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“EPIDERMIC” AND VISCERAL WORKS

LYGIA PAPE AND ANNA MARIA MAIOLINO

By Claudia Calirman

As feminism gained ground in the United States in the 1970s, its ideology and terminology were called into question by many leading artists in Brazil.1 Lygia Pape (1927–2004), one of the most prominent female Brazilian artists of the twentieth century, was among those who rejected the nomenclature, stating she was not interested in “any ideological feminist discourse.”2 The work of Anna Maria Maiolino (b. 1942) from the 1960s seemed to be motivated by experiences such as women’s daily lives. She recalls that many critics considered these themes prosaic, banal, and obvious.3 Such domestic subjects have long been critically and popularly disallowed in women’s art, and to a large extent remain so today. Though adamant about rejecting the feminist label, both Maiolino and Pape were engaged in questioning and redefining constructions of women’s identity, a central feminist pursuit.

Despite their professed lack of allegiance to feminism as a cause, both artists contributed seminal works to the feminist canon. Though both Pape’s and Maiolino’s artistic practices were rooted in the Brazilian Neoconcrete movement from the 1950s and 1960s,4 the focus here is on these artists’ later “contaminated” production, their so-called “epidermic” or visceral works addressing the abject and the sensorial. Through these themes, they were able to question traditional gender roles and introduce topics related to women’s constructed identity in Brazilian art without any overt engagement with the discussion of gender.

This separation, while subtle, likely represented an important tactical gambit: in Brazil and elsewhere, women artists who addressed feminist issues frequently found themselves pigeonholed or critically lambasted. In the 1993 exhibition catalogue UltraModern: The Art of Contemporary Brazil, Arcacy Amaral states: “It seems quite clear to me that, at the moment, any artist who represents social problems in his or her works will always be discriminated against in Brazil by the country’s formalist critics.”5 These critics have also dismissed the multiculturalism that has permeated visual art criticism since the 1990s, accusing it of being an imported fashion from the United States, and disdaining it as part of the minority quotas program and the politically correct mindset.

Despite their lack of embrace of feminism, women artists have enjoyed a predominant role in Brazilian society since the advent of what is known in Brazil as Modernismo. In 1917, Anita Malfatti (1889–1964) was instrumental in introducing Expressionism to Brazil. In the 1920s, Maria Martins (1894–1973) explored Surrealism, and Tarsila do Amaral’s (1886–1973) paintings powerfully evoked the notion of Antropofagia, or cultural cannibalism, as described by her partner, the poet and writer Oswald de Andrade, in his “Anthropophagite Manifesto” (1928).6 The 1960s saw a veritable explosion of prominent women artists, including Lygia Clark (1920–88), Lygia Pape, Anna Bella Geiger (b. 1933), Anna Maria Maiolino, and Regina Silveira (b. 1939), among others.7 In more recent generations, Jac Leirner, Beatriz Milhazes, Rosângela Rennó, and Adriana Varejão—all born in the 1960s—have gained marquee status in the international art market and in global exhibitions. The discussion in Brazil has never been based on the same issues raised by Linda Nochlin’s seminal 1971 essay, “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?” since women artists have had a seat at the table for over a century. A more compelling question, then, is why so many leading women artists so vehemently rejected feminist discourse, even as their works addressed the same issues tackled by their feminist counterparts in the U.S. and elsewhere.

For the art critic Paulo Herkenhoff, Brazilian artists, regardless of gender, have always striven not to be considered derivative of hegemonic centers of artistic production; therefore the discussion of center versus periphery was always more salient than the debate on gender issues. Herkenhoff points out that artists from Latin American countries are “constantly being pressured with the burden of proving that they are not mirrors but full individuals, perfectly capable of participating in the contemporary system of symbolic exchanges.”8 From this perspective, the desire to bridge the confining territory of “Latin American art” and to participate as “equals” on the international scene was always a more important issue for these artists than inwardly focused discussions of identity politics. As Lygia Pape said, “I think it is outrageous that an exhibition can still be titled Latin American Art.... This is self-discriminating, it is very reductive.”9 The art critic Guy Brett concurs: “No European artists are asked that their work give proof of their European identity, but this is always the first thing expected of a Latin American.”10 Brazilian artists constantly sought to singularly define themselves by the quality and innovation of their work,
independent of any specific context or culture. However, as the cultural theorist Nelly Richard astutely claims,

