

REGINA VATER

SHELLIFE



W O M E N & T H E I R W O R K

A P R I L 3 - M A Y 10, 2003

A U S T I N , T E X A S

REGINA VATER

"SHELLIFE"

or Art as an Experience of Awareness.

"When creative art is truly inspired, it comes close to being sacramental."

Paul Brunton

"A poem is a mystery; the reader must find the key." (*"Un poème est un mystère dont le lecteur doit chercher la clef."*)

Stéphane Mallarmé

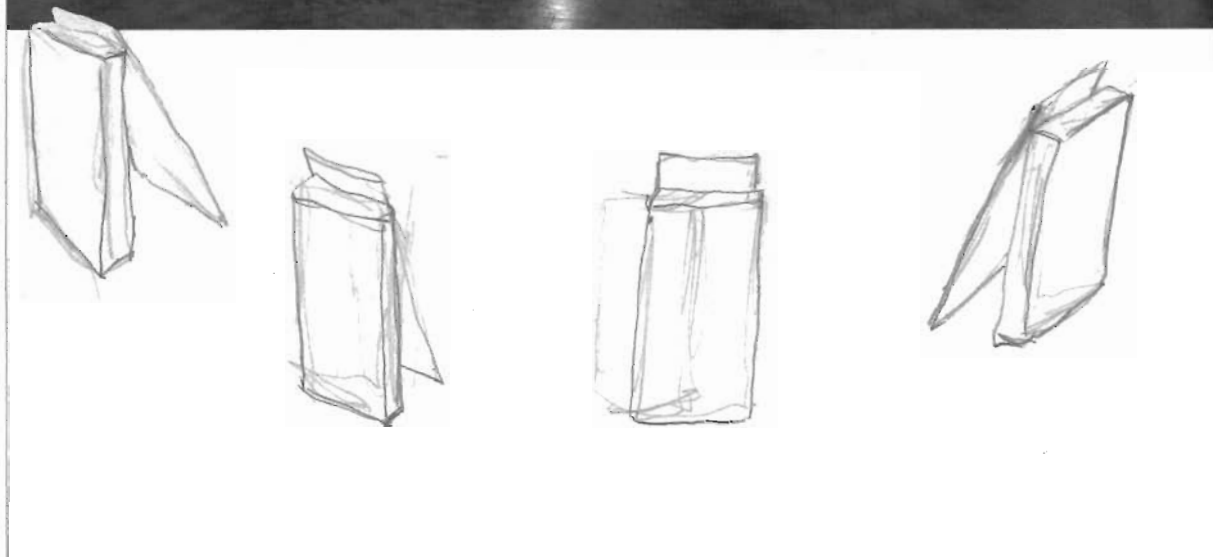
"Let the soul of man take the whole universe for its body."

Simone Weil

Since "*Magi(o)cean*," her very first installation, in 1970, to the present day, Brazilian born and Texas based artist Regina Vater has consistently developed an important, powerful, and impressive body of installation works. She started her artistic career in the sixties at a very young age and was already an established artist in Brazil and abroad before moving to the USA. Her art has a life of its own and is definitely not concerned with reproducing the past, applying any kind of aesthetic 'recipe' or 'formula' to present human and artistic issues, or trying to unveil the 'mystery' of these issues through any 'special effects' for the future. On the contrary, Vater's art is a sincere celebration of the mystery of Space, Time, Life, Light, Art, Poetry, and the related Human Myths and Cosmologies. And here resides her unique approach to Art as an integral experience of awareness.

The pieces exhibited in the present show, "*Shellife*," are the most recent examples of this compelling life-long celebration. Affirming her reverence for life and nature, honoring the fruitful reflections of the human spirit and constructing works conducive to the appreciation of the beauty of creation, she accomplishes a sacred function ('sacred' being defined as 'participating in the divine creation') in accordance to the hermeneutics of Art.

These pieces, which could also be described as 'awareness' pieces, or 'metaphors of awareness,' are created as a way to materialize what is behind and beyond their physical and aesthetic



WHAT WE SPEAK BECOMES THE HOUSE WE LIVE IN

The House We Live In, Plexiglass, sandstones, kerosene lamp, bricks and lettering. 2003 Installation. 6' to 8' diameter (approximate)

presence or material manifestation. Their ultimate goal is to offer the viewers a deep motivation to stimulate and raise their own state of consciousness, aesthetic latitude, and sensibility. Poignantly and concisely sharing with the viewer not only a 'finished object or artistic product,' but the the process of her own philosophical concerns, existential reflections, as well as her perspectives on life, art, culture, poetry, and spirituality, Vater's ultimate interest is to create works that best express her soul, fulfilling masterfully the definition of a work of art as given by Maurice Barrés in his "*Mes cahiers*" (My notebooks): "A work of art is the medium of a soul" (*"Une oeuvre d'art c'est le moyen d'une âme."*)

