

Regina Silveira: The magic of shadows

Artist reveals the power of public art by covering Masp in blue

Carlos Haag December 2012



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In 1962, multimedia artist Regina Silveira was studying under Iberê Camargo (1914-1994), in his native city of Porto Alegre. Iberê controlled each student in the room with eagle eyes. A classmate standing next to Regina was delicately painting something with a very expensive sable paintbrush. This annoyed Iberê so much that at one point he could no longer control himself, so he yanked the paintbrush from Maria's hand, told her that this was not what painting was about and threw the paintbrush out the window. "We froze, watching the paintbrush fall on the top of a moving streetcar," Regina recalls. "Then he asked for a wide paintbrush with hard bristles and squeezed all of Maria's paints on her palette. He remained on his feet and started painting over what she had done, using thick brush strokes." Regina says that in a few minutes, the original painting had been totally transformed and the result was marvelous. "I'll never forget that expensive sable paintbrush flying out the window," says the artist.

This was the start of the professional life of this lively, curious creator. She has always been guided by poetic investigation and freedom, with an attitude that constantly questions everything that is traditional or consolidated in art. “The artist does not come up with solutions; the artist asks questions and can also provoke tension,” she explains. This is why she is involved in so many types of artistic expression, ranging from photography to painting, from posters to involvement in city architecture. Regina is as interested in subverting the systems of artistic perspective as she is in representing the shadows that are created without revealing the element that causes them. She has been engaging in urban landscape since the 1990’s. Her most recent work, *Tramazul*, can be seen on Paulista Avenue [in the city of São Paulo] until January 2011. Regina transformed the ‘box’ that houses Masp, the São Paulo Art Museum, into a huge embroidered diagram of blue sky. “I feel very gratified when I see that art spaces held sacred are giving way to street manifestations, in a closer relationship with the public.” Painter, illustrator, engraver, and graphic artist, Regina is also a retired teacher of the Fine Arts Department of ECA-USP. As such, she gives credit to academic experience. “I managed to produce experimental works of art and objects thanks to research grants from such agencies as FAPESP.” Next year, the Edusp publishing house will launch the book *O Outro lado da imagem: a poética de Regina Silveira* [The other side of the image: the poetics of Regina Silveira], by Spanish art critic Adolfo Montejo Navas. Below are excerpts of Pesquisa FAPESP’s interview with Regina Silveira.

Classic author Pliny the Elder (23 to 79 A.D.) defined the language of images as a shadow, “the sign left on the wall by a lover who has left.” This has a lot to do with your art, doesn’t it?

The interpretation of this metaphor on the origin of painting, which is almost a poem, is not that simple. The first image or original pictorial representation is not exactly a copy, a direct registration of something real; this is a more complex issue. That loving – and disciplined – gesture of fixing a shadow of something real, which is not an image in itself, but a vestige and a sign of absence, by means of an abstract contour (Leonardo warned that contours did not exist in reality) makes Pliny the Elder’s metaphor something much more intricate. This has nothing to do with the images that appear in various cultures; it is related to the enormous power of provoking the imagination to other considerations on the relationship between what is real and images – and, inversely, at least in my opinion, on the function of images within what is real. Anyway, silhouettes are representations in their most basic and rudimentary state.

Why did I get interested in silhouettes? The why is linked to the ambiguity and the mystery that I have found in these images for a long time. Silhouettes seem simple, when we think of them as dark, filled-in contours – but they are actually very ambiguous and appropriate for several phantasmagorias. The shadowy silhouettes have always led to extraordinary games of imagination, in a secular manner, in different art forms. Silhouettes that represent shadows conserve absence-related data that real shadows have, where they are not images but rather signs linked to a source; they are vestiges and signs with time and memory implications. I have always been interested in the mental and temporal relationship that shadows stain with their present or absent references. In short, this is a vast field for poetic operations, which I have always thought of in terms of substitutions and distortions. When does this begin? After working for some time on distortions of the artistic perspective, on photographic images that I solved mostly with contours, as exemplified by *Anamorfis* (1980); I made a set of four photograms (*Enigmas*, 1981) in which I covered objects photographed with the silhouettes (shadows) of other absent objects – to assemble series of visual ideograms, with combined and enigmatic meanings. My early art also includes the series of prints called *Dilatáveis* (1981), where the silhouetted shadows were proportionally much more extensive in relation to the small photographs of politicians, soldiers, and executives, which I had cut out from newspapers and magazines published back then. In the following years, the shadows and the silhouettes grew to environmental proportions, as exemplified by the installation *In absentia MD* shown at the 1983 São Paulo.

Your love for the art of painting is noteworthy, even though for a long time you didn't believe in this art form.

