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**Feminine Objects, Embodied Subjects: Lygia Pape's Feminist Aesthetics**  
Rebecca Kosick, University of Bristol

Lygia Pape was a member of the midcentury group of Brazilian artists and poets that, together, formed the neoconcrete movement in 1959. They launched officially with a manifesto that same year, though the shared investments and collaborations that defined the Rio de Janeiro-based group had already been underway for some time. Defining themselves against earlier movements in concrete art and poetry,<sup>1</sup> the neoconcretists favored embodied, participatory artworks—a mode of working that involved what they deemed “intuition.”<sup>2</sup> This was opposed, as they saw it, to the increasingly “scientificist vision”<sup>3</sup> of artmaking on the part of the concretes, who were invested in antsubjective, sometimes mathematical abstraction in both the visual arts and in poetry.

Of the neoconcretists, the most well known outside of Brazil are artists Lygia Clark and Hélio Oiticica, along with poet Ferreira Gullar, who in addition to being a poet, was an art and cultural critic and served as the group's primary theorist. Until recently, Lygia Pape was less well known, though that is changing quickly. The members of the neoconcrete group all had their own identities within the movement, but they also had a shared set of problematics that they explored from roughly the mid 1950s until the beginning of 1964's military dictatorship. These included an interest in embodied and sensory participation. The dictatorship, which for lasted 21 years,

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<sup>1</sup>. These movements in art and poetry were both marked by an interest in abstract, nonfigurative art. Many neoconcretists, including Lygia Pape, were initially part of the concrete art movement. Lygia Pape's early work with painting and printmaking is demonstrative of the hallmarks of this movement, such as the use of simple, geometric shapes and a limited range of colors.

<sup>2</sup>. Lygia Pape and Paulo Herkenhoff, “Lygia Pape and Paulo Herkenhoff: A Conversation,” *Review: Literature and Arts of the Americas* 35, no. 64 (2002): 39.

<sup>3</sup>. Ferreira Gullar, *Ferreira Gullar in Conversation with = En conversación con Ariel Jiménez* (New York: Fundación Cisneros, 2012), 69.

was partially responsible for scattering the group, and during this time, many of its members left Brazil, including Clark, Oiticica, and Gullar. Pape remained. While some critics suggest that neoconcretism ended in 1964, this essay wishes to explore the ways the practices that developed from this movement can be read as enduring longer than that brief five year period. It will argue that Pape's work in particular used an interest in subject-object confluence that arose from neoconcretism to explore what might now be understood as a mode of feminist posthumanism.

With an emphasis on embodied participation and sensory engagement, neoconcrete artworks have been interpreted in light of their relationship with phenomenology.<sup>4</sup> In the years before the group broke from the largely São Paulo-based concretists, the Rio-based contingent then known as “grupo frente” was particularly influenced by Maurice Merleau-Ponty.<sup>5</sup> The phenomenological investments of the group included the prizing of sensory experience; tactile engagement with works of art; and a resistance to the binaries of body and mind, inside and outside, and (among others) subject and object. Like the philosopher, the artists who formed the neoconcrete movement sought “the re-examination of the notions of ‘subject’ and ‘object.’”<sup>6</sup> Merleau-Ponty describes how “we have become accustomed, through the influence of the Cartesian tradition, to disengage from the object” whereas “experience of one's own body runs

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<sup>4</sup>. This includes my own work. See Rebecca Kosick, “On the Matter of the Concept: Ferreira Gullar's Relational Poetics,” *Luso-Brazilian Review* 54, no. 2 (2017).

<sup>5</sup>. They read other philosophers as well, notably Susanne Langer, who had been introduced to the neoconcretists by Mario Pedrosa—an important cultural figure and former philosophy student who also “had a strong interest in the relationship between art and life.” He helped unite and inform some of the neoconcretists' investments, and Pape has described herself as “a daughter of Mario Pedrosa.” Pape and Herkenhoff, “Lygia Pape and Paulo Herkenhoff: A Conversation,” 38.

<sup>6</sup>. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 23.

counter to the reflective procedure which detaches subject and object from each other.”<sup>7</sup> For Pape and her colleagues during neoconcretism, embodied experience gave way to a relational and nonbinary understanding of these (and other) apparent poles.

In this way, neoconcrete practices can be understood as addressing the limits of the human—their work proposes that the contours of the human subject are entangled with the contours of the nonhuman object and seeks a revised understanding of these categories. Through embodied participation, neoconcrete works of art invite “viewers” to merge with the material apparatus of the art object. In this merge, objects take on agentive properties capable of directing participants’ engagement, and participants’ bodies and senses come to contribute materially to the work of art. By elevating the importance of the senses, neoconcrete works of art also reject the hierarchies that would place mind over matter or subject over object. Furthermore, the chiasmic exchange of these poles that results from sensory participation proposes, in the first place, a nondualistic understanding of subject and object that imbues both positions with the presumed characteristics of the other.

Though Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology may have been the catalyst for such nonbinary investigations, neoconcretism can also contribute to contemporary studies in the area of new materialism that similarly reject the “dualist gesture of prioritizing mind over matter, soul over body.”<sup>8</sup> This rejection is a feature common to many of the practices that developed during neoconcretism, but in Pape’s case, there is also a sustained consideration of the ways in which nondualistic and participatory artworks can manifest a feminist understanding of subject-object relations. In Pape’s work, female and nonbinarily gendered subjects are mutually exchangeable

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<sup>7</sup>. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 230-231.

