

ARS CRITICA (or Regina Silveira's "plagues revisited")

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Latin *plaga* -*ae*, blow, wound, affliction, harm, lesion. Historically 14th century plagues.
Synonyms *catastrophe* and *curse*.

(adapted from the Brazilian Portuguese dictionary edited by A. Houaiss)

Rather than ciphering a collective evil, a plague substantively points to disequilibrium.¹

Manuel Antônio de Castro

Although the genealogy of plagues leads directly to Ancient Egypt and a historic imaginary with cultural intersections that include biblical narratives fueled by the literary metaphors of ancient Egyptian legends, their own allegorical descent goes beyond this diachronism and its apparent reluctance to belong to our own period, as if it were the semantics of another age far removed from our own more or less civilized contemporaneity.

Wound, affliction, imprecation, curse, overwhelming collective misfortune, calamity, scourge, a great quantity of inopportune or harmful things; or in the figurative sense, something that causes great evils, that prejudices peace and harmony. Such are the charged definitions dictionaries usually provide, as if they related to a single trip into the past, except for animals or insects taken from their ecosystem and becoming pests or plagues. In other words, dangers whose extent is recognized. But in the case of calamities caused by natural events - the other legacy variant - they are always treated as events, or even as spectacles in their very misfortune, traumatic regressions to the "real" but corresponding to isolated circumstances, and never for teleological causes of course.

¹ "This is extensively studied by ecology and has many facets, but relates particular to breaking the equilibrium of an ecosystem. A plague is not done away with by eliminating the causative element or agent. It must be redirected to its place in the life-chain and reinserted in productive tension, since eliminating it would affect - sometimes with irreversible and incalculable losses - an entire tautly integrated system of differences. Therefore, the point is to maintain an identity as tension for differences." (trans.) In "As três pragas do século XXI", *Revista Confraria do Vento*, Rio de Janeiro, 2007, p.17.

In any event, there is a whole compendium of evils is unveiled by the word plague. It has its own resonances, reverberations that affect us, though perhaps not so immediately or closely. Indeed, all the imagistic background around these biblical abysses turns on similar iconography, an archaic visual repertoire already named and crystallized largely from a religious angle, and ultimately derived from a narrow list known as God sending the "ten plagues against Egypt" as part of historical mythology.²

However it is the allegorical descent that is of real weight, and another wider ranging "real" that has broader sites of action than one might think, and much closer to us. Just as the categories of "first world" and "third world" tend to become impaired, the historical rancor of the plagues itself may become obsolete, in light of some of our more everyday ecumenical problems. In this respect, it can hardly be denied that some of our most validated paradigms are plagues in dispute or covert. This is the case of the IMF or AIDS. Or the absolute rule of advertising in the viscosity of our period, or the imposed reign of economics as the exclusive ideology of history or life itself. Perhaps our mere survival bereft of historical meaning or mission is just another inoculated plague, such as the pursuit of subjective happiness at any price? May not global warming and its foretold disasters, or fundamentalisms of all sorts, be ciphered as plagues? Is not the constant inflation of information, rumors, and truths in a state of fallaciousness competing in the same universal category?³ A minimum and more exhaustive contemporary inventory would be frightening in its diversity, richness and classifications. Unlike the legendary instances, our contemporary plagues are spreading and interchanging and metamorphosing in the image and likeness of the world we live in; they are more porous and permeable, and less defined as such. Being much more correlated and interdependent, they are part of our apocalyptic and integrated everyday existence. Thus their presence is more subtle and

² "Reality: the plagues in the Bible are ordinary events described in the typical Egyptian literary metaphors" (Myth 75), Gary Greenberg, *100 Mitos de la Biblia*, Ed. Océano Ámbar, Barcelona, 2002, p. 241.

³ Antonio Manuel de Castro recognizes these three plagues as new century ills: information / knowledge, speech, and truth, in all cases as manifestations against poesis, "the possibility of onto-poetic fulfillment " of the human being, in *As três pragas do século XXI*, op. cit., p. 17/20.

more incorporated, as internalized violence would be.⁴ Hence, Silveira's "plagues revisited" proposal is situated not merely in the ambit of fabulation, nor is it so decontextualized. Its analogical roots are metaphorical and cross any historical redoubt to be projected as part of our lives today smitten by violence, environmental deterioration, systemic corruption, contamination of everyday life and other such plagues.