[T]he judgment of “quality” seeks to make itself trustworthy (equitable) by pretending to rest on the neutral institutional recognition of women and men with works of equivalent merit. But how can we not doubt this judgment when we know that the formalist category of quality is not neutral (universal) but rather forged by a prejudicial culture that defends among other interests, masculine supremacy as the absolute representative of the universal?22

As Latin Americans, then, women artists in Brazil already faced certain unwanted and unwarranted expectations about what their art would stand for; to adopt a feminist identity in their practice would only add another, potentially narrowing stamp. In attempting to avoid any specific label, many women artists understandably opted out of feminist discourse. In time, discussion of feminist art in Brazil and elsewhere in Latin America became all but taboo.

Amaral suggests an additional explanation for the lack of feminist interests in Brazilian art, writing:

In reality it is necessary to recognize the practical reason why women in Brazil had so much availability to dedicate themselves to the arts. The presence, even today, of one or more domestic helpers in the household providing services for the middle class and the upper middle class always gave Brazilian women the possibility to dedicate themselves to the arts, a condition that their North American counterparts could not afford in contemporary times.23

Born in Rio de Janeiro, Lygia Pape participated in the seminal 1967 exhibition Nova Objetividade Brasileira (New Brazilian Objectivity) organized by Hélio Oiticica at the Museum of Modern Art of Rio de Janeiro (MAM/RJ). Pape contributed two sculptures to the exhibition: Caixa de Formigas (Box of Ants) (Fig. 1) and Caixa de Baratas (Box of Cockroaches) (Fig. 2), both from 1967. In Box of Ants, an acrylic box encloses a piece of raw meat being devoured by live ants, laid on top of a mirror placed at the bottom of the box. Inside the box, three painted circles bear the inscription “a gula ou a luxúria” (gluttony or lust). Box of Cockroaches is also an acrylic box with a mirror affixed to the bottom—this one containing a grid of dead cockroaches, with the larger ones glued to the bottom of the box.

Though this argument does not explain the phenomenon, it does raise an interesting point about the discrepancy of class in Brazilian society. It is only now, in light of the recent massive street demonstrations in Brazil in response to the government’s lavish expenditures to host the 2014 World Cup, that this gross social and economic inequality is being publicly challenged.

A complete account of the lack of interest in gender issues in Brazil throughout the 1970s must also take note of the country’s history of brutal social and political realities. In the late 1960s and 1970s, Brazil was in the midst of the most repressive years of a military dictatorship that came to rule the country for twenty years (from 1964 until 1985). In December 1968, the military regime decreed the AI-5, Institutional Act #5, which abolished civil rights in the country, instituted censorship of the media and the arts, and implemented torture as a practice of the state.24 All attentions were turned towards the struggle against the repression and censorship imposed by the military regime, overshadowing other important debates such as gender differences, social inequalities, and racial discrimination. In the wake of globalization, Latin American artists became better known, yet for the most part, the work of Latin American women artists from the late 1960s and 1970s—a period characterized by both artistic innovations and political repression—remains largely unexamined.25

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WOMAN'S ART JOURNAL
At the time, these sculptures were interpreted as a critique of museums, and the stagnant, “dead” art contained therein. In retrospect, however, Box of Ants and Box of Cockroaches were also significant in their attempt to break with the reigning constructivist order promoted by the São Paulo-based Concrete movement, which favored geometric abstraction, rationality, and mathematical order. By provoking disgust and repulsion in the viewer—whose face is reflected among the dead cockroaches in the mirror at the bottom of the box—these works offer a stark repudiation of the rationality promoted by geometric abstraction. For Herkenhoff, “These works contaminated the aseptic constructivist project, through the parochial female fear of cockroaches and its scatology.”