I lost my belief in painting in the late 1960's – specifically, in the kind of painting that had stemmed from my traditional training and that had gained quite a lot- or relative – contemporariness after some major disruptions caused by courses and my close contact with Iberê Camargo in Porto Alegre. This disbelief made me 'lose my bearings' and led me to review everything I had ever done – in addition, I became aware that I was still an artist in training. All this was the result of my first – and relatively long – trip to Europe, where I became acquainted with manifestations of contemporary art grounded in poetics and means that were totally new and different from painting. Of course, I also saw the originals of historical paintings, something I had dreamed of for a long time; but having such close contact with that contemporary art and doing, seeing, hearing and discussing totally new ideas with artists of my generation was like shock treatment; additionally, all this was going on in an artistic setting that was already dominated by the counterculture of the end of that decade.

I was totally changed when I came back to Brazil, but I also had to do a lot of thinking to provide new guidance to my work... This may have been the start of my curiosity about the media to produce images and the origin of the hybrid features that characterize my work. However, it's untrue that I dislike paintings and painters. On the contrary: painting is an essential part of good combinations of contemporariness. I think that the most interesting painters, like Richter, Polke and many others, are those who work with an awareness of the diversity of media and languages, operating eclectically, with a 'shuffling' of codes, including pictorial ones, within the notion that 'everything has already been done.'



Abyssal, 2010, installation, adhesive vinyl, 130 sq. m approximately, Atlas Sztuki, Lodz, Poland / Photo: Tomasz Stanczak

You have always been uneasy about representation, what you refer to as ‘de-artification.’ Could you explain this?

I have always been interested in the ways of creating visual representations, reflexively speaking; what I mean is that I have always been interested in producing representations that look at themselves, but with no formality. In the conceptual environment of the 1970’s, most of the images around counterculture environments – meaning in places other than art galleries and museums – were photographs, videos, and documents published in countercultural publications and shown in countercultural exhibitions; often, these images were distributed from one person to the next; the syntax had to be ‘dry:’ without autographs. Artistic engraving techniques were banned! Traditional printing and engraving techniques were too ‘artistic’ for the movement of conceptual ideas and visual features. The objective pursued was the dryness of the ways of industrial printing, without the ‘manual’ touch, for the production of a visual feature that was more appropriate for conceptual contents – to produce the kinds of images that I could qualify as ‘art-less.’ Even photography had these dry visuals, devoid of technical specifics. In those years, I chose to pursue hybrid engraving, which waived ‘a hand mark,’ and combined industrial printing procedures with those of traditional engraving. On one hand, I remained close to traditional printing techniques, because teaching engraving techniques was a consistent activity in my academic career. On the other, I resorted to everything that the field of industrial printing could offer as a resource that might be of interest to my language and broaden my production tools. This ‘everything’ was very broad and I had no fear of the mix: next to traditional engraving, there was the preference for silkscreen and lithography, as these techniques became hybrids with photographs and the like; on the other hand, an inclusive engraving variety, without any prejudice, permeates the world of printing possibilities – whether artistic or less so. This permanent curiosity about the media, which still persists, has for a long time helped to turn me into an ‘expert’ in any of the said techniques, embroiled in increasingly complex technical possibilities. I want to believe that my inner freedom regarding the use of the means derives from my artistic practice, which for a very long time has been sustained by continuous reflections – more questions having been asked than answers provided – on the nature of images and visual representation. I have never viewed images and representations ‘naturally,’ but rather as a radical artifice, able to magically act as the mediator between what is real and what is perceived – the means are merely strategies to guide ideas and intentions, creation, and appearance.

The manipulation of traditional codes is an outstanding feature of your work. How does this ‘dialogue’ between what is real and what is an artifice happen?

The deconstruction of traditional codes was – and possibly still is – my favorite trap. I could only go down that path after I had finished my very traditional training, where knowing how to draw comes first and is a preparation for painting, the artist needing to draw something every day to ‘loosen his hand,’ where prints are considered a secondary form of art, the style footprints of architecture have to be copiously copied onto boards and the belief is that unless the artist is familiar with anatomy, he will be unable to represent the human body and its movements. In the second stage of my life, after I had become a professional, I came across other barriers I had to demolish: the barrier that says that photography is not an art, that ‘artistry’ needs the touch of a hand, that art is pure expression, and so on. It was a real pleasure when I finally understood that artistic perspective, geometry and optics, which are strict systems by which to learn, understanding, and representation of the visual world, because they provide ‘accurate’ and scientific visualizations, could be tools used for dreaming and for making distortions and phantasmagorias, without abdicating any of the rigor. A poetic leap, for the benefit of magic and the enigmas of the visual, with rigor as a trap. The operation to deconstruct traditional codes is more evident in my work and in my widespread use of geometric deformations of figures and shadows, to distort ‘normal’ images. The deconstruction is also the basis of all those architectural drawings of the 1990’s, in which I distorted nearly functional images for the construction of indoor premises in paradoxical spaces through the application of compressions and convergences stemming from exits that didn’t fit the original construction, in a parallel artistic perspective. When they gained a real scale, in works such as Graphos and Apartamento, the trap was the virtual abyss grafted within the space of perception. To deconstruct traditional codes, one must ‘be thoroughly familiar’ with the codes, of course, not to use them but to ‘pull the rug’ from under the spectator’s certainties.

