



Monica Bonvicini,
*A Violent Tropical,
Cyclonic Piece of Art
Having Wind Speeds
of or in Excess of 75
Miles per Hour, 1998.*
Installation view.

PRISMATIC VISIONS

An Interview with Rosa Martinez

by Carolee Thea

The curator for SITE Santa Fe 1999, Rosa Martinez, was a member of the curatorial team for Rotterdam's Manifesta I, curator for the International Project Rooms at ARCO, a participant for Phaidon Press's *Cream: Contemporary Art in Culture*, and was the acclaimed artistic director of the 1997 Istanbul Biennial V.

Carolee Thea: *In the publication, Cream, you said, "the practice of being a curator gives you a chance to work in dialogue with the artist to co-produce a new reality and to relate together in a new context." Can you elaborate?*

Rosa Martinez: When I organize an exhibition my first step is always to define a conceptual framework. The conceptual framework is based on a series of updated reflections on the problems of contemporary life and art that correspond to a larger cultural framework. I then start thinking about artists and specific works. I might select an existing piece that an artist has produced because it connects to my concept. In other cases, a work may be site specific in relation to my proposal, a city, a context, or a situation; in still others, the artist may create an entirely new project. I like to create a common ground of understanding, and after exchanging ideas, to negotiate and feel a full communication and an enthusiastic agreement to develop the project.

CT: *Many curators work with a consistent nucleus of artists. How do you find new artists?*

RM: I am informed through many sources. My research is a continuous and open process. I travel, visit exhibitions, and read the magazines and catalogues for shows that I don't see personally. I exchange ideas with other curators. Artists are a good resource about other artists. Philosophy and cultural theory are also components which fuel my interpretations. Artists who reflect the moment and who go beyond accepted conceptual and formal disciplines are choice. For example, I believe painting has elaborated a historically important discourse and has strong meaning, yet in the context of a biennial which looks beyond the present and into the future, the discipline of painting is unrenovated. Video and photography are renovating painting.

CT: *Can you define the role of the biennial vis-a-vis the museum?*

RM: Biennials are transgenerational and transnational and describe newly interconnected strategies. The discourse that separates is over, and while the barriers are toppling, the artist's multiple modes of expression must be exhibited. Biennials are the most advanced arena for this expanded field precisely because they do not function like museums. Museums are temples for the preservation of memory where the art works are fetishized and displayed to create reverence and distance.

CT: *In 1971, Dennis Oppenheim's work, Protection, blocked the entrance to the Metropolitan Museum with guard dogs to question the sanctity of museums. Today, structures have changed, and museums contain project rooms for contemporary installations that are less precious than the way you described.*

RM: I am an art historian, I appreciate all moments in art and I defend the existence of the museum. Museums are rarefied sometimes but they are also trying to renovate their

strategies. Today, however, biennials are a context for the exploration and questioning of the synchronicity of the present on both a global and an intergenerational level, while also presenting an opportunity to break through the centers, like New York and London. The centers have the power, but those on the periphery have voices that contribute to a better understanding of our world.

CT: *The early model for the biennial was Venice. It was a Eurocentric, nationalistic model born of the 19th century, where each country had its own pavilion like an embassy or trade show.*

RM: In 1986 Harald Szeeman questioned this territorial separation by founding this new section, the Aperto, for young artists at the Venice Biennale. Aperto artists represented their art, not their nation. However, the model was canceled by Jean Clair, a subsequent Biennale curator, who said, the young ones, we don't need them. Szeeman, now in his mid-'60s, is a perspicacious, generous, and fantastic man. It is fitting that he has been chosen to be the curator for the next two Venice Biennales, in 1999 and 2001. He calls these turn of the millennium Biennale, "Aperto All Over," so the new spirit is clear.

CT: *It is also true that cultural politics employ biennials to enrich the local atmosphere by way of a tourist attraction. This is not a bad thing really.*

RM: There are so many places on the planet where international discourse can be questioned and improved. This widened dialogue doesn't always have to happen in the centers; all places contribute to an understanding of certain realities today. Istanbul has 15 million inhabitants and Santa Fe has only 55,000, but the dialogue that has begun is a contribution and is necessary.