<sup>8</sup>. Rick Dolphijn and Iris van der Tuin, *New Materialism: Interviews & Cartographies* (Ann Arbor, MI: Open Humanities Press, 2012), 119.

with objects, but for her, this becomes a gesture of emancipatory, not oppressive, politics—an “embodied and embedded brand of feminist” art practice.<sup>9</sup>

Experimenting with a broad range of methods and media, Pape is known for her work in painting, sculpture, lithography, and poetry. Though the vanguard provocations of neoconcretism are sometimes understood as insufficiently capable of engaging politics, Pape has reflected that “much of my work and that of Clark and Oiticica has a political undercurrent” though she notes that, “under a dictatorship, or in a state where the political future is uncertain, you have to be oblique.”<sup>10</sup> This political undercurrent expresses itself least obliquely in Pape’s work during the dictatorship period, but as this essay argues, her later work is continuous with many of the approaches to artmaking that date to the more strictly defined neoconcrete era. By extending the embodied and nonbinary approach emphasized by her work during neoconcretism, Pape is able to produce art that challenges repressive state and gender politics. As her work shows, a “focus on embodied female subjects establishes the premises for new and more accurate analyses of power.”<sup>11</sup> Although what is now called feminist posthumanism developed as a discourse after Pape’s (post)neoconcrete experiments, her work from the late 1950s through the 1970s can help shed light on aesthetic approaches to a similar set of questions already underway in Brazilian art.

### **Nonbinary Ballet**

Pape’s two *Balés neoconcretas* (Neoconcrete Ballets), produced in 1958 and 59 are works emblematic of neoconcretism’s core features. They represent a staging, in dance, of a poem by fellow neoconcretist Reynaldo Jardim. Jardim’s poem, “alvo-olho” (target-eye), which Ferreira

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>10</sup> Pape and Herkenhoff, “Lygia Pape and Paulo Herkenhoff: A Conversation,” 45.

<sup>11</sup> Rosi Braidotti, “Posthuman Feminist Theory,” *The Oxford Handbook of Feminist Theory (Oxford Handbooks Online)* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

Gullar calls “um poema ‘rotativo’”<sup>12</sup> (a ‘rotating’ poem),<sup>13</sup> depicts the two words encircling each other in various configurations across five panels of text. This circular movement is translated into Pape’s ballets by way of dancers concealed in three-dimensional objects. In *Ballet I*, these objects consisted of red rectangles and white cylinders, both two meters tall and seventy centimeters across. *Ballet II* was performed with two pink, square panels approximately two meters square, one of which was topped with a blue stripe. *Neoconcrete Ballet I*, as Pape describes, was a kind of “leitura visual, coreografada do poema” (visual reading, choreographed by the poem).<sup>14</sup> As she recounts, “there were no people visible on the stage—only geometrical forms in motion” made possible by the dancers inside and the forms themselves, which contained “small wheels that allowed them to move across the stage.”<sup>15</sup> As with other examples of neoconcrete art, the *Neoconcrete Ballets* were participatory, embodied, collaborative, and multimedia works that helped collapse the distance between art object and participating subject.

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<sup>12</sup>. Ferreira Gullar, “Ballet Concreto, Arte Nova” *Jornal do Brasil*, August 31, 1958, 13.

<sup>13</sup>. Unless otherwise noted, translations from the Portuguese are my own.

<sup>14</sup>. Denise Mattar and Lygia Pape, *Lygia Pape: Intrinsecamente Anarquista* (Rio de Janeiro: Relume Dumará, 2003), 66.

<sup>15</sup>. Pape and Herkenhoff, “Lygia Pape and Paulo Herkenhoff: A Conversation,” 41.

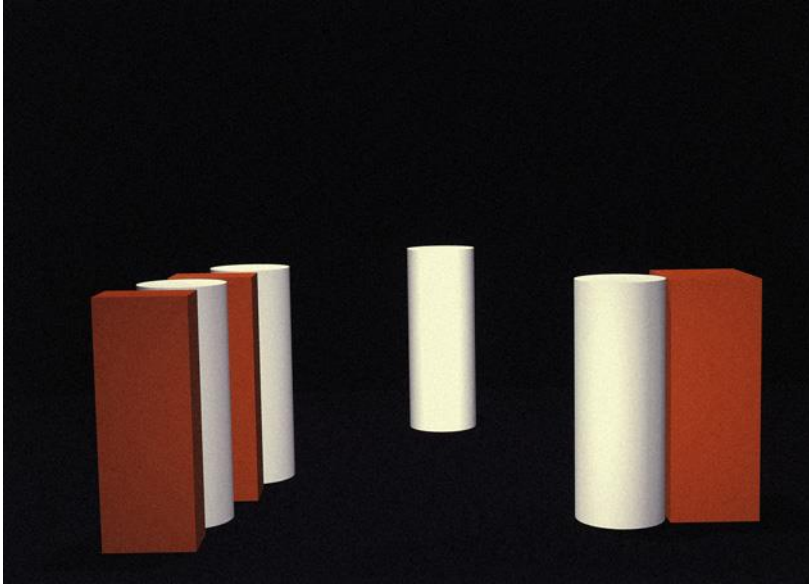


Fig. 1 Lygia Pape, *Balé Neoconcreto I*, 1958, wood, painted cloth, and eight dancers, Projeto Lygia Pape, Rio de Janeiro.

When the dancer joins with the object to perform the ballet, the limits between human and object matters collapse, and from the collapse of that binary, the work emerges. Luis Camillo Osorio traces Pape’s interest in embodied art forms to the *Neoconcrete Ballets*, where he writes that “the body takes on a more contained and austere form, as a force that organizes movement, a vital agent that can be directed.”<sup>16</sup> Here, Osorio points to the bidirectional embodiment taking shape in the *Neoconcrete Ballets*. On the one hand, the body becomes object-like. Hidden inside or behind simple geometric shapes and moving in an uncomplicated route around the stage, the dancers reflect the austerity of the objects they inhabit. At the same time, the objects, and Jardim’s poem in the case of *Ballet I*, exert their own agential influence—what Osorio here calls direction—over the bodies of the dancers. The nonhuman components of the ballets thus also contribute to determining the character and choreography of the dance.

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<sup>16</sup>. Luiz Camillo Osorio, “Lygia Pape: Experimentation and Resistance,” *Third Text* 20, no. 5 (2006): 574.

