undated (Gallery archive no.:TBU-ed-062). From the series: Serie Op Art. Black and red pen on paper 11,8 x 21 cm. Courtesy the artist and Galerie Barbara Thumm, Berlin.
- 3, 4, 5 and 6. Teresa Burga, "Borges", 1974 / 2017 (Gallery archive no.:TBU-74-063) 51 drawings, musical score and sound installation. Pencil, black and coloured felt pen on paper, print on paper and sound file. Courtesy the artist and Galerie Barbara Thumm, Berlin.
7. Teresa Burga, "4 Mensajes", Installation view.
8. Teresa Burga, "Ilusión óptica", undated (Gallery archive no.:TBU-ed-068). From the series: Serie Op Art Pen and felt pen on paper 21 x 29,9 cm. Courtesy the artist and Galerie Barbara Thumm, Berlin.
9. Teresa Burga, "Ilusión óptica. Sogas entrelazados", 1978 (Gallery archive no.:TBU-ed-072). From the series: Serie Op Art. Felt pen and pencil on paper 21,5 x 26 cm. Courtesy the artist and Galerie Barbara Thumm, Berlin.
10. Teresa Burga, "Untitled, 14 -15.04.1974", 1974 (Gallery archive no.:TBU-74-0032). Series of 13 drawings. Ink on paper, framed 28 x 33 cm each. Courtesy the artist and Galerie Barbara Thumm, Berlin.