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Teresa Burga, Pioneering Conceptual Artist Focused on Women and Labor, Has Died at 85

BY **ALEX GREENBERGER**

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Teresa Burga.
AP

Teresa Burga (<https://www.artnews.com/t/teresa-burga/>), an artist whose indefinable output made her one of the most important conceptual artists in Latin America, has died at 85. The Peruvian Ministry of Culture announced her death on Twitter on Thursday.

Today, Burga is considered a major figure for her boundary-pushing works focused on authorship, forms of labor, and the status of women in Peru, her home country. Her work has taken the form of sculptures, installations, drawings, paintings, and conceptual projects, in the process expanding what art could be.

Burga's best-known work is one that during its day generated confusion. *Perfil de la mujer Peruana* (Profile of Peruvian Woman), from 1980–81, marked a collaboration with the psychotherapist Marie-France Cathelat, with whom Burga founded the Investigaciones Sociales y Artísticas, an institution through which they facilitated social research. For Burga's project, she and Cathelat interviewed 290 middle-class women between the ages of 25 and 29 in Lima to obtain statistics on their political leanings, their bodies, and their identities. The presentation of their findings took the form of drawings and diagrams, as well as artworks, including a sculpture composed of quipus, knotted fabrics alluding to an Incan counting system.

Against the backdrop of Peru's transition from authoritarianism to democracy, Burga's project attempted to question how much agency women in the country had at the time. The exhibition created a media circus when it opened, and many seemed to miss what Burga and Cathelat were getting at. Critic Mirko Lauer was among the few who caught onto the duo's methods, writing, "I wonder who would be talking about this event if the project had been described as the exhibition of some sociological panels on women in Peru rather than calling it a show of *conceptual art*. How many people who attended would not have attended and how many people who did not attend might have?"

Burga had focused on women, their bodies, and their rights before in her work, though it is unclear to what extent she identified with the feminist movement that took hold in many parts of the world during the 1960s and '70s. Sometimes, Burga focused on her own body, as she did with the 1972 work *Autorretrato. Estructura. Informe., 9.6.1972*, for which she created a self-portrait via diagrams and charts of information related to her heart and blood. In subjecting herself to data systems, Burga was creating a self-portrait created not by her own hand but by the machines that surveilled her. "This work is a testimony to my experience, to how I experience the world today," she once said.

Looked at now, *Autorretrato* parallels neatly with other conceptual experiments undertaken by U.S.-based feminist artists such as Martha Rosler, Mary Kelly, and Lynn Hershman Leeson during the era, but Burga's work eluded viewers upon its exhibition in Peru. "Artist or Computer?" asked one publication at the time.

