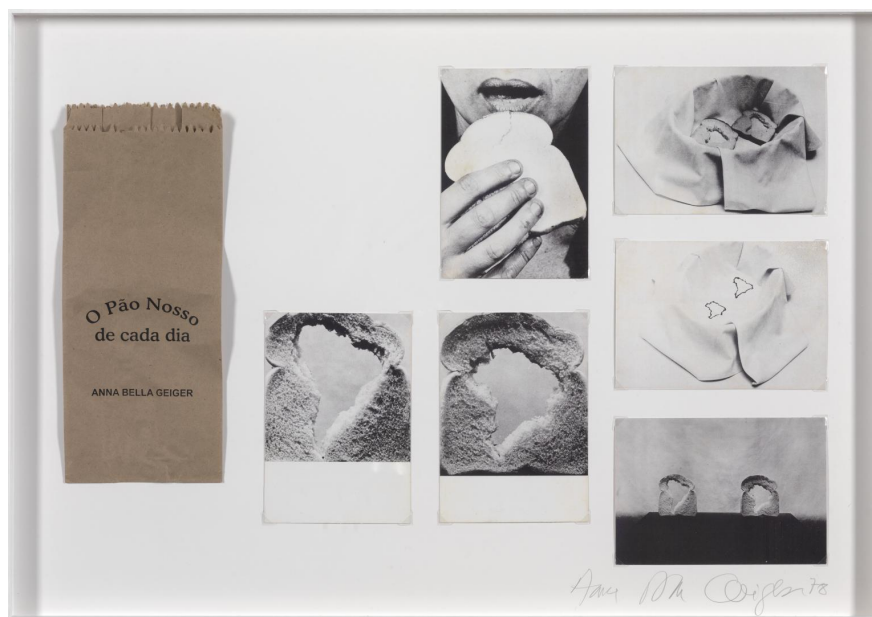


GLOBAL CONTEMPORARY ARTIST ANALYSIS

ARCHIVE PROJECT

ANNA BELLA GEIGER: CHALLENGING KNOWLEDGE

EMILY SHIELDS, ART HISTORY, SENIOR (DECEMBER 2021)



Anna Bella Geiger, *O Pão Nosso de cada dia (Our Daily Bread)*, 1978, 6 postcards and screenprint on paper bag mounted on card, 500 x 709 mm (50 x 70.9 cm), Tate Museum, London, England.

This short art analysis paper accompanies an original video presentation produced by UTC undergraduate students, dedicated to the work of a contemporary artist and developed as part of ART 4190r: Global Contemporary Art course in Spring 2021.

Anna Bella Geiger

Anna Bella Geiger, an avant-garde Brazilian artist, was born to Polish-Jewish parents who had immigrated to Latin America ten years prior to her birth. Her mother was from Ostrowiec, a small town in northeastern Poland known for its metallurgy, and her father was from Lodz, the third-largest city, located approximately seventy-five miles southwest of Warsaw. In Poland, her father worked as a leather craftsman, and upon his relocation to Rio, he transitioned to women's fashion, opening a haute couture store called Ninon Modas.¹ In the early 1950s, Geiger enrolled at the *Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro* (UFRJ) to study Anglo-Germanic literature and linguistics. During the same time, she participated in drawing, painting, and engraving classes under the tutelage of Brazilian abstract artist Fayga Ostrower who urged her to think ideologically and figuratively, and while in the fifties few Brazilian artists had fully embraced abstraction, Geiger continued to pave the way by exhibiting in the *I Exposição Nacional de Arte Abstrata* (First Exhibition of Abstract Art) in 1953.² In the sixties, Geiger entered what art critic Mario Pedrosa labeled her "visceral phase" in which she continued working in abstraction, yet her forms were organic and tended to resemble human anatomy. Geiger's practice shifted once more in the seventies, when she abandoned traditional mediums and substrates in favor of experimentation with video, and in 1974 with her work *Passagens 1*, she became the first woman to use video art in Brazil.³ Throughout her career, she has taught at several universities which has prompted her reflection on the construction of knowledge and

¹ Agnieszka Sural, "We Shot Ourselves in the Foot: An Interview With Anna Bella Geiger," Culture.PL, 2017.

² Sarah Poppel, "All Creative Being: Interview with Anna Bella Geiger," *Highways of the South: Latin American Art Networks* 3, no. 2, (2014): 98.

³ *Ibid.*, pg 98.

imbalances in power, themes that can be found in works such as *Admissao* (1975) and her *Equations* series.

