

Memories^I

Alejandra Altamirano Brett

^I Alejandra shared her memories at Guy Brett's memorial on 26 October 2021 at Tate Modern.

I am very touched to see you all here tonight and moved to know some came all the way from Brazil to pay tribute to Guy's life.

I am grateful for Gilane Tawadros & Achim Borchardt-Hume, Director of exhibitions at Tate Modern to have found the time come to say a few words about Guy.

Special thanks to Frances Morris, director of Tate Modern. Thanks to her we can gather today and celebrate Guy's life.

Like Guy, Frances championed the work of many important artists decades before they become recognised, and that is why she invited Guy to curate an exhibition about Takis, a renowned Greek Kinetic artist who was completely unknown in the UK.

Frances also took the risk to ask Guy to be the curator of the Takis exhibition when she knew he had Parkinson's.

Since Guy was at the time finding it difficult to express himself, he asked Frances if could co-curate the exhibition.

It took Frances a year to find a curator whom Guy was prepared to work with. His co-curator was in the end found in USA, Houston, his name is Michael Wellen. Thanks to him and his patience, the exhibition and the catalogue were a total success!

I met Guy in 1975 and I Instantly fell in love with his mind.

I found him to be completely surrealistic. He introduced me to worlds I never thought could possibly exist. Works of art which were not screwed to a wall but floating in space.

Works of art which produced bubbles in constant motion. Works that had blinking lights, works that had symphony of sound, works that floated silently in the space, sculptures which expressed themselves through their changing reaction to light and beams, radio sculptures with feathers, vibrating wires, self-destroying machine complex.

Other works you had the privilege to touch and change their shape, which then became to my surprise another sculpture!



Guy Brett in front of Hélio Oiticica's *Bólides* in the exhibition *aberto fechado: caixa e livro na arte brasileira*, Pinacoteca do Estado de São Paulo, 2012. Photo: Alejandra Altamirano Brett

But the cherry on the cake for me was when Guy received a cardboard box full of works of art from Brazil. One of the works, which emerged from this treasure box was a plastic bag & stone, you have to blow the bag with air, close with elastic. Press the bag slowly with both hands in order that the stone goes up and down in the cavity. This work of art blew Guy away for many years to come.

He exposed me to other dimensions of art, not just kinetic art but to Conceptual art and Tropicali.

I saw flexible objects and capes that were designed to be worn while dancing to the rhythm of samba.

Some included poetics or political messages that were revealed depending how the wearer moved.

An incomprehensible world was unfolding at my feet....

left puzzled and not knowing anymore what art was!

In 1975, the time we met, we were witnessing an overwhelming social inequality in all developing countries, many were living in extreme poverty and mobilisation started to take place around the world demanding basic living conditions. We started to see militaries taking over civil democracies and witnessed thousands of people killed, imprisoned, and disappear.

Guy saw how these political & social changes were deeply influencing ordinary people. Without any formal training and using whatever materials they had to hand these people, were producing intensely moving images from Central Africa, China, from the nightmare images of Hiroshima survivors to the weaving of Greenham Common and the patchworks of the Chilean resistance sewn onto scraps of clothing fabric and wool.

They were made by the families of the 'disappeared' people.

It was an anonymous expression of art resistance against the repressive Military government of General Pinochet.

Guy felt compelled to write and curate an exhibition about these huge political, social & Cultural changes that were taking place around the world. Museums and galleries along with *The Times* newspaper, who Guy had been working for 10 years didn't recognise popular art as art. *The Times* relationship with Guy became irreconcilable leaving him no choice but to resign as art critic from *The Times*.

At that moment his quest was to try to find out what was happening beyond Europe and the United States.

With Andrew Dempsey they proposed to the Arts Council to organize an exhibition about Africa. They managed to work for several months on this project but unfortunately the Arts Council decided not to go-ahead with the exhibition. It was a bitter blow for both after putting so much energy into the project.

Africa was still not on the map.

For the next 10 years it was difficult for me to see the frustration and isolation Guy was feeling.

It became clear to him that the art world in Europe and the USA had kept marginalised women artists, contemporary artists from Latin America Africa and Asia.

Luckily Pluto Press published two diaries of his called, *Images of the art Resistance* and *Images of Liberation from all over the world*.

Then in 1986 Guy wrote a book called, *Through our own eyes – Popular Art and Modern History*.

In 1990 his attention was drawn to many Latin American artists, their works had an underling political dimension addressing social and political realities as integral to art practice.

Sculpture & installations were taking an entirely new life creating an incentive to form a more intimate human connection.

Guy proposed to all the main museum directors in London an exhibition called, *group exhibition with nine Latin American artists*¹.

The reception he had from the museums was frosty, they couldn't understand the concept nor the artists...except for Elizabeth Ann Macgregor, at the time director at the Ikon Gallery in Birmingham. She invited Guy in conjunction with the Corner House to curate the first contemporary Latin American exhibition in the UK.

Each of these artists invented metaphors which link the 'Latin American' with the 'global'.

Some of the materials used by the artists were plastic bags, potatoes powering radios, banknotes, ash, coca cola bottles, metal and veils, hair, comb, painted iron, mirrors with lights, 300 Amazonian Gourds, several hundred bird feathers, 600 hundred thousand metal coins, 2000 bones, 800 communion wafers and airmail paintings.

¹ Transcontinental: Nine Latin American Artists, Ikon Gallery, Birmingham and Cornerhouse, Manchester, 1990 [<https://ikon-gallery.org/event/transcontinental-nine-latin-american-artists/>] Acessos em 22/11/21.

They challenged our preconceived ideas about Latin America along with our ways of seeing and understanding art.

What really surprised me was to discover Guy spending time researching about Angeles Arcabuceros from Peru. I never thought in my wildest dreams that Guy had any connections with the angels as he did. Perhaps what captured his imagination were the 'Warrior Angels' painted by anonymous artists.

I feel I don't need to explain further what happened with Guy's life as a curator and writer because from the year 2000 onwards, museums in Europe and America started opening their doors to women artists, artists from Asia, Africa and Latin America, they become interested to hear what Guy had to say.

The only thing left for me to say is a huge thank you to all our Brazilian friends.

To have been able to feel their love, admiration and respect for Guy when he passed away brought my daughter and I such a huge sense of comfort. To see all the main newspapers in Brazil dedicate whole pages to him, how artists and writers made sure to publish their thoughts and feelings about him. And how Raquel Arnaud organised a webinar bringing together different artists, writers and critics to discuss the legacy Guy left on the art world.

Once again I want to thank Tate Modern, Frances Morris, for their unconditional support. Without their help we wouldn't be here tonight. And to Ridinghouse Sophie Kullman donating Guy's book, *The Crossing of Innumerable Paths* for our guests. I feel it is an important contribution to the art world since there are many artists in that book that people have never heard anything about it.

Claire Hindle & Laura Griffith for their incredible input in organising this event and to my grandson Theo England, who edited the sound to my video, without his input my video would have been in complete silence.

Special thanks to my daughter Luciana Brett England, she has been a power of light to show me the path during these difficult times with my soul in turmoil.

Since Guy departed, she has been a constant support, my backbone, and a source of inspiration.

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