

Call Them Dissidents. But Don't Call Them Feminists.

Over the last 60 years, Brazil's women artists made work about universal rights abuses, not gender issues, a new show finds. "It was all of us, all citizens, who didn't have rights."

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Berna Reale, "Palomo," a video performance piece from 2012 in the Amazonian city of Belém, is part of exhibition in New York on Brazilian women artists lending their visibility to human rights issues, rather than gender-related ones. via Berna Reale and Galeria Nara Roesler, São Paulo

By Jill Langlois

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The Brazilian artist [Berna Reale](#) sits atop a horse painted scarlet, a cage-like muzzle covering her face.

As the animal clops down the empty street at dawn, Reale guides it with black leather reins, her hands in gloves that match. Her dark hair is cropped short and her back is straight. She wears a black military uniform and a serious expression on her face.

The 2012 performance piece, “Palomo,” which took place in the Amazonian city of Belém, is meant to question the idea that institutions like the police project a sense of peace and security. Like all of Reale’s performances, “Palomo” didn’t happen in a museum but in a public outdoor space, giving her a much broader audience and spontaneous responses from people who didn’t set out to look at art that day.

“When you perform for people on the street you don’t know how they’ll react,” says Reale, 57, who also works with the police as a forensics expert. “It creates tension. They have the right to be bothered by it, just like I have the right to be there performing it.”

One of Brazil’s most important contemporary artists, Reale is featured with 17 other prominent and emerging creators in a new book, “Dissident Practices: Brazilian Women Artists, 1960s-2020s.” Written by the art historian Claudia Calirman, it explores how women artists responded to some of the country’s most difficult historical and political moments — from its military dictatorship in the mid-1960s and return to democracy in the mid-1980s to the social changes surrounding gender norms and the objectification of women in the 2000s.



Anna Maria Maiolino, “Por um fio (By a thread),” from the series “Fotopoemação (Photopoemaction),” 1976/2017. via Anna Maria Maiolino and Hauser & Wirth Gallery

Eleven of these artists, including Reale, are also participating in an accompanying exhibition of the same name, curated by Calirman at the [Anya and Andrew Shiva Gallery](#) at John Jay College of

Criminal Justice, through June 16.

While women have been at the forefront of Brazil's art world for decades, they were not always willing to use their visibility to discuss the gender-related issues they personally faced.

"They didn't talk about women's issues," says Calirman, an associate professor of art history at John Jay College of Criminal Justice and chair of the department of art and music. "If they did, they would be looked down on. So they were mostly doing art about other things. And when they would go there, it would be a very thorny issue."

For those who worked throughout Brazil's 1964-1985 military dictatorship, making sure their work was not considered feminist, or read through that lens, was a conscious decision, in part to steer clear of being pigeonholed as a "women's issues artist." It was also about making sure that sweeping human rights violations directed at all citizens were being addressed.

Anna Bella Geiger, who was born to a Jewish-Polish family in Rio de Janeiro, says she made a point to include both Indigenous men and women in her 1977 piece "[Brasil native/Brasil alienígena \(Native Brazil, alien Brazil\)](#)."



Anna Bella Geiger, "Brasil nativo, Brasil alienígena (Native Brazil, alien Brazil)," 1976/77. Nine pairs of postcards juxtapose scenes of Indigenous life (the Bororo Indians) with images of white people that imitate them. (The artist inserted herself into the set of corresponding images.) The work questions mementos that tourists take back to their supposedly civilized lands. via Anna Bella Geiger and Henrique Faria, New York

"There was no time or mental space to focus on women's rights," she says. "It was all of us, all citizens, who didn't have rights then. We couldn't vote, we couldn't give our opinions in newspapers because they were censored. We were isolated and alienated."

Tatiana Flores, a professor of Latino and Caribbean studies and art history at Rutgers University, says that culturally many Latin Americans typically disliked classifications like feminist that can "read as a U.S. imposition."

"Certainly, discussions of race and racism in Latin America are frequently dismissed as U.S. concerns mapped onto Latin America.

The topic of feminism functions in a similar way. Calirman's book will spark important and necessary conversations."

The second book Calirman has published on the subject, "Dissident Practices" focuses on what women artists were doing during some of Brazil's most important historical moments and societal changes, and how they responded to them.

By including works that are humorous and playful — from artists like the performer Márcia X, the sculptor Lyz Parayzo and the visual artist [Renata Felinto](#) — Calirman hoped to draw more readers in.

"They're fun," Calirman says of the art pieces. "You open the book and you start laughing." She added, "I didn't want to do anything heavy. I didn't want to do protest art."

In the 2012 video piece "White Face and Blonde Hair," Felinto takes the racist practice of blackface — still used in some comedy shows on Brazilian TV at the time — and turns it on its head, painting her face white and wearing a long blond wig while browsing high-end boutiques in São Paulo's affluent Jardins neighborhood, an area many Black Brazilians avoid because of the instances of racism that have taken place there. She wore big sunglasses and a pearl necklace, tossing her hair and shaking her shopping bags to make sure all her purchases were on display.



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The goal, Felinto says, "was about giving this feeling of embarrassment back to people who are the type who usually make us feel that way." Felinto adds, "During the performance, some women watching were indignant. They realized quickly that it was about them.

"It's the kind of work that makes people laugh, but it's a nervous laugh. And that's what I wanted."

Aleta Valente, one of the youngest artists included in the exhibition "Dissident Practices: Brazilian Women Artists, 1960s-2020s," is part of a new generation of women to come onto Brazil's art scene, using social media to build visibility and create space for artists from more diverse backgrounds. Her work is an exploration of the self through photos, videos, selfies and memes.

In her 2019 self-portrait "Material Girl," Valente poses provocatively on top of a pile of discarded construction materials, an unfinished cinder block wall behind her. It's meant to call into question the construction of female stereotypes and the way in which women's bodies are seen as materials for consumption.



Aleta Valente, from the series "Material Girl," 2015. It relates to the way women are seen as materials for consumption. via Aleta Valente and Galeria A Gentil Carioca, São Paulo

"Obviously I'm feminist, but that's not all my work is," Valente says. "When an artist is a woman and she's depicting her experience in the world, her way of looking at the world, she's immediately labeled feminist. But when men look at the world it's seen as a universal experience. That's what bothers us as artists. Being put in a box."

Reale agrees. Her work focuses largely on violence against minorities. That means, unfortunately, that women are often the subjects of her performances, because, as she notes, Brazil is a world of extreme inequality.

“If that’s what it means to be a feminist, then I guess I am one,” she says reluctantly. “If there has to be a word for it, sure, we’re feminists.”

Dissident Practices: Brazilian Women Artists, 1960s-2020s

Through June 16, Anya and Andrew Shiva Gallery at John Jay College of Criminal Justice, 11th Avenue at 59th Street, Manhattan, (212) 237-1439; shivagallery.org.