The installation "*Shellife*" is the main piece of the exhibit and extends its title to the entire show. Like the other pieces, it overwhelms the viewer by its conciseness, strength, meaningfulness and beauty. The images and installations created by the artist reveal a surprising economy in terms of the visual elements employed – real or depicted eggshells, a fossil shell, the image of an ear (or, rather, an 'acoustic shell') stones, petals, different fabrics, and verses – commonplace elements in our everyday lives; yet the works created with these few and common elements have an extremely powerful presence, which in turn empowers the viewer's soul and his/her knowledge of the created things. They intelligently point

to the fact that the sacred dwells precisely in the commonplace of our everyday lives, in the simple things, in Nature.

In *"Shellife,"* the artist invokes the mystery of the primordial egg – genesis of the universe, symbol of life and the renewal of nature – causing enchantment and amazement, and provoking a myriad of sensations, reflections, and meditations. The artist transforms the tangible reality of the piece – a yellow fabric in the background evoking the oneness of the egg yolk, a transparent screen composed of countless eggshells resembling the roof of heaven, and a white ceramic bowl containing the compact paste of life – making us see the unseen, creating a magical and timeless space that leads us to an intangible meditation on the spirituality and the mystery of life. We are transported from the material to the immaterial; from the visible to the invisible; from the Total Fragmentation to the Total Unity, where every single piece of shell or every verse disposed among the objects contributes to mirror and enlighten the "unus mundus," the one world, the Universe. As a Space and Time capsule, it is inside the space of the eggshell that time operates generating life, as a synthesis of the duality, as a conciliation of the dichotomy. In a similar way, the use of the artistic force in metamorphosing the objects into a ritual of high art or high magic is a way for the artist to convey her own experience, share the many gifts she received, and also refine and renew her own investigations and state of consciousness.

Vater condenses the myth of the primordial egg, present in so many cosmologies, in the 'paste' of life located inside the bowl, rendering homage to all cosmologies, and more specifically to the Yoruba goddess Oshun, that immigrated to the Americas with the African Diaspora. In effect, during the Afro-American rituals, eggs are offered to Oshun and the yoke paste is considered to be the recipient of the Ashé, or the vital energy. In previous installations, Vater has also made a striking and remarkable use of food as the main artistic material of her work. Just to mention a few of the most recent works where this occurs, the artist used rice, corn, and black beans in *"Vervê,"* a 1997 installation with the shape of a spiral mandala; nuts in the installation 1997, *"God gives nuts to some who have no teeth";* honey in *"The*

Inominable," a 1998/99 installation; and popcorn in *"Amon/Amen,"* a 1999 installation. In this frequent and highly creative use of food as raw material for her installations, Vater has dignified both the food, as a fundamental vehicle of life and the divinity, and art, as a supreme offering of spiritual nourishment.

It is interesting to observe how Space and Time have always been a central and constant concern to Vater, in terms of her own personal investigations and work, leading her initially to research and study the myths of the Amazon, and then the other Brazilian and World cosmologies as well. Through her work, the artist constantly reminds us of how much in need the contemporary world is of the knowledge contained in these cosmologies. To Vater, they are the real repositories of the ancient wisdom, an invaluable source that broadens the horizon of our souls. The knowledge transmitted by these mythologies revealed to her the importance of a spiritual vision where the human being is an integral part of nature, and not an external entity meant to subjugate it at his own will. So, from her concern with Time and Space, and her investigations of ancient mythologies and cosmologies, Vater realized the urgency to incorporate ecology as one of her primary artistic concerns. In effect, to her credit, she was one of the first artists to deal with the subject of ecology, having participated in the first major international event ever dedicated to the issue, the 1976 Venice Biennale.

If the motif of the egg is also central to other pieces of the show: *"Cosmic Egg 1" (1980), "Cosmic Egg 2" (1980),* and *"Tempo or Time Folds" (1987),* and if these pieces also stress the artist's concern with Time and renewal, they privilege, however, slightly different implications. *Cosmic Egg 1* and *2* are prints representing an entire egg and a broken egg, respectively. The word TIME is written on the eggshell, revealing that for the artist the egg is an image of the threshold of time, but also highlighting the need in our contemporary societies to verbalize the obvious, since we are quickly losing the mythical signification of beings and things, and nowadays TIME seems to have become essentially an artificial construct. *"Time Folds,"* on the other hand, introduces yet another enigmatic element: the coexistence of different chronographies

or multiple times, in other words, how different spaces (an eggshell and a fossil shell) become metaphors for different concepts of time, and how time leaves its marks on different spaces which become, in turn, different metaphors for time.