The conceptual and visual feedback posed and constructed by Silveira goes beyond our historical coordinates, since it enables new critical content - a contemporary *ars critica* not often found on the art scene, in which even the use of titles in Latin does not fail to augment the intra-historical condition of this exhibition-situation, of its gravitational verve. *Mundus Admirabilis e Outras Pragas* poses an irony of shuttling back and forth, a nomination or naming as poignant as it is patent (in a choice both significant and timely, that reconnects to the field of culture as a semantic force). It becomes the title of a heritage, now contemporary, that is guided by awe, by synonyms of wonder, since it is almost an invitation to a "cabinet of curiosities" that barely conceals its venom in possible innocence. *Mundus Admirabilis e Outras Pragas* acts as a rare aesthetic treatise, whose visual negativity - its dark side of shadow, darkness, graveness, threats⁵ - synchronizes with the critical concern of a poetics that is often political in several of its signs and configurations [see the 1980s series *Dilatáveis*, or installations such as *Enigma do Duque* (project) 1995, *O Paradoxo do Santo*, 1994, *To Be Continued* (Latin American Puzzle) 1998, among many others], and also with this reflective plunging into the nature of image to reveal its other side, its underlying adjacencies, directed toward a different, more profound and graver informative and cognitive perplexity. A different spatial-sensory experience.

The new plagues are put together as fables - image fables - and this is because Silveira's work has always featured analysis of representation as a

⁴ Symptomatic in this aspect is José Saramago's *Ensaio sobre a Cegueira* [Essay on Blindness], Editorial Caminho, Lisbon, 1995, and its renewed relevance in the 2008 Fernando Meirelles film based on the same work.

⁵ It is not hard to imagine Iberê Camargo, Silveira's professor in her Porto Alegre period, showing interest in the ethical density of this exhibition, and such a tense association between imagetic background and constructivist rigor.

whole to be dismantled, paying attention to the hidden imagetic iceberg, exposed through constantly critical visual simulacra, in a humanistic deconstruction of inherited visual substrates and genealogies. Like a fictional situation that aspired to a different narrative and interpretation.

For a long time, the cartography of shadows was predominant, its analysis and projection in distorted perspectives produced an entire metalinguistic discourse on the object of art, which affected its visual and cultural roots. In this case, her most recent works make this fabled condition even more explicit through the allegorical power posed, and through their major referential substrate as point of departure.⁶ Although fable usually contains a moral, it may be paradoxical in as far as it operates through contrast, through displacing figures, and through the partly disguised contents of its story. This may relate to the allegorical function recovered by contemporary art, particular after the seminal Craig-Owens piece⁷, which involves the high visual gravitas ingrained in art history itself (something Silveira always insists on highlighting throughout her work⁸).

Indeed, the interventions, translations, and metamorphoses caused by plagues - in the territory of nature or in our humanity - are highly visual transformations and closely attuned with Silveira's operations and strategies shunning discursive limits and aesthetic reification. Hence the exhibition being emphatic, dense and architected on the basis of its diversity and recognition, or its relevance and critical power as a great allegory that reconnects all its pieces in an open constellation of meanings. For all these reasons, Silveira's encounter with the imaginary of plagues seemed predestined.

Silveira's "plagues revisited" are also attuned with the extraordinary side of the world they represent, with the strange nature they signify: in every case a disruption of something, change of state, metamorphosis, a field of deformation and diversions that her new works are able to interpret and

⁶ The artistic practice of Liliانا Porter, Nelson Leirner or Anna Bella Geiger, for example, includes allegorical contributions in different degrees.

⁷ "The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism", October 12 -13 (New York, spring and summer, 1980).

⁸ "All my work refers to the history of art, past and recent. But this is done through concepts, never by direct citation," Regina Silveira, 1996, (interview), in "Pedagogia do traço", in *Cartografias da sombra*, organized by Angélica de Moraes, Ed. Edusp, São Paulo, p.15.

take beyond the millennial repertoire. In plagues, in addition to a radical visual change in the state of things, we see there is always devastating multiplication, disguise or camouflage, contamination of elements. Curiously, a scholar such as Annick de Souza notes that "in the Hebrew text, the nine trials were not called 'plagues' 'but 'signs, wonders, proof of divine power".⁹ Thus the use of the term "interventions" (divine ones in this case) for plagues is not unfounded.