In fact, the works' nonhuman components have been characterized as specifically *live-ly* features of the *Neoconcrete Ballets*. As Osorio notes, "the movement is rectilinear, without curves, without physical or expressive exuberance, and travels through space like a subtly programmed motor, giving *life* to the geometry and body to the colours."<sup>17</sup> Light and music are attributed with a similar life-giving force by Iria Candela, who notes that these features "enlivened the austere choreography on the bare stage."<sup>18</sup> The music in *Ballet I* was provided by Jardim under the pseudonym Gabriel Artusi and *Ballet II* was accompanied by "a percussion piece consisting of just two notes played on the piano."<sup>19</sup> Though produced by human collaborators, as these critics suggest, light, music, and the movements of the forms on stage can also be credited with supplying the work with life.

This feature of the *Neoconcrete Ballets* can be said to replicate the relationship between the bodies of the dancers and the objects they inhabit during the dance—something many of the dancers actually found frustrating. None of the human collaborators are prominent in the staging of the two ballets, and their way of giving the work life is always mediated—and perhaps overshadowed—by its material components. In the *Neoconcrete Ballet I*, for example, Pape used but entirely obscured the bodies of professional dancers. She reflects that:

houve uma coisa muito curiosa: a maior dificuldade foi convencê-los a se apresentar dentro daqueles objetos, sem nunca se mostrar, já que a minha intenção era exatamente captar o motor do corpo, aquela possibilidade de ele se deslocar no espaço sem a presença da figura humana, isto é, apenas a captação do movimento que o corpo é capaz de realizar.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup>. Ibid. Emphasis mine.

<sup>18</sup>. Iria Candela, "The Risk of Invention," in *Lygia Pape: A Multitude of Forms* (New Haven, CT: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2017), 6. Emphasis mine.

<sup>19</sup>. Pape and Herkenhoff, "Lygia Pape and Paulo Herkenhoff: A Conversation," 41.

<sup>20</sup>. Mattar and Pape, *Lygia Pape: Intrinsecamente Anarquista*, 66.



(a really curious thing happened: the greatest difficulty was convincing [the dancers] to perform inside of those objects, without ever showing themselves, since my intention was just to capture the movement of the body, the possibility of it moving in space without the presence of the human figure, that is, just capture the movement the body is capable of realizing.)

Used to embodying their own bodies and using their kinetic possibilities in the service of expression, the dancers, when asked to lend themselves invisibly to nonhuman objects, protested the precise kind of subject-object confluence staged by the *Neoconcrete Ballet*.

The dancers' invisibility has led a number of critics to comment on the ways the *Neoconcrete Ballets* contribute to what Sérgio Bruno Martins calls an "effacement of the body."<sup>21</sup> As Martins writes, the Ballets "restricted dancers to the task of bestowing movement to geometric forms that entirely covered their bodies,"<sup>22</sup> limiting their expressive capacity as a result. This sentiment is echoed by Candela, who describes how *Neoconcrete Ballet I* "denied the presence of the dancers on the stage, trapped as they were inside abstract volumes that moved on wheels."<sup>23</sup>

Yet I would suggest that, rather than a denial or effacement of the body, the *Neoconcrete Ballets* can be understood as a transformation of the relationship between those bodies—human and nonhuman—that contribute to the work. In this, and other examples by Pape, the human subject and the nonhuman object come to be unified and in the process, shake loose the hierarchy that would privilege one over, or distinguish one from, the other. The prominence of geometric forms in the *Neoconcrete Ballets*, can thus be understood not as a rejection of the body, but as a rejection of the premise that the human body can—or should—be understood separately from other material bodies that comprise the work of art. As Pape herself suggests, though the human

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<sup>21</sup>. Sérgio Bruno Martins, "An Anti-Class in Avant-Gardism," in *Lygia Pape: A Multitude of Forms* (New Haven, CT: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2017), 30.

<sup>22</sup>. *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>23</sup>. Candela, "The Risk of Invention," 7.

body was invisible, it was not entirely erased in the work. Instead, in joining with the objects, the dancers were transformed into engines that enabled the dance's staging. This transformation demonstrates another way in which the *Neoconcrete Ballets* provide for a confluence of subject and object. There, poetry is the choreographer and dancers are engines. This kind of slippage—between subject and object, human and nonhuman—allows the work to come into being.

In terms of the *Neoconcrete Ballets'* relationship to gender, these explorations were still nascent in Pape's work which, like her contemporaries at the time, tended toward abstract forms over figurative practices that might represent embodied subjects of any gender. But staged as a dance, there is a temptation to read the two types of forms in *Neoconcrete Ballet I* as representative of male and female dancers, and their shapes—angular or rounded—do fall into a binary that maps onto metaphors of masculine and feminine bodies. But this binary is complicated by the way the shapes translate Jardim's poem, which contains two masculine nouns, "Alvo" (target) and "Olho" (eye). Pape describes how:

criei para a palavra "olho" quatro cilindros de 2 metros de altura, com 70cm de diâmetro, pintados de branco, e para a palavra "alvo" quatro paralelogramos pintados de zarcão: todos em madeira e com rolimãs na base, o que os fazia deslizar suavemente no palco. Assim, com o movimento geral, criava-se uma coreografia em cima do poema do Reinaldo.<sup>24</sup>

(for the word "olho" (eye), I made four white cylinders two meters tall by 70 centimeters in diameter and for the word "alvo" (target) I made four bright red parallelograms: all were wooden with wheels at the base that allows them to glide smoothly across the stage. And so, with their movement, they created a choreography from Reinaldo's poem.)

In addition to replicating the colors of a target (red and white), the objects in *Neoconcrete Ballet I* also mimic the visual features of the words they correspond to. The cylinders translate the double "o" in "olho" onto the circular shapes that form their upper and lower ends. The

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<sup>24</sup>. Mattar and Pape, *Lygia Pape: Intrinsecamente Anarquista*.

parallelograms mimic the angularity of the V—and when capitalized the, A—in “alvo”.<sup>25</sup> Thus the dance, while produced in pairs and suggestive of a gender binary, in fact takes as its referents the visual material of these two nouns, both grammatically masculine.

