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**Anna Bella Geiger**

*Circa MMXIV, Imagination is an Act of Freedom*

Curated by Bernardo Mosqueira



*(to my love)*

Anna Bella Geiger is one of the most important Brazilian artists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Her work features a rich diversity of media and procedures and, like her singular biography, it always surprises us the deeper we delve. Anna Bella is one of the most experimental artists in the history of Brazilian engraving, one of the most relevant purveyors of the New Figuration, a recognized pioneer of video art in Brazil and part of the first generation of conceptual artists in Latin America.

Born in 1933, the daughter of Jewish immigrants from Poland, Geiger began her study of the arts, like Lygia Pape, at Fayga Ostrower's studio. At that time, in the early 1950s, her work was very much linked to abstract informalism, but, throughout the following 60 years, her production has been characterized by constant internal ruptures.

Anna lived an important part of her life during the military dictatorship – which had a profound effect on her interests and positions. In 1965 comes the first of many ruptures in Anna Bella's career: this is the year when she abandons abstract informalism and begins a series of engravings and drawings entitled “Viscerals.” After all, how can one be abstract when the world is so urgent? While the standard printing plates for engravings were traditionally rectangular, Anna

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started cutting them in the shape of human organs. Understanding that one's body is constantly engraved by the world, Anna realized that we should look to the body itself for evidence of the marks left by reality. With conceptual resources of simulated transmutation, Anna went on to investigate the insides of metal as if examining the pieces of a body that feels pain. On the paper's surface, the sequence of impressions leaves a relief resembling a body printed there. For Anna, conceptual formulations do not come from the work itself, but in function of the work. The processes of research and production are, therefore, also necessarily founded in conceptual strategies. On the lower part of the paper, the title written in pencil is as imperative as God's breath in the man of dust: it reads "Estômago" ["Stomach"]. Stomach it is. In some of these engravings, we see the shadows of the original plates, since the plate is the body, it leaves a shadow. In the white space, in the surroundings of the image, is the shocking absence of the rest of the body. Emptiness. Which we examine.

In the early 1970s, Anna Bella Geiger began engaging in educational activities connected to the Museum of Modern Art in Rio de Janeiro. Her classes turned more and more experimental-- to the point that, based on a study of the symbolic through her obsessive readings of Jung and Mircea Eliade, she decided to propose that her students investigate the *Center* utilizing only dirt, the surface of the Earth, and tools such as shovels, rakes, hoes, ropes and brooms which they brought with them to the desert at the edge of the Marapendi Lagoon. The experiment was the object of photographic registers and resulted in audio-visual exhibitions. For Anna, this work had a spiritual and ecological relationship with nature, such that the world itself had become the very medium for art. The result of this experiment indicated an infinite expansion of the possibilities of creative action, but, as such, also its very exhaustion. This caused Anna to spend some time without producing anything, dedicating herself exclusively to intellectual and educational activities.

Still, she continued to reflect on the symbolic and the Center. In 1974, developing techniques of photo-engraving and photo-serigraphy, Anna Bella Geiger began a series entitled "Polarities" in which, like in her Visceral phase, words appear on paper, though not written in pencil, but rather printed with clichés. "Centro" ["Center"], "Periferia" ["Periphery"], "Certo" ["Right"], "Errado" ["Wrong"], "Finito" ["Finite"], "Infinito" ["Infinite"], "Dentro" ["Inside"], "Fora" ["Outside"], "Parte" ["Part"], "Todo" ["Whole"], "Dia" ["Day"] and "Noite" ["Night"] were some of the words that were no longer relegated to the base of the image, affirming the figurative, but instead located inside the image, acting as if they were truly integral parts of the work-- information placed in the space with precision.

Unlike what it might appear, the Polarities did not simply position complementary or opposing features, instead indicating coexisting elements which, due to the image-word relationships, questioned polarity itself through inversions, disorientations, annulments, etc. This sort of strategy, which approximated the axis of imagination to the axis of reflection and stimulated critical activity, is an important, recurring characteristic of the works of art produced in Brazil under the military government. From her study of the symbolic, there was then a serious discourse and reflection on her political position which questioned the situation in Brazil, but also the Western world and its modernity as a whole. The affirmation and contradiction of these words at the same time is a strategy introduced to pervert the structure of a civilization structured

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by the axes of the circulation of letters.

