

The empathic art of Josely Carvalho

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I was already acquainted with Josely Carvalho's artist's books when we began to discuss bringing to Brazil the Connexus exhibition she had organized with Sabra Moore in New York.

Despite its great New York success, that exhibition of Brazilian and North American women artists engaged in dialogue about universal existential themes did not find easy acceptance in Brazil, from our failure to find sponsors to the limited press coverage.

Consequently, no one in Brazil appears to have been aware that such important artists as Catalina Parra, Ida Appleboog, Faith Ringgold, Liliana Porter, May Stevens e Nancy Spero had been here at all.

The main reason for this is the prejudice that exists in our country towards any event that celebrates difference. Many Brazilian women artists – successful ones especially – refused to participate in the exhibition because they did not want to be regarded as “women artists”, having found a market for themselves, as well as recognition and power, in a world controlled by men. They achieved equality without ever having thought about sexual politics or feminine identity and certainly cared little about whether or not they would go down in art history.

In her diary, Eva Hesse (another successful artist) quotes Simone de Beauvoir: “What woman essentially lacks today for doing great things is forgetfulness of herself, but to forget oneself, one must first be assured that now and for all the future, one has found oneself”.(1)

The Simone de Beauvoir quotation that so impressed Eva Hesse is from *The Second Sex* and was written about Marie Bashkirtsev, a Russian artist who, despite her twentieth century success in Paris, did not go down in the history of art written by men, having intuited that she would be erased from it. In spite of the years of ‘progress’ that separate them, her diary, like Hesse's, is a valuable document of the internal identity conflicts of a woman and **an** artist.

The perpetuation of male production as opposed to the forgetting of female production is a constant. Yolanda Mohalyi, Sheila Brannigan and Maria Martins are not often remembered;

Tarsila do Amaral and Anita Malfatti would also remain forgotten if two women (Aracy Amaral and Marta Rossetti) had not produced in-depth studies of them and their work.

Talk of sexual politics is considered piffle in Brazil, and identity problems are understood in terms of their content. According to Julia Kristeva, the search for identity is identification *in abjection*. In the search for identity thus conceived, the subject self and the object self struggle to disassociate, to stand apart, allowing individuals to see themselves as they might be seen by the “other”, and be as the “other” does not want itself to be seen.

But being in the world is a political situation and, similarly, politics are no subject for the visual arts in Brazil.

It is significant, for instance, that the rejection of multiculturalism by political discourse in our country, one of the organizing principles of Carvalho’s exhibition, is considered through Edward Said’s concept of orientalism, an attempt at self-protection from the stigma of aprioristic culpability.

Multiculturalism in Brazil is completely obscured by the desperate search for submission to the European code in order to be successful abroad, which many have managed.

Any reference to politics is considered pamphleteering and radicalism is such that even Carl Andre, after his felicitous statement that “Life is the link between art and politics”, would be accused of pamphleteering.

Political work by international artists is not disseminated in Brazil. Everyone knows Borofsky but, despite the millions of street children in Brazilian cities and the atrocities of São Paulo’s Carandiru, no one wants to hear about the magnificent work he did at MoMA in 1992 about the image of the homeless, nor even of his film *Prisoners*, made with inmates from three California prisons, of which he said:

I use my art as a tool to work out what’s going on in my life. I’m working with an inner politics here, and what’s going on in these prisons has to be worked out in my life too. What can I learn from these people? What does it mean to be free? Why do people end up in prisons?

Likewise, it is from her empathy for the world around her that Josely Carvalho constructs works pregnant with metaphor and metonymy.

Images from the Gulf War allude to images of other wars and other deaths in the East and in the West, in the First World and in the Third, in Recife and in São Paulo, presented to us as televised spectacle and cooled by a diffuse, uniform light.

Suzy Gablik warns us that “*Right now, our culture still promotes only a disenfranchised conception of the social role and political function of art: and it will continue to do so as long as we conceive of culture itself simply as an arena of individuals to achieve their own professional ends*”. (4)

On a lesser scale, the political strength of art is equally scorned in the United States, where Josely Carvalho has lived for fifteen years and where she is better known than in her native Brazil. In the last three years, however, the political power of artists has been increasingly recognized, particularly in New York’s *The Decade Show*, organized by three museums (the New Museum for Contemporary Art, the Studio Museum of Harlem, and the Museum of Contemporary Hispanic Art, which is currently closed).

Showing the high quality of many black, women and Latin American artists whose presence in museums and galleries was marginal throughout the 1980s, as well as work by other artists of equal quality who had been institutionally successful, the exhibition issued a warning to those prejudiced cultural spaces that worshipped only the “European” code: “very white, very male, very mainstream”. (5) *The Decade Show*, in which Josely Carvalho participated, worked some very visible changes in the cultural politics of hegemonic institutions, making them more flexible towards multiculturalism and the politicizing of the aesthetic object.

It was until after the warning issued by the *Decade Show* that Waldo Rasmussen managed to organize his long-dreamt-of (nearly ten years in the planning) exhibition of Latin American art. More astonishing still was the prophetic vocation of “Helter Skelter: L.A. Art in the 1990’s”, a political exhibition that revealed the violent, oppressive, dispossessed side of contemporary life and, coincidentally, closed two days before the Los Angeles race riots.

Some artists are seeing politically what politicians do not see.

Josely Carvalho's installations reveal images that are poetic, participant fragments and that remind me of words by the politician and poet Aimé Césaire:

*Beware my body and my soul
Beware above all of crossing your arms
And assuming the sterile attitude of the spectator
Because life is not a spectacle. (6)*

Her last Brazilian installation (at MASP, in February, 1993), was coldly received and drew negative critical response, yet I saw women who visited it grow mute with emotion, perplexed by the condition of women in the Third World.

Brazil needs critics who can see politically. Unfortunately, in 1993, Josely was unable to find anyone who would stand up for her work the way Oswald de Andrade stood up for Anita Malfatti's work in 1917.

And yet the two artists have something in common. What shocks us in both their work (in their exhibitions of 1993 and 1917, respectively) is their disclosure of the body's materiality and ambiguity.