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# Oral history interview with Regina Vater, 2004 February 23-25

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## Transcript

### Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Regina Vater on February 23 and 25, 2004. The interview took place in Austin, Texas and was conducted by Cary Cordova for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This interview is part of the Recuerdos Orales: Interviews of the Latino Art Community in Texas.

Regina Vater and Cary Cordova have reviewed the transcript and have made corrections and emendations. The reader should bear in mind that he or she is reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

### Interview

CARY CORDOVA: This is Cary Cordova for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This is an oral history interview of Regina Vater on February 23, 2004, at her home at 4901 Caswell Avenue in Austin, Texas. And this is session one and disc one.

And as I mentioned, Regina, I'm just going to ask if you could tell us a little bit about where you were born and where your family is from originally, and when you were born.

REGINA VATER: Okay. Yeah, I was born in Rio and I grow up in the south area of Rio, in Copacabana, Ipanema. And my father is – was – is a physician. He's retired now. And my mother used to work, before she married, in a newspaper owned by one of her cousins, but then she cease her work outside of the home and dedicated herself to the house. But she always liked to write poetry and things like that and to read them. My father had a more, kind of, scientific mind. And my family, although I have this German name that comes from my great-grandfather – well, was the father of my grandfather – from the part of my father, that was born in Weimar and he came to the Para in the Amazonian to take advantage of the rubber plantation there, to make money with rubber. And this is interesting, because he lost everything and the family became integrated, married the Portuguese descendents and, you know, even my father doesn't speak German nowadays. There is this echo of German ascendance but I am Basque, Portuguese and Jewish. Everything is mixed in me.

And it's interesting that even when they – my father – you know, I was asking my father what was this thing that I had in the arm that's keloid [black blood], you know, and he said, well, this is black blood, my daughter. He said: this is black blood because of the blacks we had in our lineage. They have more propensity to keloids than–

MS. CORDOVA: Keloids, you called it?

MS. VATER: Yeah, keloid is a – when you do surgery or something, this doesn't heal very well and creates this kind of bump in your skin – that is what my father said – I am saying this because being tall and kind of more fair – here in Texas, because there is a lot of Germans here, you know, many people think that I'm German, and in Brazil nobody asked me that, because there were mixes and all, but I never thought about that until I came here.

MS. CORDOVA: You didn't have that part of your German identity announced in Brazil?

MS. VATER: Yeah, although I choose this name, Vater, to sign, because my father – first of all, when I was in the school when I was very little, all my colleagues called me Regina Vater because it was name that they could memorize very easy, because I was the only person that had that name, and it was different from the other people. And I like it, of course. I am an original. And then later on when I started to – my attraction for art – actually, you know, since I was a child I had this in mind that one day I would like to be an artist, but then became much more accentuated in my puberty, and my father then started to – because my father is the kind of – how do you call this guy, the film of Marlon Brando, he is a master –

MS. CORDOVA: A Godfather.

MS. VATER: Yeah, my father really had that kind of, you know overbearing attitude – in the family. All my sisters called him the "Godfather." And he always wants me to be a doctor, you know, to go to medical school – I have two other sisters doctors, and I never wanted, and didn't have any attraction. I always wanted to be an artist. And then when I decided that I really want to be an artist, he gave me these paints and he forgot to give me the brushes. And I painted like the whole night, you know, with my fingers, because I didn't have brushes. I had really that hot fever.

And then he gave me–then he had a client that was a painter, was a guy from Holland, Van Back, that was very conservative, was a very academic guy.

MS. CORDOVA: Van Back?

MS. VATER: Van Back, yeah. I see that – I always heard his name like this.

Then I went to have classes and this man and my father together, and I only had like 14 years old or 15 years old, and I just said, no, this is not working. [Laughs.] And I decided, I prefer to be by myself. And then when I –

MS. CORDOVA: Was his training too formal for you, or what were you reacting against?

MS. VATER: Well, it was too formal, it was too academic, and I really didn't want that kind of thing, although my family came, at that age I was kind of sneaking in my mother's books that were about Greek philosophy. I read like Socrates when I was 14 years old without understanding Socrates. Of course, he never wrote. But Greek philosophy, when I was 14 years old. I would listen to anything. But I had this project in my mind that I was to be a person that knew about things, you know, and then I sneak and my mother had the most eclectic kind of library. You know, she had Milton, she had Vick Baum, she had Krishnamurti and so on and so on. And that's the first book that I read, more serious besides those teenage kind of romances, you know. And I had a friend also that put me in contact with American literature, too.

But anyway, but when my father became aware that I really want to be an artist and start to be – he put a stone in my way, make obstacles for me, and I want to have classes with a teacher that actually lived very close to my house and was a very good painter, and he said, no, no, no. And I went to work for my first work was like 15 years old, something like that, was just to pay for these classes. And then when he discovered that, he became obsessive and he'd say that I really need to do something else – I need to go to engineering. And then I compromised: okay, I'm going to school to do architecture. And because of this I start to sign my name as Regina Vater, as an artist, because with myself I thought one day he is going to be very proud of me as an artist.

And it took a long, long time – it took years – years. Only after I got my Guggenheim, he accepted. It took like more than – I don't know, like I received my Guggenheim in 1981 and this was happening in the late '50s, you know.

MS. CORDOVA: Wow, so you were really also –

MS. VATER: Oh, no, I was really determined. And this is one of the things actually that prepared me for the career of an artist, because the career of an artist has a lot of rejections, you know, a different rejection all the time. And if I could deal with the biggest rejection in my life, which was the rejection of my father, everything else came out not fantastically wonderful, but easier, you know?

MS. CORDOVA: What was your mother's response, and what's your mother's family background?

MS. VATER: Well, it's interesting that from the family of my father I'm a descendent of a very important poet that my father never spoke about him when I was a teenager. A very important poet that did the first translation for the Brazilian Portuguese of Homer and of Virgil, and after this he was called the "Brazilian Virgil [he translated the *Iliad* and the *Aeneid*]."

MS. CORDOVA: Oh, that would be –

MS. VATER: Odorico Mendes.

MS. CORDOVA: Mendes.

MS. VATER: Yeah, that came from my Jewish blood – not only from him, but the German part also.

And another guy that I also was descendent from my father was a writer, too. He wrote some romances. And he was one of the introducers of the Alain Kardechism in Brazil. His name is Bezerra de Menezes. Actually, I went to Brazil lately and I started to do a – collect some data to do a video on him, because he is a very interesting personage. But anyway, my mother's family, both families are from the north of Brazil northeast of Brazil. My mother's family, her father was from the navy and from Sergipe, and her mother was from Ceará and this – her mother was related to – it's kind of strange to say these things – [laughs] – because it looks like that I am megalomaniac – [laughs] – but it's very funny. But my mother is related to José de Alencar, one of the most important Brazilian writers from the Romantic era, and her mother was related to these people. And her father's family, there is a lot of people in the military, in the army, but people of some importance. There is one including Lourival Seroa da Motta, that is very well-known. He worked with Marechal Rondon. Who was one of the first people that started to do the contacts with the Indians in the interior of Brazil [Rondon went with Theodore Roosevelt into the Brazilian jungle].

MS. CORDOVA: And who is that again?

MS. VATER: Lourival Seroa da Motta. Seroa is another very different name in Brazil. There is only one family called Seroa – S-E-R-O-A. And it's Basque, according to a Basque person that once I met. And he says, oh, this name is Basque. It means that dew, the little rain that comes in the morning. And I thought that was very poetic.

And she – there were some people in my mother's family that one of them – they did government jobs like engineers that's working at the administration of the city. This grandfather from my father – out of my father, too, and –

MS. CORDOVA: How did your parents meet?

MS. VATER: I think that they met in the Carnival.

MS. CORDOVA: Really?

MS. VATER: A Carnival party, yeah. That's what my – that's what I heard my mother saying that, yeah. A product of Carnival. [Laughs.]

MS. CORDOVA: And do you have siblings?

MS. VATER: Yeah, I have more – three sisters. One is from the first – the marriage of my father and my mother – that was his first marriage – and then two others from his second marriage.

MS. CORDOVA: And so your mother, was she supportive of you being an artist?

MS. VATER: Yes, she was. She was, but sometimes she always dreaded my father, because my father was so – as person with too much, you know – he has smoothed a lot during aging, but he was impossible. My father really made me suffer a lot, you know, because of art. Well, I didn't speak with him during seven years because of this – because I opted to do art.

MS. CORDOVA: When was that?

MS. VATER: That was when – between – when I did my first show in 1964, my first woman's show, nobody from my family came for this show that I did. The show was packed. I have photos of this show. But the show was packed and I sold almost everything, but I – nobody from my family came.

MS. CORDOVA: And you didn't speak to him for the next seven years?

MS. VATER: Oh, yeah. My mother was also very distant, because she – I think that he – well, he controlled her from remote control, you know, and he also liked to do the same with me. I actually did architecture three years – two years and a half. I can't consider that three years, and then I jumped out when I did this show. What happened is that he – when I – he was very happy that I was going to school to do architecture, and then he said, you know, your grandfather is not driving anymore and he had – my grandfather had an old Jaguar. I always was crazy to have a car. And he said, your grandfather has an old Jaguar that's sitting there, nobody's using. Can you imagine, I didn't have any money to pay the gasoline, but fantasies – you know, it's a youth fantasy. And he said, there's a Jaguar sitting there. I will give the car for you if you pass in the school. And then I passed in the school and then all of a sudden the car – he never gave me the car. He said, well, I didn't want to also – you know, I asked–[inaudible]. I do not remember very well.

But anyway, and then I was, of course, working in my art. I was ferociously working my art, and I did this first – then came the potential to do this first show. I never consulted anybody in the family about these things, and I went away and did it. And then when I did this show, I was so convinced that I really had reached an incredible success, you know, a victory because, can you imagine – without the help of the family in this show that has publicity, newspaper reviews and so forth – sell things–a lot of people came. I just wanted to get out of the school. This is not my – I'm going to follow my bliss. And then I went off – I turned, you know, the corner and I dropped out. And he said that, well, you're not going to have the car anymore. And I said, that's okay with me, because I'm going to be an artist.

MS. CORDOVA: And you never did get your architecture degree?

MS. VATER: No, never.

MS. CORDOVA: And no looking back, not sorry?

MS. VATER: No, I'm not sorry. You know why? Because I know that at this time, this point in time, I will be a mediocre architect, never signing my project, working for a man, because most part of the women architects, all

they do is that, they work for a man. It's what all my colleagues in the school, my former colleagues – and I had very wonderful, bright female colleagues – they all told me when they meet me, you know, you did the best thing you can do with your life, you know.

MS. CORDOVA: Why do you think the drive to be an artist was so strong for you?

MS. VATER: Since I was a kid I loved to draw. I loved to do things. You know, I liked to invent, I liked – but "invent" in terms not of the scientific way. I was not like this kind of people that take things apart and discover things. I was not mechanical – because, actually, I'm dyslexic, you know, but I really was fascinated with the visual world and the beauty of things, you know. I was really – and I wanted to translate that in some visual way. I actually liked to write poems, too, but that was kind of castrated in the beginning by a very important Brazilian poet, Manuel Bandeira. And I'm sure you read that as a kid in school, I belonged to this newspaper – the people that who worked for this little thing in the school–and we went to his house, I brought my poems, and he asked me – he read – I asked him to read and he read and he said, do you know what the smallpox is, this thing that children have that makes your face all –

MS. CORDOVA: Chickenpox.

MS. VATER: [Laughs.] Chickenpox, smallpox, chickenpox. He said, do you know what chickenpox is? I said, yeah, it's a disease that all children had. He said, yes, and poetry affects every teenager. [Laughs.] I closed my book and nevermore – even today I do a lot of visual poetry and things – I have such a respect for poetry because for me poetry is kind of … where almost… like the beginning of – the origin of everything. My work is very related to poetry and I always love to read poetry. That's what I do when I go to bookstores or libraries. I go directly to philosophy or poetry, the poetry section.

MS. CORDOVA: Did your mother assist you with that?

MS. VATER: Yeah, my mother, she had a big input in that. Until nowadays, she – the way that she writes her letters and – you know, says things, she's very poetic. And when I was in my school you needed to prepare paper texts in elementary school, she helped me with that. Even in French, because I was a student in a French school in Rio. I used to write poetry in French, and I had this wonderful teacher; she was absolutely – a French lady, old nun. I was a student in a nun school. [Laughs.] But this woman was absolutely fantastic, Merè Saint Benoir, and she always says, "Oh, Regina, you are a poet!" Because I liked to write all my things in, like, poetry. I wrote a lot of things in French.

I lost my French. It's funny, I never was a student in English very well. I had a very bad English teacher in this school.

MS. CORDOVA: Really?

MS. VATER: Yeah. She actually was an American nun. And the gossip [laughs] around at the school is that she was related to Elizabeth Taylor. [They laugh.] Yeah, that's what everybody said. This woman was awful. She was really terrible. She was very hard on us, you know. She was very, very, very difficult and she made me suffer a lot. And I hated English because of her. I really hated English. And this is a language that I never am going to speak, you know. [Laughs.] And it was so funny because when I won the prize – the biggest prize for the arts in Brazil in 1972 – this was a trip abroad for two years, they paid it; you know, you'll stay abroad two years–I was going to France, you know, because I prefer – I have the language to go to France.

But then I had a boyfriend that was a writer – actually nowadays he's a very well-known writer. But he said to me, you need to go to New York. There is where things are happening, and there is Helio Oiticica; you need to meet Helio Oiticica. You need to drink in his brain, he said.

MS. CORDOVA: Who is this boyfriend?

MS. VATER: Oh, I prefer not to say. [They laugh.] But anyway, he – and he convinced me this, and I chose New York, but I was totally – I was dreadful for me to arrive in New York, because everybody made this incredible – saying, oh, is a dangerous place, you know? Everything that people could say bad about New York they said to me, but I was – anyway, I loved challenges, but when I arrived in New York I remember – the first day, the first week I just walked one block – I only knew one block. I knew – I went block – one block at a time, and then in the end I loved New York and I really – actually, I went to France and I – because I really want to know Europe, and I went to Paris, and I hated Paris. When I came back to New York I was like I was coming back home, you know, because I felt much – I feel much more – there is an energy that we Brazilians have that is much more in contact with the American energy, more than with the French culture, you know.

At that time it was already so difficult for me, you know, being abroad for the first time alone. I need to have something that really – have something that I could feel, that I was feeling more comfortable.

MS. CORDOVA: What did you specifically dislike about Paris?

MS. VATER: Well, it's kind of – I felt very lonely there. My boyfriend there was an American photographer, but the only person that I really relate to – and there was a couple, a Brazilian couple. He was a photographer, too. And I didn't know very much people. It was – I didn't know – I think that – you know, I actually – professionally, I was well received in some stance. I got a prize from the mayor of Paris. My photos entered in the collection of the Bibliotheque Nationale, you know. But I felt very lonely there. I felt – I think that's because it's so different – I had

lost totally, my French and – in Paris, mainly in Paris it's so very difficult to communicate in the French if you don't have a very perfect French, you know.
And I don't know – and it also was a time, very difficult, in Brazil. It was the time of the dictatorship, and most part of the people that run away from the dictatorship of Brazilian – and actually there was something very funny happened, because before I went there I met – oh, the first week that I arrived there, one of the leading ladies of the arts in Brazil was – she was the director of the Museum of Modern Art – she was there. I met her at the Museum of Modern Art in Rio. I met her and she told me, you need to be careful here because–don't make connections with the Brazilians that are here because these people are being persecuted by the Brazilian government, so if you link yourself to them, you know, you're going to have troubles when you come back to Brazil, because they have a very paranoiac system at that time.
And then I kind of made myself – I retracted myself a little bit from to have contact with the Brazilian people because – I was alone, you know; I was really young and alone. The only person that I made contact was Mario Pedrosa. He was an incredible mind, one of the most brilliant Brazilian thinkers in art – and Lygia Clark. But Lygia Clark also – that period too was not a very good period for her. I became much more a friend of hers in Rio than in Paris. I went to her house actually in Paris, but I tried to have with her the same relationship that I had with Helio Oiticica in New York, and Helio was extremely – he speaks out his mind without any censorship. He doesn't think when he speaks of everything, whatever, and was very talkative. Lygia is not – she is more – and she says, no, no, you need to come down to reality; you're going too much out there, you know. And she said to me – and I thought to myself, she is strange… And then in Rio we had a much better encounter. Actually, she came to me because she saw a work of mine and she came to compliment me, and we became friends because of this work, actually.
MS. CORDOVA: So you met Helio in New York –
MS. VATER: New York.
MS. CORDOVA: And you met Lygia in Paris?
MS. VATER: In Paris, yeah. You know, I became very good friends with Helio. I never went to his house very much. I went to his house two or three times. He lived in the lower eastside and I thought that was a very dangerous place to go at that time, you know. And we spoke on the telephone hours and hours, sometimes four hours. I remember once the snow started to fall and when I left the telephone, after this conversation, the car – the top – was covered with snow. We forgot time. And I learned a lot from him, you know, because he had a very inquisitive mind and he had an incredible erudition, and he brought – and since I had that project when I was a child to know things, to read – even that I couldn't understand, I'd go and read and then I'd re-read and re-read and re-read until I understand. That's what – Helio fits in that kind of scheme perfectly as a mentor, you know. And he was brilliant, you know. And Lygia, she was something else totally different. She's always says, I'm not intellectual; you are too much intellectual. And it was a lie because she was an intellectual, too, you know, but anyway –
MS. CORDOVA: Did you go out and find Helio or what –
MS. VATER: I called him. As soon as I arrived in New York I called him and he was very nice. And he actually protected me against other people that tried to put me down in New York. I'm not talking about Brazil, I'm talking about – I'm not talking about Americans, I'm talking about Brazilians. And he was – he'd give me a lot of support, and he even helped me with a work that later I showed in Venice Biennale in 1976. We did the sound for this work together.
MS. CORDOVA: Right.
MS. VATER: And every single – it was so easy – at the same time, you know, everybody thought Helio was a difficult person. I never thought of him as a difficult person. He was a very peculiar person, but –
MS. CORDOVA: Well, let's see, I'd like to go back just a little bit – actually go back a lot maybe – and ask you –
MS. VATER: That's okay. I told you that I go – [they laugh.]
MS. CORDOVA: But it was all fascinating. But I want to just go back to Brazil and your training. And you had mentioned that you had been trained to study – you had worked to study. Was that with Frank Schaeffer.
MS. VATER: Yeah, Frank Schaeffer, yeah.
MS. CORDOVA: And so I was curious what you were learning from Schaeffer.
MS. VATER: Just drawing, not very much painting – just drawing, drawing, drawing. And I remember I had this very almost – very economic drawings that I started to do like Matisse, and he said, you're too young to do that. [Laughs.] I really had the wrong formation, you know. But then I went to Iberê Camargo, that – I wish – I would like to have a teacher, like my husband is a fantastic teacher. When he teaches drawing, he is absolutely fantastic. I wish I'd had a teacher like that.
But anyway, then I went to Iberê Camargo – Iberê, to his studio, because he actually was kind a friend of Schaeffer and everybody had this kind of power around Iberê at that time [Carlos] Vergara was a student in a studio that Iberê had, and the people went there, practically watching him to paint and to clean his brushes, because he never – he'd never let us to – I think that was teaching by osmosis, more than – he says things, you know, he invites us to see films about the Cobra Group, and was more like a – you know, to be with him was a process of learning than – he really was not a person that speaks things, you know. But I felt that my work really exploded during the period that was I was with him.
That actually was–by the time that I did my first show, and then after that, what I did, I just looked for incredible people to be close to, and that was the way that I taught myself. I had an incredible – I'm very lucky because I –

because I grew up in the south of Rio – and I left my mother's house–I was very young when I left my mother's house. I left her house to live by myself with a boyfriend. I was one of the first people of my generation to do that. I did that because of my art.
MS. CORDOVA: How old were you?
MS. VATER: I was like 21, 22 years old. At that time, that was inconceivable. In the family, it was a tragedy. It was really a Latino soap opera [laughs] – it was incredible; it was awful. Now they really – you know, they curse me to the end of time, because I did that.
But anyway, but that was very good for my work, you know, and also, because I went to live in Ipanema – I already knew a lot of people in Ipanema, because I lived in Copacabana and at the very end of Copacabana – which is close to Ipanema and a lot of my girlfriends lived in Ipanema.
And I had this friend that was also from the "Sacré Coeur" that lived there that I'd become a very good pal with her, and very good friends with her. And she was one of the people that started – and my boyfriend also, he starts bringing me to these cafés and bars in Ipanema where all the best of the Brazilian intelligentsia went. And the people went to the cafés to share ideas. It was an incredible–it's like a university for me, because I sit in this table with eight, nine, 10 people. I never spoke. I was totally mute by that time–I only started to speak mostly here, because I was always a very shy person. Here I think that I need to do – I was forced to open my space, you know, and I started to speak out.