To the contemporary eye, *Neoconcrete Ballet II*—with its two pink squares, one topped with a blue stripe—looks more suggestive of gendered metaphors. Consisting of two panels, the work does in some ways constitute a binary duo. Still, these two panels also work to subvert their mutual opposition. For one thing, it can be argued that upon its initial staging in 1959, the colors themselves might not yet have accrued the unshakeable associations with gender they hold today.<sup>26</sup> But even when those associations are active, the distribution of color is such that pink is continuous across both panels, despite the taller one also being topped with blue. And, just as the first *Ballet* was motivated by two masculine words of a poem, the objects’ movement in the second *Ballet* was made possible, as Pape notes, by two male poets, “Antônio Fraga e [Romildo] Paiva, que realizavam apenas movimentos ortogonais (evitando assim se exporem ao público)”

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<sup>25</sup>. An emphasis on the visual and material aspects of words—including the shapes of letters—was important to concrete poetry, and later the poetic practices of neoconcretism as taken up by poets like Jardim, Theon Spanudis, and Ferreira Gullar. Pape’s own poetic and book-based artworks were often constituted by a mode of translating language into nonlinguistic symbols and shapes. See for example the *Livro da criação* (Book of creation) from 1959.

<sup>26</sup>. In her book, *Pink and Blue: Telling the Boys from the Girls in America*, Jo Barraclough Paoletti traces the development of these colors and their associations with gender. She notes that “surveys, catalog descriptions, and news articles dating from as late as the 1950s suggest that ‘a great diversity of opinion’ continued to exist nationwide on the subject of pink and blue” and that, in fact, early in the 20th century, pink was predominantly associated with boys. This began to change by the 1950s when pink and blue were more strongly associated with girls’ and boys’ clothes, respectively, but was “not universal until a generation later.” While her study is primarily focused on the United States, Barraclough Paoletti’s evidence suggests international corollaries, in part because much of the codification of these colors is bound up, as she suggests, with extra-national technological innovations such as prenatal testing and the rise of the global marketplace. Jo Barraclough Paoletti, *Pink and Blue: Telling the Boys from the Girls in America* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2012), 90.

(Antônio Fraga and [Romildo] Paiva, who only made orthogonal movements (so as not to reveal themselves to the audience)).<sup>27</sup>

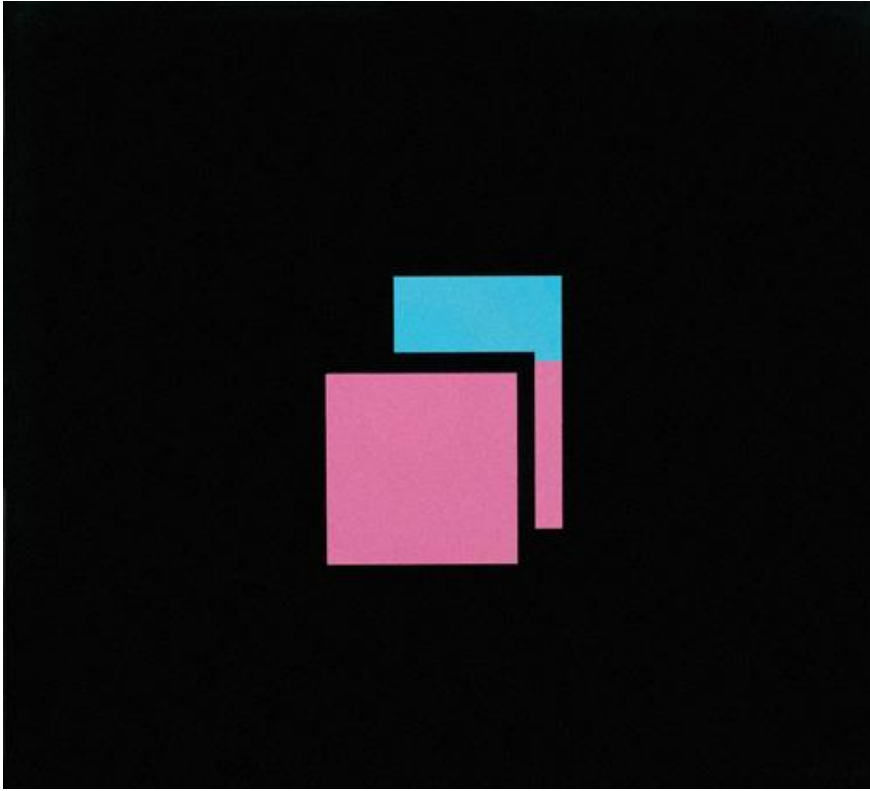


Fig. 2 Lygia Pape, *Balé Neoconcreto II*, 1959, wood, painted cloth, and two dancers, Projeto Lygia Pape, Rio de Janeiro.

The two male participants in *Neoconcrete Ballet II*, in some ways, undermine the symbolic or actual binary of male-female dance partners. But, as in *Neoconcrete Ballet I*, the second ballet avoided revealing its human participants. As a result, *Ballet II*, like its predecessor, put forward an embodied aesthetics that largely avoided the sexed or gendered body. Instead, its merge of subject and object involved the confluence of a sort of ungendered, unsexed (and ultimately unseen) human subject with the art object. As such, it can be said that the politics of gender were not yet entirely prominent in works like the *Neoconcrete Ballets*. Still, they do

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<sup>27</sup>. Mattar and Pape, *Lygia Pape: Intrinsecamente Anarquista*, 67.

demonstrate an early resistance to dualistic understandings of the relationship between subject and object, and this can be seen as starting to extend to the arena of gender.

### **Re-productive Participation**

The function of embodied participation in Pape's work was an important feature of her neoconcrete-era creations, including the *Ballets*. But the use of professional dancers in the first, and poet friends in the second, does not suggest the kind of democratization that would later be attempted by way of her participatory art. This would come to the fore more prominently a decade later, when Pape began experimenting with modes of working that invited a broader range of participants not only to merge with the art object, but to author the work as well.

Though this was a burgeoning proposal of the *Neoconcrete Ballets*, which could only come into being thanks to their human participants, their authorship remained outside the hands of those same subjects. The choreography of the ballets was co-determined, in one case, by Jardim's poem and in another, by Pape's intent to keep the human participants hidden, not by the will of each dancer alone.