Perhaps Silveira's set of studies explaining eruption poses an aesthetic statement related to this exhibition. This the case of *Gone Wild*, 1996, *Intro (Re: Fresh Widow, RS)*, 1997, *Irruption*, 2005, *Irruption Series (Saga)*, 2006, *Tropel*, 1998 or *Transit*, 2001. This would already suffice for a minimum genealogy of her artistic trajectory illustrating this aspect. Moreover, her revisited plagues are part of a compendium of her work that goes beyond the present contents. Their specific and scaled appearance - and the consequent surprise - is not just a recent development, since this has been insinuated for a long time. To see their visual etymology, one may go to the paradigmatic works that preceded this collection. Although in passing, one cannot but note the long inventory connecting them to other works that are almost advances or glimpses or pre-plague works: *Nightmare*, 2000, *De Repente*, 2000, *Moscaglia*, 1995, *Wild Book*, 1997, *Inside/Out*, 1996, *Tropel*, 1998-2007, *Mundus Admirabilis*, 2007 (the latter at Jardim do Poder, in Brasília, a seat of government, as a metaphor for long-range criticism). There are not only visually recognizable links of this critical angle, but also augur a key role for the presence of animals (the *Brazil Today* series of 1977, *Corredores para Abutres* 1982), so a veritable bestiary could be composed from Silveira's opus, as well as works hosting some level of threat. The *Dilatáveis* series from the 80s may be seen as emblematic, as are in addition to the works already mentioned, the series *In Absentia - Masterpieces*¹⁰, from the 1980s, or *Quimera*, 2003-2005, or to move onto forms that are more markedly geometric or architectonic, *Solombra*, 1990, *Todas las Noches* (project),

⁹ *El Egipto interior o las diez plagas del alma*, Ed. Kier, Buenos Aires, 1999, p. 165.

¹⁰ In particular, Meret Openheim and Man Ray, who pose a more ambiguous and threatening objectuality.

1999, and *Lumen*, 2003. In this respect, the polarity of the works in Silveira's history ought to be brought out: on the one hand an opus fed by this critical bias, on the other the presence of a more poetic essence - although both are always speculative. This balance is due to belonging to a single axis of the sublime (which deals alternately with a an awe-ful or fearful sublime, and then a more poetic one) but also by operating an equilibrium in the monopolizing excess of each side, perhaps to contradict any nearby border, or with the escapism of the ethereal, or with aesthetic functionalism, two formal aesthetic and semantic reductionisms that are always avoided.

Despite the fact that new plagues may be partly related to those recognized as the ten plagues of Egypt (a sacred heritage that did not seek to disguise, in addition to drama and moral, a certain inner emancipation, in this case of the Jewish people in the land of the Pharaohs, at the time of Ramesses the Great (II), and after 430 years of captivity), here there is no correlation mediated between the historical imaginary of plagues and Silveira's assembled visuality. Far from mimesis and remakes, or from any ideological flash-back, correspondences are never denotative, since they are shifted to our ambit, to a different perceptive and visual function. However, as lateral information, some plagues are identified or rather connected with Silveira's new works: *Infernus* with plague number 1: water turned to blood; *Corruptio* with plague number 2: rain of toads or frogs; *Fabula* with plague number 3: parasites attacking people and cattle; *Mundus Admirabilis* and *Rerum Naturae* with plague number 4: invasion of insects, and plague number 8: invasion of locusts; *Per Capita* with plague number 7: hailstorm; *Macula* with plague number 10: the death of firstborn children and firstlings. In any event, the whole combines to express the idea of collective plague, which contaminates the entire space of the exhibiting gallery. Indeed, the sensory meaning of the physical invasion, the rain of images, is the determining factor on which the works are based in their reverberation and resonance. In particular their omnipresent bestiary and disproportionate and strong visuality. In the overall poetics of each work is a pointer to an aesthetic semantics, that connects worlds (ancient and modern) in a problematization

of the "real" and historical appearances. Silveira's aesthetic proposal has hints of plagues associated with our own period, such as corruption, usury, violence and militarization. Moreover at the principal core of these concerns one must recognize an humanist aspect that seeks to provide critical images, an *ars magna* of the other side of the image, the darker side.