I remember once Lucy Lippard–invited me to give a talk about my work, and I was totally unprepared to do it because I couldn't speak. [Inaudible.] But anyway, I had–but I knew in these bars, Zeppelin in Ipanema–that's called Zeppelin and Jangadeiros. There was another – Degral. Anyway, it was Antonio's later. But this was places that people went to discuss politics, philosophy, poetry. It was the best classroom I could ever have in my life. And, you know, Carlinhos de Oliveira, Millôr Fernandes, Glauber Rocha, you know, Antonio Pedro, the filmmaker that made–*Macunaima* [1969]–was Newton Carlos, a very important Brazilian journalist that writes a lot about Latin America.
Anyway, I would just listen, listen, listen. I was becoming impregnated by all those ideas all the time, but it was not listening to only one person speaking; it was the discussion, it was the Greek way of learning. That's what happened in the Agora in Greece, you know. People went to the square and discussed ideas, and the ideas grew and philosophy grew. I miss so much that you can't imagine. Even in Brazil when I come back, there is not such a thing as this anymore.
MS. CORDOVA: I was just going to ask when that went away.
MS. VATER: Well, because that was the '60s. My husband was a student in Berkeley at that time, and he said that was the same thing in Berkeley.
MS. CORDOVA: Well, so how did the opportunity for your first show come about, this major show in 1964?
MS. VATER: In '64? Well, I was a student with Iberê already, and I had this friend – I can't remember her name unfortunately–and she had been invited for a show, but she also wanted to go to Holland because she was impregnated with the Cobra ideas that Iberê–Iberê only talked about the Cobra Group. And she wanted to go to Holland. And she had a boyfriend and then went to go together. She was another–like me, you know. And she collected an amount of money that she could go, and she went with her boyfriend. And she said, I had been invited for this show but I can't go because I'm going to Holland with my boyfriend. Would you like to do this show? And I said, oh, yeah, of course. And that's the way that I did the show.
MS. CORDOVA: And that's the "Eleven from Rio" show?
MS. VATER: No. No, it was in a gallery called Alpendre in Copacabana. No, "Eleven from Rio" was before that actually. Now, that time [of the "Eleven from Rio"] actually I was even speaking with my father, because I was still in the architecture school. That was in the '50s. My first show was in 1964, a one-woman's show.
MS. CORDOVA: And it was a solo show, right?
MS. VATER: Yeah, it was a solo show.
MS. CORDOVA: It's really remarkable for such a young person to be having a solo show.
MS. VATER: And 21 years old, yeah. And you know, because I was like–I was very pretty and very sweet and very shy, and everybody in Ipanema loved me. And what happened is that everybody brought everybody to–everybody brought everybody else to see the show and I was an incredible success. It was really–I don't know.
MS. CORDOVA: And those were sort of semi-figurative works that you were painting at that time?
MS. VATER: Yeah.
MS. CORDOVA: How would you describe them?
MS. VATER: Well, they are kind of–after that, I broke apart of that kind of–that was very reminiscent of the traditional Frank Schaeffer. It was like figurative, like very sweet and very–it was like landscapes, a kind of Impressionist, you know. They're not bad, you know, but for my age that was–actually I have some images. But I had–like one week after the show I was doing an interview, and during the process of doing the interview I start to be conscious that I need to jump out of that thing.
MS. CORDOVA: Did you know where you wanted to go?
MS. VATER: I knew that I need to do–I need to break apart from that, and what gave me the clue is that at the same time, Antonio Diaz, Rubens Gerchman, and Vergara – of course, Vergara was my colleague in Ibere's studio–they are showing–you know, it was a club, it was like a boys' club, you know. But they are very powerful and they are the first shows of these people–nowadays they are the royalty of Brazilian art–Diaz and Gerschman

–and they are really carrying with them a new image, you know. Antonio just had a fantastic work at that time. He really–his iconography was really breaking true. And of course I saw what they did and what they were doing, so no way that I can leave myself in this cocoon.
And I started to–because I was young, because I was–my family had–all that persecution of my family on me, and my father–what my father used to say is that if I become an artist, I was going to become a whore–most was really low–was very low energy that was–I was trying to clean myself out because everything is–he used the most awful arguments to take me out of art, you know? It was because I went to live with my boyfriend and I was not married. That was the signature below, testifying that I was really becoming–a devassa.
MS. CORDOVA: You were becoming an artist. [Laughs.]
MS. VATER: Yeah. And then I started to deal with the feminine body, and a woman being used as a produce, you know. I did a kind of a–in a very naïve way I did a very feminist work at that time, like–and until nowadays I feel that it's a very strong work. It was in Brazil at that period, people classified that Nouvelle Figuration, because it was more connected with the French tradition and was the people using that but I had that kind of face that you can see in this photography, people never took me very serious because I was cute and beautiful and I was trying to do a powerful work, and it was very difficult–very difficult.
On the one hand I have success. In the other hand – there was a males club that was very prevalent in Brazilian art in that period and that–although, it's very interesting because Lygia Clark, in 1964, she was already winning the prize, and Venice Biennial, and Brazil has a tradition of very strong women in the arts and a lot of space for women in the arts, but there is this club of–there is something there that–nowadays it's probably different, but that time was difficult.
And I couldn't sell also–I need to work in other jobs aside, and I did a lot of–I started to do graphic design, because with the training from the architecture school, that was the easiest thing to do. And actually I was pretty good at it; I think that I'm still pretty good at it, and I–because I do all my books, artist books and invitations and brochures and things like that when I can. And I do for my husband, too.
And I actually was invited – I don't know if you know about the Tropicalia Movement in Brazil. It's very important. The Tropicalia–I was invited to do the first cover for their record. This is something that seems very interesting. I knew Fernando Lobo who was the director of Philips, this disc company. And sometimes I visited some people to offer my work in graphic design, and this day I went there to visit him, and I just had done a show and he saw the image of my work and he said to me, I have something that I would like you to do. I have a new record of a new group that would be very proper to use one of your drawings. Why you don't do a drawing, a very big drawing like this in the format of a disc, a square drawing. I was doing these gouaches with these naked women without a head and a half-naked body without a head in a tropical landscape. And I did the work, and they bought–and they paid me.
And then later on I said, well, when is it going to be published? He said, unhappily, Regina, the Philips is not going to use your drawing because the manager of the group, Guilherme Araujo – I didn't know who he was at that time–changed his idea. He wants to have the photo of the group in this show. But who are the group? Oh, it's Caetano Veloso, Gil–all this Tropicalia group is–this Tropicalia. And then later when I did a cover for Chico Buarque de Hollanda, Calabar–I went to Philips, you know, to negotiate the design, and I saw my drawing for the Tropicalia there, they framed it, and they put it on the wall. I don't know if they still have, but – it's funny, you know, I had crossed paths with people from this group several times. When I was in Ipanema, living there, I can remember I had this friend who was an artist from Bahia, a very serious man. Actually I heard that this guy committed suicide. And I–no, actually I was living with my mother, I think. Now I'm confused.
But anyway, to go to the openings–I loved to go to the openings–and he always offered to go with me as a company, and he was always like very formal. And one day a friend of a friend of mine came to me and said to me, oh, are you a friend of Fernando Bandeira? Yes. He said, you know Oduvaldo Viana–is having a problem in the Teatro Opiniåo –because Nara Leao–that's a very well known singer in Brazil that–one of the beginnings of Bossanova–she can't sing there for two weeks, she's sick or something like that, and we need a substitute and–Viana–is thinking to bring that singer from Bahia. She's a fantastic singer. Perhaps Fernando can help to localize this woman. And then I went to Fernando and said, they are looking for Maria Bethania. Maria Bethania is the sister of Caetano Veloso. And then she was brought to Rio by this connection, and then she brought Caetano.
And I have a feeling that I have a little piece of a grain of sand in this giant history–[laughs]–of the Tropicalia Movement. But then after–actually, I know Caetano and I'm a friend with him nowadays, but – I once came here to Austin and I always go talk to him. One of the times he came and I went to see him and he said, what are you doing here? I said, well, my husband teaches here; that's why I'm living here. He says, where is he? Oh, they didn't allow him to cross the barrier to see you. Then he said: What kind of criteria is that? [Laughs.] Because they only let me to go to see him.
But this is very interesting living here and have all this connections that I used to have, you know, and–be part of kind of moment in Brazilian history, you know, because I was connected with all this group in Rio before I went to São Paulo, and then in São Paulo, in some respects, I also met incredible people. That was important for me.
MS. CORDOVA: When was this?
MS. VATER: I left Rio in 1970.
MS. CORDOVA: Okay.
MS. VATER: And the person that mostly was like a mother for me was Mario Schemberg. Who was one of the most important art critics in Brazil. He actually was a lover of Lygia Clark. Lygia lately told me that. She said,

“He was the man that I most love in my life.” She said, “It was impossible to be with him, because we are a clash of two minds, you know.” But I thought it was–I love Schemberg. He was a wonderful–he was so sweet and so supportive. He was just like a mother, you know. He was really–he really helped me a lot when I started in São Paulo.
I went to São Paulo mostly to do money–you know, work as a graphic designer, because Rio is very limited compared to São Paulo, the field in graphic design, at that time. Nowadays it’s probably very different.
MS. CORDOVA: How–
MS. VATER: But–on, what were you saying?
MS. CORDOVA: Well, I’m trying to get a better sense of what the late ‘60s was like for you, and I have that impression of cafés and that kind of young 20’s sort of experience of excitement in your intellectual community, and at the same time, the Brazilian coup is happening, right?
MS. VATER: But that was the best and most vibrant moment in Brazilian intellectual life.
MS. CORDOVA: Maybe you could explain to me how you were just integrating these two things, one that is so liberating and another that is so oppressive.
MS. VATER: Yeah, that’s very strange. That’s very strange because–well, I started to meet with all these people the early ‘60s, and ‘64 that was the coup d’état, but things started to become worse in the late ‘60s, around ‘68, something like that. But, you know, I think that–this is not only me, that says this kind of thing, but that kind of censorship made us to be very agile in metaphor and to really know how to read between lines, you know, and to–like to expand the system of signs and symbols in our work, that I feel that became much shallower after, you know. The work of the people that did the artwork in the ‘60s was very sophisticated, both politically and philosophically. It was an incredible school, and also had–we had the echoes of many movements from abroad, like the feminist movement. And in Brazil, there was a certain kind of mental anarchy that I don’t think that exists in any part else in the world. It’s so incredible.
There is a good side and a bad side of course, but I did a work in 1973 that was the pick of the worst. They are dropping people from the airplanes in the ocean, okay? Communist?! : dropped in the ocean, you know. I was doing this work of the knots. I won this prize. I actually–I started doing it in the early ‘70s, this work, and a little bit before I came to the United States, I decided to do a performance, an event in Rio. And I had this idea much before, actually. I had this idea to do it in São Paulo. When I asked help from– Walter Zanine –the director of the Museum of Contemporary Art in São Paulo, and he freaked out. He said, whoa, I think that you’re doing kind of a dangerous thing. And he kind of retracted, you know. He didn’t support me. Although I think that São Paulo would be the ideal place to do that.
But anyway, just before I came, I convinced people from the parks and gardens in Rio, the department of parks and gardens that they are going to give me a square to do something for children and the public in general with ropes and strings. An afternoon of creativity. And then I convinced the guy from the fabric of ropes and strings to give me the ropes and strings. I did it with it almost nothing with the help of some people. One of the people actually that was working with me, for the record of Chico Buarque de Calabar, the photographer, they made a very good photography record of this event. And an anthropologist and a psychologist also helped me to do interviews with the people in it, because “knot” in Portuguese is the word “nos.” That means both: knots and us–“knots and us.”
And we started with the children, we said: “Come here and do something with this rope.” They started to do things and then the adults joined. It was like from, I don’t know, 1:00 in the afternoon to 4:00 in the afternoon. I know people were much–I don’t remember how long this thing went. And it was people from–the favela [slums]. People from every social rank, gender and color went and mingled together doing that. People came from the mass because the church was just in front, and people came from the bikinis from the beach. It was very interesting. I have the photos anyway. And these people collecting–the answers about what “nos” means or what “knot” means, what “us” means, you know.
And then I did an audiovisual. I showed this audiovisual for two people: one for Lucy Lippard. That actually was when she invited me to show this audiovisual in New York when I arrived in 1980 here, for the public. And one other Guy Brett. Both of them said that it was incredible. How in the country, like under such a powerful dictatorship, this people are doing this? Because they not only did, you know, cute things with knots, but one man was totally like mumia [mummy], wrapped in ropes. And they put a fabric that was over the package of the ropes that was called “Made in Brazil,” and he was like a mumia, totally hidden by knots and made in Brazil. It was really a protest, a very creative, you know. And I didn’t tell people how to do; they invented their own way. And for me that’s the best example of the anarchical mind of the people in Brazil.
In Brazil people don’t have any respect for authority like we have here. There was no connection–no connection.
MS. CORDOVA: I’d really love to hear you talk about that a little bit more. Maybe you could put it into a comparison about how you see–
MS. VATER: Well, one thing is like–for instance, I went to see a concert of Stevie Wonder when I just arrived in New York. I went to Madison Square Garden with some friends, and there was those electrical steps–
MS. CORDOVA: Escalators?
MS. VATER: Yeah, the escalators, you know. And people were coming up, and then there was this police that just maybe with his arm like this, and everybody stopped. That would never happen in Brazil. [Laughs.] Never. Just like a sign of an arm, never. This doesn’t belong to the Brazilian dictionary, this kind of thing, this way of thinking. There is, you know–for instance, the cars in Rio, people need to put like–they make these cakes out of

concrete in front of the stores, so people don't park the cars on the sidewalk.
MS. CORDOVA: But let me ask you, at that time when people were being thrown out of airplanes and fear was high, how were they also not respecting authority?
MS. VATER: No, they have kind of ways of circumventing that kind of thing. There was always a kind of a way of–there was an expression in Portuguese: "You need to know how to swing."
MS. CORDOVA: Did you have a sense of fear at that time?
MS. VATER: Yes, of course, paranoid, like for instance to go to restaurants and to be very cautious when their waiters came because their waiter could be a spy, and never talk about politics in cabs. No. Of course. But there was also other–there was this–because there was–people didn't–have fear and also challenge, had this challenging, you know. They kind of challenged the authority all the time, had this kind of courage that I don't see anymore.
MS. CORDOVA: Was there any response from the government to your *Nos*?
MS. VATER: Well, the cover for the Calabar was censored–the cover that I did for Calabar was censored, because what I used was, I used graffiti–at that time graffiti was forbidden in Brazil. When I did a graffiti on a wall in São Paulo and I photographed it to use it for the title; I graffitied the title. The Calabar was an historical personage in Brazilian history that betrayed the country, but had other implications also. But I think that–and also the cover was–and when you opened the cover, inside there was a group of the middle class making a picnic in mid-town Rio de Janeiro, like they were totally alienated of what was going on around them.
But I think–in my mind I think that they didn't censor that cover because of my work. I think that they censored it because it was Chico Buarque de Hollanda. Chico Buarque de Hollanda was a person totally persecuted by them. I don't think that I deserved such an honor, you know.
MS. CORDOVA: That was also a remarkable time to leave Brazil.
MS. VATER: Well, I was lucky because I had the grant.
MS. CORDOVA: Right.
MS. VATER: I had to try. At the same time that my cover was being censored, I got the most important prize in Brazilian art. Brazil is a very surrealistic society, you know. You can't explain in the American way. There is–American parameters can't–they fail to explain.
MS. CORDOVA: So in entering into the United States, what did that do for you in terms of how you wanted to be, or how you now conceived of yourself?
MS. VATER: Well, I was coming here temporarily only in 1970 when I got the prize, and I knew that I was going to be–I didn't know the language, to begin with. Arriving in New York and then staying in SoHo–I rented an apartment in SoHo. And actually I met very quite important people there, but I was so afraid to make connections, because I didn't speak the language. You know, people say good morning to me; if they didn't have the accent that I recognized it, I didn't know what they were saying. It was terrible. I was very isolated. The only person that really I made contact with, nice contact–friendly contact with was Helio Oiticica.
I lived for my work and I lived to know better the city. I knew very few Brazilians. But New York has so much to offer, but also I was–in terms of museums and libraries and everything, I never felt–I felt isolated but the energy of New York at that time was so incredible that I was very excited to be there, and also to have the company of Helio all the time telling me about all these things, not only telling me about New York but about the universal culture, that could, through New York, become available to me. It was like my Ph.D., you know. I was doing–he kind of–he was my–how can I say–when you do the Ph.D. –there is a guide [supervisor] that guides you. I was–
MS. CORDOVA: Your dissertation.
MS. VATER: Yes. [They laugh.] Yeah.
MS. CORDOVA: I'm just going to switch tapes since I think we're almost done with this one.
MS. VATER: Okay. All right.
[Audio break.]

CARY CORDOVA: This is Cary Cordova of the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, doing an oral history with Regina Vater. This is still session one and this is disc two. And we were just talking about your time in New York and sort of arriving in New York and then a little bit of the loneliness and isolation that you were feeling at that time, but also a level of community that you were finding as well.

REGINA VATER: Well, sorry. When I arrived in New York, I came and I stayed the first week in a house of a Brazilian painter. And I was appalled, I became very shocked. He had somehow steal one of my ideas on knots.

MS. CORDOVA: He stole one of your ideas?

MS. VATER: Ideas, yeah, because he was one of the first people that I showed my series of drawings about the knots. And he won the prize before I won the prize, the prize to go abroad. He won the prize. And then he was in New York and I was a very good friend of his wife. And then, when I arrived in New York, he was doing the things that he was usually doing, but putting knots on it. I was like: "Oh my God." You know, the thing because I came, my original thing is not original anymore, because this guy is here doing what I had invented, you know? And his wife was my friend, and they invited me to be in their house the first week. It was awful.

Somebody called me. No, somebody called him saying that he was coming to see his work and this guy was a

big Brazilian collector. And he told me, don't show your work. This is my studio. But the guy actually asked me to see my work. "Oh, I am curious to see what you're doing." When I opened my portfolio, he saw what I was doing that was [the Knots], and I told Oiticica about that. And Oiticica it was incredible, because this I had started to work in New York in photography, because it was the first time that I had ever had a camera. And I started to do a lot of work with photography, and I actually did a work with *New York Garbage*–you know that one I showed in Venice Biennial, and this guy says, you want to be an anthropologist or an artist? And I know what I'm doing is art. "No, you need to come back to the brushes. When you come back to the brushes, I will accept you as an artist." It was like my father again, you know?

And I called Oiticica, oh my God. [Laughs.] No, but–not my father, an artist, you know? Don't even think about it. Don't listen to these kind of people. Do it. Art is experimentation. You need to go on and – you know, because I was being inspired by the poem of Augusto de Campos, one of the creators of Concrete Poetry that I admired a lot. But I didn't know him, you know, and then Oiticica said, you know what you should do? You should write to Augusto de Campos. Let him know about your work. And it was Oiticica that insisted and he actually corrected my letter, you know, because I was so afraid that my Portuguese was not right, writing for a major figure, a Brazilian poet. And I send the letter and from this point on, grow an incredible beautiful friendship.

I am until nowadays very, very good friends with Augusto. You know, I was friends with Haroldo– do not, so much like I am with Augusto, but I knew–Haroldo–as well and he was very supportive of me too, but Augusto really is a friend, you know. At a point that–we went last time that we came to São Paulo, he and his wife invited us for a lunch that we started to eat at 10:00, or I don't know 11:00, or noon, and we finished the lunch at 10:00 in the evening. We didn't leave the table the whole day, just talking, you know?

MS. CORDOVA: What did you say to him in your first letter? [Laughs.]

MS. VATER: I don't remember, probably that I admired his work, that I ask permission to use his work, you know, to be using his poetry in my work or something like that. I don't know.