This would begin to change, as Pape notes, in the late 1960s:

Quando fiz o *Ovo*, um cubo coberto com uma superfície macia onde a pessoa entra, rompe e “nasce”, estava interessada na possibilidade de uma obra sem autor. O *Divisor*, uma grande superfície de 30 x 30m, com fendas onde as pessoas enfiam suas cabeças, também foi um trabalho bastante feliz nesse aspecto. O que eu queria fazer naquele momento era um trabalho que fosse coletivo, e que as pessoas pudessem repetir sem que eu estivesse presente. O *Ovo* e o *Divisor* são estruturas tão simples que qualquer pessoa pode repetir. Ideologicamente este tipo de proposta seria uma coisa muito generosa, uma arte pública da qual as pessoas poderiam participar.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup>. Lygia Pape, Lúcia Carneiro, and Ileana Pradilla, *Lygia Pape: Palavra Do Artista* (Rio de Janeiro: Nova Aguilar, 1998), 44-45.

(When I made *Ovo* (Egg), a cube covered in a soft material that a participant enters and breaks through to be “born,” I was interested in the possibility of a work without an author. *Divisor* (Divider), a 30 x 30m cloth with slits for participants to stick their heads through, was similar in that regard. What I wanted to make at that time was a work that was collective and that people could replicate without me being present. *Ovo* and *Divisor* are such simple structures that anyone can replicate them. Ideologically this sort of proposal would be a very generous one, a public art in which people could participate.

First staged in 1967 and 68, *Ovo* and *Divisor* both attempt to democratize the participatory aspects of their subject-object confluence. No longer restricted to professional or in-group collaborators, these works had to the potential to invite a broader public to merge with the art object and, ultimately, contribute to its authorship. This takes place at two levels. On the one hand, how the participant moves through and with the material apparatus of the work determines the precise manner in which it will be instantiated. Going further, as Pape suggests, *Ovo* and *Divisor* both open themselves to replication by other participating subjects and authors—who could be anyone.

That said, it’s fair to say that the ideals of these works perhaps exceeded their practical results. As Adrian Anagnost has pointed out, “Pape consciously staged [*Ovo*] for the film camera” on the beach at Barra da Tijuca. In this version, Pape herself emerges from the work, and Anagnost calls attention to the ways that “the film presentation of Pape’s work insists upon the traditional authorial role of the artist-as-creator, whereby the meaning of the work originates in the artist’s body.”<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup>. Adrian Anagnost, “Lygia Pape in Transit: Performing Site in 1960s-1970s Rio de Janeiro,” *ASAP/Journal* 2, no. 3 (2017): 528, 531.



Fig. 3 Lygia Pape, *Ovo*, 1967, wood, paint, polypropylene, Projeto Lygia Pape, Rio de Janeiro.

This version of *Ovo* does in some ways reify the importance of Pape's perspective over that of other potential collaborators. But, with her body emerging from the cube, it also actively genders the category of subject/participant. This is a contrast with the artist's approach in the *Neoconcrete Ballets*. Rather than a hidden body, *Ovo* prioritizes the breaking-out of a visible, and visibly feminine, body.

*Ovo* and *Divisor* have also been replicated in other circumstances. And because of their participatory features, as well as their responsiveness to site and context, their potential meaning and impact are open to quite a wide array of possibilities. *Divisor*, for example, has been reenacted a number of times, in a number of contexts, and with distinct groups of participants. It also had an unrealized initial staging that differed substantially from how it has been subsequently presented. Pape recounts:

Ele foi projetado inicialmente para ser apresentado numa galeria toda branca. Eu ia aproveitar a sala para colocar um enorme toldo de plástico cheio de fendas que descia do teto e baixava em direção à entrada. Você era então obrigado a se abaixar ao entrar e depois passava a procurar uma altura razoável onde fosse possível enfiar a cabeça numa das fendas sem ficar muito incomodado.<sup>30</sup>

(Initially, it was to be staged in an all-white gallery space. I was going to use the room to install an enormous plastic awning full of slits that would have descended from the ceiling toward the entrance. When you came in, you would have to duck down and then find a height where it would be possible to stick your head through one of the slits without being too uncomfortable.)

Due to lack of funds, Pape wasn't able to realize this version of *Divisor*, which also would have blown cold air over the top of the awning and hot air underneath. Pape says this would have made participants feel “dividido térmica e fisicamente” (thermally and physically divided),<sup>31</sup> something Anagnost describes as “psychophysical manipulation in the space of the gallery” with an “undercurrent of behavioral control.”<sup>32</sup>

In this version of the work's (unrealized) staging, *Divisor* raises the specter, as Jason Farago has pointed out, of “government surveillance and limits to freedom” that were then increasing under Brazil's military dictatorship.<sup>33</sup> The dictatorship began with a coup d'état supported by the United States in 1964, and tightened significantly as that decade wore on, coinciding with 1968's *Divisor*. While many of those associated with neoconcretism left Brazil during the time, Pape remained and after aiding regime dissidents, was captured by police, held for a short time, and tortured. Under the regime, which lasted 21 years, Pape's work grew more interested in politics, though the realities of the era meant references to state oppression were

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<sup>30</sup>. Mattar and Pape, *Lygia Pape: Intrinsecamente Anarquista*, 73.

<sup>31</sup>. Ibid.

<sup>32</sup>. Anagnost, “Lygia Pape in Transit: Performing Site in 1960s-1970s Rio de Janeiro,” 524.

<sup>33</sup>. Jason Farago, “Lygia Pape's Brazil, From the Beach to the Barricades,” *The New York Times*, March 23, 2017, [https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/23/arts/design/lygia-papes-brazil-from-the-beach-to-the-barricades.html?\\_r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/23/arts/design/lygia-papes-brazil-from-the-beach-to-the-barricades.html?_r=0).



often allegorical. Also during this time, as Osorio writes, Pape “showed a more direct interest in the energy of cultural resistance and the different forms in which it was manifested on the margins of Brazilian society.”<sup>34</sup>



Fig. 4 Lygia Pape, *Divisor*, 1968, cotton sheet, slits, Projeto Lygia Pape, Rio de Janeiro.

