

PHANTASMS

An Interview with Regina Silveira

Dan Cameron

For the past few decades, the work of Regina Silveira has steadily increased in prominence so that, at age 71, she has become one of the most visible Brazilian artists working today. Silveira's art emphasizes conditionality & impermanence, yet it is able to dominate large public spaces with relative ease. Her primary concern is with the image, and exploring ways that the image can be grafted onto an already-existing structure, and in the process change the meaning of that structure for those who encounter it. Projected shadows, distortions of perspective and other fairly straightforward techniques have become, in Silveira's hands, instruments in service of a complete feeling of dislocation between structure & user.

Generationally, Silveira's art is a hybrid, its author having experienced firsthand both Conceptual Art in Europe and the U.S. and the Tropicália movement in Brazil, and emerged as something of an offspring of those two movements. In fact, her work has evolved with great consistency since the 1970s, but always with an internal logic that is sensed immediately by the viewer long before its mechanics can be put into words. In particular, the phenomenon of anamorphosis, whereby the tampering with the conventions of geometrical illusion can affect our perceptions of the greater world surrounding us, became a growing area of concern. As the result of her immersive studies in this area, Silveira's shadow extension and light projection pieces, through both their ephemeral nature and their virtuosic manipulation of space, have become captivating experiences within urban spaces around the world, entering the lives and imaginations of many thousands of individuals who had no intention of viewing them, but simply happened to be in the same location at the moment they appeared.

Although my only collaborations with Regina Silveira have been in the 2006 Taipei Biennial -- where she created a mesmerizing vinyl-decal mural of countless footprints moving diagonally across the facade of the Taipei Fine Arts Museum -- and in the forthcoming 2011 edition of Prospect New Orleans, I have known of her work since the early 1990s, when she had a number of exhibitions and projects in New York. By mid-decade, when I finally had the opportunity to experience Silveira's work on a more systematic basis in Brazil, some of the questions below began forming in my mind. It was only once I was able to come to terms with her art through my own curatorial development that I then became more interested in learning about her own perspective on the way in which her art functions in the physical, and the not-so-physical, world.

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Interview Dan Cameron – Regina Silveira

1 - We are at a point in recent art history in which public art is in a state of crisis: too few new ideas, too much repetition of forms, too much stone, bronze and steel. How does your practice manage to remain public while avoiding all of these pitfalls?

2 - What does 'political' mean in terms of your art?

3 - Your artistic career has been a series of apparent detours that later turn out to be connected to the whole. How do you approach a stylistic transition?

4 - How would you describe your relationship to the Tropicalia movement?

4 – Como você descreveria sua relação com o movimento da Tropicália?

5 - What are the non-Brazilian art movements that have had the greatest influence on your work?

6 - Is it your belief that contemporary art's strong dependency on private collectors has kept it away from the attention of the public that needs it the most?

7 - Thirty years ago, Rosalind Krauss called for an expansion of the field of sculpture, and you seem to have extended that manifesto to include drawing. Is drawing another form of sculpture for you?

8 - Before global art became a cliché, your work always pointed to a kind of universal viewer experience. Is this something that you're conscious of?

9 - The notion that visual distortion can stimulate a degree of mental activity that would otherwise be difficult to attain seems to be key to your work. How did you arrive at this point of departure?

10 - What do you think is the greatest achievement of art during your lifetime, and its greatest shortcoming?

ANSWERS

1 – My strategy has been to opt for a relative ephemerality, of the sort potentized by digital matrices, since they allow for open series of replicas – either identical or adapted to the varied dimensionality of places and supports. When I associated digital matrices with industrial materials for the coating of surfaces, especially removable ones such as adhesive vinyl, I was able to take on and control the scale of very large-size projects. But perhaps the most important thing has been the emphasis on impermanence, based on the more

fluid attitude of associating the work to the concepts, operations and results of urban interventions – even close to the actions of graffiti – with the intention that they exist only as temporary occupations, to transform and resignify specific places.

But I haven't always managed to escape from the difficulties that can jeopardize the permanence of public works, especially when located in "tougher" urban spaces, far from the care and the repertoire of formal art spaces. In a period of five years my work *Duplo* [Double] – commissioned by a private university, with a very rigorous finishing in white marble and black porcelain, in a closed square guarded by the institution – became totally graffitied and deprecated after the university stopped taking care of the square and abandoned it to be used freely, but in a predatory way, by the neediest segments of the population in that area. It was a great lesson for me; instead of realizing that pristine work (which in reality ended up being offered as a large support for interventions and a wide range of uses), I should have thought about a collaboration or complicity with elements of this same population, I could have even invented a work that would have allowed this predatory and mutant appropriation – directly for them... On the other hand, *Teorema da Gaveta* [The Drawer Theorem], the ceramic panel that covers various parts of the façade of the Institute of Mathematics and Computer Sciences of the Universidade de São Paulo at São Carlos, made even before *Duplo*, remains intact and well preserved, possibly because of the much better resolved relation of this work with its users, most of them students from this university campus, certainly more motivated by the sort of "visual charade" which is the true theme of this artwork.

