

Review / Reseña

Calirman, Claudia. *Dissident Practices: Brazilian Women Artists, 1960s-2020s*. Duke UP, 2023. 254 pp.

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For a long time, addressing the female body and women's issues in art was considered a complicated endeavor, and sometimes undesirable and inconvenient as well. In her most recent book, Claudia Calirman, Associate Professor of Art History at John Jay College of Criminal Justice, discusses how and what changes happened in the women's art sphere in Brazil in the last sixty years. Spanning from the art produced in the 1960s, during the military dictatorship, to contemporary productions, *Dissident Practices: Brazilian Women Artists 1960s–2020s* elaborates on the motivations, contexts, and responses received by women artists, as well as how women artists responded to historical changes and challenges in art during the past sixty years in Brazil.

The book first draws attention with its cover, which showcases a photo of a video performance by Berna Reale called "Palomo." In this photo, Reale appears mounted on a red-painted horse. Her posture is very straight, and she is dressed as a male police officer, with a black uniform, boots, gloves, and a crew haircut, which allows the audience to notice not only the back of her head but also the animal muzzle that covers her mouth, nose, and chin. Calirman's reading of the performance elaborates on the dual role "Palomo" has in Reale's life as an artist and a forensic expert, as well as the discrimination she suffered from her peers in both worlds. She also draws attention to the symbolism of violence attached to the image Reale created in this performance,

in which the authority figure and the horse have their image subverted. They suggest the idea of violence perpetrated (by the State) and experienced by the people, as well as the nuanced line that separates humans and animals, rational and irrational.

Divided into four chapters organized chronologically, the book showcases Reale's work as well as the work of known and not-so-well-known Brazilian women artists who faced and confronted different realities and historical contexts in Brazil, from its military regime to the return to democracy in the mid-1980s, through the very diverse set of struggles that marked the 2000s. In all of them, Calirman shows that Brazilian women artists have been at the forefront of art production for decades and tells the reader how those artists made history by offering a form of resistance to the different challenges Brazilians were facing. Calirman also emphasizes that many artists left aside issues related to feminism, gender, sex, and identity to avoid being demeaned and ostracized by critics and society. The author does a wonderful job recovering and bringing together the work of widely known artists together with less well-known artists. She also offers a unique opportunity to get acquainted with a series of works whose artists belong to peripheral areas in Brazil. Just to cite a few of the eighteen artists addressed in the book, besides Berna Reale, we can find the works of Lygia Pape, Wanda Pimentel, Anna Maria Maiolino, Gretta Sarfaty, Leticia Parente, Aleta Valente, Renata Felinto, Sallisa Rosa, Sonia Andrade, and Renata Felinto. Each of them presents a unique artistic universe, and they all offer an invitation to rethink hegemonic discourse and its praxis as resistance in art and reality.

In Brazil, a country where female sexuality is considered an integral part of the Brazilian identity, art produced by women about the female body or feminist themes remained controversial and was considered, at times, unfeminine. Even though many artists stated that they never suffered discrimination for their work during the 60s and 70s (mostly for avoiding unwelcome discussions in their art), artists like Ligia Pape had exhibitions shut down. She was also accused of pornography and of exposing female tactics of seduction. The military, the Church, and even liberal sectors in Brazilian society at that time responded alike, making sure women artists understood that they were not supposed to violate a "sense of decorum about sexuality and eroticism" (15). Women artists could still receive recognition and visibility for their work if they refrained from working with themes and images that could be deemed undesirable and against accepted social and moral norms. It did not mean they would not face constraints: most artists from those decades belonged to the upper-middle class and were white, and expectations of a certain decorum were enforced verbally and non-

verbally. At the time, other issues also took precedence over feminism, such as political censorship and economic inequality, which in part explain the choice to explore other themes in these art works.

With the return of democracy, production continued to focus on the repressive effect of the dictatorship. The chapter titled “Discourse Practices” explores artists whose works focus on themes related to violence, trauma, and power. In “É o que sobra”, for example, Anna Maria Maiolino took a sequence of photographs for a series called “Fotopoemação” (Photopoemaction) in which different parts of her face are obstructed, either by a black cloth or by scissors that seem ready to cut out her tongue. The focus on the mouth is explicit, particularly in the photos titled “In-Out” from the same series, where her mouth is photographed various times, and each time a new element emerges from it, be it teeth, smoke, an egg, or threads (60-69). Gender discourse is also the target of Leticia Parente, who works with stereotypes associated with women’s appearances and behaviors (87-89), or the work by Leonora de Barros, particularly in the work titled “Procu-ro-me” (“Wanted by myself” or “In search of myself,” 104). Many of the artists resisted and denounced the constraints faced by women, such as objectification, a fixed desirable identity and behavior, and, most of all, freedom of expression.

A more direct approach to feminism and gender arrived years later and is showcased in the last chapters of the book, along with more diversity in class, race, and gender identity in the artists. If, up to the late 1970s, most women artists were white and came from the middle and upper classes, the latest generation of women artists in Brazil identifies as Afro-Brazilian, Indigenous and of non-heteronormative gender identities. For example, the works of Felinto, Salissa Rosa, and Valente explore the escape from fixed social norms and denounce the accepted place of normality historically occupied by the white population. In those works, we see in images a practice of discourse that is strongly founded in resisting conservative and historically accepted Brazilian ideology. Works such as Aleta Valente’s, where a woman dressed in a bikini is going up a step ladder that leads to nowhere (182); Salissa Rosa’s portrayal of an Indigenous woman as an exotic animal (160-161); or Renata Felinto’s photo of a performance called *White Face and Blonde Hair* (132-133) all feature spaces of privilege in Brazilian society. The artists denounce the accepted neutrality of the white upper class in opposition to the other, the Black, the poor, the marginalized, and the unseen.

While exploring a variety of artistic approaches that, according to the author, have no unifying term or universal practice in common (4), Calirman’s use of the notion

of resistance in women's art seems to highlight social and historical responses of women artists to their particular contexts. This is especially clear in the last chapter of the book, titled "Practices of the Self," which showcases a new generation of artists who not only explore the female body and issues of feminism, but also use more diverse mediums to publicize their work. The approach by artists like Fabiana Faleiro (in "Mastur/bar", 163; "Lady Incentivo", 171) and Annie Sprinkle ("Public-Cervix Announcement," 166) reveal a trend that advocates for "the sexual liberation of dissident bodies" (165).

The beautiful and careful edition of the book—which brings together an excellent bibliography, notes, and, most importantly, the images of so many photographs and performances by a very diverse set of women artists—ends with the recognition that new "dissident practices" are already in motion to respond to new challenges in place. As I finish reading the book, I can say that *Dissident Practices* has many merits. It is an artistic, social, and historical experience throughout time and through the eyes of women artists. Calirman explores a myriad of views that ponder the multiplicity of voices as well as the historical changes and challenges faced by Brazilians throughout the last sixty years. The works collected are a testimony of time and art, and they provide a historical perspective showing the way many women artists perceive their reality and serve as a testament to their actions in promoting change. Their work allows the surfacing of current and past gender, race, and class issues, historical and social biases, and they also offer a multifaceted perspective about the resistance initiatives embraced by these artists. By bringing together multiple and dissident practices as a guiding force, Calirman turns the book into an almost permanent act of discovery and reflection regarding women artists and the condition of women in Brazil during the past few decades.