It is not secondary that at the time all metaphors for plagues were inscribed in the realm of nature, in malevolent changes affecting the earth (vegetation, or its fruits), or animals, the climate or the human body, in clear correspondence with the rural world and agricultural economy of the period, so too in *Mundus Admirabilis e Outras Pragas*, metropolitan latency is heard, although the number of animals appearing is decisive, combined with other urban signs (sound-images of firefights, helicopters, missiles or objects from our everyday life). There is the highlighted presence of several multimedia works: *Per Capita*, a score with various firearms - Wilson Sukorski's acoustic contribution to the piece, becomes a two-minute shower of hail bullets, and there is a game of light-sound essential to our understanding of the piece. The cone - almost a cannon - protruding from the wall also features a flashing light synchronized with the shots, in a small fissure. And remember here too that stray bullets are a real plague in some Brazilian cities in permanent conflict, as is dengue fever. In *Fabula*, a large half-egg with the distorted shadow of a mosquito, incorporates the noise of helicopters combined with the hum of insects, alluding to the plague of parasites. In the video animation *Infernus* we can "see" how the sound of blood dropping through a light breeze flowing underneath in a porous sensory synergy between our eye, the ear, the drop and the wind. The work is almost tautological in its visuality, given the correspondence of the movement of the drop of blood and our accomplice-view.¹¹.

If *Rerum Naturae* is shown as an impossible last supper (with a certain surreal echo), this is because it associates everyday existence of food with the strange circumstances represented, the plague of insects on dishes and tables. The installation at the entrance, *Mundus Admirabilis*, opens onto the

¹¹ On the same visual frequency are the previous works *Observatório* (2005) and *Mirante* (2006), although their aims are diametrically opposite.

spatial void of the gallery for a visit that may be frightening. Both the sinks of *Mea Culpa* and the urinal of *In Memoriam*, like the plate covered with *Per Diem*'s handprints, while reflecting on impossible innocence, also show an undisguised echo of Duchamp.

The shadows in some plagues -and Silveira has has worked on how so many shadows to reach this point! -appear two more works (besides the above noted *Fabula*), with a projection that is also threatening, though not making an explicit connection with plague number 9: the coming of darkness. *Bestiarium*, like Pandora's box that projected animals from East and West entangled (being peaceful and belligerent, respectively), is a work that combines various of various Silveira's strategies with the image of animals in perspective, coming from stone, coming out of a virtual distorted box but with real physical features. This is another borderline work showing combination of resources and a new meta-language, as do *Per Capita* or *Fabula*. As the true genesis of this collection, *Bestiarium* opens (*In Limine* was a previous title), and *Post Scriptum* (*Armageddon* was mulled as title) may close this narrative exhibition, with its Templar's sword cleaving the wall, a hybrid work, descendant of the *Dilatáveis* series, whose gigantic shadow on a missile is a projection of all weapons and periods, almost a perpetual engine of war. Both works may work as symbolic entry and exit from this constellation of plagues: being in turn, visual genesis and final confrontation (or epitaph), since there is no sequence to the exhibition.

There are three issues to finalize this critical approach that are inherent in Silveira's poetics, but revive her plagues. The first has to do with the real, with the dimensions of this ambiguous concept, the inclusion of appearance as an inevitable component, the second with the strategy of camouflage, its function of masking and play with visibility / invisibility, and the third with the vocation of criticism, with a certain ethical and aesthetic attitude. In the first case, the works, like fissures, demarcate boundaries between real and reality, on the sharp weakness in which we always move between these two extremes, since the real is neither nature nor culture - it would be an intermediate dimension - and is therefore constantly in a state of

negotiation (the most valuable contemporary art has plunged into this range with a power of ontological effects), and symbolization. According to Slavoj Žižek, "reality needs appearance, reality itself is not-whole". In this position not at all absolutist, "the Real persists in so much as failure or inconsistency of reality that must be filled. Appearance is not secondary, or rather, it emerges through the space of that which is missing in reality"¹². This view, which argues that reality is not enough, and that the Real opens a fissure in reality, is in attuned to the trajectory of Regina Silveira, and in particular with this exhibition, since it explains how the spectral and phantasmagoric side is part of the "real". Moreover, this is also the case of distortion, also constituent, as if it were an inevitable part of our Nietzschean heritage (interpretation / distortion). Here, if the plagues represent a true deviation from the laws of nature, her free rereading mobilizes all this problematic of the nature of Real-Reality, and fuels the value of the interventions and new perspectives. Thus, Silveira's plagues are like breakaways from uniform reality, radicalism of the real that feeds this "more real than reality" that instates art..