In 1970, Anna managed to get some of the first photos of the moon's craters directly from NASA. It's important for us to recall that this was less than a year after man landed on the natural satellite for the first time. Anna Bella was (and still is) married to geographer Pedro Geiger, and they, like most of their friends, were involved in the left-wing political struggles in Rio de Janeiro. With four children, in a context of severe repression in which there was much fear in openly discussing the political situation in the country, Anna began printing lunar surfaces in order to create a neutral territory (the moon) where she could speak freely. Like those who stood atop soapboxes in the city squares of London. Anna Bella inserted polarities in this graphic-imaginary space, and here we see the first use of airbrush in her work.

Also during this time, Anna Bella began developing her illustrated “notebooks”-- small artist books in which she explored issues that she considered pressing, such as the art system, the history of Brazil, Brazilian culture, the relations between the First and Third Worlds, etc. The choice of this format echoes a didactic tension, the consequence of her experiences as a teacher, but also as the mother of four children.

In the small book titled “Admission,” which parodies an ordinary school notebook, Anna Bella inserted expressions like “Hélio Oiticica” in a multiple-choice question about tropical products as part of an investigation on the formation of Brazilian identity. In one titled “The History of Brazil illustrated in chapters,” Anna Bella utilized a series of photo copies of Victor Meirelles's painting “The First Mass in Brazil” to recount the history of the colonial period from a critical point of view and also comment on the recurring massacres of indigenous communities in the 1970s – hinting at the sociology of a heterogenous population whose characteristic features are internal domination and colonization. It is these notebooks that presented the original images of the famous “History of Brazil: Little Boys and Girls.” The notebook entitled “About Art” originated some important pieces which the artist would develop over the years in the form of drawings, engravings, paintings and videos like Bureaucracy, Ideology, Adventurism, Subjectivism, etc. In the notebooks, “New Atlas I” and “New Atlas II,” Anna Bella intensifies her subversive relationship with maps, something she continues to work on to this day.

At that time in the 1970s, Anna Bella Geiger came to understand maps as instruments utilized to determine one's own location, as well as the location of others, and, that as such, they are efficient in maintaining dominance and cultural and political hegemonies. To investigate and act upon cartographic representation would then be taking direct action on the relationships of control. While still a child, Anna Bella inherited a precocious obsession with medieval art from Fayga Ostrower. She was especially intrigued by the hierarchy in the constructive dynamic of the scale of art from that period. Before the discovery of perspective in the Renaissance, the creation of images obeyed a series of codes that depended on the symbolic and the intentions of discourse. Using analogies in her work with maps, Anna Bella went on to distort and relativize geographical proportions through ideological questions. Representation, if you'll forgive the pun, will always be a matter of point of view, but perspective is the imposition of a single individual's vision on everyone else – and with the characteristic of the appearance of irrefutable truth. Modern maps, however, like any other kind of representation, and unlike images faithful to

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nature or truth, are simply descriptions of the world based on the relationships of power within a culture. There is no such thing as objectivity: it all depends on who is drawing and who is interpreting. And it is there that Anna Bella's interest lies. Creating her own rules of representation and interpretation that are distinct from the Eurocentric and colonial, she conducts transformations precisely where a split from reality is negotiated. Perhaps a different map was necessary for a different world. And these pieces by Anna Bella are examples of cartography created by a marginalized individual “at the center” of the world, and no longer the dominant individual: an individual who landed on the moon inside an apartment in the neighborhood of Flamengo, rather than aboard one of the Apollo missions. In addition to reminding us that there is no artistic, scientific or academic creation that is not the fruit of imagination and subjectivity, her maps are utopian in two senses: that which is imaginable but impossible, and that which is imaginable as the ideal objective of a certain struggle.

Her notebooks and other works produced at this time actively question Europe's central position on the world map and in culture, making Anna's artwork crucial when thinking about the decolonization of art and Brazilian culture and the beginning of intentionally post-colonial art in Brazil. In these pieces, the art system, like the global political and cultural systems, are questioned, stripped down, branded and denaturalized and, atop the ruins of Eurocentric modernity, Anna Bella builds spirals of images and language which embody and indicate new forms and possibilities for art, culture and politics. Perhaps it is important to mention that, in the early 1950s and the late 1960s, Anna Bella lived in New York City, and also traveled to Europe, participating in exhibitions there at a time when the world wasn't as small as it today. More than once, after returning home, she gave interviews stating that she was disappointed with the art found in the West.