This interest was brought to the fore in the first realized staging of *Divisor*, which took place not in the rarefied space of the gallery as had been planned initially, but in a favela near to where Pape was working at the time. She recalls that,

The first time I made this was in an area close to the slums and full of children. When I left, the children came and, first of all, stepped on the cloth. Then they discovered that they could go underneath and put their heads through the holes. Suddenly it became a completely different animal. It became this piece of cloth that was moving, walking down the hill, with these children inside.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>34</sup>. Osorio, “Lygia Pape: Experimentation and Resistance,” 579.

<sup>35</sup>. Pape and Herkenhoff, “Lygia Pape and Paulo Herkenhoff: A Conversation,” 44.

Like other of her neoconcrete colleagues, notably Oiticica, Pape collaborated with the inhabitants of Rio's favelas in the 1960s. This was a moment when both artists became increasingly interested in questions related to marginality, and in seeking artistic possibilities by way of engagement with so-deemed marginal spaces, including Rio's favelas. Oiticica and Pape both worked closely with the *passistas* (samba dancers) of the Mangueira favela and samba school. In Oiticica's case, the dancers from Mangueira, were critical collaborators in the presentation of his well-known *Parangolés*, which consisted of brightly-colored wearable cape-like structures that included messages of protest such as the well-known *P15 Parangolé capa 11* (P15 Parangolé cape 11) which reads "Eu incorporo a revolta" (I embody revolt). Pape also became increasingly involved with the Favela da Maré in the 1970s when she was teaching at Rio de Janeiro's University of Santa Úrsula. As Anagnost describes, in her teaching "Pape encouraged her students to look beyond the formal city and its canon of architectural landmarks. In addition to classroom teaching about the favelas' informal architecture, she led her students on excursions into the Favela da Maré"<sup>36</sup>

Oiticica's and Pape's engagement with individuals from Rio's favelas was wrapped up in their intention (problematic at times) to identify modes of political and cultural resistance to a stifling dictatorship and what Martins calls "a culturally constrained middle-class."<sup>37</sup> Martins describes Pape and Oiticica's involvement with the Mangueira favela, writing that "the samba school offered Pape and Oiticica, who jointly frequented Mangueira hangouts, a transformative communal blueprint" and argues that "it is hard to imagine the bourgeois public of the MAM-RJ [Museum of Modern Art, Rio de Janeiro] feeling as comfortable as either Mangueira *passistas* or

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<sup>36</sup>. Anagnost, "Lygia Pape in Transit: Performing Site in 1960s-1970s Rio de Janeiro," 540.

<sup>37</sup>. Martins, "An Anti-Class in Avant-Gardism," 32.

Oiticica's avant-garde colleagues wearing the capes the artist designed"<sup>38</sup> As Martins points out, the Mangureira *passistas* were participants in a version of Pape's *Ovo* as well, which reappears in triplicate in her 1968 film *Trio de embalo maluco* (Crazy rocking trio) where the dancers and Oiticica "emerge from the eggs playing samba instruments."<sup>39</sup>

The Mangureira *passistas* contrast with the professionally trained dancers who took part in the *Neoconcrete Ballet I*, though in both cases the participating subject's merge with the object is what instigates the work's coming-into-being. As a further contrast with the *Ballets*, in the case of both *Ovo* and *Divisor*, the participants' bodies are visible. And in both of these works, the participants themselves included individuals from local communities and, in the case of *Ovo*, dancers trained in arts native to Brazil's *favelas* rather than in received or imported schools of dance. Likewise, when *Divisor* moved from its planned staging in an art gallery to its first realized staging on the streets of Rio de Janeiro (and over the heads of local children), this carried the potential for the work to be authored in part by the very subjects more often excluded from that role.

However, it is the case that the emancipatory ideals of such works are undercut by their realization within a socially, economically, and racially divided Rio de Janeiro. Anagnost points out that in spite of the participatory gesture of works like *Ovo*, *Divisor*, or Oiticica's *Parangolés*, there was "a clear spatial and behavioral divide between onlookers and those participating in the artworks."<sup>40</sup> As she writes, "those who danced in Oiticica's sculptural, garment-like *Parangolés* and those who emerged from Pape's *Trio* of cubes— were predominantly Afro-Brazilian" and the largely white "onlookers stood mostly still in a rough circle around each work while they

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<sup>38</sup>. Ibid., 31-32

<sup>39</sup>. Ibid.

<sup>40</sup>. Anagnost, "Lygia Pape in Transit: Performing Site in 1960s-1970s Rio de Janeiro," 536.

watched the performers/participants within.”<sup>41</sup> Similarly, Anagnost notes that *Divisor* registers “tensions of a white, well-connected adult artist and poorer children of color, tensions found precisely in the site, in the ambiguous boundary between Pape’s street and the neighboring favela”<sup>42</sup>

Generously speaking, a politics that is sensitive to the confluence of art and life is legible in works like *Divisor*. As Pape has indicated, it is a “collective” work,<sup>43</sup> both in its gesture of authorship-by-participation and in its articulation as, literally, a communal movement. While the work can register (and at worst, replicate) social stratification, *Divisor* can also have an emancipatory political resonance. This was something that was capitalized on during a 2016 use of the work during a student occupation at the Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais,<sup>44</sup> where the large cape expanded the impact of the group’s protest. But this feature is contextually dependent, and *Divisor*’s staging in 2017 outside the Met Breuer on New York’s Fifth Avenue does not produce the kinds of associations with protest, resistance, or a recentering of the margins that might have been sought in other stagings of the work.

*Divisor* can and does have darker resonances as well. “After half a decade of dictatorship,” Esther Allen writes, “the immense white canvas reads as a tablecloth, and at this banquet, the smiling heads bobbing across it are the guests, the table, and the meal.”<sup>45</sup> This

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<sup>41</sup>. Ibid.

<sup>42</sup>. Ibid, 523.

<sup>43</sup>. Pape, Carneiro, and Pradilla, *Lygia Pape: Palavra Do Artista*, 45.