The second aspect relates to camouflage, and is particularly attuned to the spirit of a period in which financial capitalism is called "fiction" (Vicente Verdú), and the universe of information, commercial advertising, politics, economics disguises its real data. An example of this is that for decades the 1968 slogan of "imagination to power" has been appropriated by the technocrats to be used instrumentally in tactics of simulation, deception, etc. However, camouflage, as "sophisticated strategy of invisibility"¹³, may harbor a subversive character in bringing out mechanisms and substrates, precisely due to its power to reveal depths and superficial intentions. Faced with the systematic degradation of the citizen, "current art has articulated as one of its customary practices a dismantling of the mechanisms producing the social image or the image of reality, to analyze them and so enable us to see the social construction of our period more clearly. For some, this is most certainly

¹² Slavoj Žižek, *Arriesgar lo imposible – Conversaciones con Glyn Daly*, Ed. Trotta, Madrid, 2006, pp. 92 – 93.

¹³ Maite Méndez Baiges, *Camuflaje*, Ed. Siruela, Madrid, 2007, p.100.

a means of cultural resistance and disobedience, or, in any case, a more lucid, and thus more critical way of being in the world".¹⁴

In the case of Silveira's plagues, camouflage functions through the high level of contamination of visual signs, the formation of graphic, objectual, virtual or projected stains, which distort the literalness or linearity of mythical predictions. The semantic camouflage is in the displacement of visual meanings to our contemporaneity, and the use of coded elements of distinct character (in pieces ranging from multimedia to craft) to an almost parodic situation, were it not for the critical high tone deployed in all the interventions and constructions..

This brings us to the third point, to the initial reference to the title of *ars critica*, which involves identifying not only problems beyond the field of art, but also a wager on a kind of "relational art" (Nicolas Bourriaud), in which these plagues revisited are inscribed, through their political enunciation in the broad sense of the word rather than its impaired meaning so familiar in apparently democratic societies. This is the level of critical enunciation posed in these plagues revisited, in the position of seeking understanding of the ordinary world, as space (and time) that has to be rehabilitated, reconquered. The entire exhibition is a work of inclusion and discussion rather than exclusion. The coincidence of communal sharing, constrained public space, faults in social relations, under the rule of the consensual economicist and instrumentalist logic of the world, are wide ranging needs that a certain art feels driven to fill. And in this requirements, its answers are new questions, a manifestation that fulfills the "function of dispensable politics".¹⁵ Therefore, *Mundus Admirabilis e Outras Pragas* poses an exhibition situation that goes beyond objects, or the substantiation of works. As Jacques Rancière rightly notes, the game may be in the interchanges initiated between art and non-art, and not in their opposition.

At bottom, as Silveira says, the motivation for questioning the mythical universe "emerges from a need I have always felt to use art forms to talk about the world. Working on the contemporary context of plagues may

¹⁴ Maite Méndez Baiges, op. cit. p. 103.

¹⁵ Jacques Rancière, *Sobre políticas estéticas*, Ed. Macba, Barcelona, 2005, p. 54.

derive as much from experience of living the present as from looking at the threats to our future on a planetary level."¹⁶ Clear recognition of the dissonance of a world divided, which has taken on contours that are sometimes dazzling, worthy of trans-historical fable.¹⁷

Just as this exhibition contains hints of vigilance and expectation, there is also watchfulness - here the important part of the plague metaphor is its warning or even premonition (its futuristic side), or its close attunement to the present day, rather than its past or stagnant outcome in *illo tempore*. As if it had quite a different level of "fire power", or developed thought, even in its dialectical articulation with the community, which is a community of perception. The plagues revisited of *Mundus Admirabilis e Outras Pragas* drive the replacement of an ancient mythology by new and sensitive ideas. The work offers a sensitive fabulation aesthetic worthy of being deciphered without any possibility of mimetic inflation. At the same time, it reflects the way contemporary art does not need so much merely sociological data, or data from statistics, with their "objective" or "consensual" interpretations, since it has its own means of conveying its own signs, that other form of sensitive data.

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¹⁶ Regina Silveira, e-mail 19/09/2008.

¹⁷ After writing this piece, resorting to an end-note, I would mention Arnaldo Jabor's highly sarcastic and lucid article on the book organized by Adauto Novaes, *Mutações-Ensaio sobre as novas configurações do mundo* (Ed. SESC, São Paulo / Ed. Agir, Rio de Janeiro, 2008). The article is also attuned to the period, which is posed in terms of plagues as ironic prophecies ("when we will be happy as 'things'"), for its singular refinement and portrait of what may be ahead. O futuro não será mais o que era, *O Estado de São Paulo*, Insert 2 - Culture, 23/09/2008.