CT: *Santa Fe is a small complicated city, rich in contrasts and imagistically close to the end of the world. Here, a naturally flamboyant landscape of mountains and high desert also contains the bleak reminder of the Manhattan project.*

RM: "Looking for a Place," (my title for SITE Santa Fe) questions the place that art has in our societies today as well as the question of finding one's own place. How we conceive natural places like the ocean or the desert, how we experience our bodies and how the politics of space are sexually organized are all elements of this. The answers are different in each locale, but they might have similarities too. Santa Fe is a perfect environment to present an exhibition aimed at a fruitful dialogue with contemporary international art currents, and one that speaks to finding one's own place. Sometimes it takes a long time to find one's place. It took Walter DeMaria five years to find the place to install *The Lightning Field*.

CT: *What do you extrapolate from the diversity of cultures in Santa Fe?*



Clockwise from above:
Cai Guo Qiang,
*Bringing to Venice
What Marco Polo
Forgot*, 1995. Photo-
graph documenting
performance/event.

Miwa Yanagi, *Information City*, 1996.
Direct print.

Shirin Neshat, *Rapture*,
1998. Film still.

Francisco Ruiz de
Infante, *Habitation de
Lenguages*, 1998. View
of installation.



The discourse that separates is over, and biennials are the arena for the expanded field.

RM: There are three communities not living together or interacting much: white Anglo Saxon, Hispanic, and Native American. In this one place, all of the problems of identity, struggles for land, thematic tourism, science, and nature arise.

CT: *Will the dialogue of nature and culture be addressed in SITE Santa Fe?*

RM: I have been to Santa Fe with some of the artists, who have explored the place and thought of different projects. We have discussed them, trying to connect understandings and find a common direction. As the curator, I have an overview of the show's content and appearance. I don't think artists are just producers of things, they project their own understanding of the world and I respect that. I've invited Cai Guo Qiang, a Chinese artist who made a project in Hiroshima with gunpowder, balloons, and rings that float and then explode. He was rethinking the power of the atomic bomb and its negative potential. I thought that he could do a project in that direction because Los Alamos is so near, but when he felt this place he preferred to work on the spirituality of the landscape.

CT: *Santa Fe contains spiritual and animistic influences as well.*

RM: I have presented the artists with the possibility of confronting this. Now it's their turn; they will react and give their interpretations of this spiritual balance or lack. Michael von Hauswolff, for example, is preparing a project called *Operation of Spirit Communication (New Mexico Basic Minimalism Scene)*. In my conceptual framework I talk about our anxiety about space, how we live, where we live, our bodies and how we take care of them, how we dress and protect our identity with fashion, etc. I'm also interested in relational aesthetics, projects that ask for the participation of the spectator, and I hope some of the artists will go this route.

CT: *Speed and technology diminish our space on a psychic level. To include the spectator in a work brings one back into oneself as a frame of reference.*

RM: Interaction is important. Cai Guo Qiang did a project of this type in Istanbul. He wanted to connect East and West, and as we did not have a big budget, he did it through a very delicate performance. He threw stones from both shores of the Bosphorus, the European and the Asian, and he filmed that action. Then he installed two TV monitors in the left and right axis of one of our most beautiful venues, the Hagia Eirene Church. Each monitor showed his action on one side of the Bosphorus and the stones crossed virtually from one monitor to the other, symbolically connecting East and West. He then invited the visitors to construct paper planes, to write a desire on them, and make them fly in the axis of the church connecting the entrance with the apse (representing the human and the divine). At the end of the show in the middle of the church there was a big beautiful

white mountain with all the planes and all the desires of the visitors.

CT: *This participation, encompassing the viewer, is like an intervention which changes the equation of the activity, of object and subject.*

RM: Yes, the autonomy of the artwork is put into question. When the spectators interpret the work they create it in another way. We no longer think in mirror aesthetics, with only two sides—active artist/passive spectator. Now the visions are prismatic.

CT: *Cubism comes to mind.*

RM: But Cubism was too geometric and analytical. When I speak about prismatic views I do not mean only visual perspectives, I mean emotional, ethnic, symbolic, and others.

CT: *Many people come to live in Santa Fe to retreat from the problems of cities and global politics. It has become a mecca for the rich from New York and Los Angeles.*

RM: Yes, it's an existential focus; we look for a place to hide ourselves, or to develop ourselves in relation to others. People who go to Santa Fe go to find this landscape, this peace. The conceptual background that I propose to the artists is an instrument of reflection on all this.

CT: *The exposure to diverse ideas from all over can imply that mainstreamism will result. Instead, the separate and unique triumph. In New York there once was a melting-pot mentality; now the struggle is against this mainstreamism. People want to maintain their difference.*

RM: Absolutely. This is what happens with globalization. It's bringing back the extreme defense of ethnicity, of identity, so there's this struggle, globalization against identity and vice versa. I think those are two sides of the same coin. And they establish a dialectic that has not been solved.