<sup>44</sup>. See Sálvio Humberto Penna, Facebook post, November 17, 2016, <https://www.facebook.com/salviohumberto.penna/videos/1354069841278577/>.

<sup>45</sup>. Esther Allen, “Lygia Pape’s Radical Banquet,” *The New York Review of Books*, June 12, 2017, <http://www.nybooks.com/daily/2017/06/12/lygia-pape-radical-banquet/>. As Allen also points out, the bobbing heads visible above *Divisor*’s sheet recall the cannibalistic analogies that Oswald de Andrade first forwarded in his 1928 “Manifesto antropófago” (Cannibalist manifesto). Drawing inspiration from the cannibalistic tradition of Brazil’s native Tupi people, the manifesto resisted the marginalization of Brazilian cultural production by repositioning it not

reading harkens back to Farago's claim that the work is suggestive of the surveillance state, and indeed Pape has commented on the fact that *Divisor*, while encouraging of mass movement, also restricts the motility of any single individual. As she describes, each participant is “dentro do seu escaninho, aquelas cabecinhas todas certinhas” (inside her own little spot, all the little heads facing forward), something she notes was a result of an imposed “ordem matemática, com espaços iguais entre cada fenda” (mathematical order, with equal spacing between each of the slits).<sup>46</sup> The mathematical spacing of the slits provides an example of the object's agential force, one that, in this context, generates metaphors for the stifling, restrictive control of the dictatorship that sought to determine and limit the movements of Brazilians at the time. As Anagnost points out, such control also extends to some stagings of *Divisor*, such as a filmed version from around 1970 where Pape and “a group of adults organizing the children” call into question the work's “affinities to some generic, spontaneous urban social movement.”<sup>47</sup>

In addition to the clear social divide between the artist and the children from her neighboring favela, the work is also shaped by the urban space of Rio de Janeiro. This is true of its hills—down which *Divisor* descended in its first realized staging—and its architecture, which is and was marked by unequal and inequitable development. *Divisor* and *Ovo* both call attention to social hierarchies, and their meaning is dependent both on who participates and on where, and in what context, the works are staged. The ways in which Rio's land and cityscape unite with the

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as a passive recipient of inherited European forms, but as their active devourer. Oswald de Andrade was important to the neoconcretists, and would be the subject of Pape's master's thesis in 1980. This metaphor has the potential to stake out a political position that insists Pape's work—and Brazilian art, generally—is a non-derivative, international vanguard despite, and also because of, its origins in a “marginal” country. At the same time, the metaphor can be accused of problematically invoking indigeneity. See Oswald de Andrade, “Cannibalist Manifesto,” *Latin American Literary Review* 19, no. 38 (1991).

<sup>46</sup>. Mattar and Pape, *Lygia Pape: Intrinsecamente Anarquista*, 74.

<sup>47</sup>. Anagnost, “Lygia Pape in Transit: Performing Site in 1960s-1970s Rio de Janeiro,” 523.

cloth and the participating children, then, call attention to the fact that the merge of subject and object, human and nonhuman, that is made possible by such works of art cannot be understood as a purely theoretical proposal unmarked by political and social context.

While Pape might be criticized for this blind spot, I want to call attention to it in part because it begins to point to some of the ways that Pape's work (intentionally or not) can fruitfully complicate the kind of subject-object confluence explored by the neoconcrete group. Rather than being abstract categories, when applied to *Divisor*, for example, it's clear that both subject and object are absolutely shaped by social relations. And rather than a "flat" encounter between two abstract categories rendered ontologically comparable, the work provokes reflections on the very un-flatness of Rio's geography and its social hierarchies. This kind of embodied and contextually-inflected approach to subject-object confluence will be something Pape takes up more directly in later explorations of the objectification of women.

Though *Divisor* and *Ovo* don't go as far as some of Pape's later work, they do extend Pape's engagement with gender. As John Rajchman writes, "with the membrane of the white sheet dividing individual heads from the rhythm of the collective movement beneath, or the birth out of white cubes called 'eggs,' we find the emergence of a new public, and with it, a kind of becoming feminine and becoming Brazilian."<sup>48</sup> Recalling Simone de Beauvoir's famous assertion that "one is not born, but rather becomes, woman,"<sup>49</sup> Rajchman comments on the ways in which these two works emblemize Pape's "distinctive idiom."<sup>50</sup> Via their participatory capacities and birth-related metaphors, *Divisor* and *Ovo* both constitute, locate, and feminize their human and nonhuman components.

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<sup>48</sup>. John Rajchman, "Lygia Pape's Vital Ideas," in *Lygia Pape: A Multitude of Forms* (New Haven, CT: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2017), 38.

<sup>49</sup>. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (New York: Vintage Books, 2010), 330.

<sup>50</sup>. Rajchman, "Lygia Pape's Vital Ideas," 38.

As Rajchman notes, the two works are suggestive of birth and the reproductive body, and they enable, in his words, a “becoming feminine” that extends beyond the domain of the human. I have noted that, unlike the *Neoconcrete Ballets*, *Ovo* and *Divisor* enable the participating subject to be visible, and thus embodied. An interesting corollary also takes place in the material objects that contribute to the work. While the human participants take on the role of metaphorical infants, emerging in each case through material membranes, the nonhuman, material object serves as the birth-giving apparatus. As such, each of these works suggest an overlap not just of the abstract poles of human subject and nonhuman object, but of subjects and objects that both gesture toward sexual embodiment.

The relationship between objects and female or feminine-identifying bodies has often been depicted as a disempowering one. What *Divisor* and *Ovo* both contribute to this discourse is the possibility that, rather than such bodies being reduced to the (lowly) status of objects, objects of art might productively benefit from their becoming embodied and, in Rajchman’s words, “feminine.”<sup>51</sup> In these works, this happens with a continued emphasis on a nondualistic understanding of subject and object—one that replaces an abstract exploration of this exchange with an embodied and culturally embedded one. *Divisor* and *Ovo* both call attention to social hierarchies and to the ways in which subjectivity may be unevenly distributed as a result of such inequities. In this way, they can be understood as instigating a critique of the very notion of a universal subject, in favor of an understanding of subjectivity as something that is entwined with a range of human and nonhuman matters.