MS. CORDOVA: And maybe you could talk a little bit about the inspiration for *Luxo Lixo*.

MS. VATER: Well, being a Latin American and seeing the garbage that people throw in the streets of New York, at that time, was too much. It was my way of co-opting not only with the consumerism not only because New York is a big store, and of course, arouses you all the desires of consumerism, and at the same time, my revolt against, you know, the difference of wealth that does not only exist in New York. Of course, in Brazil, there is a lot and but there is just like outdoor, like a poster–it's so much, you know?

It's not that I don't like New York. I love New York. And I say that New York actually is one of the most best memories of places that I lived in my life. But everything in New York is black and white, is very sharp and very defined. New York is all orthogonal. There is no curves, you know, because Latin America is full of curves, you know. New York is not. But this is a fantastic training camp. [They laugh.]

MS. CORDOVA: Training camp. [Laughs.]

MS. VATER: Yeah, really. But we–[inaudible].

MS. CORDOVA: Well, I'm curious, because actually a lot has been–well, I don't know if a lot, but some has been written on New York in the 1970s as like Magnet New York.

MS. VATER: It was a fantastic time.

MS. CORDOVA: And especially like a very strong Latin American community within New York at that time.

MS. VATER: I don't think we were–

MS. CORDOVA: But what was your experience?

MS. VATER: Actually, I didn't have connections with the Latin American community at that time. I don't think that there was a strong community. My opinion is that there was not. Latin American art was not appreciated at that time in the United States.

MS. CORDOVA: Well, I don't want to suggest that it was, but more that people from Latin America, especially in exile, were bonding while in New York.

MS. VATER: Well, there was, yeah, there was a lot of people from Chile. But that didn't mean that they were good artists, you know? There was people like Paternostro, of course, and Omar Rayo and other people, but I think also I didn't want to use the sympathy of the Americans bringing to myself the persona of an exile artist, because that was very easy to manipulate Americans with that persona.

MS. CORDOVA: Could you explain that?

MS. VATER: Well, I think that you know, of course, the horrendous things that were happening in the dictatorships in Latin America made a lot of liberal people here be very concerned and very helpful. But I think that was a very easy way to get your way in. And also, there was not an artistic criteria of quality of work. I wanted criteria that could see my work under the criteria of quality of art, you know? And actually I never–I think that I am a maverick all my life. I never–I don't like and my husband is too–I don't like to manipulate and to use something just to cast a favorable or because I'm exile or I'm Latin American or this, and so one is favorable for Latin American art. Because that time was not favorable to Latin American art.

Actually, the first show of experimental Brazilian art that happened in this country, I think that I brought it.

MS. CORDOVA: In 1979?

MS. VATER: In 1979, yeah. Before that, the work was very conventional and fit in the image that people here had of Latin American art. And the people that organized it seemed, perhaps they were well intended, but they didn't have the experience of experimentation in art.

MS. CORDOVA: Had you curated a show before then?

MS. VATER: Never. I don't think I am a curator. I just saw an incredible opportunity. Somebody came to me and asked me if I could do that. What happened about this show is that I had this friend that worked in advertising agency in Brazil and his advertising agency was promoting the Banco do Brazil. And the Brazilian bank was going to open an agency in New York and he came to me and says, oh, are we going to have Caetano singing and Antonio Carlos Jobim singing, blah blah blah, blah blah blah. And we would like to have a show at Leo Castelli, Leo Castelli. Are you crazy? But you know a lot of experimental people here. You could show, make a beautiful show of drawings, of Brazilian drawings. And then I just say, well, yeah, but I need money. No, it is no problem–Brazilian Bank.

Then, I went and I got all these 49 artists to do works, you know, selected them. I hired one of the most well known Brazilian critics, Aracy Amaral to write the text. She wrote the text against Brazilian drawing for the most incredible that seems, but that's true. Some artists that read this text thought: oh you crazy! I'm not crazy. She wrote. I didn't know. But anyway, the designer was already working in the catalog and then the guy came to me, says, oh, I have very bad news. The Bank of Brazil is not allowed to do anything more. I said, what? What am I going to do with all this? And I am being paid nothing.

Then, I went to an American attaché cultural from São Paulo who was living at São Paulo at the time. And I went to this American attaché cultural, very wonderful person, can't remember her name, unfortunately. But she was a very nice person. And she was very enthusiastic about the show and she said, no, this thing needs to go on. I am going on vacation to New York. I can make contacts there for you. Tell me who I should look for. And then she say, so I'll look for Linda Schearer, because she came here and she saw the same people that I was inviting and probably, you know, she could give me her help. And I know somebody in a gallery in Manhattan and ask him if he is interested. I will see what I can get there and we make the connections.

The guy was interested. Linda Schearer gave her support. She was totally positive about and the guy from the Brazilian ministery external affairs Itamaraty–that had came with Linda Schearer to my studio. He saw all that and I ask him to help just to buy a ticket for me to come to New York, and when he saw that my list coincided with the list of Linda Schearer, then he gave me the ticket. And the artists agree to lend me their works. You know, it was all works and paper. And I carry all these works underneath my arms in my portfolio like posters. I showed it to the customers as posters, you know. No money at all. I stay in the house of an American friend in New York, a psychologist friend of mine in New York. And I came with very little money, then Brazilian consulate paid for the cocktail and actually they looked like they put a lot of money. They didn't. Of course, they received this almost like a gift.

And actually, happened something very interesting. They went to–because we are still under the censorship in Brazil, they want to take one of the artists off of the show, Rubens Gerschman, because his work was very political. And then, I said, well, I would like to invite you, I told the attaché, I have to invite you to see all the works together in the same time that Linda Schearer has come to see because I invited Linda Schearer to come to see the works, too. And then, I got the opportunity of that moment, and I said to Linda Schearer: "Linda Schearer, what do you think what can happen if one of the works of this artist needs to be taken off of this show, because it's a little bit too political?" And then, she said in front of him, "Well, I will see that tomorrow we are going to have demonstrations in front of Rockefeller center [where the Brazilian consulate was]". Demonstrations against Brazil in front of the Rockefeller center! It was this way that I got Rubens Gerschman as part of the show. He is not my particular friend, you know, but I defend his work.

MS. CORDOVA: He's not a friend of yours?

MS. VATER: Well, Rubens was always a very difficult person, you know? He is one of the boys of power group and he never – he always dealt with me in a very kind of ironic way like I never was going to succeed or something like that, like he was always putting the benefit of doubt, you know? But they – that's what I told them happened in the early '60s. There was a group that I kind of–it's difficult to pass through and he was one of them. But you know, the show for me was such an incredible dream, you know, that I could realize it without any support almost, because I asked support from Brazilian industry. Luis Villares gave me $100. José Mindlin gave me $100. I had like $200 of two very rich wealthy people just because they wanted to have their names in the posters that were actually given free to me by a printer in São Paulo. But I have all the record of everything came out in the *ArtNews*. John Cage came to the show, and Joseph Beuys came to the show, you know, Linda Schearer, and many, it was–Simone Forti–came to the show. And I have even a film about the show, a super 8 with John Cage looking, Quentin Fiore.

MS. CORDOVA: I think of what you said about trying to sort of surround yourself with really strong minds and I think that you essentially went and tried that in 1976, both John Cage and Joseph Beuys. Is that correct?

MS. VATER: Beuys is, I can't tell that he was my friend like Cage became, because Cage really became a friend of mine. Beuys was at first, was an acquaintance. Somebody almost mythic that I had admired a lot. And I had a profound respect, but was inaccessible. So I kind of – but it was almost like the books that I read when I was fourteen years old in my mothers house, that I read despite that I was not understanding. [Laughs.] It was something like that, you know?

MS. CORDOVA: What were you drawn to in his work?

MS. VATER: Well, his connection with ecology, his connection with healing, mainly this, and his connection with a real democracy of knowledge.

MS. CORDOVA: And for Cage?

MS. VATER: Wow. Invention, invention, invention, invention, invention, invention. And an incredible connection with humor and lightness and Cage for me, if he was a painter in another period and he was a little bit more conservative, he would be like Matisse. You know, he had that kind of enchantment of Matisse, that lightness of Matisse. Because Matisse was a wonderful artist, a painter, but he was not an inventor like Cage was. Although, he was an inventor, but not in the extreme that Cage was. But I love Matisse, too. [Laughs.]

MS. CORDOVA: So how did you first contact Cage?

MS. VATER: Nineteen-seventy-six, I was going to the Venice Biennial to represent Brazil there. And during that period, I was not only doing graphic work, but I also was working as a freelance journalist. I was doing some interviews. I had an interview with Caetano, several other people in Brazil. And I came to Mino Carta, Mino Carta is M-I-N-O Carta, no? He is one of the most important journalists in Brazil and he was the director of ISTOé. I believe it was ISTOé. And he was a nice person - I can't say that he was a friend. We had this professional camaraderie. He was here and I was here. And I came to Mino and I said, Mino, what do you think if I go–I'm going to Europe now and going to pass through New York. What do you think if I bring an interview with John Cage. Do you publish this? He said, oh, yeah. That sounds good. I'm sure he probably thinks, oh, she is never going to get it, you know?

And it is interesting because when Oiticica that made my intellectual contact with Cage in the early '70s, Oiticica never met Cage. But he made me read Cage departing from my very spare knowledge of Cage. I start to go to all these performance, everything that I could go. And I knew who he was, physically. And once I was coming in the train, the West Side, and he was inside of the wagon, and we are almost lonely. This is in the early '70s. And I saw him and I said, oh my God. I am going to talk with him. And then I very timidly, I said, Cage, Cage. He looked at me in a very strange way and he left about in the 18th Street. It was him. Later on, I said, no, that's really him. That's why he probably was scared of me, or something. [They laugh.]

MS. CORDOVA: That sweet face could look scary?

MS. VATER: He was in his jeans. Anyway, in Venice, when I was in Venice, I met Tomaso Trino, and the guy that directed–the editor of *Flash Art*, Giancarlo Politi. I told Giancarlo Politi, I'm going to Milan. Then he told me: "When you come to Milan I would like to invite you for lunch." And then I went to a lunch with him, a woman that I assume was his girlfriend, and that was also a journalist, and Bonito Oliva, that Italian critic of art. And then it was very interesting, because during this lunch was me and this woman talking and just both guys talking by themselves. It was just like a man and woman divide. And I was very timid, as I said, at that time. I kind of didn't speak very much, but one minute I said once: "I'd really like if you could help me something. I am going to New York and I'd really like to meet John Cage." And he had an art diary. He had the address of everybody and I said: "Do you think that you could get me his address and his telephone number?" He said, "Yeah, I have the address of his manager. I will give to you." And he gave me.

And that's what I have when I arrived in New York. And I called and I said, "So I am a Brazilian artist. I do interviews." I explain to the woman and she said, "Well, he is out of town, but I will speak to him and if he is agree, I call you." And I was in the house of this American psychologist that I was when I came to New York. And one day she called and said "Can you come tomorrow, the day after tomorrow actually. 9:00 is good for you?" I said, "Yeah." And I went there. I stayed there from 9:00 to noon talking with him. It was absolutely incredible. He was so comfortable. I know. I think there was a chemistry between us, because Cage, he had a very. He had a child, his child in him. Everybody has a child in him. And his child was there without repression and without censorship. And at that time, I was a very naïve and almost–I had the same. I think that our children mingled together and we had this wonderful–he told me many, many, many scenes. I had a wonderful interview. I still have this tape. And then when I arrived in Brazil, I translated–a friend of mine who was married to an American guy from the NBC television here – actually a big reporter here. She helped me in translation. And then Augusto de Campos–also edited and I gave to Mino and he paid me and he never publish it. And then I asked him, "Why not publish it, Mino?" He says, "Oh, I think that Brazilian public is not interested in John Cage." That was a big lie, you know. Then, later on, John Cage was a big thing in Brazil, many books now have been published there and so forth, actually some of my photos of him are in them, because most of the books Augusto did it, you know. But then, this interview Augusto made me publish it in another magazine.

MS. CORDOVA: So it was published?

MS. VATER: It was published, but not in the–because ISTOé is just like Newsweek. It was a very big interview. Then, later on, I did another interview with him for the magazine *Interview* when he was 80–oh no, 70 years old. It was 1981. And this interview was published–actually I took a photo of him that has been used by his manager in many publications, and that I used it in my artist book that I published last year.

But then when I met Bill [Lundberg]–I brought Bill, because Bill was also a fan of him and knew Cage since Berkeley, time of Berkeley, but never had befriended him. Then we become very close friends. And everything that I did in New York, you know, he always came, you know he always gave me an incredible support. Really, when I applied for my green card, he wrote on behalf of me. He also wrote on behalf of my Guggenheim, also. And he was extremely supportive.

MS. CORDOVA: And yeah I see how the relationship developed where you and Bill then interviewed John Cage in a video form, and then that also became the basis for your film *Controverse*.

MS. VATER: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

MS. CORDOVA: But first of all, when did you meet Bill? What year was that?

MS. VATER: Bill I met when I did a show, the Brazilian show in 1979–actually I met him before, but this meeting with him counts a lot of course, but the real thing happened during the time that I did the Brazilian show, because I came to do a show in a gallery in Tribeca, C-Space, directed by Urbach.

MS. CORDOVA: The collector?

MS. VATER: Marina Urbach, and she is still around. The other day I heard about her. She worked with John Gibson later. I don't know where she is now. But anyway, she had this small gallery in Tribeca and she invited me to do this show and I was showing a film installation that I had done in Brazil in 1976. The show was in '77 and since the first time that I came into New York, I became friends with Muntadas. Antonio Muntadas is a Catalan artist, very well known in the New York. You know, Muntadas came to the show, was a good friend of mine. We kind of drift apart, but at that time he was a very good friend. And actually, there was [inaudible]. And then, because our lives there is some important parts that are kind of intertwined, but because he brought Bill to the show and during the opening, my projector broke and I was kind of panic. And Muntadas said, "Oh, I have here a friend that he knows how to fix projectors. He can help you." And Bill came and fixed my projector and he said – Bill was also very timid and he said to me kind of smiling, he said, "I loved your work. I really would like to talk to you about your work." And I said, coming from the experience of being a woman in the arts. You know, him being the male counterpart–I said, "This man is special. [Laughs.] I know that we need to be together!"

And then Muntadas says, "Well, let's go to my house. We can have some wine and talk after the show." It was always nice to go after a show some place, you know. And I passed the whole night talking with him, with Bill. But kind of, you know, mumbo-jumbo because my English was still bad, you know? I don't know how we understood each other. But I see that there was a connection, a strong connection. But it was not like I felt a charm from him, but it was everything under veil, you know, and very much like a professional kind of thing. But I had this incredible and you know, like I saw this beautiful aura, you know, and I was very much mesmerized by him.

Then, I come back to Brazil and actually I had a big health problem in Brazil during that year after I came back from this show. And I was in the hospital feeling very lonely, and among other things that I tried to cling, in nice

way, was the image of this man talking at me in New York. And then I wrote him a postcard from the hospital and he answered me, but very kind of, nice, but laconic. But I says, you know, I would like–he made me more curious. I really would like to know that guy. And when I came to the Brazilian show, he was one of the first people that I contact to invite to the show. And then we really fell in love, you know, dramatically. Because it was, I had no money. He had no money. It was awful this spot it was, really.

And then, of course Leopoldo Mahler, this Argentine–this friend of mine, he said, "Well, I'm going to São Paulo Biennale, and I know I need an apartment in São Paulo. Let's trade. You stay in my apartment and I'll stay in your apartment and then you're going to have more time to know this man that you're in love. But you need money. You need to apply to a grant. Why don't you apply for the Guggenheim?" And my name was suggested for the Guggenheim years before, many years before in the early '70s, before I came for the first time, by a Amilcar de Castro. And Amilcar said: "No, why don't you apply?" And he sent my name, I received the forms, but I never applied, because at that time, I didn't feel that I was mature enough for the grant. I think that did it, because they saw that I probably respect the grant so much because I didn't apply. Now I was applying. I had personal letters from Dore Ashton, from John Cage, from some heavyweight personalities.

And I applied, but Bill–and I went back to Brazil and almost every night Bill called me. "You need to come back. You need to come back." I said, "I have no money." He says, "Sell everything and come back." And I did. I did a garage sale and I brought $10,000 with me. But then, Bill–I discovered Bill was separating from his wife and I couldn't live with him. And he separated, but he was not living with–I rented an apartment and when my money was finishing and I was almost crying asking people in Brazil to send me money to come back, I received a letter from the Guggenheim, saying that I had won the prize. And then, the year after, Bill got his Guggenheim. And I always said that the Guggenheim was our good mother, because without it, we couldn't make it because we are extremely poor. We lived there on the—I have a photo here—it was incredible—that was the way that we lived in New York.

And I was really in love it was the most romantic way of beginning of–Bill was showing in the Whitney and in important places. He actually was part of that group from John Gibson Gallery and but once Bill went to see Leo Castelli and Leo Castelli offer him a show and he refused him because what he wanted is that Leo Castelli bought a work of him. We had absolutely no money at all. Here we are making money moving furniture.

MS. CORDOVA: Were you selling any work at that time?

MS. VATER: No, I was doing lots of shows, but I was not–I never sold my work, because I sell things here and there, in the very uneven way. And I have works in some good collections, but this is one thing here. I have sometimes two years until I sold another work. And I, because when I changed my work in 1964 to–I just said, I'm going to do graphic design to sustain, to make my invention be possible. And you know, who sustained all my experimentation was my graphic design jobs and my freelance jobs in graphic design. And I never had lived in luxury but I lived much better than this if I didn't live in New York, you know, of course. But, you know, I never had ambition to become a wealthy artist, never, never, because I met people. The people that I met were so important in my mind in terms of art thinking, you know, because they were all heroes. Helio Oiticica, Lygia Clark, John Cage–John Cage, according to the interview that I made with him, he taught himself art history to make money giving classes of art history in order to be a composer. Or he was the driver of Merce Cunningham's–truck, Merce's company to make money for.

You know, so another thing that I learned in the purpose of all my career is that–and Bill also–is that we are very lucky that we had reached a place of stability in our careers. We never reached the glimmery or, how can I say, the shinery of the–

MS. CORDOVA: The glamour? No, I'm sorry.

MS. VATER: The kind of fame that many people think that to be an important artist is all about. It's not this kind of–how can I say? What's the word that you use when something really is very shiny and very–those things that you put in your–

MS. CORDOVA: Glitter in your eye?

MS. VATER: Yeah, yeah, yeah. This is not the glitter, so to say, a kind of glitter-success that we reached. But I had a little peek of that in Brazil when I was younger and it's not that I didn't pursue that later. I really pursued it, but I think that being in contact with that in Brazil and through my growth as a human being and all the things that happened in my life, or say, in our life, that is not the most important thing– is to accomplish a real solid work as an artist.

MS. CORDOVA: Are you referring to your time with Camargo, or who are you thinking of in terms of seeing success for an artist?

MS. VATER: Well, let's say, I'm not speaking about me. Speaking about Bill, Bill is one of the real–this is in the words of John Hanhardt, you know, to the senior curator of the Guggenheim. Bill is really one of the forefathers of video installation. His name is–you know, many people came like Jeff Koons gave an interview in *Artforum* and interview and say that he is one of the most important artists for him, but Bill doesn't have the same objectives as Koons, and I don't think that Bill even want that kind of fame. This is the fame, you know, but you know, there is something very solid about the presence of Bill as an artist, very authentic. That's what I think that we both are very much together. We are looking for authenticity in our work.

MS. CORDOVA: Well, let me ask you, because you're bringing up some really interesting issues about the idea of success for an artist and especially during the late '60s and 1970s, you seem to be moving away from painting and towards–well, obviously installations, also towards maybe even conceptual art. I don't know if you would ever call yourself a conceptual artist.

MS. VATER: Yeah, a long time ago it kind of passed it through me, this term, but I really don't like very much that connection nowadays.

MS. CORDOVA: But I guess what I'm–

MS. VATER: I like to work with ideas. This is conceptual art, if you can call as a work with ideas, but my work is not only brain, you know. It is not only brain oriented. Of course, the intellect plays a very important role, but I don't think that art is just about intellect.

MS. CORDOVA: Right, and at the same time though, a lot of the things that you're creating are sort of intangible or not necessarily easily marketable within the marketplace, your installations, your films, I suppose, have a limited ability to be a commodity in the marketplace. So in that respect, you've already, perhaps, chosen a path that is less likely to follow in that idea of the artist success model.