A year later, Pape participated in the Happening “Apocalipótese” (in Portuguese, a combination of the words “apocalypse” and “hypothesis”)—a weekly series of outdoor artistic interventions at Aterro do Flamengo, in the outskirts of MAM/RJ. At this event, Pape performed O Ovo (The Egg) (1967; Fig. 3), which centered on metaphors of birth and destruction. The Egg incorporated a series of giant wooden cubic structures (not ovoid-shaped, as the title might suggest) covered with colored plastic. From inside these breakable boxes, members of a samba school burst out dancing and playing music in a clear analogy to a birth. The surface of the cube, which was made of a thin plastic material, acted like a second skin or epidermis, and was easily torn apart by the dancers in a visceral act. The violence and spirit of transformation implicit in the act also referenced the political repression of the times, and the need to break free. Like Box of Ants and Box of Cockroaches, O Ovo also functions as a critique of geometric abstraction, since the participant has to break the box, violating the cube to be “reborn.”

The sensorial experience of breaking through a surface to create a transformative state was similarly promoted by Pape’s Divisor (Divider) (Pl. 12), first performed in 1968, and since then re-performed several times in multiple venues. Divisor consists of dozens of people poking their heads through gridded holes made in a large sheet of white cloth. The piece is a collective and amorphous moving body, a kind of expanded ghost figure moving in space, with multiple heads and openings like a monstrous Greek Hydra. Speaking simultaneously to the one and the many, Pape’s Divisor resonates with Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt’s notion of the “multitude,” which those authors describe as an organization based on the free singularities that converge in the production of the common. The multitude is neither fully a collective agent nor a collection of individual agents—it takes shape mainly as agency, a “productive potential” of human life for those who perform through or within it. The symbolic meaning of Pape’s Divisor changes every time it is performed and shifts based on the viewer’s individual experience; this is intentional, as the artist was more interested in proposing ideas than authoring a finished work of art. Divisor has a transformative power, suggesting a change of perception once the participant is immersed in its collective experience.
Divisor also suggests a figure come to life, sharing a sensibility with Mikhail Bakhtin’s description of “grotesque realism”—a grandiose, exaggerated body that is not individualized but rather hybrid and social. Peter Stallybrass and Allon White suggest that, in order “to complete the image of the ‘grotesque realism,’ one must add that it is always a figure in process, it is always becoming. It is a mobile and hybrid creature, disproportionate, exorbitant, and outgrowing all limits, decentered and off balance, a figural and symbolic resource for parodic exaggeration and inversion.” For Bakhtin, the grotesque realist body violates classical aesthetics, which favors a unique, individualized, autonomous, closed, polished, proportionate, and symmetrical body. If anything, Divisor, like her earlier works Box of Ants and Box of Cockroaches, also represents a contamination of the classical order, a bold challenge to the prevailing claim of formalism and modernist autonomy in the visual arts in Brazil.

In her seminal film Eat Me (1975; Fig. 4), Pape once again provoked sensations of attraction and repulsion. Here the viewer is confronted by a close-up of a female and a male mouth, suggestive of a vagina, sucking and expelling objects, partially inviting and partially threatening. In one shot, a mustached, lipstick-covered mouth—incidentally belonging to the artist Artur Barrio—fills the entire screen. It sucks a red stone (actually an object made of plastic), which soon changes color, becoming blue. This image cuts to a female mouth sucking on a sausage smothered in ketchup, and then goes back to the cavity of the man’s mouth. Male and female mouths are alternated among voices in different languages rhythmically uttering the phrase “a gula ou a luxúria?” (gluttony or lust?). The growing sound of female groans, sexual in nature, culminates with a scream, creating an unsettling experience for the viewer. At the end of the film, an abrupt transition to the sounds of an advertisement suggests an interrupted sexual consummation.

Playing even further with notions of bad taste, debauchery, and kitsch, the following year Pape created the installation Eat me: A Gula ou a Luxúria? (Eat Me: Gluttony or Luxury?) (1976; Fig. 5), which referenced and strongly criticized the idea of women as both objects and agents of consumption. Tents containing small white paper bags carried the inscription “objects of seduction.” Inside the bags were kitschy objects—calendars with naked women, pubic hair, aphrodisiac lotions, peanuts, and mirrors. She stamped the bags, kissed them with red lipstick, and then signed them. Everything could be bought by the audience at the bargain price of one cruzeiro—the Brazilian currency at the time.