2 - The political consists in the assault on perception, in the transformation brought about by grafting something into the given space in such a way as to magically change its relationship with the real, altering the experience and understanding of the place. In terms of my work, the political is an operation of estrangement: making things, places and worlds "something else" for a moment, or even "never-more-the-same", after being inhabited by the fiction.

3 - I believe that strong stylistic changes certainly took place before the 1970s, when I was still struggling to impress changes in my practice as a painter headed toward an expressive, material and somewhat gestural abstraction, resulting from a very traditional art training. But I think that from then on, frankly,

I can see my work as one large whole, with almost necessary variants – or, as I like to think of it – a well of a single poetics, which I am continuously digging. My interest in the image – in the sense of a practice and a reflection on the nature of images as a representation of the world, and how they operate as mediators of perception, in the strictly political sense of representation – has been a common and constant platform for many of my apparent comings and goings, over the last decades. I can also see recurrences – in the attitudes of disassembling the traditional visual codes, in my interest for space and for architecture, under various forms, and in the curiosity and opening to nonartistic, new or technological media for explorations and various collaborations. Alongside these recurrences there are some common threads linking a good part of what I have done from the 1970s up to now, without apparent connection. One of them is the photographic and indexical basis of a good part of my production, which includes the projected shadows, the distortions of perspective, and the various phantasmagorias that I have projected in various urban contexts.

4 – In the years of the Tropicália movement (1967 and '68) I was living outside Brazil, based in Madrid, as a fellow with the Instituto de Cultura Hispánica, for studies in the history of art and painting. In that period of military dictatorship in Brazil, Tropicália instated an experimentalism with anarchic leanings that was a true leap for the quality of the language used in poetry and music. All of this reached me, almost without delay, as a desired transgression at a moment when I myself was beginning to make close contact with (and be influenced by) the counterculture of other geographies, some of which were fully established. For me it was a time of radical rupture, in personal and professional terms. This was when I abandoned painting and delved deep into the experience and recognition of other kinds of poetics, with conceptual foundations sustained by new media and supports, which required me to develop a totally new repertoire.

In 1973, when I returned to live and work in Brazil, I entered into close productive contact with a group of concrete poets, both with the “leading lights” Augusto and Haroldo de Campos as well as with the younger constellation; and in the post-Tropicália times I was able to draw closer, in terms of the sensibility itself, to musicians, artists and poets such as Caetano Veloso, Oiticica and Paulo Leminski, as well as many others who left a conceptual legacy that greatly influenced later generations. In short, the Tropicalia years were definitive ruptures in many latitudes – for me as well – and in any case it was a period of

“molting to another shell” to assume, from then on, this syntony (?) of mine with more hybrid languages.

5 – I often say that I am ecumenical, always open and interested in exchanges with other fields of language which are not necessarily those that I work with, nor limited only to contemporaneity. Nevertheless, I can say that my imagination and path have been significantly influenced by neo-Dadaist and conceptual manifestations of the 1970s, developed on generational platforms closer to my own. Seeing the exhibition *Information* at MoMA in 1971 and being at *Encuentros de Pamplona*, held in homage to John Cage in 1973, really marked and changed my artistic outlook. The effect was as strong as what had happened to me during the previous decade, when I left painting and more traditional forms of art after I found, in Europe, the manifestations and exhibitions that celebrated kinetic art, arte programmata, arte povera, and the initial stages of computer art. In those years – which I still consider as the time of my art training – all of this triggered reflections that literally revolutionized my prior “convictions”.

Years later, when I was fully involved in my postgraduate studies, my contact with the work by Duchamp and, especially, his conceptual and pseudo-scientific sources, triggered important reflections and intensely stimulated my imagination. In historical mannerism – the first moment of art as invention – I was able to find many affinities with my work and my postures. I don’t even need to say that this constituted a “line” for me – it was like finding my own “family”.

6 - Really, this dependence runs counter to the true functions of art and the role of the artist, which is to magically mediate the relation with the world, at all times. I am aware that reaching and interacting with a broader public, of all ages – even an anonymous one lacking experience with the protective spaces of art – only takes place effectively in the public space, or else in the few (but fortunately increasing) institutional spaces that lend importance to this interaction. In my public practices over the last years, the graphic interventions that temporarily cover architectures and façades have certainly sought to situate the work within this potentiality. But the interventions, operations or strategies – whatever you wish to call them – that have most stimulated this direction, which is fundamental for me, are precisely the projections of light in various urban

contexts that I have been doing since the late 1990s. When I make nocturnal projections of fictional images on the highest and darkest parts of buildings, on walls and in the streets, in movement through heavily populated urban areas, along paths previously selected for being significant or emblematic for that place, my preferred operation is that of estrangement, and the best tactic is surprise. I have made various kinds of luminous or phantasmagoric writings – the superhero, the fly, the flying saucer, the word *luz* [light] or animal tracks – by way of gobos or lasers, using devices in constant movement, with the aim of altering the normal view of the things and places, momentarily interrupting the indifference and influencing people's perceptions. But in fact, the result could never be evaluated; for example, there was no way to know the effect caused on the passengers of a certain bus that crossed the projection of light – here we are speaking of a fluid and tenuous happening that is poetically blended with the real.