MS. VATER: Yeah. Well, I think that is not that I choose in purposes, but I think that the way that my work fits in the society tends to have this kind of, you know, reception. But this is not something that gives me–there were so many people in the past that happened and their work really contributed. I want my work connected with authenticity and also with a real contribution, not only for me. I'm not working for me. I think that I feel art as a call, because, I admire Joseph Beuys, you know, and Oiticica, and all these other guys. I think that you are called to share your talents, you know, when through your communication that you choose. And you can't limit the way that you communicate, you know, there is not a single channel when you are a creator, you are inventing. You try to invent, you know. There is not–I am going to be painter just for the rest of my life because this is the way to communicate ideas.

MS. CORDOVA: So maybe just going back on that idea of conceptual art, I'm curious if you consider the project that you did–*What is Art* or *O Que e Arte*–if you consider that to be partly conceptual art or would you–or what was even your process of coming to, and I guess maybe to describe, you took the word "art" and you put it in all these various forms.

MS. VATER: Well, that series that actually I think that it kind of floats atemporal is not–you can't fit that work in the '70s, because it could be done now also. And that series I did because I really was pissed off the art milieu–what I was seeing in the art milieu. If in the '70s, in the late '70s, the scene was bad, I can't imagine now, because I think that we came a long way to a low definition culture, a culture that really enhances entertainment

[Audio break.]

And low thinking and low–it's not low thinking. There is no time. There is no space for reflection, for deep–to plunge deep into some subjects. It's just like people are not interested into grow inside.

MS. CORDOVA: Did you feel that globally or was that–

MS. VATER: Globally.

MS. CORDOVA: Okay.

MS. VATER: I don't know in Tibet or–

MS. CORDOVA: [Laughs.] I mean from your personal experience in traveling around and being in both Brazil and the United States. You were feeling that the art world was–

MS. VATER: No, no, this is global. It's unhappily something – we are now very shallow, a giant wave of very shallow thinking.

MS. CORDOVA: So what would you want people to get from that particular project?

MS. VATER: Well, that–just to think about. I think the other day I actually heard on National Public Radio a very interesting thing. There is a guy, a philosopher in New York that he goes to kind of a very low class neighborhood and he makes like a little "Agora" and make questions, you know. He makes like a Socratic technique with people and I think it's important to make questions, you know? Like I did with *The Knots* before. It came from my depth of experience and knowing the knots that I think art has this – sometimes it's not so evident, is not so clear and direct. You know, the question comes underneath many layers. But sometimes, depending on the circumstance, you know.

That's what I did in São Paulo that was a festival, the first time that I did that in. I did it in São Paulo, in a festival that was just like a circus kind of thing because there were people doing all sorts of things. "And so what I'm going to do here, that can be really have some weight? You know, when I did the questions and I publish the book. And then I did again in New York in a festival that woman that used to work with Nam June Paik that had that festival in New York. There was this lady, the woman that played the cello for Nam June Paik that did a festival Moore, more, Moore. Charlotte. [Charlotte Moorman.]

MS. CORDOVA: I can see the picture.

MS. VATER: I think, yes. I didn't know her but she invited a friend of mine from Argentina and he told her about me and then through her, I went and did these questions. I have a lot of New Yorkers answers with that I could do a fantastic book. I never did it. And then I did here in a show in Austin, too. But, yeah, the one that I did in photography is using the word ART like real poetry. Actually, it was not very well received by–Oiticica actually wrote the catalogue for it. It was not well received by the Brazilian critics. You know why? Because I use the word in English. [They laugh.] And there were same Brazilians–[inaudible]–critics really ah, you know. When there is a lot of Brazilian artists copying a lot of *Art in America* pages, you know, for their work to be well accepted abroad. I was doing very sincerely because I really, you know, I used the word in English, for me, aesthetically, it was easier you know? I want to do something that could expand the space, here and there, because I thought that the problem was not only there. It was here, too.

But anyway, I think that the work succeeded, because nowadays it is being much better accepted than that time.

MS. CORDOVA: So you actually think it's more well-received now?

MS. VATER: Now, oh, there is no doubt about it. No, the [inaudible] that some photos of that time was bought by Gilberto Chateaubriand, one of the major Brazilian collection, now belong to the collection of the Modern Art Museum in Rio, Brazil. I brought and showed photography in Brazil recently. They made a mess in the catalogue on the part of quality–completely different. But anyway, the register is there, but isn't it interesting–that's what happened. I feel sometimes that I did a work here and sometimes even later I see like a wave that comes years later, you know? Today, I opened a Plateau Beaubourg website and I saw some people and I said, God!

When I was in Paris, I was very lonely, but I had this American boyfriend. I had a strange relationship with this guy and because it was good for me and it was bad for me, you know, because my mind–I think that he really loved me and I liked him, but there was some things that we really didn't agree. You know, mainly about art, you know. He was a very formal kind of photographer. You want more to drink?

MS. CORDOVA: No, I'm fine.

MS. VATER: And anyway, and I did a work using–you know that Marat, the David canvas of Marat, the Assassination of Marat that Marat had an arm outside of the bathtub? I did a work myself in the bathtub with an arm like this, to put on like this and I put a bed, my bed that I photograph it because I felt very lonely in Paris and I did a work only about my bed, not that meant that I love beds, meant that I was really lonely because I was really lonely. I did a series of very lonely beds in Paris. I use myself, the bed, and the Marat canvas. I bought the postcard and I put these three things together. And I did all these series about my bed, I think, but this work in particular, I call "Da Vida Amar at Paris"–I think that you understood because you understand Spanish and signed David À Marat, Paris. But that is a play on words with David À Marat–Paris, because David–but–[in Portuguese]–I swing the letters and get–Da Vida Amar at Paris. That was, you know, this thing about my relationship and this guy, my loneliness, it was about this.

And actually, the photographer that did my photo was a friend of Oiticica. I did this photography after I left Paris. Anyway, today I opened that website of Plateau Beaubourg and I see a work of a French girl. She is doing something almost identical. It's not identical, but the idea is almost there, something that she broke off–

MS. CORDOVA: Sophie?

MS. VATER: Yeah, exactly. That she broke up with her boyfriend or something like that. And this is wow. That's another–

MS. CORDOVA: Calle, sorry, Calle.

MS. VATER: Yeah, that's interesting. Another thing also is that in '75 when I arrived in Brazil, I was so–I was coming from New York and I was coming back to Brazil and I saw, oh this, role of a Latin American woman trying to catch a man to marry, this whole thing about marriage, and this thing about the woman giving up careers to marry and so far and so on, that's what made me want to do a work. And I made *Tina America*; that was a performance that I did during one day and this friend that was colleague of me in Psicoanalise in a group of–Psicoanalises–who was a photographer, Maria da Graça. She said, you know, I only had one film. We need to have–and I have only one afternoon, and I did that in one afternoon.

And I did changing personalities the whole afternoon because I want to portray the Latin American woman there, the personage that they do to captivate, to become successful in life mainly in a– and I put that in a book that they use in Brazil, the middle classes in Brazil, to put wedding photos. Because I really want to–anyway, I did that in 1975 and Frederico Moraes who is an important Brazilian critic, even use it in a reportage that he did about the presence of woman in Brazilian art. This same guy, years later, when the work of Cindy Sherman arrives in Brazil, he even didn't say, oh, Regina Vater did that before, because I really did that before Cindy Sherman.

MS. CORDOVA: Yeah, that's true. I love that piece, by the way. I think that's just wonderful. But so you're saying that there's also this message, or that you were contemplating these ideas about marriage, too, that is underlying that. Is that correct?

MS. VATER: Yeah, I think that because there is this thing, you know. We, in Latin America–I don't know here because I didn't grow up here but in Latin America, you know, marriage was one of the most important goals in the life of a woman, you know? No matter what you need to marry. And my quest was not to marry, was to find a man with whom I could be an artist and respect my work because this–Bill was so important for me, because it was somebody that I fell in love and professionally I thought that we could share a space. It was not that easy, you know, later on, I discovered. But I think that what the conviviality of ideas, of thinking, of many things, that I have with Bill, you know, like it would not be easy to find in a Brazilian man. I think that. I don't know. That's one of the things why I'm over here because for me it was very important to have a companion, but I didn't want just to marry somebody.

MS. CORDOVA: Well, it seems to me you have some very negative reactions over your lifetime from Brazilian men. I mean, not just your father, but in terms of your attempts to try poetry and sort of the gearing of your painting towards a specific direction and your education and I don't know, I'm sure–

MS. VATER: I had wonderful male friends, fantastic male friends. No, I had fantastic male friends. No, the Brazilian men are wonderful as friends, but as men to marry I think they are afraid of intelligent woman. That's what Lygia Clark once confessed me. "You see all these intelligent women there? They're all lonely." And they, you know, like Mario Schemberg. You know Mario Schemberg married a woman that doesn't–years light [light years] away from Lygia Clark, and I know that Lygia and him was a perfect match, you know?

MS. CORDOVA: But you think that's different here and that was part of the reason?

MS. VATER: I think that – in my experience, it was easier here. I don't know if it's easier totally, because I met some people in New York that was absolutely awful too, as male you know, but I don't know in what terms of view. It's not that, Bill also have, sometimes you know, the patriarch inside of–Bill's sneaks out too but–[laughs]–I know, I have that kind of experience, that Bill had–[laughs].

MS. CORDOVA: So Tina America, it was just an album. It was the creation of a book in addition to these photographs, right? I mean, it was part of your book-making project that was to grow.

MS. VATER: Yeah.

MS. CORDOVA: Is that correct?

MS. VATER: Yeah, yeah.

MS. CORDOVA: And how did you get into bookmaking because–

MS. VATER: Well, I was doing that since I was in Paris. No, actually the first thing I did was in New York. I did–when I was in the Pratt Institute, I did a little thing. I think that I have one example. I did a silk screen– in Pratt Institute–with a poem about garbage that I wrote in English. It was my first attempt to write in English. And I did that in Pratt Institute. And then I went to Paris and I did a book that actually Kynaston McShine loved it so much. And I showed this book at Franklin Furnace and well, I have the original, but somebody stole this copy at Franklin Furnace. And I thought that was–I became very pleased with that. Somebody stole my book. [Laughs.] But, it's a

book that is based on the Einstein–something that Einstein wrote about time. And my work has this whole connection with time.

And then from that book came all sorts of other things, you know. There is a site that you saw. There are all my books there is only one book that is not there, that I need actually to discover it– inspired by Matisse – this thing was like a quote. I need to give her. It's something that I did to Bill in honor of our relationship. I always made a joke to Bill saying if Matisse was alive, our relationship, mine and his, would be in danger, because I really love the spirit of Matisse, you know, that joyful mischievousness, you know that I really like, that togetherness with joy. And he wasn't a sad person at all, and I really like that lightness. And so rare nowadays, you know?

And I did this work in homage to Matisse but also as a poem about me and Bill, me and him, our relationship. It's a very–it's almost concrete poetry. But the whole book plays with colors like the cutouts of Matisse and plays on the colors of the Brazilian flag and the American flag, like very primary colors and how they intermingle. It's an interesting work. I actually scanned it, because I had done the original work on real cutouts and then I scan it and I digitalized and now it's kind of ready to become a real book. I did this scanning before I went to Brazil and I have now in a CD.

But I have to do so many things now, I'm preparing for a show of photography that I'm going to show at Flatbed [The Flatbed Gallery, Austin, TX]. Actually we're going to show together. He is going to show a big installation and I'm going to show these photos that I actually started in Brazil in '77, but I kind of continued now. And I wish I had more time to do everything that I would like to, and also to take care of my garden–[laughs]–that is an important part of my life. I learned that you just go with the flow, you know. I think that I used to be much more–how can I say–worried about oh, my God. I'm taking it much easier now. I don't know. After this trip to Brazil at least, I think that I am slowing down. I'm not so in such a hurry, you know?

I think that I'm becoming older and I'm not in a hurry. I think that when you are feeling sometimes that you become older, you become hurried because time becomes shorter. But I don't know. I think that life is to be enjoyed, too. And if you don't enjoy life, art can't be–art doesn't come. Its higher potentiality doesn't–I understand that just to do, just to become a fabric of artifacts is not art. Art comes from a much deeper reality, and has a connection with the way that you live your life.

And I think that art is an avenue of growing, growing as a human being. When you're growing as a human being. You're helping other people to grow as a human being, too. And that can't be achieved in like a materialistic way at all. And that the material aspect can be achieved only with techniques. It's not–art as an art. I feel that now, more than ever, I don't know, I think that it is a way that you perform your social presence in the world in a very palpable way because if you work with visual art more than the other arts. But, this is just, how can I say, an external format for something that is not–that is an instrument. It's a device for something that–some way of transformation that is not technical, material and so far and so on, you know. Otherwise, you know, you'd be not so fascinated and we couldn't devote our lives with so much fervor.

MS. CORDOVA: We need it to be that complex. Let me–because I know this tape is coming to an end, let me stop the tape and are you feeling okay to continue or–

MS. VATER: Yeah, we could continue. I just would like to have a more–

MS. CORDOVA: All right, we will take a break and I'll stop your tape right here.

[Audio break.]

All right, we're recording. This is Cary Cordova with Regina Vater. We are in our first session and this is disc three. And Regina, you were just going to talk–

MS. VATER: Yeah, you were asking me about the things of a translational culture. And when I was here in Austin, continuing my work of concern with ecology, I did that series *Electronic Nature*. But always in my work, I really like to give many layers of reading and meanings. And the work, *Electronic Nature*, it is what I did. At that time, I didn't even have a VHS player. I did like a safari, a photographic safari, on television. I put the television on the nature program–I distorted the hue of the television and I put the camera on the tripod and I photograph as much as I could, all the animals, but with the distorted hue.

You know they came out with incredible colors. I even have one of these photos in a museum in San Antonio. And I did a show and these people–and these people in San Antonio they want me to do an installation. And I thought about it and it came to my hands a text of Octavio Paz –fantastic – about translation. And he–I can't remember the name of the Tibetan monk. It's not–Milarepa [Tripikata]–it's another monk. I have the–I used this text of Paz in my show, but anyway, what I did I put in the wall, the electronic nature photos. And in another, because what they mean to me is that in our contemporary society many times the contact that we have with nature is most part of the times, through electronic media. Because a child that lives in New York and if it's like

São Paulo or New York, doesn't have–like another day I was watching something about some kids in Harlem that say, you know, there is some people here that never saw the World Trade Center. You know, the woman was talking. Can you imagine if they saw forest, you know, animals?

And we have this contact with the nature through electronic means, and then because this is the name I gave to the series. Electronic Nature, with all the colors distorted, and I installed this in the wall, a series of these works in the wall, and another wall I projected a photo of actually a photographer from Bolivia. I think–Bolivia or Peru–Pisco de Gaiso. I have his name correctly. I can find later, but this photo came out the Brazilian newspapers on front page. I was just living Brazil and I saw this and I said, God, this never could carry in American newspaper, because it was a naked Indian, totally naked. She was on her knees, and she had a baby, her baby, in one arm and in another arm, she was kind of holding this little piglet from the forest, that had lost his mother and she was breast-feeding the piglet. And I said, well, this is Mother Nature herself, you know? And the caption said that the Indians in that tribe, they do that with all their wild animals that lose their mothers.

And then what I did, I put the translation in one wall, and this woman projected in another wall, this confront of cultures, behavior towards nature. And in the back wall, I put the Octavio Paz text where he recounts this tale of this Tibetan, I think that was a Chinese–no, was a Tibetan monk that went to–no, this show was in 1993. Now, my memory is kind of short. But I will find out. He went to China to collect old, ancient Buddhist manuscripts, and he was a guest in Emperor's house. And during the time that he was compiling this text, the Empress became pregnant, and she was very ill–she had a kind of a fragile health. And he was very concerned about her while he was working on this text. And one afternoon, he was in the midst of this, came to the window a bird, magnificent that he never saw before, and he kind of telepathically asked the bird, so what is going to happen with Empress. And then, the bird performed a pirouette, a kind of movement, in the space, just like, you know, but was like a court dance. For him, this signified a very good omen. And he understood that everything was about to be okay with the Empress.

And then, this is the example that Octavio Paz gave of this meta-communication between species or cultures so distant. How can we bridge it, you know? That, of course, can be bridged by art in many ways, but there Octavio Paz adds a phrase that is so beautiful that I use it in my postcards. "For you to understand the other's, you need to become the other's without ceasing to be your self." That's what translation is and what it is communication. You really need to–you have to give space for the other, and that's, I think that is very difficult when you get out of your culture and go to another culture. And for you to understand where you are going and for the people where you are going to understand you, until the bridge is built is a long effort. It takes a long, long time. It is not easy.

And mainly, when you came from a culture that, for so many years, and for so long, was isolated from the process of power, like the Latin American culture was. It still is.

MS. CORDOVA: So for you, who is the other? I mean, if you are sort of living your life, perhaps according to this phrase that Octavio Paz has given you, or you would like to apply it, I mean, do you just apply it abstractly in any situation, or is there really a sense that you are looking to understand this other?

MS. VATER: Well, it's always an exercise; it's a constant exercise because it took me a long, long time to, you know, to–this is not, for instance: the gregarious way that Latin people have. In Brazil, people are, they really enjoy that with an incredible sense of humor. It's not the same way that people socialize here. And that was a really incredible hole in my life. It was like a black hole, you know? I'm not saying that this–but it is the way that the culture is different. I'm not saying it is wrong or right. It's the way that people are raised.

People here are raised learning to be lonely and we are not raised in that way. We are raised in a totally–I always had thousands of friends. I was very–although I was a timid person, but I always had people around me and I always looked for people. And for instance, with Bill–I love him and we have a very nice relationship, but in two separate points of our relationships. We never went to Brazil and he was living his idea, and he is not–he was not in the beginning a very social person in terms of relationship. And that's what's really a big shock, you know, for me, because I came from a different strategy to deal with life because in Latin America, you have all this network. I was a maverick professionally, but in terms of friends I had friends from all walks of life–anthropologists, architects, psychologists. And for me it was a kind of shock how Bill could survive being that–I have friends still nowadays, friends from kindergarten.

And I have a friend that–you know, I bought an apartment in Rio, because my father had left me an apartment that I didn't like it. And he finally gave me this thing after years of never giving nothing to me. And I think that he was repenting and he gave me this thing that was absolutely awful–I sold the thing and I want to apply the money and I bought a very teeny little apartment in Ipanema without seeing the apartment. A friend of mine choose the apartment for me because I was not there. Everything was made by email and it is a fantastic place. This friend did this for me. Two friends did this for me. I have friends like that friends for thirty, forty years. They are just like sisters. More sisters than my sisters. And Bill was sometimes with him says: I wish I could have

friends like you have.

But I think that we are raised in that kind of that way and I need to learn. It's not that I don't have–I don't know nice people here. I know incredible people. I knew occasional, but this is–it's more formal. The culture is more formal, much more formal, and that makes you more lonely. This contrast for me was very painful, but at the same time, made me grow, because left with myself here left a lot for reflection and gave me space to discover things by myself, you know, because in Brazil they're kind of pampered. You know, you always have–kids there they leave home very late in life in Brazil. They didn't until very–my cousins lived and they married and they live with the parents. And that was kind of totally different for me in my family actually. But anyway, I think that I wish that Americans could learn a little bit more like us. That's what I wish. [Laughs.]

MS. CORDOVA: What do you think the chances are?

MS. VATER: I see that Bill learned it actually. He is fascinated in Brazilian culture. He is fascinated with this "savoir de vivre". Because there is a "savoir de vivre" there that, that's what I told you. When I came back from Brazil, I'm taking it easier. I'm flowing with the flow better, because I actually, when I arrived at this time six months ago, coming back after six months, that's what it's been. It was on a Fulbright. But I, when I arrived there, I was so much in a train of doing things fast that I got a back ache that I couldn't get rid of it because my confront, my way, my time, with the Brazilian time totally clashed, it was a kind of cultural shock. I want to do things, these things you can't, you know, and then, you realize that, no, I think this is going to happen. And it actually happened. I bought the apartment. I bought in the Brazilian way. I did these things in a Brazilian way, kind of rely on people, trusting more in people and not claiming that I need to do everything by myself; that I have people to count with. Unfortunately, I can't say the same thing here because everybody is very busy here and they are in another train of mind that I can't impose a Brazilian way on them.

