Frieze

Profiles /

Teresa Burga: Profile of a Peruvian Woman

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For more than 50 years, the artist has used conceptual art to examine the inherently political nature of information

For nearly 30 years, they sat in storage in the dampness of Lima – a city where, as the artist who made them observed, it's too humid for paint to dry. Prism-shaped objects, painted with garish imagery copied from advertising posters. Drawings on gridded paper, drafted with an architect's precision, their margins noting the hours and minutes of the sessions in which they were made. Conceptual diagrams, with tree-like branches, words dangling off them. Dates, schedules, stamps, calendars, numbers and punch-cards: markers of time – and its displacement.

Until recently, it seemed likely that Teresa Burga's principal legacy would consist not of art but of informatics and information systems. For three decades, she worked as an official in Lima's customs office, where she programmed hierarchies for tagging information and legal taxonomies within an early computer database – devising the first such information resource in Peru. (The system, called sIgLa, or Customs' Legal Management Information systems, was used until recently.) Then, in 2006, when Burga was 70 years old, two young curators knocked at her door wanting to speak to her about her role in developing pop and conceptual art in late 1960s Peru. 'I simply didn't believe you,' she told one of them later.

Untitled/Prismas (J), 1968/2013, acrylic on plywood, dimensions variable. Courtesy: the artist and Galerie Barbara Thumm, Berlin

Over the past decade, Burga – whose retrospective, 'aleatory structures', is currently touring Europe – has been recognized for a practice spanning drawing, painting, mechanically programmed works and conceptual structures for the visual display of information. At the core of her work is an interest in biopolitics and the cybernetic body. She has pictured with versatility the ways in which, through disembodied systems, we come into contact with means of regulation, standardization and profiling. Information, for Burga, is inherently political.

Burga was born in 1935 in the small port city of Iquitos: the epicentre of Peru's rubber boom, which ushered in the European colonization of the western reaches of the amazon. As a child, she moved with her mother and father, a naval officer, to Lima. After training as an architect, Burga came into contact with the fractious cultural atmosphere of 1960s South America, where various restive artistic movements began to bristle against conservativism, colonialism and patriarchy. The influence of figures and movements such as artur Barrio and tropicália in Brazil, as well as Argentina's Rosario Group, eventually spread to other parts of the continent. Uniting these artists was their critique of consumer society and the imperialist legacies of the US and Europe – forms of corporate colonization that persist to this day.

In 1966, six young Lima-based artists, including Burga, calling themselves the Grupo Arte Nuevo (New Art Group), began producing works spanning pop, happenings and ephemeral environments. A photograph from 1966 shows a series of their garishly coloured, painted sculptures leaning provocatively against the city museum's Spanish baroque architecture. Newspaper reports attest to the rebelliousness they incited in Lima's art scene, which, up to that point, had been in thrall to European academic painting.

Teresa Burga. Courtesy: the artist and Galerie Barbara Thumm, Berlin

Arte Nuevo were championed by the influential critic Juan Acha, who took note of the group's 'cultural activism', as he called it. Acha, who was a Marxist, wrote in 1971 about the radicality of contemporary art in a rapidly changing Latin America: 'Many argue that underdevelopment – a socio-economic characteristic of the Third World – is incompatible with the artistic avant-garde. It is, however, quite the contrary: underdevelopment requires the presence of the avant-garde.' He would expand later, in 1975, that what was needed in Latin-American art was a 'cultural and artistic self-decolonization' and an evaluation of 'our *mestizaje*' (mixed heritage). Art, as Acha wrote in 1984, was a 'matter of the sensorium of our Third World, so colonized by the dictates of the official forces of Western Culture'. something else was needed beyond the mere copying of Euro-American artistic imports.