CT: *What is the male/female ratio of artists at Santa Fe?*

RM: There will be a balanced number of women and men.

CT: *Do you see a global feminist art emerging?*

RM: Not really. I see that there are more and more women producing art who are significant in the visible arena. Their contributions are expanding the field and the visions about the meaning of art, but I do not think they are acting with the militant radicalism of the '60s and '70s. They are very conscious about their problems but they are not schematic and rigid, they are more fluid and wiser in a way due to the work that others did before. Miwa Yanagi is a Japanese photographer whose work is futuristic and melancholic at the same time. Her works are not feminist in the traditional sense; they present women as those who open the elevator doors in large commercial stores. Those kind, silent, beautiful, and submissive women are, for me, a critique of the passive role of women. In her videos, Mariko Mori fantasizes of being a goddess.

CT: *This sounds like a treatise on women's roles in the '50s, like the Grace Kelly myth. Yet Mori's work is a spiritual negotiation of one's role in a futuristic, technological space.*

Santa Fe is a perfect environment to present an exhibition aimed at a fruitful dialogue.

RM: Many women are trying to escape from the weight of patriarchal history imagining for themselves a world without the gravity of History. Others, like Shirin Neshat, an artist from Iran, deconstruct the arena of the patriarchal model in Islam, where women are obliged to wear a veil in public spaces. From Portugal, Helena Almeida, uses the house and its furniture to explore how women are tied to domestic space. Monica Bonvicini, from Italy, analyzes gender issues and the sexual politics of space. She also criticizes with pain how we metaphorically carry the house on our shoulders and how difficult it is to escape the domestic prison. In one of her works, *Are walls women's best friends?*, she took excerpts from films (directed by the big macho directors of the '50s and the '60s) where there is always a certain moment where sad, tired, or abandoned women lean against a wall, to gain support. As if they never could stand by themselves...Her piece for Santa Fe will be a book on the macho world of construction workers. She has been collecting answers to a very ironic and ideological questionnaire in various cities and she will present the results. Ghada Amer, from Egypt, analyzes the sexual connotations of abstract painting and in Santa Fe she will create a "Love Park" trying to reflect and reinvent affective relations and the meaning of love in our lives. Charlene Teters is an extraordinary woman, a Native American artist. She is analyzing how Indians are represented in the mass media, in Disney's portrayal of Pocahontas, for example, and how that representation mystifies and confronts the Native American reality.

CT: *Monica Bonvicini's work references Gordon Matta Clark's famous acts of architectural rupture. Hers is a portrayal of violence done not only to the white cube, but to the domestic environment. Perhaps this is interchangeable.*

RM: At the Istanbul Biennial, the decision to exhibit more women than men was an effort to balance the patriarchal tradition we all live under, which is particularly strong in Islamic cultures. Women are renovating the discourse of contemporary art and the critique of culture, to highlight this was a significant gesture. I think women artists of the '90s are more fluid than before, finding their way like weavers, adapting to the obstacles and circumventing them, not destroying them. They are trying to construct together with the male.

CT: *Many heterosexual men have taken a certain role in the art world that celebrates adolescent machismo.*

RM: Yes, I believe this is a backlash. They are saying to all women, you have already achieved what you wanted. You are equal now. You are free. But still look how powerful and nice we are. But in fact men are terrified that women will steal their power, so they reclaim male power. I hesitate to use these words, but it is kind of a new fascism, a macho fascism. When men feel that their masculinity is in question, they feel a need to affirm it more and more. The fetish of

the phallus is still there, the idea of creation as ejaculation, puffed (like with Pollock)—it is a very male form of affirmation. I think some people become very aggressive when you say that you are even a little bit feminist, because they think you are going to bomb the established order.

CT: *There is no such thing as being a little bit feminist.*

RM: Maybe I should say a soft feminist. Women are more and more conscious of the unbalanced interchange that patriarchal society offers them. Give me your sex, take care of my children, clean my house and I will give you some money, security, and protection, but you have to obey and be good to me. And if you want to work, do it, but don't forget your other duties. When we say, "I see things in a different way," the violence might start. But we should say to men, "Don't worry, we still like you, we would only like to invent other models of effective relations and we want a better distribution of the domestic obligations and of the power relationships, we're not going to cut your throat."