When the installation was later re-created at MAM/RJ, viewers were once again invited to inspect and purchase vulgar objects of desire—dentures, wigs, eyelashes, apples, miniatures of fake female breasts bearing the word “darling,” red lipsticks with the inscription promessa (promise). Pape defined these items as instruments from daily life and offered them to the
public as a critical vision of debauchery and consumerism. By mimicking salacious trinkets sold by street vendors, Pape sarcastically exposed female strategies of seduction, unmasking false promises of ideal female beauty in society.

This installation is even more striking when considered within the context of the “economic miracle” that was underway in Brazil at the time, with sales of consumer goods for the lower middle class soaring even as the military regime was at its most repressive. Pape points to the impoverished aesthetic of kitsch pervasive in the suburbs of Rio de Janeiro, stressing issues of class difference and inequality through the cheapness of the objects and their discarded quality. Summoning the comic-tragic, Pape’s installation offers a sardonic view of the beautification of women as objects to be desired, and as avid consumers of objects of seduction.

In 1976, a version of the project Eat Me: Gluttony or Lust? was published in the second issue of Malasartes, a celebrated (albeit short-lived) journal in Brazil that disseminated theoretical and visual projects by artists. In the pages of Malasartes, Pape elaborated on the concept of epidermização (epidermization), emphasizing the sensorial aspect of her work as opposed to a rational one. She wrote: “It is not a discourse or a thesis. I unfold the project at the level of an epidermization of an idea, the sensorial as a form of knowledge and consciousness.”

Pape’s ‘epidermic’ works dealing with the body through notions of the abject and contamination, the breaking of the cube/skin, and consumptive desire go beyond the discussion of women’s construction of identity in society. Her feminist legacy, even if she did not intentionally embrace it, belongs to a larger critical project—one that reminds us that consumerism and mechanisms of seduction can unleash desire, but cannot ever fulfill it.

For Anna Maria Maiolino, as for other artists enduring the climate of fear and self-censorship under Brazilian dictatorship, the notion of ‘viscerality’ was a poignant and common theme: works dealt with body parts, viscera, and the fragmented and dilacerated flesh. According to Herkenhoff, “In Brazilian art milieu the words ‘visceral’ and ‘viscerality’ were used [by many artists] to indicate the body’s expressive intensity; as well as the organic production of meaning.”

In Maiolino’s visceral pieces from the 1960s, this concept came through the connection of food and excrement. In one of her earlier works, the soft sculpture titled Glu, Glu, Glu... (1966; Pl. 13) (made of upholstery stuffing), a male torso above bears the inscription Glu, Glu, Glu. In the lower section, padded volumes depict digestive organs, including the stomach and
the intestines. These body parts, nakedly protruding out in space like overexposed viscera, alluded to the torture inflicted on political prisoners during the military regime in Brazil.

Born in 1942, in wartime Italy, Maiolino immigrated with her family to South America at age twelve, living first in Venezuela and then moving to Rio de Janeiro in 1960. Like many European artists from her generation, Maiolino lived through the experience of war, exile, and the need to adapt to new environments. From 1968 to 1971, she lived in New York City, where she felt once again like a displaced immigrant, writing, “Without a green card, without anything, I am but one more ‘illegal’ in the American paradise.” Also during this time, overburdened by household tasks and the obligations of motherhood, she produced no new work. Eventually, following a suggestion by Oiticica, she began taking personal notes and commenced a fertile period of writing poetry. In her interviews about those years, there is a sense of silently bearing the unspeakable, deprived of her personhood and her voice. Of this difficult yet formative period, Maiolino wrote: “The words, with their weight and meaning, originated metaphors of sentiments, in angst to find answers to the many questions from my personal life and also to constitute a way to elaborate my reencounter with the military dictatorship upon my return to Brazil.”