MS. CORDOVA: Could you actually–I mean, I think you're sort of winking to something that is an interesting sort of problem in the United States in that in addition you've become sort of the representative of Brazilian culture. I mean, I can see that sometimes you are the single Brazilian artist in an exhibit of Latino artists, right?

MS. VATER: Mostly here in Texas because there is a lot of Brazilian artists in New York already.

MS. CORDOVA: Right, right, but I'm then curious about this. Do you feel a part of –do you call yourself a Latino artist? Do you feel a part of that–

MS. VATER: Well, undoubtedly I am Latino. I am Latino like a Romanian person is Latino. I am Latino like a French person is Latino. I'm Latino like an Italian person is Latino. They are all Latin cultures. They all have Romance language and they all came from a matrix that was Rome.

MS. CORDOVA: Well, I guess part of what I'm asking is that as you just pointed out, it's so diverse, right, that there's such a tremendous diversity within that idea of who a Latino is. And yet, there has also been a thrust in this country and perhaps even indicated by this interview of Latino artists in Texas, that there is some sort of overarching identity for Latinos in the United States.

MS. VATER: Perhaps the Portuguese culture is the closest thing to the Spanish culture among the whole Latino diaspora. But I always felt that kind of strange that the French and Italians and the Romanians are not put in the same thing because we are all Latinos. Although, even though the Portuguese is the most closest thing to the Spanish culture, we are different also, very different. And I tell you something, when I came back from New York to Brazil in 1975, from that stay in New York, one thing that I really made sure that I was going to know more about Latin America. Because even in Brazil, because there is this part of language, we didn't know at that time so much about Latin America.

And then I traveled. I went to Guatemala. I went to Colombia. Peru, I already had went, but I went to Peru again. I love Peru, by the way. No, because it is incredible. It's just like to be in Tibet; it's another world altogether in the Andes. But, Argentina, I went to Argentina. Anyway, and traveling, making all this traveling, you see very clear that each country is a totally different from each other. Now, I went to Mexico, and Mexico before, even before I arrived in New York. You know, it's they all speak Spanish. They were all conquered by–you know, all the cultures the roots are the same conqueror, the same foundation. But it's different, like I imagine Brazil is very different from people in Mozambique and from people in Angola and from people in Goa or Macao. We are all colonized by the Portuguese, you know.

MS. CORDOVA: And you had already hinted at, probably switching topics a little bit, but your experience learning English. And I assume you grew up speaking Portuguese. And you also grew up learning Spanish or speaking Spanish?

MS. VATER: Spanish I had a very little initiation to it in school because it was obligatory to teach a little bit of Spanish. But when I arrived in Peru in 1967, I went to represent Brazil in the Lima Biennial, I was in wonder. To

see a culture so close to mine and so different. I was in wonder about the difference in between people, human beings–the contribution that each group of people can give to the general idea of human beings because each has its particular way of resources and intelligence and so forth, and so on and I think that each culture is a repository of part of the universal wisdom. I am saying that today and I am 60 years old. At that time, I couldn't have analyzed, like I'm analyzing, but I had the fascination for the other.

For me it was wonderful to take a cab in Lima and to be able to communicate, you know, the guy make an incredible effort to understand my Portunol, and I try to understand his Spanish. For me, it was a fascinating experience and furthermore, I made friends with the most incredible people in Cuzco, a family in Peru that was the Martin Chambi family, that was an incredible photographer. I don't know if you know about them, but I have a book of them. I actually have a photo, a real photo that Manuel gave to me. He was just like the royalty of Inca descendents, you know, architects, photographs. I think Martin Chambi was discovered by a curator from the MOMA in New York and before he had become a big important thing in North America, he was discovered by the museum and then nowadays, he is one of the most important names in photography.

But I was introduced to Manuel, the son, by Nelson Pereira dos Santos that was a very important Brazilian filmmaker from my group in Ipanema, you know, the people that I–but I was introduced to Inca culture and I come back like three times to Peru, two or three times to Peru, just because I met those people. They're fascinating. I always was fascinated by the history of this past in Latin America that I feel–I felt very badly when I went to Mexico and I didn't have the tools and I didn't have the opportunity that I had in Peru to meet somebody of the caliber of Manuel to introduce me to the culture in Mexico. I went to that museum of anthropology in Mexico [The National Museum of Anthropology, Mexico City]. And I felt immediately–

[Audio break.]

And I felt humiliated because I felt that I was in front of something very, very powerful and I didn't have the better–better tools to understand that. I was just like somebody that doesn't know what a letter means in front of an incredible text. And I actually came in contact – much better contact with the Maya and Aztec culture here in Austin because of its proximity with Mexico because I never had this opportunity before.

MS. CORDOVA: Do you want me to pause the tape?

MS. VATER: To be closer to Mexico somehow.

MS. CORDOVA: [Laughs.] I'll pause it.

MS. VATER: I know you need to bring me–

MS. CORDOVA: Yeah, well, I'm thinking probably we're getting to the end of this first session I think. But one of the questions that I've been really wanting to ask you that we haven't actually even necessarily geared into, but–you have mentioned how shy you were as a child and yet a lot of your work, especially I guess in the '70s, I see, you sort of veered into performing. And I'm wondering where that aspect of yourself grew from, how you have cultivated it since that.

MS. VATER: Well, I didn't do many performances to begin with. I did a performance that was a photographic performance and then I did the performance in a Contemporary Arts museum? in São Paulo. But I was totally mute–

MS. CORDOVA: And that is the *Three Monkeys* [1975]?

MS. VATER: *Chinese Monkey*s, yeah. That was kind of a commentary on the Brazilian culture that was totally alienated–becoming totally alienated by the process of the dictatorship. Yeah, it was very bad.

And that using–I just did one of the performances now in Brazil but also it was like a talk. It was a lecture about my work but I did it in a kind of performance. No, it was not a lecture. I didn't give a lecture. No, I did a performance, a mute performance and I was having a slideshow of my work.

MS. CORDOVA: And what was the performance?

MS. VATER: Well, I did a PowerPoint show of all my career since the '60s until now, but I did – I chose, like, very carefully good examples of my work, that could make connections, and works that people forgot, like the *Tina America*–this kind of thing.

And I passed the whole time–I had a tray, a basin with water and I put some herbs, and I made, like, a ritual. I put some herbs, I put a candle, I put a–and I kind of washed my curriculum. I had, like, 30 pages of curriculum and I washed one by one all of the pages of the curriculum. [They laugh.]

MS. CORDOVA: That actually makes me think of so much of your other work. I think of the film *Cinderella Penelope* that you did in which you–

MS. VATER: That is an awful work.

MS. CORDOVA: You interspersed classic film clips of mostly women and men in an embrace with you–I think–I assume it was you, although you were headless in the shot, doing tours around the house.

MS. VATER: That was not me; it was a performer here in Austin. It is a very well-known performer. What is her name? This is a film there. She was actually my Tai Chi teacher at the time. Gold. Her last name is [Heloise] Gold. I can't remember her first name. It was Gold. I didn't know–yeah, she did that. She is a performer. No, I did this–actually, I had on video of myself doing this before here in the house, and that I washed my photos of my work in a sink. I was–it was also a slide show. I was washing things in the sink, and some photos of my work. And I was talking about some works of mine that were forgotten and it seems like I was "for the improvement of memory" or something like that.

This was a video that I did a long time ago. I was not even living in this house. It was in the early-'80s. If I did this in Brazil now–because–I feel that somehow because I'm not there, many people–and I'm not in Rio since–I did that particular for Rio. I'm not in Rio since the 1970s and many people in Rio, from there–when you go there–that milieu–the art power cultural milieu–they feel kind of like I just–I'm not more from there. That I'm–well, it's just like–well, when we were for New York and you lived in New York, they forget about you. People's memory just dissolves. But I think that in Brazil in there is sometimes a kind of resentment also because–I don't know, there is a–I feel the–[laughs]–wow– [a cat walks by]

MS. CORDOVA: Why do you say that *Cinderella Penelope* is awful? I'm just curious.

MS. VATER: Oh, because, you know, I am dyslexic and who did the editing of that video? It was me, in a very old equipment of the ACTV here in Austin. And the equipment is used by all sorts of people that have very different hands, and ways of dealing with machines. It was totally out of synch. And me being dyslexic with that precariousness of the equipment made the editing of this thing–although I had good intentions, it's very awkward. I feel many of my videos very awkward because of this problem. But now with the computer, it is much easier. I can control things in a much more easy way. And I actually intend to come back to do lots of video now because of the facility of having the computer.

MS. CORDOVA: When did you realize you were dyslexic?

MS. VATER: Here. And it's funny; it's interesting because this is something interesting because here people don't have problems to deal with the handicaps. Have and have not–they have not but people are – really kind of very open-minded about this. And in Brazil, this–until–at least when I grow up, these things are put underneath the carpet, you know. People don't talk. You just deal with, even though they know that you have this problem, you know.

But now I understand, when I was a child, I had an incredible difficulty with many, many things. For me, it was an incredible struggle when other kids of my age were not–perhaps it was this that really oriented me to the visual world, you know, because in terms of language, I always had problems. And perhaps because the visual expression for me was much easier, I could dominate that better.

I could–I'm very good–I always felt I'm very good and–how can I say–circumvent my disabilities, but, for instance, I am left handed. I broke this arm, like, two years or three years ago–my left hand–my hand–I just thought "I'm going to retire as an artist because I can't use my arm anymore," but the guy told me: "you're not going to be perfect, but you're going to be able to do things." And I stayed in this arm immobilized by almost six months.

And I learned how to do absolutely every–because here you need to do everything from cleaning to gardening, everything. I did everything with my right hand during this period–and then I came along and I don't feel any difference only that my hand is not straight anymore. But it's working–[laughs]–that is what counts.

MS. CORDOVA: How did you break it?

MS. VATER: Oh, I was incredible. I was just–not jogging, actually walking in the neighborhood. And a friend of mine told me, "Oh, I have a friend; I know that you walk in the neighborhood and I have a friend that is looking for a house in your neighborhood. If you see something, please let me know." And I saw this place. Actually, this is strange because I had a premonition when I was approaching this house that was something bad it was not good. You know, my relationship with that house–was not good.

But I saw the house was for sale. And I try to keep in my memory the telephone number. And I didn't see that in the sidewalk was a bump and it was very early in the morning and there was nobody to help. It's so awful

because the bone came through the flesh. It was very bad.

Then I realized there was a kindergarten around the corner and I went and saw – they noticed. They know about this stuff, because kids, they fall all the time. And I went there immediately to see if a mother could help me. And I found a teacher that brought me home. The woman was incredible. She was an angel. Never more I met her, but she–this woman probably saved my life like an angel. She brought me here and she called Bill. And I stayed in the hospital for almost a week.

But anyway, these things–actually, you know–part of this experience in life that actually–for me it was good that this happened here because in Brazil, everybody came and help you. Oh, and then you feel so sorry for yourself. Here you don't have time or space to feel sorry for yourself.

MS. CORDOVA: I don't know if that is good or bad. [Laughs.]

MS. VATER: No, I think that life, you know–my mother, when I was a kid, a very little kid, she used to say these verses of a black poet, a Brazilian black poet, fantastic poet, that actually was a friend of the great-grandfather of mine that translated Homer. He says– [in Portuguese]. It says, "Don't cry, my son, because life is a fight–very intense fight and to the weak it puts them down, but to the strong make them great." [Laughs.]

MS. CORDOVA: Alright. [Laughs.]

MS. VATER: Well, the guy was a black during the time of slavery in Brazil, you know.

MS. CORDOVA: All right, well, what I would like to do is I would like to maybe bring this session to a close and say that when we come back we can talk more about your time here in the United States, following your residency, and moving to Austin.

[Audio break.]

MS. CORDOVA: This is Cary Cordova interviewing Regina Vater for the Archives of American Arts, Smithsonian Institution. Today is February 25, 2004. We are at her home in Austin, Texas. And this is session two and disk one. And, Regina, you have some ideas that you wanted to start us off with today.

MS. VATER: No, it's just that I wanted so much when I speak about things and sometimes I'm not very focused. I like to make some – I don't know how to say that name – that word in English–[in Portuguese]–adding something. There is two things regarding to my family that I would like to add.

In terms of my father, I had all of these difficulties with my father. But I had admired him immensely. You know why? Because he is a very dedicated physician and he dedicated his life to the poor. He–I saw my father–later on in life I saw my father paying people, in a public hospital, giving money for people for them to come back to have another time with him to revise what he had–to see how the person–how the disease was going and so forth–destitute people. He treated a lot of people. He has names in many hospitals–his name in many hospitals in Rio, you know.

And he shared a lot of his knowledge. This is something that almost doesn't happen in science, you know, in many fields. But when he did an operation, he was a fantastic surgeon and everybody says that, you know. And when he did a surgery that was a kind of challenging, sometimes even a–common thing–he invited young doctors to come and to watch the surgery. He was a good teacher. And he has–it's incredible–he really–all of his clients–I remember when I was very little before he separated from my mother, in Christmas we received all sorts of gifts from crystals –the most fine crystals–to eggs, and to chickens, and everything.

And he made the point always to visit the very sick people at home; to pay visits at home, you know. He was extremely dedicated to healing and it's because perhaps this–that perhaps I also have this–feel art as a call and view art as a healing process to society. And I also–I'm interested in the power of art as a healing process, and a device to help society, not something–because he was like this all of his life, you know. And he was a very difficult father, but as a social person, he was admired by many people as a physician.

And somehow he had inherited this from that great-grandfather that I told him that I intend to do a video about him. Adolfo Bezerra de Menezes–that was a writer also and also physician. And actually he–there is many books written about him in Brazil because he was one of the people who introduced to Brazil the Alain Kardec doctrine–the spiritism. And he is extremely famous, he has many centers with his name, streets with his name. And his codename was the "doctor of the poor," because he even sold things from his house to help the poor and then–I think that I really need to honor this part of my history, because this is a very important history.

And another great-grandfather that went to translate the Virgil and Homer was exiled in France–he self-exiled because he was offered a position in government and he refused. Actually, he was offered to be–the emperor

was giving up the throne for his young son and he was–and leaving to Portugal. And he was invited to be a regent, and he declined it because he said "I'm not prepared for that," and then he gave the name of somebody else.

And then later on he left the country because he thought that the country was going in a very bad direction. And he actually died when he was trying to come back to Brazil. He was riding in the train between England and France because he was living in England at that time. He lived in France and in England. And actually, I have a relative of mine from the French branch because his daughter stayed in France and married a Frenchman. And this cousin of mine, this far-away cousin of mine, he is the president of the Academie-Francaise, Maurice Druon. He is very proud of his great-grandfather that we have, because he was a very good translator. He was a good poet but mainly a fantastic translator of Homer and Virgil–he was totally. Then perhaps this passion for erudition and for knowledge somehow–it came in the bloodline.

And from my mother's side, her family was–they have, like, a sugarcane farm in the very north of Brazil in Sergipe, but then there are so many children and they lost the money that they had. And they came to the south and they then, you know–they–like–I told you, many of them work in the army.

My mother had Oseas Seroa da Motta–they all had Biblical names, like grandfather was Ezekiel, Oseas, Jonas–all of these people had these kind of funny, interesting Biblical names. But Oseas Seroa da Motta was he ran a very important newspaper in Brazil in the beginning of the last century that was pastiched by the dictatorship sometimes, not this–another one–Getuliovargas.

But I just wanted to add this, because sometimes–it sounds pretentious but I think that is part of my history, and somehow I think we inherit good things and bad things from the bloodline. And I think that the bad things, we need to really to know how to–how can I say–to get rid of them, or to elaborate them, you know, and to pass to another plane, another level, because otherwise it's just to perpetuate neurosis; like we inherit DNA. We inherit this kind of also–[in Portuguese]–the physical–the DNA–you know the helix–

MS. CORDOVA: Oh, DNA.

MS. VATER: Yeah, how we inherit that. We inherit I think also sometimes some ways of dealing with life and the world that this is part of our spiritual process that we don't need to be so attached. But we have good things, too. I think that there is that. We need to learn how to get rid of the bad things.

MS. CORDOVA: I think that's wise. Let me ask you because you brought up this aspect of your father as a healer, and I can see that a lot of your work is trying to build on that, as you, yourself, say. Is there a specific work where you can really see your father's influence?

MS. VATER: No. No, I think that is the spirit of the thing. No, not at all. Right now, no. It helped in the beginning when I was not even thinking about these things when I was very young, because we receive it so many–laboratory–you know, pharmaceutical things at home, I saw all of those illustrations of insides of bodies and things like that. That comes out in my work when I was–in '67 when I was dealing with nouvelle figuration that I opened the bodies of the woman and was seeing inside of the bodies. That perhaps in a formalistic way could be a direct influence–came through my father–not from him, but through my father.

MS. CORDOVA: What did that mean to show the insides of those female bodies – often even headless, is that correct?

MS. VATER: Yeah, I think that it was–nowadays I can probably see–nobody never asked me this but I think that that was already something–this is something that I am since a child very early in life because as I told you, I was reading Greek philosophy even when I didn't understand. To understand the external shape of things is not the real thing, you know.

MS. CORDOVA: And that persists in your work.

MS. VATER: Yeah, very much so. Nowadays, what I try to do, there is a quest for beauty of course, because the beauty in terms in art–for me I think is the device of seduction of the spectator, you bring the spectator closer–for him to discover things that are not in the surface, you know, but they are in–the meta language spoken is many, many layers, that he can heal according to his knowledge of things, of course, and his sincerity. We always are in some stage of evolution and that we can appreciate things according to our luggage–intellectual, sensible luggage. And I think that art has very much to do with that.

Sometimes you read a book and you're not prepared to read that book. And later on you discover–like, when I saw the work of Helio Oiticica for the first time, in 1967. Actually, I was working together with him in a show. We were representing Brazil in Paris Biennale. And they did this show, the people that was going to Paris biennale and I saw his work. And I said that "this guy is–I talked with myself–everybody was making an incredible fuss

about this man and he's–for me, he's a con artist"–because Helio was working in–was inventing– art povera–at that time, in the '60s, you know.

MS. CORDOVA: What was the work that he had in that show?

MS. VATER: Oh, boxes with sand–colorful sands and boxes, and glasses with colorful sands. This was in 1967.

MS. CORDOVA: And you didn't immediately like it.

MS. VATER: No, I was not prepared. I was not–I was–I had–23 years old and my culture went to a certain limit.

MS. CORDOVA: And now when you think of that, what do you think of that particular work?

MS. VATER: It's a fantastic work. It is extremely inventive.

MS. CORDOVA: I know you were building a friendship with Helio. How did that sort of evolve or how did it influence you?

MS. VATER: That happened when I was in New York. I told you this. And while that evolved–I became like a telephone friend of Helio because I never–it was very difficult to see him. He always didn't like people to go to his house; he was very private with his things. But I spoke with him almost every day in the telephone. I didn't have anybody else to speak with. I didn't speak English. I didn't speak English that time. And I knew very few Brazilians. It was him and another woman that was very nice but she was a Brazilian Japanese, a very shy reserved person. She was a kind of an uptown kind-of people–a nice person, but very reserved.

And some Brazilians that passed by New York–some Brazilians that I met in Rio–I knew a lot of people in Brazil and sometimes people passed through New York and I met them, but that was just like to see one day for a coffee or something like that. Helio was really the steady and he was incredible. And actually, when I left New York, he came to the airport to say bye to me. That was–parting from him was–I feel very honored because he didn't do that for anyone, you know.

MS. CORDOVA: And when you left New York was that the 1975 trip?

MS. VATER: Yeah, I left New York–I went–as I told you, I planned to travel to Latin America before I go to Brazil but first I did a stop in New Orleans, because my mother had a brother that he was consul of Brazil in New Orleans. He was a diplomat–he was consul of Brazil in Boston and then he was consul in New Orleans. And he arranged me to have a show at Loyola University, the gallery of Loyola University. Then I started there. And then I went to Guatemala, Colombia, and Peru, and Argentina, because I had a show in CAYC and the Centro de arte et Communicacion [Centro de Arte y Communicacion, Buenos Aires, Argentina].

MS. CORDOVA: Now, was that when you did "Miedo"?

MS. VATER: Yes. My second video tape–because actually, the first videotape I did in Paris for a woman called Ruth Escobar. That for me. It is one of the most crazy and difficult. She is a real politician.