Burga's first works were paintings: figurative, brightly coloured works on sculptural panels, many of them derived from advertising or marketing imagery. Her series 'Prismas' (Prisms, 1968) contains

tessellated, garish imagery and words printed on blocks of different geometrical shapes. Never interested in the expressivity of the author's hand, Burga began outsourcing the painting of her works. The 'human figure was losing its primary role', she wrote in a 2006 text for Arte Nuevo's 40th anniversary. The lynchpin of Burga's project to date remains the deflection of subjective expression, in order to capture the ways in which the human body is suppressed, tessellated, translated or deferred more generally. In 1968, the left-leaning military officer general Juan Velasco overthrew the Peruvian president, Fernando Belaúnde Terry. Velasco's regime lasted until 1980; it instituted vast governmental reforms and nationalized many industrial sectors, which caused political instability in the mid-1970s. The artistic and cultural sectors were centralized, too, and began supporting art that spoke directly to the country's national identity. Acha, Arte Nuevo's original supporter, was jailed briefly (on a technical mistake) and eventually went into self-imposed exile in Mexico. Arte Nuevo was no more.

The year Velasco came into power, Burga was awarded a Fulbright Fellowship to study at the Art Institute of Chicago. While there, she came under the influence of conceptual experiments in cybernetics, machines and actions, producing work on the basis of scripts and algorithm-like rules. She was also energized by an argumentative pedagogical atmosphere and the fact that she could speak relatively freely as a woman, in contrast to the deference to authority required in Catholic, patriarchal Peru. Burga's *Work That Disappears When the Spectator Tries to Approach It* (1970) is a wall piece comprising layers of light bulbs, 100 in total, arranged in a square formation around a black box. As you approach, the bulbs gradually switch off, so that, when you reach the work, you are left in a dark, seemingly empty room.

Teresa Burga, *Insomnia Drawing (8)*, 1981, pen on paper, 30 × 21cm. Courtesy: the artist and Galerie Barbara Thumm, Berlin

Burga remained in Chicago for two years. While there, she began creating a series of energetic conceptual experiments, marked by a structuralist interest in translating and transposing information systems from one language to another. In one, she translated a poem by Jorge Luis Borges into colourful visual diagrams (*Borges*, 1974); in another, a poem by Peruvian poet Blanca Varela is turned into a musical score, with each letter of the alphabet given a different note (*Estructura: Propuesta Sonido*, structure: sound Proposal, 1970). *4 Mensajes* (Four Messages, 1974) is a semiotic analysis of broadcast media in which several 'messages' – specific images such as a man's face, a telephone – are diagrammed using taxonomies of classification.

Autorretrato. Estructura. Informe, 9.6.1972 (1972), made for Burga's first solo exhibition at Lima's Instituto Cultural Peruano Norteamericano, is grounded in a one-day investigation of her physiology and medical profile. The artist depicted herself through the myriad statistical operations used to diagnose, regulate, classify and designate her – audio of her heartbeat, electrocardiograms, blood analyses, a headshot – all placed on information panels. a 'Face report', made on graph paper, provides a measurement and annotation of Burga's face, with topographical lines resembling a cartographic rendering. An interview in Lima's *Correo* from 1972 ran with the headline: 'Teresa Burga: artist or Computer?' It was with this work that she successfully developed a form of art at the intersection of politics, information and the body. While conceptualists in Europe and North America were exploring similar intersections between embodiment and information, Burga's work gained a political edge through its topicality within a Latin-American context in which violent suppression was the norm. Throughout the postrevolutionary history of Peru, consecutive governments enforced various forms of political exclusion and suppression derived from biological, political and linguistic taxonomies: man, woman and indio, defined in different ways at different times. With her insight that information is inherently political, Burga emerges as a prognosticator of the various forms of body quantification, standardization and profiling that have increasingly imposed themselves on all aspects of human life.