In 1978, back in Brazil, Maiolino was invited by Oiticica and Ivald Granato to participate in the Happening “Mitos Vadios” (Vagrant Myths) in a vacant lot in Rua Augusta, in São Paulo. The title was a direct response to the I Bienal Latino-Americana, concomitantly inaugurated in São Paulo, which was one of the first important international cultural events held during Brazil’s transition back to democratic rule. The I Bienal Latino-Americana was called “Mitos e Magias” (Myths and Witchcraft), an allusion to the predominance of magic realism and surrealism in Latin America, a trend frequently pilloried by many artists as regionalist. Maiolino participated in this Happening with two installations: Monumento à Fome (Monument to Hunger) (Fig. 6) and Estado Escatológico (Scatological State) (Fig. 7). Monument to Hunger consisted of two sacks, one filled with white rice and the other with black beans. The sacks were tied together with a ribbon and placed on a table covered by a black cloth. In this work, Maiolino addressed the food staple of the lower class in Brazil: rice and beans. In Scatological State, she displayed various types of toilet paper on the wall, arranged from the cheapest to the most expensive, and humorously included a newspaper and a plant leaf. With these two works, Maiolino connected the ends of the digestive system—ingesting and excreting food. She implied that what enters the body must subsequently be eliminated. In associating food to excrement—she comments on the masses
of flotsam and jetsam, the discarded items—or in this case, people—left adrift at the margins of society.

Likewise, her later installation *Arroz e Feijão* (Rice and Beans) (1979) remade for the 29th São Paulo Bienal (2010), also addressed disparate social access to consumerism, discriminating high from low, those with means from those who are disenfranchised from consumer society. It consists of a large table covered with a black cloth set up for a meal. Seeds of rice and beans germinate from white plates filled with soil. Hope and hunger are intertwined.

The art critic Frederico Morais ironically noted that it is precisely in the excremental function of the body that low and high meet indiscriminately, with no class distinction.¹² Maiolino’s work draws on the notion of abject art: the abject occupies the place of unfulfilled desire. She writes, “The intestine is a cavity that we never can fill in, in the same way that we can’t fulfill desire.”¹³ From the mid to late 1930s, Georges Bataille wrote about the abject in a group of unpublished texts under the title “Abjection et les formes misérables,”¹⁴ as a way to describe attraction to the rotten and the wasted. For Bataille, “What the system cannot assimilate must be rejected as excremental.”¹⁵ In examining Bataille’s writings on the abject, Rosalind Krauss pointed out their association not necessarily to bodily abjection but instead to social exclusions. According to Krauss, “These texts identify social abjection with a violent exclusionary force operating within modern State systems, one that strips the labouring masses of their human dignity and reproduces them as dehumanized social waste.”¹⁶ Krauss claims that much of abject art is founded in the multiple forms of the “wound,” which is always the place of the feminine. She asserts that “whether or not the feminine subject is actually at stake in a given work, it is the character of being wounded, victimized, traumatized, marginalized that is seen as what is in play within this domain.”¹⁷ Indeed, underlying Maiolino’s practice is a pervasive sense of the precarious, the fragile, the visceral, and the sensorial: for better or worse, all qualities traditionally related to the female body.

The feminine struggle against the male, patriarchal, and univocal sense of order is also played out in Maiolino’s work through language (or better, the lack of proper language). Maiolino similarly attests to the utterance of language as an impossible task, an unfinished business, in her super-8 film In-
Out (Antropofagia)(1973–74; Fig. 8). Two mouths, one female and one male, alternately occupy the full screen. At the beginning, a black adhesive tape covers the mouth on screen, like a censor box, making the act of speech impossible. The mouth then tries to convey some sound, to formulate a sort of speech, to no avail. In subsequent shots, non-linear images unfold: menacing teeth, a mouth ingesting a long black thread, lips spilling colored filaments, a mouth holding an egg. Despite their articulation of different bodily motions such as eating, talking, and arguing, ultimately, these mouths are stripped of an important function: the ability to articulate speech, to no avail. In subsequent shots, non-linear images of fear and censorship, to fragility, precariousness, and destruction. Consisting of a floor dotted with hundreds of fragile egg carpet acts as a minefield potentially charged with the possibility of birth and annihilation. The eggs also represent the passage from nature into the symbolic order existing in a transitional space. According to Herkenhoff, this work occupies an area “between the pre-verbal (the egg as a metaphor for life before birth), and the non-verbal (the growing fear of experiencing a space of insecurity and alienation).” It is a visual poem alluding simultaneously to fear and censorship, to fragility, precariousness, and temporality.