This is also reflected in your interest in dealing with the artistic perspective that ‘organizes’ the world for the spectator. Is this a way of avoiding the ‘mechanical’ interpretation of art?

Undoubtedly, the purpose of artistic perspective is to organize the visual as a scientific correlation with the visual world. In addition, one cannot deny that the geometric structuring of space provided by this system can be detected in the entire illusionist chain, not only in paintings, but also in moving images and in the similarities with the digital world.

In the 1970's, when I was studying the coded nature of illusionist images in paintings and photographs, trying to understand in which direction my own work was going, it was almost inevitable to view artistic perspective as the basic structure of the photographic images of the city that I used in *Destruturas urbanas*, a series of silk screens that I had made at that time. At first, I thought that the geometric structure with perspective which I overlaid on photos of the city (São Paulo) to create compartmentalizations of many kinds was an interference similar to what I had done in my previous work, when I superimposed images of garbage and car junkyards on very similar urban landscapes, extracted from commercial post cards. I was ready to name that new silkscreen series "*Interferências*" when I realized that the interference in that case was purely semantic, given that the visuality of the photos was entirely in harmony with the perspective of the graphic meshes that I was overlaying. This is why I named this series *Destruturas*; in fact, this was a name I borrowed from the poet Augusto de Campos, who named them thus when he saw the silk screens. When I decided to construct deformed visualities and vertiginous spaces, artistic perspective became essential once again – not the conventional engraving system, with adequacy rules and limitations, but the kind of artistic perspective that is generated beyond those limits, to produce anamorphosis, curvy representations and visual enigmas. This was the freest and most imaginative field, with no commitment to 'visual truth,' which spurred my imagination. This also provoked many artists who came before me, all of them 'inspiring,' and led by Duchamp. I wanted to start understanding his statement when he started work on what would become the Large Glass constellation, rather than retrieve the artistic perspective that would return to painting the intelligence that painting had lost! Let's say that I 'felt at home' and very comfortable with this strict perspective, which was actually a geometric support to produce deviations, paradoxes and phantasmagorias. This led to a type of transgression supported by the traditional components of the system: points of view (one or several), distance, points and exit lines, the line of the Earth and the line of the horizon.

Is 'curiosity' the artist's fundamental driver?

Is curiosity important for the artist? I think it's something fundamental, but curiosity should not be restricted to the use of media. I define curiosity much more broadly: the curiosity to perceive, to become acquainted with, to be in the world. It is almost an action: the opposite of installing oneself in something that is known, supported and risk-free. In relation to the means, in the past I used to advocate this curiosity in opposition to what I called the 'specialist artist,' the artist focused on only one traditional medium: engraver, designer, painter.

One must understand that the context of my affectations was precisely located: either in my experience during my conceptual years, when the means imploded and blended with many other traditional categories; or in the engraving environments, the main field of my teaching career, where the focus was more on the technique and less on the art. I always appreciated the non-artist with a strong language-related performance, where the medium wasn't that important. Today, it seems that these considerations have lost their power, because the situation has changed and artistic practices have fluid limits: the medium conducts a dialogue, the dialogue is a total hybrid, as expected. But the fact is that I continue feeling apprehensive, now that I am a specialist in a technical novelty, which is another scourge that often installs itself in the fields of art and technology. In this case, curiosity about the media becomes popular, yet in an empty space, when the poetic aspect becomes secondary.

Have the 'white cube,' the galleries, the museums, lost their vitality nowadays? If we're only referring to art's protected spaces, then saying that the 'white cube' has lost its vitality is something difficult to prove. Record numbers of visitors have been going to museums and one of the functions of the museums of the future is to make the art environment provide entertainment, which is already occurring. At the same time, the protected spaces of art, the neutral (white) spaces of the former Modernism venues, in magnificent isolation for a specialized repertoire – these are not being seen by that many people after the art spaces became architecture/art playing leading roles, to the point of causing problems in terms of receiving art itself. More consistent with the loss of vitality of the 'white cube' is the growing vitality of manifestations out of the protected art spaces, sometimes in public areas. These manifestations are provided by individual artists or often by groups of artists, whose actions are focused on results more closely tied to real life. The relationship between Art and Life, which existed in the 1970's, is back, albeit with other components; it also includes a landscape of the media, comprised of the electronic media and the internet. As a result, the 'white cube' is less interesting now than the unprotected spaces, such as the streets and the urban topology. The linearity of a mainstream that dislocated itself from one 'white cube' to another ended a long time ago. The best thing about the work I have been doing these last few years, which involves covering architecture and showing night projections that use the city as support to dislocate images and 'semanticize' places, is to contribute to some kind of transformation of experience or to provide a new perception, in purely magical terms. My target audience is anonymous, and I cannot assess resonance among them; it's a challenge.