CT: *It's not the throat that they are concerned about.*

RM: Yes of course. Anyway, I think that women's art is starting to be part of the river of art, whose present course is not militant.

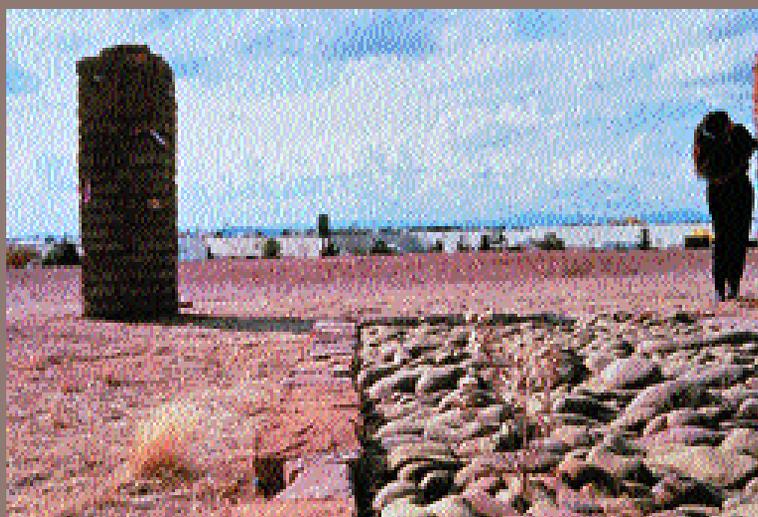
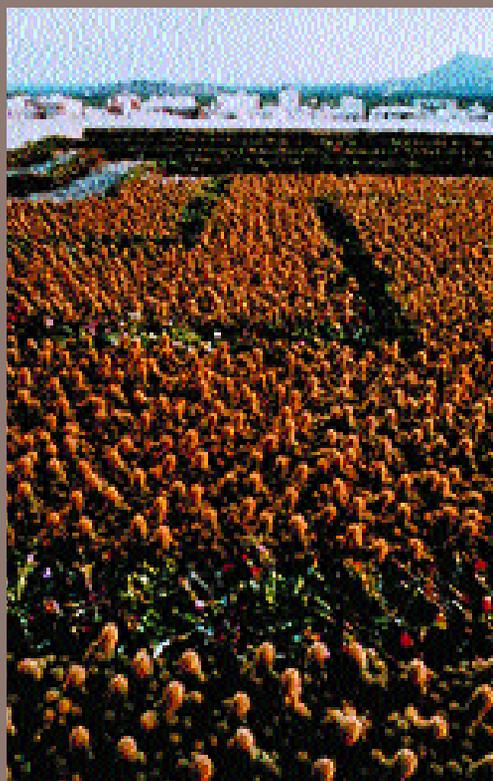
CT: *Do you feel any discrimination as a female curator?*

RM: We should ask the Guerrilla Girls to count how many women are in the best curatorial posts. Catherine David was the first one in 50 years to direct Documenta. I do not remember any woman directing the Venice Biennial. Most of us are in peripheral situations, and I know that I have to work harder than my male colleagues. I am a member of an association of curators called VOTI. This association has been accused of being a male club, even if a lot of women are members. But this is because boys are still more visible, we are more silent, more discrete. We are still looking for our own language, but we are still obliged to use the language of the Father.

CT: *What about the other fight, the one we women have with our mothers and the mother in ourselves?*

RM: Yes that's another issue. We also have to fight the possessive and vampiric power of mothers and our own desire to embrace everything. We have to control hysteria, which for me is just a protest of the body against the lack of power, the lack of voice. As for the lack of phallus (not the lack of penis), I laugh every time I think of our supposed "envy of the penis." We have to start to be aware that Freud is not the only truth and that psychoanalysis is a very macho thing. In the Jungian sense, everyone has a masculine and feminine part, and we must integrate them. At the same time, we are obliged to deconstruct all the laws given to us by the fathers. So there is a lot of work to do but we shouldn't be afraid of anything!

Carolee Thea is a writer and curator living in New York, and a frequent contributor to Sculpture.



Top to bottom: Ghada Amer, *Borqa*, 1996. Mixed media, 17 x 16 in.

Charlene Teters, *American Holocaust*, 1992. View of site-specific project.

Ghada Amer, *Cactus Painting, Unfinished*, 1998. View of site-specific project in the Roman theater, Sagunto, Spain.