MS. CORDOVA: What was her name?

MS. VATER: Ruth. Ruth Escobar.

MS. CORDOVA: Escobar.

MS. VATER: Yeah, she is Portuguese. She was born in Portugal but she became one of the most important theater impresarios in Brazil. And she brought Boby Wilson, Peter Brook, you know, you name it. She is a very powerful woman. And she was going to–she was just coming back from Teraa and at that time they had a festival–theater festival there and then they are coming to Paris to this theater festival–Festival d'Automne–in Paris.

And I met casually in the street with Antonio Pitanga. Antonio Pitanga is one of the most well-known black artists in Brazil. Now nowadays he works for TV Globo but, he stars in many of–I knew Pitanga from Ipanema. He was one of the people that I–and then when we met: oh, hi, how are you, blah, blah.

And he had married, but he was separating from his wife. And then he was looking for some place to live and I was looking for some place more cheaper in Paris to live, too. And then there was this couple, a Brazilian couple–a very rich couple–that wanted somebody to sit their apartment for some while. And they are friends–I assume of they are friends of Pitanga. I don't know how that happened. I knew them but–I don't remember how that happened. That was so long time ago. And then I shared this apartment with Antonio Pitanga.

And Pintanga was part of the crew of Ruth Escobar. And in this crew was the most important actors and actress in Brazil. Was like a Sergio Brito, that is–his name is just like a big thing. Brazil–theater in Brazil is something very important–it always has been. Anyway, all of these important people in this crew–and Pitanga–I was very isolated in Paris. Actually, I did a work with Pitanga, Pitanga corroborated with a work of mine.

Another day we were looking up my old negatives. That is something I never showed. That was like a–the work of Oiticica "Almost Cinema". I don't know, sometimes I think that–Helio not by malicious thing, but he got some ideas from my work–well, not this. This one "Almost Cinema". I did that before he did his thing with Pitanga. Well, it was dated –because Pintaga was there in that time. It was something about the shadows of the leaves in a park in Paris.

But anyway, Pitanga brought me to the house of Ruth Escobar and she was pissed off with her director, the director of the play because he had made a project that for the people acting totally naked over a machine that he had built that was a very complicated machine, that was–the machine and the naked people. And the machine broke out. And the–she couldn't get any engineer to fix this machine. And then all she had was the actors. And the play could only complete with this machine. I don't know what the play was all about because I never saw it.

Anyway, and then she wanted to do a video about herself and about the troop–the artists and crew, and this frustration with the director. Actually, what she wanted to do was something against him–like I'm also [narcissistic]–but she was extremely narcissistic. And she plays all the time in front of the camera so far. Well, anyway, she asked me–she said, I would like you to do a video–I know that you do photography. I would like you to do a video about this and such and such, "but I never did a video in my whole life!" "Oh, this is very easy. And so there is this place we can get a camera and then they explain to you how to do it." And that is what happened.

I went there, they explained to me. And I got this camera and I had this camera in my hands all of the time doing cinema verité every day. And all of the time. And she was posing, and of course she was faking reality all of the time. So that I invited Mario Pedrosa to see what I had done. He never met her before. And when he was leaving her apartment, he says to her. "I congratulate you; you represent very well spontaneity."

MS. CORDOVA: With a degree of irony here. [Laughs.]

MS. VATER: Yeah, of course.

MS. CORDOVA: What happened to that film?

MS. VATER: That video was–I broke apart with her because –this is something funny that also–I think that came from my history of the family perhaps because when my father separated from my mother I kind of became the advocate of my–the lawyer of my mother–I advocated. She suffered a lot in this separation and I kind–I advocated. I became the defense of the weaker part of the family, and I tend to be like that. I tend to be the defenser of the weaker.

And then she was using all of these incredible actors and she was not paying them. And then they came to me and they complained. And then I heard so many stories that what –I reached to a point that I went to tell her, "Why don't you pay the actors," you know. And then she got pissed off at me and we kind of drifted apart, and I left the video without complete. And it was bad. This woman hates me. Until now she doesn't say a word to me when she sees me. Well, she was not paying me either, but for me it was a kind of experiment with them, with something else [video], because they are there because of her.

But she had a friend that became her husband later, that he finished the video so that one of the guys that is now in the ministery of culture – a good friend of mine, an actor – Sergio Mamberte–once I met him São Paulo and he said, oh, Regina. I saw your video that you did of Ruth Escobar–blah, blah, blah – it turned out to be a film. And I never saw this video–they edited—that was made in that kind of video, black and white, that was wheel to wheel. They probably transferred to another system. I don't know what they did with it. But this thing exists because Sergio Mamberte–that is a very important person in culture in Brazil. When he was working with Gilberto Gil recently in the new government, he told me that he saw this thing–this thing exists–and is signed with my name and the name of the guy that finished it.

MS. CORDOVA: Do you know what it is called?

MS. VATER: I have no idea.

MS. CORDOVA: But then she gave you your first start at video.

MS. VATER: Yeah. [They laugh.] Yeah, I owe her this. Well, it was very fun. This woman, she was so

megalomaniac. Bobby Wilson, who I knew from New York when I was in New York, because I had a friend who was friends with him, and she brought me many times to his rehearsals. And Boby Wilson was not only playing in New York [Paris] in this festival d'autome but also he had a one-man show. In the Gallierà Museum–that museum that offered me to do this show that I rejected.

MS. CORDOVA: When was that?

MS. VATER: 1974. 1973 or– '74. And then Boby Wilson, who was shown–who had the opening–it was his birthday in the opening. This show was on his birthday. They had this beautiful cake. You know what this woman did? She came hugging, arm-to-arm with the minister of culture of France to stole the show–and we, the crew, behind her filming her enter in a triumphant, glorious entrance when Boby Wilson was putting off the candles off of his birthday. She was too much. She is–this woman is dangerous. No, she really is. I heard many stories about her.

You know, in Brazil, during the dictatorship, I think it was Boby Wilson that brought that play, "Stalin" to Brazil. And the people didn't want him to play the play because it was about Stalin. The military–they have these narrow-minded ideas, you know, and the title of the play was "Stalin." They couldn't play in Brazil. And even that was an American playwright.

And then she gave her children–she had little kids–she gave her children as a hostages to the dictator. "You stay with my children here…" You know, she bargained – she says, "Stay with my children here" – or something. She used her children to get the play to play. She was really–she is now–she is still alive.

MS. CORDOVA: [Laughs.] So with that, was *Miedo* your next video experiment or was your next film?

MS. VATER: The *Miedo* was the next one. And then–

MS. CORDOVA: Okay, and then how did that even come out as an idea.

MS. VATER: Well, that was very easy because I arrived in Buenos Aires during coup d'etat of Isabelita. And all of the military paraphernalia was in the streets, you know. It was a crime of terrible–everybody was under fear. And for me, that was like regurgitated what I saw in Brazil. And I–and Brazil was during the dictatorship and for me it was, you know, almost like a preparation to go home. The next step was to go home. And I did this performance in front of the camera and–Glusberg–filmed it. I don't have the video. The video become totally glue and probably–Glusberg–has copy because I know he had a copy–still had a copy. I don't know if he still has it.

MS. CORDOVA: Who has–

MS. VATER: Because they are very difficult–those videos, they glue. The tape glue all together. They become like you can't–I don't know. I think that I even throw my thing in the garbage because it was impossible. But it was a good video because–Glusberg–did the camera. It was it like 30 minutes without editing; me trying to do faces of fear in front of the camera. And the sound was interviews that I make in the street asking people what fear means to you and come out psychological answers, sociological, political–all sorts of things.

MS. CORDOVA: What do you remember most?

MS. VATER: I can't. I have a transcription. I remember that some people really are scared to talk about the subject matter. [Laughs.] But there are some people very courageous. Argentina is extremely politicized. Latin America is extremely politicized.

MS. CORDOVA: What was it like to go back to that environment after having spent some time in the United States? Did that make it register in any different kind of way?

MS. VATER: Well, I think that people here don't talk very much about politics. And they don't discuss in the way that people discuss in Brazil. If people here saw some people discussing something like people discuss in Brazil or Argentina now, they thought that people are fighting. They are just, like, in a clamor of–in the ardor of discussion. People become very emotional. Like, for instance, this thing that happened with this guy that was running for presidency right now, that he become very emotional in his discourse. I thought that that was a pity because the people didn't understood–didn't allow him to have–show off his emotions.

MS. CORDOVA: You're referring to Howard Dean?

MS. VATER: Yeah, because that in Latin America is nothing – [laughs]. It is like that all the time. [They laugh.]

MS. CORDOVA: Were you able to show "Miedo" in Argentina?

MS. VATER: I showed it in Argentina. I showed it in Brazil. This is no problem. If I was going to show in a big movie theater or something like that, that would have been a problem. I remember that shows that I had

problems of censorship–of course I had a problem with Calabar, because I think that people are really after Chico Buarque more than my image that I use for the record, because Chico is a person with a–mark from the government–Caetano, Chico, Gil, all of these people.

But, for instance, I participate in a show with Vergara and Evandro, and two was good friend of mine. Vergara, by the way, was husband of the first wife of Chico Buarque. You know, it was just to give you a measurement. You know, I know all of these people. This is just like a little club.

And Vergara did a work that–in Brazil they do–in processions–in many holy weeks–in Brazil for the processions to pass they make this carpets made of sand–color sand or mulch, the colored mulch, things like that; that when the processions passes, it has disintegrated. What he did, he did the Brazilian flag with colored sand. And the militaries closed the show, because it was an inadequate use of the flag. But I wonder if that didn't happen here, too.

MS. CORDOVA: Yeah, how did he respond?

MS. VATER: They closed the show.

MS. CORDOVA: Did he protest at all? Or was there any point?

MS. VATER: The press people–it came out in the press. No, but we're during dictatorship, you know. And you could protest but–[they laugh] –but to a certain point, you know.

MS. CORDOVA: I think we talked a little bit about *Three Chinese Monkeys*, which followed that, or was it part of the same sort of creation–

MS. VATER: It was the same stream of thought.

MS. CORDOVA: And that was produced also in Argentina, or in Brazil?

MS. VATER: No, it was in São Paulo when I arrived. That was in the–I came back to live in São Paulo and I asked–there was going to happen this show in the Museum of Contemporary Art, University of São Paulo. The director was Walter Zanini. And I told Zanini, Zanini, "Can I make an impromptu here–a little performance?" I never do performance, you know. I was doing things for the film that I–a film that I did later on or for the video. But I don't–in public it really is difficult for me. I really don't–I don't have that talent.

But because it was a still thing, I was in the position of the Buddha with my eyes blinded and my mouth–you know, with something over my mouth, my eyes, and my ears, in the position of the Buddha–I could handle that pretty well and I think that was half-an-hour or more than half hour that I stayed like that. And I called it "Three Chinese Monkeys." That for me was more like a mirror of what I was looking at Brazil because the dictatorship evolved at a certain point in '75 when people became totally disconnected with politics.

What I felt – the difference between when I left Brazil when I arrived, people really want comfort, and they want good cars, good houses, and the economy was–I think that the period was a kind of time that the economy was going up. And people very, very alienated–totally different when I left. Very–politics was something that didn't enter in the menu of the subject matter of conversations and things like that. People are used to living their lives–like, politics is for the politicians to deal with, but we're not going to think about hunger or about the people. We're not going to think about misery of other people. We're not going to think about anything. We're just going to think about us. And that is why I did *Three Chinese Monkeys*.

MS. CORDOVA: Interesting. Did that also propel you even more in your interest in ecology? Or where does that really emerge for you?

MS. VATER: Well, that had emerged before because when I did my first installation in 1970, I did it with garbage in Rio.

MS. CORDOVA: Maybe you could talk a little bit about that, because I don't think we have discussed it.

MS. VATER: No. Well, I don't remember very much. Well, I always like to experiment with my art. Even when I was painting, I was trying to do objects and to go into 3-D and I did some things that moved. I did some lamps. Even now, there is a collector that have become a very good friend of mine, Julio and Miriam Graber. They have some of my lamps that I made in Rio.

And I'm always kind of inquisitive. I want always to try to use some shapes – you know, new ways. And that period, you know, I had been contacted already with work of Oiticica and things that are happening–done by other artists in Rio like Lygia Pape [ph] – mainly Lygia Pape and Helio and Lygia Clark. And I didn't know–I was not friends with them at that time. I didn't know them but I knew about their work.

And I understood that I could do art with anything. And then in that time, 1970, was the time that Garrastauzu Medici was in government and that was most awful dictator that Brazil had. This man was really worse than the Borgias. And he–we're really seeling many people disappearing. It was very difficult even in the liberal circles to talk about things. We need to be very careful–sometimes silly things.

I remember some people–this is actually incredible. Because Brazil has this face – one face is that things can become very almost sinister, like in the case of this dictatorship that happened there, but also at the same time something very comic can happen. People were throwing books that they had, whole libraries out in the garbage, because they had the risk of the police coming in, they could investigate what kind of books you have. And then somebody threw these books in the lagoon in Rio.

And a guy there–you know, a street seller got some books and was selling the books in the central station. And he says: "Olha o Freud, Olha o Freud, Olha muita sacanagem"–his pledge was like–"Look, I have Freud, I have Freud. I have a lot of pornography!" [Laughs]–like Freud was pornography. There was this face, you know–it is interesting because Brazilians, they really avoid things to become too heavy. This is our one of our very good qualities in Brazilian culture – is a culture that towards that that –it is not lightweight in terms of–how I can I say–without consistency, but it's not to make life very tragic–you know, not make life–oh, something that is really unbearable. Life is like this. You need to take the best of it and to put the best ingredients to survive it.

But anyway, because this man, Garrastazu Medici–because of his regime of terror, I decided to make like a prayer for Brazil. And then I–inspired by many things that are made in the–in beaches in Brazil on New Year's Eve–the offerings for the Goddess of the ocean, and so forth. And I decided–I had this friend Sylvio Palhares – with whom we many time times discussed – talked about the African pantheon, and he told me a lot of things. I didn't know so much like he knew.

But it always kind of fascinated me–I became fascinated with the metaphors with the symbolism. And there is a protector of Brazil. Like Virgin of Guadalupe is the protector of Mexico, Brazil is protected by a black Madonna. It is very interesting because it is a Moreno country protected by a black Madonna. That altar was for Nossa Senhora da Aparecida, who in the sycretism, is the Orisha of hope. She is the rainbow snake. When the African religion and the Catholic religion collided, they became syncretic. She is, she represents the Osumaré.

And then what I did was an offering for the protector of Brazil who is Nossa Senhora da Aparecida–but who is also the Goddess of hope in the beaches in Rio. She was in the installation. But I dealt with garbage because in that moment we are dealing with a lot of garbage, you know, political garbage. But the garbage that I used was the physical garbage that people throw on the beach. But at the same time I dealt with the natural elements that the sea brought like algae or shells and things like that.

MS. CORDOVA: And you have just given me a very–a new perspective on that work because I had–I had heard or read about the sort of environmental take on that but I hadn't really put it into the perspective of also being a critique of the Brazilian government.

MS. VATER: Yeah, but this–yeah, my work–as I tell you, I think that my work always have, like–it's kind of esoteric in some ways, because it has always layers. I try to put–and if you can't get from one side–probably you can get from another side. That is all right. And sometimes, you know, people read–I remember when I start to work with the Amazonian mythology–the time period when I applied for the Guggenheim. And I was discussing with Lygia Clark about putting in a wall the transcription of the myths that I was working with.

And Lygia said– "No way, don't do that. You're going to–you're going to contrive the reading of your work instead of expanding it, because the spectator –always bring his world experience to the work and the work becomes a device that always can bring you to some place that you haven't even thought about." And that is true. You can't–it is not a scientific formula. The art was not–you can't deal with art in a scientific formula because this–I don't like to call myself a conceptual artist because conceptual art is very much together–most like scientific formulas.

MS. CORDOVA: Do you think there is a genre that you fit into?

MS. VATER: I just am an artist, you know.

MS. CORDOVA: How have your installations changed over time?

MS. VATER: Well, I think that they changed with my growth as a person, with the acquisition of knowledge that I amassed through all of the years. And I was always curious–and always reading about–I became very interested in comparative religion and philosophy because I think that each culture – cosmology is an incredible wealth of knowledge–the condensation of a lot of wisdom and knowledge. If you go to Tibet, you learn a lot about some things, if you go to India you have another kind of knowledge, and if you go to the Native Americans, the Hopi here, you have another kind of another kind of knowledge. You're always learning.

And my idea–and I think that I–you know, I have this idea a long, long time ago – is that people, they built cosmologies–cultures–groups of people built cosmologies and culture–well, of course culture comes from cosmologies. Because the planet, because the geography challenges and what the planet teaches to that determined group of people. For instance, if you live in the Amazon, you can't wear clothes like the Arabs wear or the Eskimos wear. You need to be naked otherwise it would be like hanging from all over the branches in the forest.

But at the same time, you know, your language–you're going to express many qualities of the word, "green," and probably not so many of the word, "white" like the Eskimos have. And I don't think that when you call people primitive or even –archaic– I use the word a lot–the word, –archaic, because I hate primitive, but I don't have a better word. But when they call people primitives–I think that is–they don't know. I think that's an incredible prejudice that people have. We nowadays can be extremely primitive… And if you consider the boomerang of the Australians–the Aborigines in Australia–this is extremely sophisticated in terms of physics, the law of physics. You can't call that thing a primitive device.

MS. CORDOVA: Just to go back for a second, you used the word, "green," and of course that made me think of your film *Green* [1991], that you also did. Was that something that you were thinking about, the sort of multiple meanings of green or the possible alternative language of green?

MS. VATER: No, actually no. Well, they–encomende–they asked me to do a work for this show in the kotinick – I don't know how to pronounce–the–Royal National Museum in Antwerp– it was a big show of Latin American art–about–it was 1992–first show in 1992. Actually, I showed this work not only there but the video also I showed in New York at the Donnel Library. And I came out with the idea of some work that I could do for – somebody could install it for me because I knew that I was not going. I was going to Brazil because Bill got a Fulbright.

And then what I needed to do–and I almost took all of my resources from architecture school was to plan this thing very carefully that they could build there according to my design. And what I did was a pyramid that came together, that came apart and came together. And on the top of the pyramid, you see this television passing–you know, a video about the fruits of the–that the Europeans got in America and brought to Europe like potato, tomato, and all of the–you know, genetically engineered was made here much before the Europeans arrived and went to stop with the hungry in Europe.

And over this television was a black caravelle that I bought in a flea market that was something that probably came from Mexico that was like a galleon or a Spanish galleon – totally black. But that was a lamp–was something very kitsch. And inside of this boat was–you had a place to attach the lamp. Inside of this boat–instead of putting a white lamp, I put a green lamp, because the green meant for me–the green light to–rape America–rape the nature here–and also the green–that they are raping.

MS. CORDOVA: And was it also possibly at that moment–I'm thinking of the–what is it – the quincentennial at that point. The 500 years of discovery of Columbus, 1992.

MS. VATER: Yeah, that was made for a show around this, because of this date. It's incredible. This installation–when the museum contacted me to send it back, I was–I was going to Rio, to Brazil. And I said – please send it to Brazil because I can show there. And when this thing arrived in the port in Rio, I donated–I didn't have money because any electric or domestic appliance that arrives in Brazil from abroad, you need to pay a fee. And they send a VCR and they send a television. And the television and VCR – and I didn't have the money to take these things from the costumes – because it was very high.

And then Irma Arestizabal who is now a director of Latin American Art Institute in Italy in Rome and she used to be the director of the Museum of Modern Art in Rio. I was doing a show with her. She was directing something in the Catholic University – a gallery of the Catholic University in Rio. And she advised me – saying, "Hey, Regina, why don't you donate that for the Museo National Bellas Artes?" And then she actually helped me to write the letter, and I wrote a letter donating the work. They never took the thing from the customers.

MS. CORDOVA: They never took the thing from–

MS. VATER: The work from the customs – because they said that they didn't have money either to take the thing from customers. That was the excuse that they gave me. I lost this work. So this is not new in Brazil. Lygia Clark, she also–Lygia Clark, you know, Lygia in 1965. She won the Venice Bienniale. Went to a – a work that she did. She sold an apartment to do this work. She hired a guy from Sweden, an engineer from Sweden, to work with her. She sold an apartment to do the work–she won the prize–Venice Bienniale and she donated for the Museum for Modern Art in Rio.