Like many contemporary artists, Geiger's work is inextricably linked to politics. She is largely interested in conceptual questions rather than technique; Giulia says of her work *Arte e decoraçã*o (1975), "[she] raises questions that are capital to her artistic practice: what does it mean to be a female artist from a *peripheral* country oppressed by a military regime, in a world generally dominated by men and by western cultural models? And what does *peripheral country* mean exactly?"⁴ Uniquely, instead of leaving Brazil when a military regime came into power, Geiger stayed, but she demonstrated resistance by boycotting the 1969 São Paulo Bienal which had heavily censored artwork submissions.⁵ Although during this period of totalitarian rule, the economy experienced industrial growth, labeled the 'Brazilian miracle,' simultaneously, income inequalities grew dramatically.⁶

This unequal distribution of wealth is reflected in Geiger's documentation of her 1978 performance *O Pão Nosso de Cada Dia* in which she presents an arrangement of photographic postcards combined with a brown paper bread bag to comment on poverty. Two adjacent postcards depict slices of bread with cutouts in the shape of Brazil and another displays the pieces now placed in a bread basket while the corresponding image below it features only the voids, the drawn outlines of the shape of Brazil, bringing them into foreground. Employing the use of positive and negative space through the cutouts of bread presents a contrast between presence and absence; the presence of wealth for some and absence for others. She further

⁴ Giulia Lamoni, "(Domestic) Spaces of Resistance: Three Artworks by Anna Maria Maiolino, Leticia Parente, and Anna Bella Geiger," *Artelogie* 5, no. 5 (2013): 8.

⁵ Camila Maroja, "Framing Latin American Art: Artists, Critics, Institutions and the Configuration of a Regional Identity," (doctoral thesis, Duke University, 2015), 38.

⁶ Timothy J. Power, "The Brazilian Military Regime of 1964-1985: Legacies for Contemporary Democracy," *Iberoamericana* 16, no. 62 (2016): 15.

iterates this point by effectively using bread as her medium, a food item that has a rich history of being valuable for its labor and ingredients, but after the innovation of mass-produced slice bread, has become so abundantly cost-effective that it is often a social marker for poverty.⁷ The presentation of this piece and its emphasis on Brazil in association to poverty forces viewers to confront any preconceived notions of he or she may have about the country as a “peripheral” one, and as Homi Bhaba describes in the *The Location of Culture*, she is creating a productive space by first recognizing social marginality.⁸ Thus, she can begin to bring Brazil into a space of global inclusivity, disrupting the Euro-centric balance of power.

Married to cartographer and geographer Pedro Geiger, she again remodeled her practice to explore cartography. One work that illustrates her skepticism toward the objectivity of cartographic documents is her series *Mapas elementares* (1976). In the first video of the series, Geiger draws the outline of a world map, but similar to the representation of Brazil in *O Pão Nosso de cada dia*, she leaves a void where the country would normally be. Elena Shtromberg interprets the void as an effort to position Brazil as a “site of trauma.”⁹ Geiger came to understand cartographical documents as both a tool for finding the self and the location of *others*. Therefore, those who control the production and distribution of maps have control over global representation, and they have a seemingly omniscient knowledge of the location of others, and in this way, maps can facilitate cultural and political hegemonies. The theme of knowledge is also propelled further in Geiger’s refrain from labeling any nations or territories in her hand-drawn map, so the viewer must rely on his or her existing geographical knowledge.¹⁰ Lindsey

⁷ William Rubel, *Bread: A Global History* (London: Reaktion Books Ltd, 2011), 39-58.

⁸ Homi Bhaba, *The Location of Culture* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1994), 169.

⁹ Elena Shtromberg, “Maps,” In *Art Systems: Brazil in the 1970s* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2015), 139.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pg. 139.

Herkommer remarks that in her other works, Geiger never includes a legend, another deliberate choice to draw interpretation out of her viewer, and in fact, evoking self-reflection about knowledge is her artistic objective.¹¹ Again, she is questioning systems of national identity and knowledge as a post-colonial method of altering perspective. As a woman of Brazilian national identity and Jewish-Polish heritage, she challenges the arbitrariness of territorial divisions; she promotes a view of culture akin to Hall's description, "Cultural identity... is a matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being.' It belongs to the future as much as to the past....Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformations."¹²

As an artist whose career has spanned six decades, Geiger has maintained her creativity through reinventing her artistic practice. Whether implementing unconventional mediums, substrates, or processes, her experimentation is always founded in education. Her pedagogical background equips her with an inclination toward teaching through her art pieces. In addition, her thematic interests are found at the intersection between art and politics, and this is evident in her oeuvre. Works, such as *Mapas elementares* (1976) and *O Pão Nosso de cada dia* (1978) reflect how her life experiences of being married to a cartographer and living in Brazil during an oppressive regime have shaped her identity, and her deliberate omission/inclusion of geographical information allows those who interact with her work to question the power structures behind learned knowledge.

¹¹ Adolfo Montejo Navas, "Anna Bella Geiger- A Poetics in Archipelago (Approximations)," In *Anna Bella Geiger: Territórios, Passagens, Situações* (Rio de Janeiro: Casa da Palavra, 2007), 237, quoted in Lindsey Herkhommer, "In the Name of Geography: The Conceptual Maps of Anna Bella Geiger," (master's thesis, Southern Methodist University, 2012), 10.

¹² Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," In *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990), 225.

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