The 1970s saw various pro-democracy movements in Peru under the leftist military dictatorship. Many of these were led by women. In 1979, the country's vast indigenous population was given the right to vote. In 1980, Burga, with the sociologist Marie-France Cathelat, founded an association called ISA (Social and Artistic Investigations) and took out an advertisement in a Peruvian newspaper. They asked for women in Lima, aged 25 to 29, to participate in a survey about their life and views. Over two months, Burga and Cathelat interviewed 290 women across 15 districts of Lima. The women were asked detailed and personal questions falling into 12 broad categories: anthropometric, religious, physiological, cultural, economic, political, judicial-legal and so on. The result, *Perfil de la mujer Peruana* (*Profile of the Peruvian Woman*, 1980–81), first shown at the Continental Bank in 1981, was the first-ever such survey of Peruvian women.

Silencio (silence), 1966, collage and acrylic on Masonite, 122 × 91 × 6cm. Courtesy: the artist and Galerie Barbara Thumm, Berlin

The material aspect of this piece consists of sculptural and visual models that demonstrate the humour and versatility of Burga's tessellated information structures based on the data gathered in the interviews. *Perfil religioso* (religious Profile, 1981), for instance, is a sculpture in which bowls are filled with water and salt to indicate the proportion of respondents who identify as religious and those who do not. Another depicts the professional profile of the respondents, vibrantly captured using an ancient Peruvian counting device, the quipu, with strings of varied hues. A brain-shaped relief, composed of segments in different colours, indicates the education levels of the surveyed group: red, for example, signifies 'incomplete university education'. The results showed that women, as Cathelat noted in an accompanying text, 'desire change [...] and give priority to the changes

they want to effect in their relationships with themselves, with their partners, with society around them, with the work they do and with the human rights they want to attain as individuals'. One finding was that women wanted to do paid work (less than one percent of respondents said they would prefer to stop working). In a conservative Catholic country dominated (then as now) by patriarchy, women also supported abortion: 'a majority claim that human right to exercise full and complete control over one's own body.' The subject remains fraught: as recently as 2010, Peruvian police responded with violence to a peaceful protest by women demanding abortion rights.

Newspaper sources from this era indicate that the work was received not only as a display of research but embraced as conceptual art. ('But What Is Conceptual art?' asked a 1981 headline in the Lima monthly *Contacto*.) The programmatic aspect of *Perfil* also consists in attributing political intentionality to women, though, of course, the political vehicle is the artwork itself. It made a splash: photographs document President Belaúnde Terry touring the work at its 1981 opening (shortly after his democratic re-election).

In the 1980s, Peru's artistic scene began to embrace indigenous arts movements with the aim of capturing the country's autonomous cultural character. Burga was never directly involved in these movements or in using art as protest. When she attempted to show *4 Mensajes* as part of a government-organized arts festival, she was told it lacked 'Peruvian character'. Her practice was progressively ignored. It's a testament to the ways in which political activities can blindsight one another: viewed today, Burga's works appear highly political in their concern with the conditions of normalization placed on the body, especially women's bodies. But her critique is, above all, biopolitical – and she refused to be shoehorned into the immediate engagements of protest or indigeneity or even feminism. Her political interrogation is more conceptual, aligning with the notion of 'coloniality of power' theorized by another Peruvian, aníbal Quijano. Burga looks to the forms in which power is carried through knowledge, infrastructure and social constructs.

It is ironic, then, that Burga's works, marked as they are by time, statistics and information – at least one piece bears a stamp from her customs office – were dislodged from time for so long. Now in her 80s, Burga continues to work, looking to various forms of deskilling – for example, by copying the drawings of young children to explore physical limitations. Burga's body of work is subject to the same structures of control that she has pictured and critiqued. Hers is not only a happy story of rediscovery: it is a case in point that, while political engagement in art can motivate change, politics itself can be capricious and blind. To Burga, it would seem that political efficacy is the final aleatory structure: dependent on an impulsive, yet decisive, toss of the coin, which sometimes only art can catch.

Main image: Theresa Burga, Untitled (Bar)*, 1966, mixed media, collage and acrylic on Masonite, 123 × 92 cm. Courtesy: the artist and Galerie Barbara Thumm, Berlin*

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