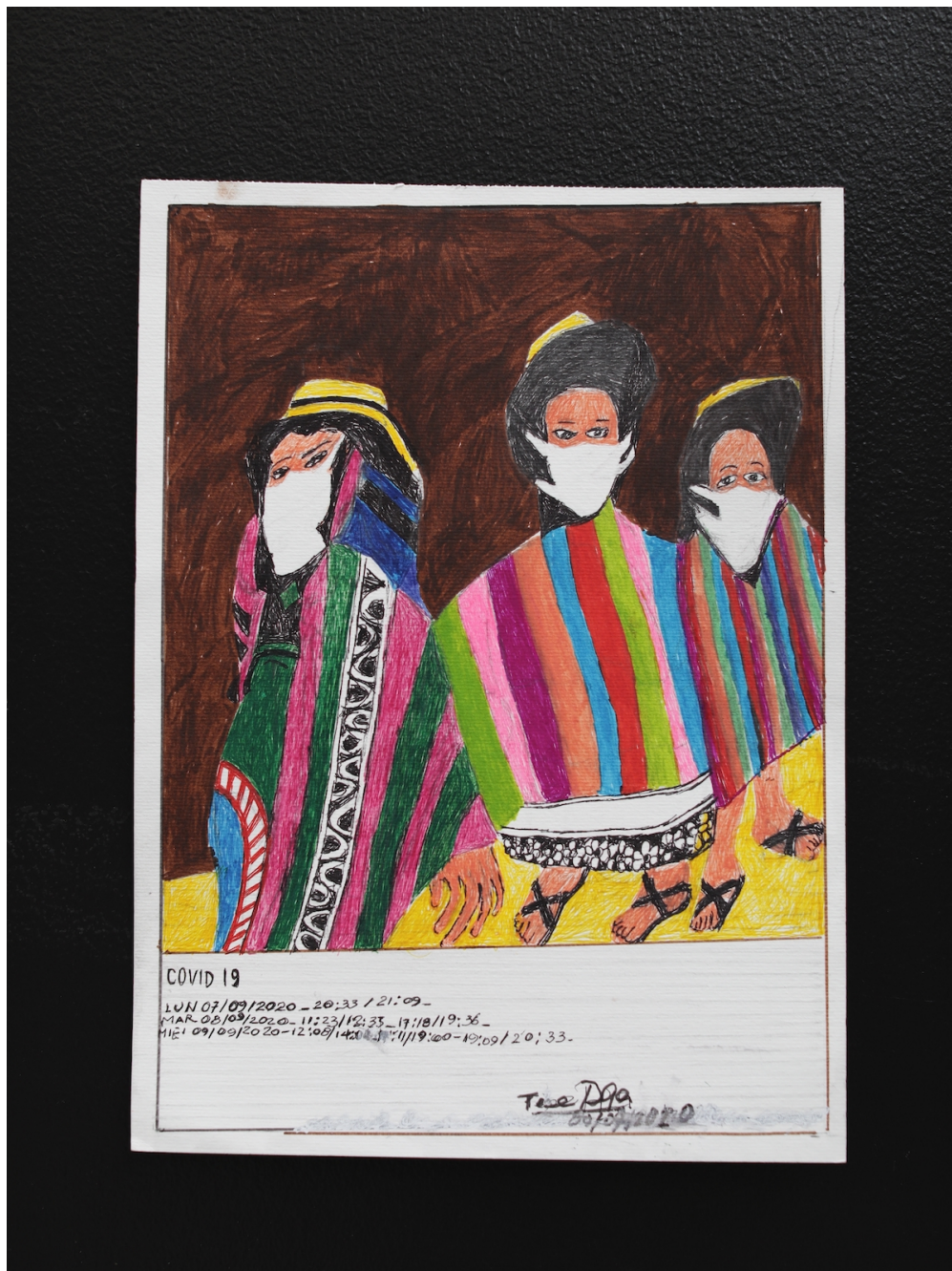


A "Prismas" sculpture by Teresa Burga.
GDA VIA AP IMAGES

Over the past five decades, Burga's art has taken a number of forms, from fancifully colored sculptures to drawings based on children's doodles. Yet it has only been recently that this work has come to light internationally. There is a three-decade lacuna in Burga's CV, from 1981 to 2010, in which she barely showed her art publicly. Starting in 1975, she worked as a customs officer, and she continued doing so until 2005, producing new art at night.

Teresa Burga was born in Iquitos, Peru, in 1935. She initially went to school for architecture and then transitioned into studying art instead. After she graduated, in the 1960s, she became a part of Peru's avant-garde art scene. She was a part of the Arte Nuevo group, which synthesized styles derived from Pop, Happenings, and Op art. Burga was one of just two women in the group (the other was Gloria Gómez-Sánchez), and her work during the era focused more explicitly on the male gaze than that of her colleagues.

The sculptures Burga produced during this time evince a playful quality derived from the hotly hued look of advertisements during the era. Her "Prismas" sculptures feature pared-down images of children and furniture depicted against swatches of lime green and neon blue stripes. Burga often delegated the labor of crafting the "Primas" to local carpenters and craftspeople, and she had intended for such works to be mass-produced. In a similar way to Sol Lewitt's wall drawings of the late '60s, Burga's "Primas" are based on diagrams bearing instructions for their creation, dimensions and all. "The workers, like the viewers, become collaborators in realizing its vision," Ruba Katrib, who curated an exhibition of the "Primas" works at SculptureCenter in New York in 2017, **has written** (<https://www.sculpture-center.org/publications/7329/teresa-burga-mano-mal-dibujada>).



A recent work by Teresa Burga.
AP

Burga left Lima in 1968, the same year there was a military coup in Peru, to study at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago on a Fulbright scholarship. When she returned to her home country in 1971, it was now under authoritarian rule. Her work responded to this in veiled ways. For the 1974 work *4 Mensajes* (4 Messages), Burga appropriated the language of four television broadcasts and scrambled it until it no longer made sense. The work subverted the messaging used by Juan Velasco Alvarado's government, and it was also a retort to the preferred mode of Peruvian art at the time, which tended toward traditional aesthetics. "Deskilling was a decolonial stance," Ashton Cooper writes in the catalogue essay for a **2019 Burga show**

(<https://www.alexandergray.com/exhibitions/teresa-burga>) at New York's Alexander Gray Associates gallery, which represents her alongside Galerie Barbara Thumm in Berlin.

Burga was rescued from obscurity at age 75, when she had her first major survey in her home country at Lima's Instituto Cultural Peruano Norteamericano in 2010. International acclaim soon followed. She appeared in the 2011 edition of the Istanbul Biennial; "The World Goes Pop," a 2015 survey of international Pop art at Tate Modern in London; and Okwui Enwezor's 2015 Venice Biennale in Italy. Her work also figured into exhibitions held as part of the Getty Foundation's 2017 Pacific Standard Time initiative in Los Angeles, which that year focused on Latinx and Latin American Art—one was a survey of decolonial art at the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego called "Memories of Underdevelopment," the other a survey of feminist art at the Hammer Museum called "Radical Women: Latin American Art, 1960–1985." Surveys of her work were also held at the Migros Museum für Gegenwartskunst in Zurich and the Museo de Arte Latinoamericano de Buenos Aires.

Even when she wasn't working, Burga crafted drawings. She made a series of them when she couldn't sleep known as the "Insomnia Drawings," and she also did another series that was based on images seen in mass media and on the internet. Burga was at work on the latter series as recently as last year, crafting one work featuring Peruvians donning masks during Covid.

Asked once why she produced such works, Burga said, "I want to escape from the artist's taste and from subjective self-abstraction, because the worst thing an artist can do is to be self-complacent and please the public. I've always believed that."

Maximiliano Durón contributed reporting.