And she went to France, and she lived in France – many years. Sometimes she came to Rio and one of the times she came to the museum and she said, "Oh, I would like to visit my work." "Oh your work never came out from the customs because we didn't have money to get it." And then she went to the customs and they said, "Oh, it

was sold like an old metal, at the metal yard."

MS. CORDOVA: Why did you think that–did you feel like that was just complete disrespect of your work?

MS. VATER: No, I knew about–Lygia Clark's story. I couldn't complain. I didn't lose an apartment.

MS. CORDOVA: So comparatively you were better off? [Laughs.] Let's see–

MS. VATER: And the work was published in a book – a school book in Holland and Belgium. There is a document about this work. It is well-documented. Some people that published it a schoolbook in Holland asked if they could publish a photo of the work. The work is still existing somehow and I have the video.

MS. CORDOVA: In some ways, some of your work, maybe the installations, rely on the photograph or the documentation.

MS. VATER: No, my work is totally perennial–perennial me, au contrary is very temporal–

MS. CORDOVA: Temporary.

MS. VATER: Yeah, temporary.

MS. CORDOVA: And how do you feel about that?

MS. VATER: It is part of life. The universe is not going to last forever.

MS. CORDOVA: And so maybe just going back for second. When you got the Guggenheim in 1980, and you had met Bill, and so there was already this–you have this desire to return to the United States.

MS. VATER: No, I didn't have a desire to return to the United States.

MS. CORDOVA: Oh, you didn't?

MS. VATER: No, I didn't.

MS. CORDOVA: Oh, would you tell me how that happened? [Laughs.]

MS. VATER: No, I wanted to marry Bill. No, I came here because–because I had a big career in Brazil. It was just–I did shut a big door behind me when I came here. I was not invented here as an artist.

MS. CORDOVA: So you really didn't even want to be here?

MS. VATER: No, it's not that. I want to come here like a visitor. I want to have that pass that I could go back and forth. Like, I came here–like, since I left in 1973, I came here like two or three times. I left friends here–life is here but I didn't want to live here. It was difficult for me. I didn't dominate the language; it was not my culture. All of the things of my work–the root of my work is Brazilian roots. It is very difficult for the Americans to fully understand my work.

Many Brazilians actually think that I am doing this work to be–that I started the work in Brazil–is ridiculous they say that–but for me to be original because people like original ideas. But it is not that and people don't understand my work here and people don't understand my work. And there is another thing. I am not a monothematic kind of person. I am not–you know, for many historians and many people here, they like people in boxes, and I don't have a particular box. I am not only a video artist. Another day, Gabriel Perez–he was just saying, "Oh, you do documentary photography!" "Yeah, I do that for a long time." But people become surprised that I do–I do all sorts of things. I feel like I–I feel like–I am a creator like people used to be in the Renaissance, I guess.

MS. CORDOVA: When you return to Brazil, do you feel like the community there still understands your work?

MS. VATER: If the art politics there allowed me to get through, yeah. Yeah, no–people–of course–when I did a show in Fortaleza and Ceara, people really–I had all sorts of very good commentaries about my work. Many people become very emotional. No, because actually, I did something very–that come from my experience there. And it was in homage actually to this–with my great grandfather that was a doctor for the poor. He was born there. He was born in Ceara.

And I did a work with healing herbs, the herbs that they use for healing because there is a lot of natural medicine going around, mainly in the northeast–they are working there [to heal]. No, I really–I feel that the students–Bill had students, all of the students came to me and a lot of people to help me and it was very nice.

But I don't–here too I feel that people–the students that sometimes help me with the work, I feel that they have a pleasure–some people not, but the most accessible people.

But my problem is that–oh, she is a photography artist, she is an installation artist, she is a video artist, she is a filmmaker. What is she? It is difficult for people to deal with. When you came to do this interview with me, you saw the amount of information there is about the work because it is radial. I can't contrive myself. I really can't. I am an experimental person. I like to do that.

And that is the–for me, in terms of promoting the work, in terms of the politics of art, in terms of the commerce of art is the worse thing that I can do against me. But I'm not working to be–like I told you–to reach the glittering fame. I am working; aiming toward a quality of work, or to a depth of vision, that I think all of this experience together can bring me to something.

MS. CORDOVA: It seems to me you're–I'm just sort of reading this perhaps–that you're caught in these circumstances where you are often most creative or most productive in situations of isolation or perhaps even a sort of sense of exile and loneliness, and yet, you're also–and perhaps maybe that is part of the degree of productivity that you've had even here in the United States–and yet you're also caught in a community that you feel is not understanding your work, or not able to integrate it. So it's as if you have to take it back to where it came from to have it interpreted and appreciated.

MS. VATER: Yeah, but that is another problem because in the politics of art, because art is full of politics everywhere. Because I left Brazil, I did a disfavor to me because as just somebody that lives in New York–like Bill, he used to work in New York. Like I said, they wanted to do a show with Bill once. And Bill nowadays is totally forgotten in New York. That happens. And what happened was the same thing with me there. Some people remember me, of course but there is, you know–people fight for their own interests and I can't –I don't need to explain for you the way artists and art critics are.

But that's okay. I always felt a maverick, I always felt the outsider, and I always felt the–I always felt that I was not fitting in. This feeling is not something new because when I was a very little child, I was the tallest in the class. And this is not a new–

MS. CORDOVA: Well, even though you felt a degree of isolation, it seems to me you also continuously attempted to–

MS. VATER: Communicate. [Laughs.]

MS. CORDOVA: To communicate with the United States public. And I'm thinking of your curatorial experience, or you're sort of–you're 1984 show but also your more recent I think 2002 show of Brazilian artists. And that, you know, even so, you do try to bring those works in. Are those works successful as shows? As exhibits?

MS. VATER: Yeah, well, this show, the *Art in America*, the *Art in America* gives six pages. The senior editor–Rafael Rubinstein– whois actually a very good poet. I found out later that he is a very good poet; he did a wonderful writing about it. So his writing was much better about my show–the show that I curated than what the person that wrote about the mega-Brazilian show at the Guggenheim. It came out in the same magazine. His writing was much better, a much deeper view. You know, much more careful, and respectful.

No, I think that this show was an incredible success. It is a pitty that I offer for–you know, I did very careful packaging with slides, with good materials for 10 museums around Texas. Nobody wanted it. Even, with the review of *Art in America*, nobody wanted it.

MS. CORDOVA: Even after the review came out.

MS. VATER: Yeah, even after the review.

MS. CORDOVA: And who–

MS. VATER: No, I'm not going to say it.

MS. CORDOVA: [Laughs.] But you approached how many museums?

MS. VATER: Ten.

MS. CORDOVA: Ten in Texas and none wanted the show.

MS. VATER: [Inaudible.]

MS. CORDOVA: And this was the 2002 show, correct?

MS. VATER: Yeah. But I think that–what I try to do–I think that Brazil has a very special – Brazil, like Mario Pedrosa used to say, it is a country condemned to modernity like the United States is. Mario Pedrosa said that, and I think that we are very like siblings of the same family–the United States and Brazil somehow, but only that Brazil knows a lot about the United States and the United States knows nothing about Brazil, and the United States only know the bad things about Brazil. Always in the radio I see all about the violence in the streets. That is the same that happened in New York or in L.A. I went to Brazil recently–I know that. Brazil is not Colombia. Brazil is not Colombia. And the drug problems which are there, are here, too.

MS. CORDOVA: Well, it seems to me it also has the sort of – the construction of both violence or recreation–the sort of beaches and–

MS. VATER: Oh, then–oh, then is the sexual image–that, you know, all the women there are sexual and whores and things like that. That is what actually for me is a very bad–of course we are sensual. We deal with sensuality, with "touching" in a different way–we talk in a different way. But I think that Brazil has much more to offer than these petty little things. It is much deeper. And it is an understanding about life–there is an understanding about camaraderie, about relationships, about art, invention in art.

There are some artists that pass through this barrier like –Cilde Meireles– did – Oiticica – recently they discovered Oiticica here. And in New York, lately to–there are some artists that are showing there. But it took a long time. Brazilian visual–this show on Brazilian visual poetry, I did here, thanks to Sylvia Orozco, that she created this space, or that she opened this space for me, because I think that never was a show before–the visual poetry–that scope here–it was a little Brazilian collection of Marvin Sackner–that he has an incredible collection of concrete poetry and visual poetry that he showed–what he had in his collection, but not in the amount that was shown here.

In visual poetry, the Germans said that they invented it. No, it was born in Brazil. It's something that really–of course there was visual things happening even in medieval times but not–but you can say that Expressionism also happened. It started much before the French invented–because the Christians, the early Christian paintings are totally expressionist.

MS. CORDOVA: You have just made me think about the actual work that you have as your work – as representative of your work in that show, the *Camoe's Feast*. And I wonder if you could talk just a little bit about the inspiration for that, but also maybe a little bit about the concrete poetry movement just in general, and maybe even building your experience as a poet, so the sort of evolution of that.

MS. VATER: Well, I hate to call myself a poet because my standards of quality of poetry are very high, and I hate–as a visual artist, okay, but as a poet–and for me, poetry is something for me–is almost like to go into the realm of the sacred, the gods, you know.

MS. CORDOVA: I'm going to pause you actually just for a second after asking that question because I realize that we're at the end of this tape so.

MS. VATER: Okay.

[Audio break.]

MS. CORDOVA: All right we are recording again. This is Cary Cordova interviewing Regina Vater for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This is disk two of session two. And I really just asked you a big, huge question, Regina, about your life as a poet and the concrete poetry movement and maybe evolving all the way to your work with *Camoe's Feast*.

MS. VATER: Well, like I told you, I always love poetry because my mother – we have a neighbor that was related to a very important poet in Brazil. We had poets in the family, and poetry was always very important, for me. I was always reading poetry. And I think the concrete poetry came to me in the evolution of reading poetry and always aiming to be better and to the most recent and the most new form of poetry. I actually became very good friends with Carlos Drummond de Andrade, and I have some letters that I exchanged with him during the period that I was in New York, and even before–he even wrote a poetry for me that was stolen by some people, because Carlos Drummond was a nominee for the Nobel Prize. He was very important in Brazil.

And these letters are in the national library in Brazil. I donated them. But, anyway, for me Carlos Drummond, he actually was for me the jumping board for the concrete–but they don't have anything in common. But although there is a very – how can I say – precise and economic poem by Drummond, "No meio do caminho havia uma pedra havia uma pedra no meio do caminho…" And it was during this period–a little bit before that I came to the United States in 1973, that I got in touch with concrete poetry. And one of the poems that I read was "Luxo-Lixo" – of Augusto Decampos–the word, "luxo," L-U-X-O, transforms into the word, "lixo," L-I-X-O. And luxo means luxury and lixo is garbage.

And that poem inspired me to do all of that work about the garbage in New York, the audiovisual that I did, that Helio colaborated–and with that I represented Brazil at the Venice Bienniale. And from that on, I really started to open myself to see the image in the word, to work with–in that vein–in that poetic vein when I started to have a relationship, a literary relationship during my travel with Augusto de Campos. And when I arrived to São Paulo, I went to visit him. And every visit that I made to his house, we actually became very good friends and he always gave me things. He was extremely generous. And he always gave me information, material, books, published material about–on visual poetry and on concrete poetry.

And, you know, I couldn't escape–I was in the process of living intensely and experiencing intensely this. And I met through him–I met incredible people. And these people also–in terms of–all of the people–and I make an incredible circle of people that I know all over Brazil nowadays, from the north or to the south of Brazil–connected with the movement of visual concrete poetry, that actually came about in Brazil in the '50s when the three poets' Decio, Augusto and Haroldo and Goringuer – the Swiss-born–I think that Swiss-Bolivian – Goringuer – I think also collaborated together.

But anyway, I never felt myself as a poet. I always felt that I was experimenting with it–and gradually, I start to feel more–how can I say–secure with what I was doing. And my experience as a curator here in the United States–I don't feel myself as curator. I just only see lacks on the Americans in terms of knowledge about Brazil. And if I can help to fill that–hoping to teach them something–if I have this thing in my hand, why am I not going to do it? If I have the opportunity in my hand–but I don't like to be–I like to be in beginning of revolutions. I don't like to be neither in the middle neither in the end. [They laugh.] The beginning is much more exciting. [They laugh.]

MS. CORDOVA: That makes sense. [Laughs.]

MS. VATER: And that is worth all of the troubles because you there are in the middle or in the end, then it becomes like mechanical. Then my work in that show, the table for Camôe's–I had that idea to do that installation months before that show actually. I had an idea to do a–because I heard the story, what had happened with him, and I had–I felt so much like him that–not because–Camôe's is a monster. He is like Shakespeare. But the artist that did so much, gave so much, and doesn't have anything. He was just like Mozart. They buried him in a common ground.

MS. CORDOVA: Oh, just like Mozart, right.

MS. VATER: He died very poor in Lisbon. His story is absolutely incredible. His story is a big movie. If he was American, everybody would do the big Hollywood thing.

MS. CORDOVA: [Laughs.] Maybe some day.

MS. VATER: He had love affairs with women of all races, Chinese, African, everything. He was a lot–a big lover, an incredible passion, his story, but the phrase: "To go to lands–that men never went to before,"came from him.

MS. CORDOVA: To land?

MS. VATER: "To places that never man went before"–that the Star Trek came from – "Lusiadas," came from his poem, from his epic poem. Anyway, I don't know if you know the story–

MS. CORDOVA: I do, but I would like for you to tell it.

MS. VATER: Yeah, the story is that he owed a lot of favors to the noble people that always are sponsoring him. And he went to retribute with a dinner. And when the people arrived, they have all of the plates–he asked–he actually borrowed plates, crystals, because he didn't have it–a friend lent him the best china, and so forth. And he had the table set but all of the plates were upside-down. And then when the people were sitting at the table, he said–well, if you turn up the plates, your dinner will be served–the banquet–we start the banquet.

And when they did that, each person had a poem wrote especially for that person–a personal creation for each person. And he says, well, this is my way of feeding you. You have fed me all of these years. This is my way to feed you.

And, you know, I have very little in terms of money. I survive from my husband's–that I never feel that it is my money, actually. It is my husband's to work as an artist–experimental artist like he is because I never had a job here in the United States. I always work in–like, freelance, doing the most and don't sell absolutely anything. I never had a–in my bank account there is $20 I guess. Now, I got the grant and I became very rich. I have, like, $4,000 [dollars]–[laughs]–

MS. CORDOVA: So, I mean, that definitely must make your life feel a little unstable at times.

MS. VATER: Well, I got used to it. I got used to it. In the beginning it was very difficult. But–

MS. CORDOVA: It has not been a choice that you haven't wanted a steady job, or rather it's more–

MS. VATER: Oh, I really tried. Yeah, I tried several times, but it was difficult. On the one hand I don't drive. There is–and there is–in New York, I even worked as a cleaning lady, or taking babysitting, and things like that. I don't care–but nowadays I feel a little bit old to do that kind of thing. And also I didn't come here in the same way that some people come, that really want to do America, to become rich. I don't have that frame of mind. That was not my goal. So that's so–that if I have come here to be all rich or famous, I would have stayed in New York, for instance – when Bill come here to Texas–I was not married with him. I could have said, "Oh, you go and I stay." Because I wanted to be with Bill, I came–I married Bill here in Texas.

MS. CORDOVA: What year was that that you married him?

MS. VATER: Oh, 19–I have a little marriage something but I don't have it –I don't know. But I don't remember. It was 1989 or '88, something like that.

MS. CORDOVA: And so you two have been living here for several years already, correct?

MS. VATER: I have been living with Bill since 1981, together. But married–I only married here in 1987 or '88.

MS. CORDOVA: You moved here to Austin in 19–

MS. VATER: '85.

MS. CORDOVA: '85. And how did that job come about or what did you think about it?

MS. VATER: Well, we were very desperate because we were already doing very heavy work in New York to survive. We are doing all of these shows. I am being the editor of Flue, the magazine of Franklin Furnace. Actually, it was the first magazine published in America totally dedicated to Latin America–the first publication on Latin American art that Martha Wilson invited me to edit. I was doing all of these things, showing in good places like museums and alternative museum and I was doing–I was not without doing things – to make money. It was a totally different–all the artists in New York, too. I was not the only one. And Bill also–many times we did, like, moving jobs, furniture jobs. I have my problem with my knees exactly because of that.

But what made us to leave New York–is that we lost our loft. We were paying $400 for a loft and then the building was sold, and the new people wanted $4,000 for the same loft. We lived in a car for two weeks. After that, we went to New Jersey. Like, many people were evicted in New York–they go to New Jersey, they moved in. We went to New Jersey but Bill–it was hard for Bill to be in New Jersey and be working with the moving thing in the city. It was very difficult.

And then he started to look for places to teach–he had a little experience of teaching at Parsons [Parsons School of Design, New York, NY] and other places but they paid very little there. And then he saw this ad for the University of Texas and I said, "Well, let's do it. You're going to apply and you're going to get the most incredible people to write for you." Because Bill–I promote Bill's work much more than he promotes mine. Actually, Bill doesn't know about promotion, neither his work, neither mine–nothing. He just hides.

And I got Dore Ashton. You know, Dore Ashton is not a person interested in the kind of work that Bill does but she is a big name. I got Lucy Lippard, Dore Ashton–I got tons of people from my–the people that I knew that was–my acquaintance after all–Quentin Fiore–I don't know–a lot of incredible people. I think that even Cage–I don't know–I think that even Cage I asked to write. And Bill got the job.

MS. CORDOVA: [Laughs.] I'm not surprised–

MS. VATER: Yeah, because here they have no idea–Bill is one of the pioneers in American–in video art. This is in the word of John Handhart. He is the father of Bill [Viola], many of these people; he came before. But because he hides nobody knows that–only the connoisseurs. And here, the whole faculty was made up of–was like 80 percent men and 80 percent painters. The rest were photography.

MS. CORDOVA: And you attempted to teach at the university, right?

MS. VATER: Yeah, I applied three times. I always had got the third place, the consolation price. [Laughs.]

MS. CORDOVA: Do you read into that? Do you have any understanding of why that would be?

MS. VATER: You know, it escapes my mind. I don't know.

MS. CORDOVA: It seems odd that the university wouldn't have space for someone of your experience and–

MS. VATER: I think that–I don't know. I can create in my fantasy many explanations but I am not inside of the mind of these people. What can I say?

MS. CORDOVA: So in part that has also contributed to not having a very stable job life.

MS. VATER: Yeah, of course. I give many lectures for free, for free in the classes of some of the teachers–not many. There is a woman, Susan Whyne–I give classes in her class–a lecture in her class. In Bill's class I gave. I think that was about it. And once I gave a lecture – that Jaqueline Barnitz – invited me, a long time ago. But that's it.

MS. CORDOVA: Was she supportive of your work?

MS. VATER: [no answer]

MS. CORDOVA: So maybe we could go back for a second to talk about–to the magazine because I know that was important to get that off the ground and get started, and how did you get involved with that? I mean, you had mentioned that you were invited, I guess.

MS. VATER: The Flue Magazine? Well, I am doing artist books since Paris – you know, 1973, '74. And I knew about Franklin Furnace and in my visits to New York, even before I met Bill, I went there and I made–I presented myself to Martha Wilson. And Martha Wilson is this big heart, is this person–very open mind, and very experimental person, and a simple person. She is not a complicated person like many people in the art field is.

And then she says, oh, okay, give me some of your books and something like that. I'm know that I'm not a good seller of artists of books. I gave some things for her. And I think that that created kind of a connection between us. And then when I moved to New York, and I was already with Bill, I went there several times; she invited me to participate in some shows. Lucy Lippard made this show; she invited me to participate in this show. And she understood that I–I think that she knew about the Brazilian show that I had curated.

And then she came to me and she said, "I want to do a magazine on Latin American art. Could you help me?" And that is what has happened. And also there was at that time–I knew that I was friends at that time with a Brazilian woman who mysteriously drifted away. I never could explain why she did that. I think that perhaps her husband–I don't know–he's a very secretive person, but I don't know. Martha – her name is Fatima Bercht. She now works in the Museo del Barrio, something like that.

