

A Review of

*Dissident Practices: Brazilian Women Artists, 1960s-2020s* by Claudia Calirman (Duke University Press, 2023, 264 pages)

By Megan A. Sullivan

I traveled to Los Angeles from my home in Chicago in the autumn of 2017 to experience the massive, Getty-sponsored Pacific Standard Time: LA/LA initiative, which mounted some 70 exhibitions of Latin American and Latinx art at cultural institutions across southern California. With not enough time to see even a fraction of the shows, I nevertheless found myself back at the Hammer Museum's *Radical Women: Latin American Art, 1960-1985* for a second, and even a third, visit. Around every corner of the expansive show, curated by Cecilia Fajardo-Hill and Andrea Giunta, was a revelation, and it became evident to me that there existed a vast, largely unknown and significantly understudied corpus of groundbreaking work by women artists from Latin America. I wasn't alone in this realization. The exhibition was a sensation, and it laid the groundwork for a flurry of new research, much of which is still in progress.

The seeds of Claudia Calirman's recently published *Dissident Practices: Brazilian Women Artists, 1960s-2020s* certainly date to well before that exhibition. Her book arrives in a moment in which there exists a public is hungry for serious research on women artists, in part thanks to that exhibit. Calirman's study, which focuses on the work of women artists from Brazil in the last six decades, is, to some extent, a recuperative project, much as *Radical Women* was. But the author makes clear in the introduction that the Brazilian art world is rather exceptional, and thus a straight-forward recuperative project would not do. In the United States and Europe, as well as many Latin American countries, women artists were held at the margins of the development of modern art, their contributions either initially ignored or quickly repressed. Brazilian modernism, however, has been in large part defined by the work of women artists,

from Anita Malfatti and Tarsila do Amaral in the 1920s to Lygia Clark and Lygia Pape in the 1950s and 60s. Despite this persistent presence of women artists, Brazil did not experience the flowering of feminist art that drove a generation of women artists working in the North Atlantic to prominence in the 1970s.

Most of the artists at work in Brazil in the 1970s rejected the label “feminist,” as did many of their counterparts across Latin America did during those years. This was both because, Calirman suggests, of the perception that feminism was yet another U.S. export and because other, more pressing concerns—the violence and repression of the dictatorship, but also rampant inequality, to give just two examples—took precedence in the minds of many. Despite the importance of women artists in Brazil and the extensive body of literature on them, questions of gender have not taken center stage. Thus, the task that Calirman sets for herself is to deal meaningfully with art by a diverse group of women over a rather significant span of time when no binding framework such as “feminist art” readily exists. Eschewing any essentialist idea of biological sex, the author rather structures the book around the theme of resistance. Over the course of four chapters, she tells the story of how radical, dissident art made by women offered a particular site of social resistance, one grounded in, but not limited to, questions of sex and gender.

Organized in a roughly chronological fashion, *Dissident Practices* takes its reader through the work of several generations of women artists, tracking both their evolving strategies of resistance and the changing social forces that necessitated such continually renewed efforts. The first two chapters are set in the years of the decades-long military dictatorship (1964-85), territory previously surveyed by the author, albeit with a focus on male artists, in her *Brazilian Art Under Dictatorship: Antonio Manuel, Artur Barrio, and Cildo Meireles* (Duke University

Press, 2012). With a focus on relatively well-known women artists like Lygia Pape, Ana Belle Geiger, Anna Maria Maiolino and Leticia Parente, Calirman establishes both the possibilities and limits for women artists during these years as a result of both outright censorship and conservative social norms. While outright feminist forms of artmaking were shunned and problems of inequality, center-periphery relations, and resistance to the government itself took precedence, the work of these artists nevertheless fought women's objectification and patriarchal structures, questioned established female roles and identities, and advocated women's emancipation. Calirman demonstrates how the artist's body became a site of sustained investigation, one where pain, pleasure, desire, and control might be registered and communicated.

The second two chapters cover the period from the 1980s until the present, a time in which, as Calirman argues, the overriding threat of a violent authoritarian regime was replaced by a number of others: repression aimed at the poor, Afro-Brazilians, and slum dwellers. In these chapters, we see a new generation of artists embracing nudity and sexuality that would have been quickly censored in earlier decades, while openly espousing feminism that had been shunned by their predecessors. While the move toward a more full-throated endorsement of gender and sexuality forms the central throughline of the latter half of the book, it is complemented by the author's insistence on the ways in which that endorsement intersected with problems of race and class. Indeed, Calirman highlights not only the changing tactics that artists employed, but also the shifting socio-economic strata of these women. During the 1960s and 70s, women artists were overwhelmingly white and middle or upper class. Only in more recent years, Afro-Brazilian, Indigenous and working-class women artists began to make their mark on the art scene, putting pressure on "invisible systems of power and privilege" that have long structured

both Brazilian society and the Brazilian artworld (185). Delving into the work of Rosana Paulino, Berna Reale and Lyz Parayzo, among others, names likely less for the English-speaking audience at which the book is aimed, Calirman reveals the work done by these artists to challenge patriarchal values and unspoken social codes.

Calirman's use of the notion of resistance as the book's central throughline effectively grounds these artists' disparate works in a rich, nuanced, and concrete sociocultural context. We are presented, then, not with a narrow history of women's art, but rather with a much broader history of social resistance from the point of view of women artists. The fourth chapter, for example, grounds a new generation of artists' embrace of feminism within the context of the 2013 protests that erupted across Brazil, unearthing the ways in which the fight against gender inequality intersected with newly invigorating resistance to racial and class-based discrimination.

By moving across generations, rather than sticking only with the somewhat more well-trodden territory of the 1960s and 1970s, the book offers an expansive account of the development of an activist strain of the Brazilian art world over last half century, unearthing the ways in which often unspoken biases and taboos gave shape to each generation's multifaceted projects of resistance. And despite the book's broad scope, Calirman attends carefully to the individual nature of each artist's project; I never got the sense that a given work was being wholly subsumed by either sociohistorical circumstances of its production or the book's broader narrative.

For all the merits of this framework, the tradeoff is that relatively less attention is paid to questions of medium and form. To be fair, these are not Calirman's main concerns, and no one book can do everything. Nevertheless, the artists' sometimes pioneering use of new mediums, such as video, seemed to call out for a deeper analysis of how artists pushed against not just

social mores, but also the very possibilities of what and how art could be. But like with the exhibition *Radical Women*, I get the sense that this book's rich archive will plant the seeds of future research projects, and the unanswered questions that the book left me with will be soon taken up.

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