In the early 1990s, Maiolino further explored the notion of banality, repetition, and the tedious manual labor of women’s daily domestic tasks: waiting, passing time, knitting, cooking, and preparing food. She adopted handmade unfired clay as her main medium. Abandoning the mold and shaping forms with her own hands, she worked with large amounts of clay, manipulating them on site and letting them dry out without firing them. In the installations Muitos (Many) (Fig. 10) and Mais de Mil (More than One Thousand) (Fig. 11), both 1995 and from the series Terra MOLDADA (Modeled Earth), Maiolino repeatedly emphasized the gesture of creation. Produced in succession, each of these objects bears the mark of the artist’s hands, what the art critic Paulo Venâncio Filho called “The Doing Hand.”

In a 2002 interview, Maiolino stated: “The installations of unfired clay were the result of the desire to make sculptural works with more hand-molded parts in less time, thus enabling a greater accumulative potential, greater entropy. Once formed, the clay does its natural duty: it dehydrates, petrifies, goes back to the state of being potential dust.” Maiolino’s thousands of handmade pieces made of raw clay, called Rolinhos e Cobrinhas (Little Rolls and Little Snake-Shaped Coils), (1993–2007), are unfurred, fluid, and amorphous. At dOCUMENTA (13) in Kassel (2012), the artist filled a small house with myriad unfired clay pieces in different shapes. The installation Here & There evoked the same sense of precariousness and fragility from her early works. These multiple little coils and rolls were taken as reminiscent of food or excrement—handmade pasta from her childhood memories or simply waste. Food and intestines were again entwined.

Though gender difference was not a priority, it is time to revisit the prevailing idea that there was no feminist art coming from Brazil. The works presented here by both Pape and Maiolino incorporate the notions of “viscerality” and “epidermization” through their insistence on ingestion and its expulsion, contamination, failed attempts to communicate through language, metaphors of birth and destruction, and through the vulnerable and the precarious. These works bring an exquisite (dis)order and debasement to the prevailing masculine logical discourse, becoming, despite their utterly negation, a hallmark of Brazilian artists’ take on feminism in their own terms during this period.

Claudia Calirman is an assistant professor at John Jay College of Criminal Justice, City University of New York. Her book, Brazilian Art under Dictatorship: Antonio Manuel, Artur Barrio, and Cildo Meireles, received the 2013 Arvey Book of the Year Award from the Association for Latin American Art.

Notes
This article is part of a larger upcoming publication focusing on women artists from Brazil and Chile from the 1970s and 1980s, thanks to a 2013 Art Writers Grant I have received from Creative Capital/Warhol Foundation.


15. Manobras Radicais, Buarque de Hollanda and Herkenhoff, eds., 77.

16. “Apoloipopitéase” was coordinated by Oiticica and featured the participation of a number of artists. It was born of the artist’s desire to break the boundaries between the work of art and the public.


22. Eat Me (1975) was originally shot in 16mm and later remade in 35mm, 10 minutes, and in color.


24. Eat me: a guia ou a luxúria? (Eat Me: Gluttony or Lust?) (1976) was first exhibited at Galeria Arte Global in São Paulo.


26. In the outdoor space of MAM/RJ, a film showed the artist seductively inviting the viewers to enter the installation.

27. Despite the brevity of its existence (only three issues between September 1975 and June 1976) and its relatively small run of five thousand copies per edition, Malasartes became one of the most celebrated artists’ journals published in Brazil during the mid-1970s.


30. Anna Maria Maiolino, Vida Afora/A Life Line, 264.

31. “Helena Tatay conversa com Anna Maria Maiolino,” in Anna Maria Maiolino, 42. Translated by the author.

32. Frederico Morais, Do Corpo à Terra: Um Marco Radical na Arte Brasileira, n.p. In an audiovisual work from 1970, Morais relays a quote from the head of the Buckingham Palace garbage collectors, justifying their five-week strike in London: “The garbage of the Queen is like everybody else’s: if it is not quickly collected, it will start smelling badly.”

33. “Helena Tatay conversa com Anna Maria Maiolino,” in Anna Maria Maiolino, 39.


37. Ibid, 121.

38. Herkenhoff, The Art of the Ultramodern: Contemporary Brazil, 63.