

TERESA BURGA

Aleatory Structures

May 26–August 12, 2018

Since the 1960s, the Peruvian artist Teresa Burga (b. Iquitos, Peru, 1935) has created works that constitute a fine-grained record of the social realities of her time. Her extensive oeuvre encompasses Pop Art-style paintings and environments as well as conceptual drawings and objects and cybernetic installations. The unifying constant in the artist's formally and aesthetically diverse output in a wide range of media is her insistent endeavor to visualize complex social structures, but also the individual's capacity for practical self-determination. The latter, Burga argues, is inextricably bound up with the exchange of information and an understanding of its contexts, which can empower people to take charge of their own lives and become actively engaged in their communities. As a female exponent of Latin American art, Burga was often ahead of her time. Due to the political situation in her native Peru, which long suffered under a military dictatorship and struggled with severe economic crises, she worked largely in isolation from the local and international arts scenes. The comprehensive retrospective *Teresa Burga: Aleatory Structures* is the artist's first solo exhibition in Switzerland.

Like many other women artists of the 1960s and 1970s, Burga examines patriarchal social structures that regiment the lives of women and inquires into possible avenues of female empowerment within the system. Where her contemporaries in the United States and Europe celebrate the female body and its presence in the public sphere in a show of newfound confidence and strength, Burga's Pop Art paintings and environments present female figures who are largely excluded from public spaces: prostitutes, solitary women in the streets or in domestic isolation, gazing at the outside world even as they are barred from active participation in it. Showing women as switchboard operators, wait staff, or knitting, Burga's Pop works pinpoint entrenched stereotypes, illustrating that, although Peruvian women gained the right to vote in 1955, their involvement in the affairs of their country remained tightly circumscribed.

If social inequality and a rigid power hierarchy define relations between the sexes, a similar imbalance separates Peru's various ethnic groups. Although the Peruvian arts scene of the 1970s and 1980s repeatedly adapts stylistic features of indigenous craftsmanship, the native peoples of the Andes remain marginalized. Burga addresses this inequity, a legacy of the colonial era, in her more recent drawings. Working with photographic sources, she translates pictures of markets where Andinos sell and buy their wares into a naïve visual idiom. The "market drawings," created in 2016–17, highlight the fact that the different segments of Peru's population even today hardly come into sustained contact with each other; the markets of Lima are a rare exception. The other major form in which indigenous people participate in public life is through their folklore, captured in the artist's drawings of "women in traditional costumes" (2017).

In her "children's drawings" (2013–14), Burga offers a humorous send-up of the art world's elitism: she manufactures faithful copies of drawings by children, which are not usually regarded as art, and so transplants them into the art context. Her intervention subverts the trope of the "artist's hand," deliberately downplaying her own role as creator and the ideas of authorship and "artistic genius" with which it is intertwined.

The artist pioneers this strategy undermining the mechanisms of the art world in the "newspaper clippings series" she creates in 1974–78, copying magazine covers as well as clippings from newspapers and periodicals. The motifs she chooses illustrate the importance of self-determined participation in community life as well as the influence the media exercise over how social realities are perceived. In the 1970s, she focuses on imagery that highlights the severe constraints limiting women's involvement in society; overstepping these bounds is likely to get them in trouble with the populist-nationalist revolutionary military regime. Burga revisits the ensemble of drawings based on newspaper clippings in 2012–14, demonstrating that the reflection on these issues has lost none of its relevance. As before, she translates mechanically reproduced images and the accompanying headlines from local newspapers into freehand drawings. The motifs solicit a dialogue about prevailing social conditions and their representation in the media. The reference to the need

Curator:
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(Director, Migros Museum
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On the occasion of the
opening a monograph will be
published by JRP|Ringier.

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for critical reflection of these realities, and especially of their most ordinary and familiar aspects, is a central thread that runs through Burga's entire oeuvre. The artist's interest in the possibilities of communication technology and the dissemination of information is evident in her installation *4 mensajes* ("4 messages," 1974), which scrutinizes the influence of the mass media on the perception of reality. The work is based on a sequence of sentence fragments as heard on Peruvian television on December 27, 1973. The artist selected them at random and translated them into four "messages" of her own: the first is a slide show of close-up shots of a keyboard; the second is a silent video in which the camera focuses on a woman's eloquent facial expressions and gestures; for the third message, Burga has transformed a machine-generated text into a graphic rendering, while the fourth is a recording of distorted sounds. The artist seems to propose an alternative model of communication that cancels the original message and its informational aspect. In the context of the Peruvian military regime and its manipulation of the media, the work also reads as hinting at the questionable veracity of the information provided to the public. The installation reminds us to take a critical look at the habits that inform our everyday actions and perceptions of the world around us and to question our own ideas.