At that time Fatima was doing freelance work as an art historian and she knew Martha also. And she was going to create a show for Martha. And this magazine came together in a good time, half of the magazine became the catalogue of Fatima's show. And then the other half of the magazine I curated, I invited the artists, I wrote some things, and half of the magazine was the lists of the all of the multiples that were in Fatima's show–that was a very good show that Fatima organized because she is a good professional. It's a pity that I lost contact with her, but this–another thing that I don't understand because even she visit me. She came here and visit me once. Nevermore I saw her.

But I was very pleased with the–when I did this magazine. And actually, it was–I ran into certain difficulties because some Latin American artists living in New York wanted to be in the magazine. And it was an incredible difficulty to deal with that because I say, no; this is space for people that are not in New York–the people that is there in Latin America, that doesn't have the space here.

MS. CORDOVA: So did that create tensions.

MS. VATER: Oh, yeah. Ana Mendiata. From that point, she never more spoken to me. She wanted to be in the magazine. So from that moment on, she cutted; she didn't speak with me anymore. That was a topic that was kind of bad, but she always had a bad temper. [Laughs.]

MS. CORDOVA: In terms of working with a large group of people, I also think about that show that you did in 1984 in New York of Latin American artists.

MS. VATER: "Latin America Visual Thinking." Yeah, it was not in New York, New York. It was in the Catskills in a place called–I can't remember the name of the place, my God. Well, I have the invitation. Well, it was in a kind of art set that was very interesting because these people had this old hotel. It was a place that used to be very opulent. They had these incredible hotels in the Catskills. And the family had transformed this hotel, this hotel in an art center, and they invite people to do shows. And Bill curated a show also of film installations, and they invited me to do and also participate in another show that they did.

Anyway, I invited–well, these people–both for the magazine and in this show participated people–but at that

time, they didn't have the names that they later on became.

MS. CORDOVA: Yes, it was a huge name show in retrospect.

MS. VATER: Well, in retrospect. [They laugh.] Nowadays I don't know if I could – have those people. But Alfredo Jaar, he was just a chick, a little chickling. [They laugh.]

MS. CORDOVA: Really? [They laugh.]

MS. VATER: Ana Mendieta–I don't remember if she had died already.

MS. CORDOVA: No, she was in that show as–

MS. VATER: Yeah, she was, but I don't know–she participated for photography. I think that she recently had died.

MS. CORDOVA: And you had met her, correct?

MS. VATER: Yeah, I met her much before. I met her before I met Bill in 1976 no, actually during the period that I met Bill, 1977. That first show that I did, the show that I did with Marina Urbach. That was–by that time, I had a relationship with an Argentine artist, that she and him became very interested in each other, not as romantic but because the work that she was doing and he was doing also. And it is interesting that somehow my work has to do with that same source, same matrix.

MS. CORDOVA: So you see parallels between her work and yours?

MS. VATER: I see, yes, my work parallels with her, also with Cecilia Vicuna.

MS. CORDOVA: Was she in that show?

MS. VATER: Cecilia was in the show, yeah, in "Latin America Visual Thinking." Yeah, she was. Like, it was Catalina Parra, also; I really admired Catalina. She is a very good artist. I don't know what is made of her–she is a very interesting, intelligent woman. I have an incredible respect for her. Papo Calo. Papo I knew from ages–God, since I arrived here in '73 actually because he was a very good friend of Mutadas. I remember Papo from that time. Who else? Gino Rodriguez was in that show.

MS. CORDOVA: Liliana Porter.

MS. VATER: Liliana Porter, also that I know for ages also. Yeah, I have known her for a long time because she was married with Camitzner a long time. And then they separated.

MS. CORDOVA: Have you stayed in touch with these people?

MS. VATER: Sometimes I meet–I pass through–but I am–also made me totally, you know–I'm like an island or hidden in a hole, so to speak.

MS. CORDOVA: Here in Texas?

MS. VATER: Yeah.

MS. CORDOVA: The island of Texas.

MS. VATER: Well, tomorrow probably I'll see Cecilia. She is doing a talk tomorrow.

MS. CORDOVA: That is right.

MS. VATER: Cesar Paternostro. Cesar Paternostro, I remember him since I arrived in New York in '73. He was one of the people that I met that actually I remember in my mind–he is one of the best artists–Latin American artists–that I met here. [Laughs.] He is a good painter.

MS. CORDOVA: So I am curious, with this incredible circle of artists were you feeling inspired? Was there a lot of crossover or–

MS. VATER: Well, I only discovered that I was doing parallel things after I saw the work. But since–Cecilia Vicuna that she is doing something with Quipos – I only saw after–you know, I had done my work in 1972 in *The Knots*. I don't know whether she did her work later–before or later. I don't know.

MS. CORDOVA: So what did "Latin American Thinking" mean to you?

MS. VATER: I think that there is an ingredient of metaphysics in Latin American art and metaphor–understanding of metaphor that at least, at that time, was much more powerful than in–it's not that American art is not important enough–powerful–American art is fantastic, but it didn't have that quality like Latin American art has. I'm not saying that one thing is better than the other; it's totally different.

MS. CORDOVA: Well, and also speaking of parallels, I think it's–there is a–as you say, even an unknown or an unconscious cross over in your work that you could see certain parallels amongst each other but at the same time you were in New York during the 1980s at this time of high commodification, or high selling of the art world and I even see how you–and perhaps maybe Bill's influence in terms of video art that you started recording the intellectuals, Ken Friedman, and Fluxus representatives on what was happening in the art world, and I think you were fairly critical of the art world.

MS. VATER: Oh, yeah, I always was. But since my show in 1978 in Brazil that I did a work of–where I used the Art world to criticize it and–that was not because of Bill. I hadn't yet met Bill then–Bill was not my boyfriend at that time. And I did a video of the time that was a survey about Art–a video that was–somebody took it and that's–I lost this video. Anyway, well the video [*Controverse*] was much more my idea–much more my idea, than Bill's idea, it became Bill's video because he made the camera. Many of my work becomes his work when I would do–to help because he does the camera or he helps – sometimes in the technical mechanisms of editing.

I don't say that I don't like to work with him; I love to work with him, but it's sometimes there is a fight. I love–actually, I really like–I would like to work with more with him but this–like, this show that we're doing now, together – he's showing his thing, I'm showing my thing, but to arrive to a postcard–[laughs]–that concerns both of us, is a problem. And I understand that. Of course he is–it's all megalomaniacs – a point of no transgression or something. But that is part of this thing.

MS. CORDOVA: Well, maybe I didn't mean influence as much as maybe it was an issue that you two could bond over, that you were feeling a similar sense of what was happening.

MS. VATER: Oh, yeah – no, we're both very critical of what was happening. Yeah, because since the beginning of the '80s, we saw what New York was in the 70's because New York was fantastic. New York was an incredible ground of experimentation. It was like a Renaissance. It was like being in Firenze a long time ago and now it was becoming just very shallow. I had a woman that–there was a place in Tribeca that they only allowed artists to live there and this woman used to work in Wall Street and she used to–she was a friend of Mutadas, and she was–she was buying and selling art as well.

One day she came to me–[she never bought anything of mine], but, you know, she was very nice to me , blah, blah, blah. One day she came to me, she says, hey, Regina, I wanted to borrow your curriculum. And I says, why? Oh, because I need to make up a curriculum because I need to be accepted to rent a loft in Tribeca. She made herself to be an artist – she faked herself as an artist–[they laugh] –to live in a building in Tribeca.

MS. CORDOVA: Really? [They laugh.] And a letter from you would verify that?

MS. VATER: No, not a letter. She wanted my resume–she wanted to copy my resume.

MS. CORDOVA: [Laughs.]

MS. VATER: Take things out of my resume and made up her own resume.

MS. CORDOVA: Did you do that?

MS. VATER: Well, if she didn't get my resume, she would get somebody else.

MS. CORDOVA: [Laughs.] Yeah, and so–yeah, the 1980s is also I guess a time of tremendous displacement of artists from New York because of the real estate market.

MS. VATER: Yeah, well, we lost our loft in 1984. Yeah, that was very tragic. It was very–it was extreme, it was very extreme. And you see, you know, a lot of junk was being promoted, and sold. But I didn't think that become much better. I think that what you see in the magazine–in art magazines now days, sometimes it's a joke.

MS. CORDOVA: Well, and then you produced *Controverse*, which seemed to develop a lot of your ideas of what you were critiquing?

MS. VATER: It was not my ideas because I didn't say a word in that almost. I didn't say a word there. Who spoke was Ken Friedman, and Peter Frank, and John Cage, and this woman that had a gallery. But I–

MS. CORDOVA: Was there a reason that you kept her anonymous?

MS. VATER: She asked it to me. Yeah, she didn't want to do it. But she only gave the interview. But I think that they all sat it through. And I think that the most incredible person that did it was John Cage because he said, "Well, no matter, what is happening, you should do your thing. Like, everything else has already changed because if you work as things have already changed, you are changing something."

For instance, nowadays, everybody is–I feel, you know–actually, I'm applying for a grant. I don't know if I'm going to receive it because I have no idea who is going to be judging this grant–it's some place in New York. And the work that I am applying for is something very positive with my goal in this mode of work that I do that try reconnect people with their inner self.

Anyway, I think that is a positive work and I think that in this sense, my work is almost a kind of innovative innovation because you only see cynicism, dark irony. The works really try to push you down–the more heavy it is–it is more interesting… Another day I was reading in *The New York Times* something about a guy in Northwest of Brazil; it was something about carnival and this guy does these incredible masks and he became renowned by his masks.

And he lives in this little colonial town in the Northwest of Brazil. And the people in Rio want to bring him down–and he says, no, no, no, I'm okay here. And he says the most popular things in the carnival in Brazil are a mask of Saddam Hussein, and of this terrorist–Osama bin Laden. And he says, "I don't want to do things about–I don't want to do these kinds of masks. This is bad energy. You don't deal with bad energy. You don't reinforce bad energy!" And this is one thing that I think that what people are doing are just adding to this bad karma.

Oh, actually, you know what I feel, there is a bunch of curators and something that we really think that art is sensationalism, you know. It is like who is going to shout louder, in the most bizarre way. And then they are really promoting this kind of thing. And probably there are some sick people like that, that like to buy these things, because I couldn't live in my house with something like that. And then they are promoting this. They are living out sensationalism. It is like the Roman coliseum or something.

MS. CORDOVA: Are you thinking of any work in particular?

MS. VATER: Oh, there is so many!

MS. CORDOVA: So many. [Laughs.]

MS. VATER: So much that it is difficult even to–that is not only an American thing. Another day I saw a woman from Mexico showing some works of some Mexican artists. There is this girl in Mexico City that–my God. I was–in the end I don't know if I had anger with her work or had pity on her.

MS. CORDOVA: What was–

MS. VATER: I don't remember the name of the artist but she deals with dead people. And the work that she does with dead people is really unrespectable.

MS. CORDOVA: Is it taking photographs or–

MS. VATER: No–she uses a lot–the clothes of dead people; I don't even remember very well. I only remember that during the slide show I was really becoming–my God, this is–another day I was–in the PBS show–something about Capa, the photographer, Robert Capa. And there was something that he was saying that came to my mind about artists working now.

He was reflecting about his work. I think that his–I feel very bad. I don't want to use and to make–to do this work of mine while the suffering of people to become a little famous in order to make money with it–to make money at the expenses of the misery of the other people, to be famous at the expenses of the misery of other people, and I think that is what happens a lot nowadays, is an exploitation of the worst.

That only–Joseph Beuys once had a proposed–a project–a proposal for a project I think that was wonderful. And it talks very much close to what I was talking about now. He says that "Thought" is energy and energy is matter. And then his proposal was during a certain moment we could make a sculpture with the thoughts of everybody in the world. And that sculpture could modify the world enough for the good or for the bad side. And that is a commentary of what we were talking about a little bit before.

MS. CORDOVA: So where do you get most of your ideas or what do you in terms of seeking your own creativity or trying to seek inspiration?

MS. VATER: Poetry and philosophy. Good poets–they are all good philosophers.

MS. CORDOVA: You read a lot.

MS. VATER: Yeah, I like to read, yeah. I think that art doesn't come from art. That is what is happening nowadays. Everybody is copying everybody desperately. And art doesn't come from art. Art comes from knowledge–to live the world–knowledge of knowledge. It doesn't come also from erudition–but from the processed knowledge.

MS. CORDOVA: Do you have any sort of habits within your work environment that you will do? Any sort of tradition, drawing, or planning?

MS. VATER: Bill is a fantastic draftsman. I envy him. What I do is when I have ideas, I do a little bit of planning–I do just a little draft, but very–you know, some–some people like my drawings. Actually, Bill likes them but I don't. I'm just like the poet who doesn't like to be a poet or a draftsman that doesn't like to be a draftsman. But I know that I am a good installation artist somehow.

And I like a graphic artist also–the books. But I'm always challenging myself and I'm very critical of myself. But sometimes I do a lot of mistakes. I know that I did a lot of work in the past that–I prefer–but they are part of the process. Not everything that everybody does is perfect or better. I think that the–Lygia Clark always told me, what counts, what is important is the process. She also said: "My theory comes after my practice."

MS. CORDOVA: I think she has been a real influence for you.

MS. VATER: Oh, she was a model for me. We spoke–I spoke things with her–even about my personal life, boyfriends, and things like that that I never spoke even with my mother.

MS. CORDOVA: How come she had that degree of power for you?

MS. VATER: Because she was somebody that I would like to be. She was a model. It is not that I don't admire my mother. She was a very strong woman during all of the time of separation with my father and after that and everything but in her own peculiar way she was very curious and always tried to read in her–the– self didactic and things like that. But Lygia was something different. Actually, Lygia admired my mother a lot. She spoke a lot of my mother sometimes. But just two different worlds, you know, and different experience of life.

Yeah, Lygia for me–and she was a very tough cookie–

[Audio break.]

MS. CORDOVA: Yeah, I guess maybe to explain, I had to delay our interview because I felt like there was such an intense amount of information available on you and your work that I was overwhelmed as a researcher in trying to prepare for this particular interview.

MS. VATER: Yeah, no. I appreciate that–it's very rare that people do that. But mainly nowadays, because I think that everything nowadays is meant to be in a surface. Less work as possible; more glitter and more and you know.

MS. CORDOVA: Even though I say that, but there's so much sort of short articles and materials and pamphlets and all of your videos. I was struck by the general absence of scholarship on your work. It is striking, and I wonder if you could even just respond to that, hypothesize about it, or what it has meant for you in terms of your own personal development.

MS. VATER: One answer in my mind is that, I think that the people are afraid to deal with my work because of the diversity of my work. I think that it is one answer. But, that's what I think. It means work for them, the diversity of my work means work for them. And they want to go to the shortcut. They want people that can give them easier jobs. That's what I think. And another thing it is sometimes you know it's because some of the very powerful names in the beginning when I was in Brazil, they didn't put me in a ninche.

They didn't know how to put me in a niche because I don't know, probably because of their political agendas, I don't know. How could I know? But I have no fear of that now. You know, my father did all the rejection to me, as much as he could, you know, to teach me to deal with all these kinds of things. I know what I have, you know–Bill always tell me, my God, but we did all this – no. You know, one day in the future they are going to unbury us, and unbury the bones, you know?

MS. CORDOVA: You sort of, which put me in mind that I really haven't asked you about your religious upbringing, or even the integration of anything spiritual in your art.

MS. VATER: Well, I am a mystical person. There is no doubt about my work speaks about that, yeah.

MS. CORDOVA: Did you grow up with an organized religion?

MS. VATER: Yeah, yeah, I went to Catholic school. It was actually tough, yeah. That was a very powerful thing in my upbringing, for the bad and for the good. No, I don't want to be a judge right now, but yeah, it was tough. [Laughs.]

MS. CORDOVA: And you're no longer practicing Catholicism?

MS. VATER: Well, I think that all–I am an ecumenical person. I think that in all religions resides a particle of this connection with the higher, the Creator, the energy of Creation, energy that created the universe and then anyway, because I think that they exist and there is a realm beyond this physical thing that I can believe that enough. It makes me firmly in contact with, and one of the ways that I have that I know to be in contact with that is through the Catholic Mass. And I sometimes, I go to the Mass, yeah, I go. But it's not that I am inside of the Catholic club. I don't feel myself inside of the Catholic club, because I don't belong to clubs. I never belonged to any group, any club, any nothing. I hate this idea.

I'm a maverick, and I'm very proud of it. Because although I am a gregarious person, I love my friends, but I know I hate to have somebody impose on me ideas and the ways of behaving or of believing, things like that, and manipulating me with fear and that or so – I don't. But I think that inside of many religious practices there is something there, that many times is this way because it is manipulated by human beings, you know. But probably if I was some place else, I would be going to a Buddhist temple or something like that. I have no problem in that.

When the Tibetans come, I invite them to come. I know a group of Tibetan monks. Every time that they come to Austin, I invite them here. I have an incredible respect for the Tibetan theology.

MS. CORDOVA: Where does your appreciation for Buddhism come from?

MS. VATER: From my readings about comparative religion. And in Brazil, I know some people, masters, I met some masters of the Yoruba-Afro tradition, too, but I respect to, I have an incredible respect. Is this things that say that my believing is the true way. I feel the most unreligious thing that can happen, "Is the people that use religion to manipulate politically other people, and to manipulate in terms of money economically all the people, like I see in Brazil, some churches that are going to Brazil now and they take money from the poor people to become billionaires." Things like this really breaks my heart, you know, this manipulation of the ignorance of people. It's of the psychological precariousness of some people and you know that they take advantage of people in the name of religion, when just the opposite should be happening. But this is happening all over Latin America now.

MS. CORDOVA: Well, I'm feeling like maybe we're getting to the end of our interview. And maybe I could just, in terms of a last question, ask you actually, if you feel like there's anything that you would like to include on this tape that I haven't asked you or sort of–

MS. VATER: Right now, I really don't think that I could oversee because I am so here, you know, I need to have a distance, a point of view outside and perhaps to see the tape or listen to the–or see the manuscript or to listen to the tape, you know, because I am totally here now. And it's very difficult to me to know. The only thing that I feel that we're tired. You know, I could go on, but I don't know it to be more service to you. I don't know what else I could talk about.

MS. CORDOVA: Well, maybe then, let me just pose a last question, that sort of big question, in terms of what you would hope is your legacy or what you want to leave on this earth, what is most important in terms of that? Or even just where you see your future going?

MS. VATER: Well–[laughs] –I don't have a crystal ball. [They laugh.] Well, I hope that people could make my work more available. And I came from a generation of artists in Brazil, I believe, that everybody from my generation has a book, a lavish, sometimes lavish book from their work. And there is no book on my work. All the artists from my generation, colleagues of mine, people that started, this is the thing that I love that could happen. Elizabeth Ferrer actually, she actually was here for a while. I never saw her very much because she was working in the museum here, the Austin Museum. But after she went to New York, sometimes we exchange e-mails, and she demonstrated really nice to help me put a book together. But she needs a publisher, needs money. There is a lot of things, you know? And I don't know actually if Elizabeth really knows my work very deeply.

But this is something that because I don't know, at least a fragment of what I did could be recorded in a more permanent place. I think that my work is very fragile because it is very difficult sometimes to remake some installations and they exist in terms of photography and memory, the memory of them exists. And because I never–I teach, but when I teach it, I teach in Brazil when I go there, and my experience as an artist is also something that I would like to pass on. I have the hope that this could happen in the future. Hope has been my ally during all my life and had worked. Otherwise I didn't come all the way from Brazil to live here totally in total precariousness like I lived in New York. And now, we are in a more stable situation.

It’s just, I don’t know, I think that I believe in a divine purpose and God provides, you know? I’m not taking anything from anybody. I’m doing my thing. I’m doing an honest work. I sleep well with the things that I do. I think that naturally things can reward you in the right moment. I don’t know. Sometimes, or even that things don’t work for me when I’m still alive, I have this strange belief that after I die, I’ll still be alive for a little while, you know. And not only me, but Bill, too. I have this feeling, you know, that we are. It’s funny because there was one person here at University of Texas that said: “You are quite a pusher.” I don’t call myself a pusher, you know. I really don’t. But I work, you know, as much as I can, to maintain the flame of life, the candle of life.

MS. CORDOVA: I think it shows. [Laughs.] And maybe with that all, I’ll go ahead and close our tape.

MS. VATER: Yeah, I think that’s a good end.

MS. CORDOVA: And say thank you. Thank you so much.

MS. VATER: Thank you. Thank you for hearing, too.

[END OF INTERVIEW.]

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