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What about the distance between ordinary people and contemporary art? Proximity or distance? It depends on the contemporary art and on the kind of people. We're talking about art education here, a relevant program for institutions, government entities and schools, and we're certainly also referring to habits and contagion: looking at art, being exposed to art. A number of Brazilian institutions have truly exemplary programs of this kind and this has led to an improvement on a national level, at least in some of the bigger cities. I think it's a fallacy to think that ordinary people only understand the art of the past, because the related codes are already internalized, and thus they are able to 'see.' I also think it's wrong to believe that ordinary people don't understand contemporary art, because contemporary art attacks their repertoire, and that ordinary people prefer the kind of art in which they can recognize representations and perceive narratives. My experiences during my rather long professional life as an artist and educator with different audiences – both adults and children – with or without a repertoire or contact with art, with different professions and from different social classes, have allowed me to come across enormous permeability and to get rewarding answers to quite new and radical art proposals. Why are poetry and imagination not implied? My opinion is that the signs involved in contemporary art have the potential to provide access to understand it, not because these signs are historical or are an anachronism, but because they are in synchrony with the things that the viewers experiment in their own time, life and place. In addition, the contemporary art world, in many cases, touches the frontiers of other more utilitarian areas, in which I include communication

media, with which art often shares not only the signs but sometimes the means and the techniques. I think that this contact with other areas, interwoven with practical life, could even build some bridges that might make it easier to understand the ‘weirdness’ of contemporary art.

You are a university professor and, at the same, time, a transgressor and anti-institutional: how does this dual function work?

This might seem like a paradox, but being a member of the academic community and a transgressing artist were never incompatible. On the contrary – academia was a good ‘niche’ in which to exercise my freedom to experiment and transgress. First, I managed to produce many works and projects that were really new and experimental, thanks to the support of research grants provided by funding agencies such as FAPESP and the National Council of Scientific and Technological Development (CNPq). I would not have had the chance of taking risks, as I did, if my art had had to follow the standard art market venues, when the market, in the beginning, was incipient and conservative. It was much more rewarding to treat my projects as investigations and questions whose poetic grounds I managed to bring to the surface, formulate, and defend. On the other hand, it was within the context of post-graduate studies, concurrent with my academic career, that I managed to develop more systematically the reflection that sustains my artwork. Contact with my students was the best way to re-invent myself, because of the exchange of ideas and experiences, especially with those students whose potential I detected and which has led them to be the top professionals they are today.

What is the power of interventions in public spaces, as exemplified by your work at Masp?

Of the interventions in public spaces, the ones that in my opinion come closest to the transforming functions that art, as I see it, must have above all, are the temporary or short-lived ones, in that they produce their effect and then disappear. Permanent public art, even the kind that does not propose to be a ‘monument,’ implies other contingencies and negotiations – with different levels of difficulty – that involve meaning and use. Anyway, whether it’s temporary or permanent, public art is located within the space of life. We don’t go to it; it installs itself, without being invited, in the daily life of a community, which is then obliged to live with it, sometimes ‘forever,’ sometimes for an extended period of time or even a fraction of a minute if it is an ‘apparition.’

In the last few years, I have often decided that the temporary works are more effective and I am constantly looking for opportunities to enter this environment, which I find so inspiring, of art that has a relationship with specific architecture. In this case, the city has provided the most extended support and also the most changing and fluid one, on which to 'graft' projected images, almost always in transit, some of them fixed, others animated, which I incorporated ever since the laser-animated projection of the super hero that I created to fly on Avenida Paulista in 1997. But this was after I had come up against resistance and was denied permission to 'stick' huge flies with their shadows on the gables of buildings on the said avenue, which was to be part of the exhibition celebrating the São Paulo Art Biennale's 50th anniversary in 2001. The solution of the lighted fly, the *Transit*, actually in transit in a convertible car driving along Avenida Paulista and other unthinkable routes in São Paulo, showed me how this volatile kind of public intervention could mix and blend in with the city's imagination and had the ability to suspend and transform, albeit momentarily, the places it was going through. This was like a pre-movie magic. In the last few years, night projections have been consistently held; they are also a good strategy to 'tour' images of flies, super heroes, illuminated words, and UFOs. The miniaturized images fit inside a bag; they are executed or engraved on media such as small metal plates, or digital supports, and it is truly enchanting to see them grow and become illuminated beings (or ghosts?); or when they are installed in commonly available programs and equipment for evening performances, musical events and the like.