Burga's conceptual experimental arrangements of the 1970s, which she notes down on graph paper, offer a playful challenge to our ideas of self-determination and freedom in our actions. Planned out in minute detail, the scenarios turn the spectators into participants in her projects—not as autonomous individuals, however, but as pawns restricted to the narrow set of choices prescribed by the artist. *Work That Disappears When the Spectator Tries to Approach It* (1970/2017) is the implementation of one of these schemes. Four hundred light bulbs forming a luminous square measuring 87 by 87 inches beckon to the viewer from the far end of a long dark corridor. Yet once he or she takes up the visual invitation and approaches the work, the bulbs go out one by one until the room sinks into darkness. The piece critiques a conventional spectatorial attitude vis-à-vis art while also gesturing toward the ubiquity of external constraints curtailing the individual's freedom to act.

Autorretrato. Estructura. Informe. 9.6.72 ("Self-Portrait. Structure. Report. 9.6.72," 1972) similarly harnesses art to study one way in which the subject is disciplined. Burga recruited the assistance of a physician and submitted to a detailed medical examination. The artist's body becomes the object of a compilation of analytical data, bringing art into dialogue with science. The work investigates the mechanisms of categorization and systematization that operate on bodies—and female bodies in particular—and form the basis of restrictive social policies. The self-portrait the artist derives from her health data deconstructs her individuality, revealing it to be a sum of quantitative data. Such artistic "profiling" is also at work in *Perfil de la Mujer Peruana* ("Portrait of the Peruvian Woman," 1980–81). In collaboration with the psychologist Marie-France Cathelat, Burga created an ensemble of works based on an anonymous survey conducted in 1980 for which they measured the faces and bodies of 219 Peruvian women between the ages of twenty and thirty and questioned them about their views on issues in politics, religion, economics, law, and sexuality. Burga articulates the findings in sculptures that shine a spotlight on Peruvian middle-class women's role in society, the opportunities they have to participate in their country's social and political life, and their unequal treatment by society.

The artist's interest in visualizing complex (social) states of affairs is not limited to the female body. The so-called *Borges complex* (1970/2017) is her interpretive adaptation of the poem *La noche que en el Sur lo velaron* ("Night Death Watch on the Southside," 1929). The author, the Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges, is widely regarded as a leading exponent of magical realism, which synthesizes reality and fiction. Burga assigns colors and numbers to the stanzas and verses that then serve as the basis for intricate calculations; the results are rendered in colorful bar charts on graph paper. Her examination coalesces into a visual analysis of the poem that seems to translate its mysticism into tangible and quantifiable units.

A keen analytical eye and meticulous observation underlie Burga's creative practice, yielding works that may seem playful at first but soon turn out to be critical reflections on existing social realities. The same exactitude presumably also stood her in good stead in her day job; she supported herself working as an official in the Peruvian customs administration. Although Burga does not see herself as an openly political artist, her work is a probing exploration of modern society: visual representation and information in mass culture, automation and bureaucratization, female identity and the relations between her country's different communities. This thematic focus lends cohesion to Burga's formally and aesthetically diverse oeuvre in many different media; its unifying characteristic is that she consistently eschews anything resembling an individual creative style. Her works challenge the viewer to take a stance and reject the authority of entrenched social structures. Meanwhile, the artist is acutely aware that she cannot control the effect her art will have on its audience: as the title *Aleatory Structures* (from the Latin for "dice," meaning haphazard, random, left to chance) suggests, she regards her works as impulses whose repercussions are unpredictable and shaped by contingencies. She initiates processes, but it is the viewer who teases out their full implications, perhaps as intended by the artist.

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The exhibition was curated by Heike Munder. An accompanying monograph will be released by JRP|Ringier on occasion of the opening. The exhibition and catalogue are realized in cooperation with the Kestner Gesellschaft, Hannover, Germany.

Teresa Burga (b. Iquitos, Peru, 1935) lives and works in Lima, Peru. In the past several years, her work has been presented in a number of exhibitions in several countries, including, most recently, at S.M.A.K., Ghent (2018); the Museum für Moderne Kunst (2017); the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles (2017); the Sculpture Center, New York (2017); the Tate Modern, London (2015); MALBA, Buenos Aires (2015); Museum Ludwig, Cologne (2015); the Art Institute of Chicago (2015); the Venice Biennale (2015); Sala de Arte Público Siqueiros, Mexico City (2014); Palais des Beaux-Arts, Brussels (2014); Museu de Arte Moderna do Rio de Janeiro (2014); the Istanbul Biennial (2012); and Württembergischer Kunstverein, Stuttgart (2011).

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