In the mid-1970s, Anna Bella started working on pieces in the form of amateur photography (10 x 15 cm) and postcards. After participating in the 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> São Paulo Biennials, the artist then contributed a piece to the 34<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale entitled “Our Daily Bread” -- slices of bread featuring holes shaped like Brazil or South America. In the piece Camouflage, which discusses Brazilian identity while at the same time addressing the idea of a spiritual relationship with nature, an anteater climbs onto the artist's back until the mark of the creature's fur transforms into the design on Anna's tee shirt, thus manifesting a fusion or transmutation. The animal in question, symbolic of wildlife, actually lived in the artist's apartment, along with an armadillo, three large turtles and 33 cats.

Another piece from the same period also made on postcards is “Native Brazil/Alien Brazil.” After the opening of the Trans-Amazonian Highway, there were official incentives for people to migrate to the north of the the country. With the process of occupying the region came frequent and tragic massacres of indigenous tribes. At the same time, the state's official strategy was to adopt a discourse that exalted the mixing of peoples and the Indians as the common root of the entire nation. Under an anti-democratic state, it was interesting for the powers that be to control popular revolts, and for people to identify themselves with naturally pacifistic natives, smiling in peace with nature. Anna Bella came across a newsstand with a set of postcards that showed Indians dancing, hunting and playing with animals. The captions read “Brasil Nativo” [“Native Brazil”]. One interesting point about the postcard is that it summarizes one part of a whole and,

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as such, Anna Bella concluded that, if there were a “Native Brazil,” there must also be an “Alien Brazil.” Geiger then created translations for each of the images along with her daughters and their friends. This work of art, which at the time was mailed as a postcard, is today positioned as two parallel columns generating comparisons which cause similarities and oppositions to emerge proving the nonexistence of a native Brazil, the impossibility of a deeper, common root or a history that is shared by all Brazilian people. With this work, it became clear there is a complex, unjust and completely heterogenous social structure. In “Native Brazil/Alien Brazil,” Anna’s group and the Indians are pieces of a society born out of its own fragmentation.

In the 1980s, at the same time in which she participated in important international group shows with her seminal experiments in video, begun a decade earlier, Anna Bella started work on paintings that would last until the early 2000s. It was in this period that Anna Bella developed her so-called “Soft” pieces, upholstered canvases stretched over elliptical surfaces, as well as other paintings in the series “Pier and Ocean.”

In the 1990s, Anna began developing a series called Borderlines, filling the drawers of old, metal filing-cabinets with wax, in which she embedded the shapes of maps as well as other elements such as columns, angels, numbers, lines and diagrams. The drawers serve as metaphors for knowledge itself, whose fluidity is marked by the pigmentation of the wax’s movement. What we see is the crystallization of a constant movement of mutations which create relationships, inversions and associations, able to make elements emerge, submerge, sink, leave traces or disappear in a sea, an analogy for memory, which resulted from the work of bees.

In recent years, Anna Bella has developed new “Soft” pieces, in which the sewing of lines appears like a modern metaphorical operation. In addition, she continues to develop vigorous Borderlines, and her latest experiments systematically combine images of the human body with map formats for the first time in her work.

This exhibition and this text mark the beginning of Mendes Wood DM’s representation of Anna Bella Geiger and the research for a large book about her over 60-year career. Her critical position has made her (and continues to make her) forever consider her very existence in the world and, as such, Place, Action, Identity and Subject. The method by which she constructed her work created a place very similar to our most immediate reality, where words touch the skin and where metonyms and metaphors transmute images and words in pieces of land, pieces of flesh, pieces of time and pieces of bread. The subtitle of this exhibition has appeared in the artist’s notes, texts and works of art since the 1970s. Anna Bella Geiger’s work is strong evidence of the imagination as an act of freedom; it is proof of the powerful resistance of the possibility of wishing. Anna Bella is known for a famous expression that she repeats to this day in her classes at the Parque Lage School of Visual Arts. After making a scathing affirmation, she smiles and says: “I’m just kidding. No I’m not.” Maybe she is: it is joking as a way to critique the culture.

Bernardo Mosqueira  
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