7 - I would say expanded graphics, more than drawing – however, when I think of drawing in the sense of writing, making inscriptions or graphic signs, even with light or shadows, I can see the confluence between the two terms. But what attracts me more to graphics than drawing is the idea of the matrix and reproducibility, and, moreover, the possibility of its hybridism with the digital imaginary, which is constantly giving rise to more techniques for producing images. In any case, I agree and I also see this graphic/drawing overflow of mine, going beyond the customary supports, as a strategy for invading other dimensions, architectures and even urban fabrics.

But specifically considering the relation with sculpture, I believe my work is in an almost purely optical area that borders on the sculptural. What I have done the most is to coat surfaces and volumes with drawings and patterns that never manage to leave the plane they are adhered to, yet use different strategies to suggest another spatiality, which can be volumetric, dizzying or labyrinthine. This applies both to my work with objects as well as my interventions on various architectures. The real space is a datum that I never modify physically, because for me it is the existing space that is offered, used as a contingent support. This given space is the challenge that I need to confront, to inscribe the desired transformations.

Parallel with this, I want to say that this expanded and spatialized drawing also has a markedly temporal (and possibly more allegorical) character, which is the

indexical sign itself. The graphic splotches consisting of marks and tracks of all kinds, in different degrees of accumulation that I have used to coat, speckle or wrap buildings or interior spaces can be very well perceived as an overlaid visual narrative, concerning a happening in time.

8 - Perhaps because the poetics implied in my works is derived from the illusionist tradition – a longstanding, pervasive trend deeply entrenched in visual perception – even when my entire thrust is focused on operations of transgression and disassembling of codes, they are there, at the basis, like a decodifiable passport allowing the poetic leap. I have also never made any secret of the choices I make in terms of repertoires of banal images, of objects in common use and easy interpretation, with the intention of making them “something else”, and this means to say: ambiguous or transformed up to the very limits of recognition, by way of operations provided by diverse geometries and distortions of perspective.

But if on the one hand I allow for easy access, on the other I want to include a trap: the new perception will become stuck to the memory of that image. The printed silhouette of a flattened corkscrew, thin and distorted in anamorphosis will always be a *ressacarrolhas*,¹ as poet Haroldo de Campos wrote in the small poem that reached me at the door of my house, on the morning after the inauguration of the exhibition *Anamorfás*, where I saw him taking notes in front of each one of the images. (Later published in “A educação dos cinco sentidos”, Brasiliense, 1985).

9 – In the late 1970s I started to get interested in the relationships between optics, perception and visual representation – in the sense of contingencies of the point of view and of the limits and arbitrariness of highly codified systems of representation, such as perspective and photography, which are aimed at a nearly scientific similarity in relation to the perceived real. In this direction I began to explore the effects of the marginal aberrations that sustain the geometry of anamorphoses and yet today are at the bases of so many digital transformations. The graphic series *Anamorfás* [Anamorphs], which I concluded in 1980, refers to this context of ideas. *Anamorfás* was a sort of starting point for

¹ There is an untranslatable play on words here in the Portuguese text. The neologism *ressacarrolhas* is constructed from a blend of the word *ressaca* [hangover] with *saca-rolhas* [corkscrew], mentioned earlier in the same sentence". [translator's note]

a reflexive practice that involved different ways of disassembling the codes of representation, very much supported in distortions conditioned by vantage points. When I took the work from paper into space, in my first installations constituted with painted silhouettes – as in the series *In Absentia*, in which I consider the notions of icon and absence – I came to a much better understanding of the role played by one's point of view, which is, basically, the place of this eye that apprehends or captures, also philosophically, the visualities of the world. The way that it could give rise to multiple distortions, re-perspectivizing perspectives by the simple displacement of positions, provided insight for rethinking some questions of representation such as "phantasm", fiction or simulacrum. Although with variations and additions, I believe that these starting points have extended up to the present.

10 – Here I don't think that I can give you specific responses and point to isolated manifestations, or individual artworks or artists. Making an overall summary, think that the greatest thing during the time of my generation, which is certainly a privileged generation for witnessing and experiencing so many things, could have been the taking of art as a language. Clearly, meta-language was already there before, in Monet, and entered the 20th century in the succession of historical vanguards. In this summary I refer more precisely to the focus on language that appears as a questioning into the nature and function of art in the 1960s and '70s. Here I'm not thinking so much about self-reference as about that art which reflects on its role in the social as language. Perhaps this was the greatest driver of art in the time of my generation's life.

In regard to the failures, I prefer to be more limited in my scope: in a problematic area like public art, the shortcomings arose from the immense difficulties of negotiation inherently posed by permanent works. Until today, issues such as control or a lack of imagination – but also the educational aspects properly speaking – remain to be solved, in order to foster the understanding of everything that comes into play when art is installed in the public space. This is far from the understanding of art as an investment.