In *"Milarepa,"* a print inspired by oriental scrolls, Vater uses the image of an ear (or 'an acoustic shell') as the central feature, surrounded by selected fragments of poetry. *Milarepa,* a Tibetan poet/saint, was depicted with a hand pointing to the ear, as a sign that it was through perceiving the murmurs of Nature that he became enlightened. Here, Vater reaffirms her belief in the sacredness of Nature, and she also emphasizes the importance of an acute Perception and Awareness to better perceive the "inner" manifestations of Art.

In *"Sentence or Lampião" (Lamp or Lantern),* a circle of nine lime stones illuminated by a central lamp composes the basis for the visual poetry work. Over each stone, a piece of Plexiglas carries a word forming the following verse of the eleventh century Persian poet Hafiz:

"WHAT WE SPEAK BECOMES
THE HOUSE WE LIVE IN"

Besides revealing the importance of Poetry in Vater's work, this installation, like other works created by the artist, reminds us of the symbolic importance of stones in every religion and cosmology. In other installations, Vater has already used stones as the main visual element of the piece. For example, in the 1993-95 *"ITA-OTA"* installation ('ita' meaning 'stone' in the Tupi-Guarani language of the native Brazilians, and 'ota' also meaning 'stone,' in the African Yorubá language.) In that installation, Vater spoke directly about the sacredness of stones in all cosmologies, and wrote:

I PLACE IN YOUR HAND
A STONE
A SANDY GRAIN

AND MY OWN HANDS
ALL COMING FROM THE STARS

to the fact that the sacred dwells precisely in the commonplace of our everyday lives, in the simple things, in Nature.

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Time Fold, Plotter print. Photograph dated 1987. Retouched by hand. 2002 40"w x 26"h

Therefore, every stone, as every word emitted by human creatures should generate appreciation, reverence, renewal, and love for our entire planet, because we are literally the houses we live in.

The artist – in the piece titled “*Tope*,” meaning ‘shrine,’ in Tibetan – expresses and avows the hope for this high state of awareness. Inspired by the aesthetics of Eastern religions, a cascade of dry petals falls in a golden bowl, which is full of fresh rose petals of the same color, suggesting grace, miracle, and renewal. The piece is like an abstract and intense Annunciation, an incitement to emulate the attitude of wonder of the philosopher (lover of wisdom,) letting the flower(s) blossom within oneself, in our existence of mirrors and containers for the whole universe.

According to Regina Vater’s very words: “My work has to do with ideas, with poetry and with a shamanistic approach to art. For me, any artwork, even in an unconscious way, is a form of reaching out to the creative and regenerative forces of the universe.” As one of the many admirers of her work, I can only conclude by saying that in the middle of so much ‘terminal art’ and ‘terminator attitudes,’ Vater has my deepest gratitude for sharing her

provoking insights, and the gifts she was given, contributing to an Art that grabs us for its power of organic inclusion to the web of life.

Mario S. Mieli
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New York, Spring 2003

T H A N K S T O

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Balcones Frame Supply, Inc.
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Laird Plastics

The Shangai Collection
Brazil Center, Teresa Lozano Long, Institute of Latin American
Studies, University of Texas

Cover Panel: *Shellife*, Installation detail, dyed yellow silk, eggshells, bowl and dyed liquid. 2003 144"w x 120"h (approximate)

This Panel: *Tope*, Installation, dyed yellow silk, dry rose petals, antique Chinese furniture, 'zardosi' square from Guirat, India (hand embroidered mat), copper vase with fresh rose petals. 2003 24"w x 17"d x 120"h

Back Panel: *Shellife*, Installation, dyed yellow silk, eggshells, bowl and dyed liquid. 2003 144"w x 120"h (approximate)

REGINA VATER

Born in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Resides in Austin, TX.

SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2003 *Shellife*, Women & Their Work, Austin, TX.
1999 Art Pace Artist-in-Residency Program, San Antonio, TX.
1995 SESC Paulista Gallery, São Paulo, São Paulo, Brazil
1993 Southeast Museum of Photography, Daytona Beach, FL.
1992 *Artist's Window* (video installation) at the Donnell Library Center, NY.
1989 Women & Their Work Gallery, Austin, TX.
1986 Archer M. Huntington Gallery, Austin, TX.
1981 Eugenia Cucalon Gallery, NY.
1978 Arte Global Gallery, São Paulo, São Paulo Brazil
1977 Centro de Artes y Comunicaciones, Buenos Aires Art Multiple Gallery, Buenos Aires, Argentina
1976 Museum of Modern Art, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2002 *Brazilian Visual Poetry*, Mexic-Arte Museum Austin, TX. (curated by Regina Vater)
2000 *Conceptual Art of the 70's*, Collection of the Museum of Contemporary Art of São Paulo. MAC, São Paulo, Brazil
1998 Opening of the Nelson Rockefeller Center for Latin American Art at the San Antonio Museum of Art, San Antonio, TX.

- 1995 *Ceremony of the Spirit*, Laguna Gloria Museum, Austin, TX.
1994 *Rejoining The Spiritual: The Land in Contemporary Latin American Art*, Maryland Institute, College of Art, MD.
1992 *America, The Bride of The Sun*, Koninklijk National Royal Museum, Antwerp, Belgium
1989 *Here and There: Travels Part 2, P.S.1* Museum, Clocktower Gallery (Tower Gallery), New York, N.Y.
1984 *Latin American Visual Thinking*, Art Awareness, Lexington, New York, NY. (curated by Regina Vater)
1979 *49 Brazilian Artists* (works on paper) Nobè Gallery, New York, N.Y. (curated by Regina Vater)
1976 *Venice Biennial*, Italy

SELECTED AWARDS, GRANTS, FELLOWSHIPS

- 2002 Visual Arts Grant from the City of Austin, Austin, TX.
1985 New Jersey Council for the Arts Fellowship, NJ.
1980 Guggenheim Foundation Fellowship, New York, N.Y.
1974 Incentive Prize, Mairie de Paris, Paris, France
1972 Travel Abroad, Two Years Award, Salão Nacional de Arte Moderna, Rio de Janeiro, Ministério de Educação e Cultura do Brasil

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Raphel Rubistein, *In Concrete Language*, Art in America (No. 5) pgs. 118-123 May 2002

Cynthia Sánchez, *Women Artists of Color - a Bio-Critical Sourcebook to 20th Century Artists in America* edited by Phoebe Farris, pgs. 225-230, Greenwood Press - ISBN 0-313-30374-6, 1999

Cristina Freire, *Poéticas do Processo - Arte Conceitual no Museu*, pgs. 84, 85, 107 and 128, livro publicado pela editora Iluminuras e pelo Museu de Arte Contemporânea da Universidad de São Paulo, São Paulo, Brazil 1999

Augusto de Campos, introduction for the catalog *Voices and Visions* Catalogue, Mexic-Arte Museum, Austin, TX., February 1997

Regina Vater, *The Tree of Life, Heresies, Latina*, Journal of Ideas, Vol 7, n#3, Issue 27, pgs. 62-63, 1993 New York, NY.

Regina Vater, *Espiritus Sanus in Terra Sana*, pgs. 23-27, New Observations - Issue called Terra Firma, edited by Elizabeth Ferrer, New York, N.Y. 1991

Guy Brett, *Transcontinental Catalogue*, Ikon Gallery, Birmingham, England, March 1990

Hélio Oiticica, *Regina Vater VEART*, catálogo, mostra individual, Galeria Arte Global, São Paulo, São Paulo, Brazil 1978

Gilberto Cavalcanti, *Luxo-Lixo ou la pratique socio-artistique de Regina Vater*, Vie des Arts, Canada, vol. XX number 78 Printemps 1975

Carlos Drummond de Andrade, *De vários assuntos*, Jornal do Brasil, Caderno B, 3 de Setembro de 1973 Rio de Janeiro, Brazil





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Now celebrating its 25th anniversary, Women & Their Work presents over 50 events a year in visual art, dance, theater, music, literature, and film. The gallery features on-going exhibitions of Texas women artists and brings artists of national stature to Texas audiences. Since its founding, Women & Their Work has presented 1,703 artists (includes 18 Members Show) in 214 visual art exhibitions, 100 music, dance, and theater events, 12 film festivals, 19 literary readings, and 269 workshops in programming that reflects the ethnic and cultural diversity of this region. Nationally recognized, Women & Their Work has been featured in *Art in America*, *ArtForum* and National Public Radio and was the first organization in Texas to

receive a grant in visual art from the National Endowment for the Arts. Women & Their Work reaches over 5,000 school children and teachers each year through gallery tours, gallery talks with exhibiting artists, participatory workshops, in-school performances, dance master classes, and teacher workshops.



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