Both works’ meaning is dependent on the ways in which subject and object come together—on who participates, how participants are able to engage with the works, and on the

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<sup>51</sup>. Ibid.

context in which the works are staged. Their references to birth and sexuality likewise assert an embodied and contextually-inflected subject and object. Because *Divisor* and *Ovo* extend their reproductive functions to what might be considered the nonhuman components of each work, they also begin to suggest a version of sex and sexual reproduction that, in Braidotti's words, "is capable of deterritorializing gender identity."<sup>52</sup> The "becoming feminine"<sup>53</sup> of these works is a becoming that extends without binary limits through and beyond the domain of the human.

### Living Objects

A sex and gender-invested exploration of subject-object confluence would continue to be a prominent feature of Pape's practice in the years that followed. While in the early days of neoconcretism, the joining of subject and object offered an opportunity to make a philosophical problem a material reality, Pape's later work would develop more overt explorations of the stakes of this interest. One such example is her short film *Eat Me*, from 1975. The film, whose soundtrack includes the refrain "A gula ou a luxúria" (Gluttony or lust), shows a hair-rimmed, lipsticked mouth opening and closing, smoking, and revealing teeth and a tongue that sensuously moves around a small colored object. This scene is cut in increasing frequency with a second scene depicting a hairless mouth eating a sausage with mustard. Pape describes the film as one in which she "estava ironizando o fato de a mulher se transformar em objeto"<sup>54</sup> (was ironizing the act of a woman transforming herself into an object). In this way, *Eat Me* continues to engage with an exploration of subject-object confluence, and the film's highly, but not actually, sexual content continues to erode more binaries than that of subject and object alone.

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<sup>52</sup>. Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, 99.

<sup>53</sup>. Rajchman, "Lygia Pape's Vital Ideas," 38.

<sup>54</sup>. Pape, Carneiro, and Pradilla, *Lygia Pape: Palavra do artista*, 51. *Eat Me* (in English) is the original title of the work.



*Eat Me*'s ironic reframing of the woman-as-object relates to Pape's claim that, after the 1967 exhibition "Nova objetividade brasileira," (New Brazilian Objectivity) at which she showed her work alongside other neoconcretists including Clark and Oiticica, she was interested in working with "objetos vivos" (living objects.)<sup>55</sup> These took different shapes in her work from that point on, including in the *Caixa das baratas* (Box of cockroaches), which she showed at the 1967 exhibition (and also bore the subtitle "Gluttony or Lust"). An allegory for life under the dictatorship, the *Caixa das baratas* consisted, as the title says, of a box of cockroaches. In this example, the "living" objects were in fact dead. But the *Caixa das formigas* (Box of ants) that was also shown at the exhibition, and also bore the inscription "Gluttony or lust," did in fact contain live ants (and a piece of raw meat). They subsequently escaped and, as Claudia Calirman describes, "contaminavam outras peças da mostra, principalmente obras de artistas masculinos"<sup>56</sup> (contaminated other pieces in the show, mainly works by male artists). The *Caixa das formigas* demonstrates neoconcretism's interest in erasing binaries, particularly between the interior and exterior of the work of art. As Calirman notes, when the ants escaped, they created a sculpture in which these poles "se tornavam indistinguíveis"<sup>57</sup> (became indistinguishable from one another). Gender-related binaries are less overtly addressed in the *Caixas*. These will take on more importance in later works that reference "Gluttony or lust," especially *Eat Me*, which develops Pape's investigations of the relationship between humans and (living) objects.

Like many of Pape's works, *Eat Me* is a series. As Osorio points out, "we see it developing into a film (1975), an exhibition of erotic objects (1976) and finally a book-sculpture

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<sup>55</sup>. Pape, Carneiro, and Pradilla, *Lygia Pape: Palavra do artista*, 50.

<sup>56</sup>. Claudia Calirman, "Lygia Pape: A Gula e a Luxúria," *Invenções da mulher moderna: Para além de Anita e Tarsila* (São Paulo: Instituto Tomie Ohtake, 2017)," 183.

<sup>57</sup>. Ibid.

(2001).”<sup>58</sup> Each of these offers its own feminist take on the transformation of a sexually embodied subject into an object. In the version of the 1976 exhibition displayed at MAM-Rio, which carried the subtitle “Gluttony or lust,” *Eat Me* included, as Pape recounts, “objetos de sedução, que eram saquinhos mais ou menos do tamanho de saquinhos de pipoca, cheios de objetos, como calendário de mulher nua, cabelo gênero pentelho, loções afrodisíacas, amendoim, espelinhos com imagens, textos feministas (como se fosse uma contradição daquilo tudo)”<sup>59</sup> (objects of seduction, that were little sacks about the size of popcorn bags, filled with objects like a nudie calendar, pubic hair, aphrodisiac creams, peanuts, little mirrors with images on them, feminist texts [as if they were a contradiction to all the rest]). These texts were not a contradiction, though, and were included among the other “objects of seduction” that filled the sacks in the gallery, inviting onlookers to, ultimately, be seduced by feminist writing as well.

In this version, seduction is attributed primarily to objects, which highlights the ways Pape’s work during this period continued exploring the overlaps between human subjects and nonhuman objects, around the axis of sexuality. The feminist literature included in the exhibit also reveals an overt attempt on the part of the artist to engage audiences in the cause of women’s emancipation. Writing about the film version of *Eat Me*, Calirman describes how it “promove a causa da emancipação feminina pela liberação de sua sexualidade” (advances the cause of women’s liberation through liberation of sexuality), noting that the film was in fact “muito avançado para a época e ainda mais ousado considerando que o país estava sob o regime militar estritamente conservador” (very advanced for its time, and even more daring considering that the country was then ruled by a strictly conservative military regime).<sup>60</sup> The same can be said for the

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<sup>58</sup>. Osorio, “Lygia Pape: Experimentation and Resistance,” 582.

<sup>59</sup>. Mattar and Pape, *Lygia Pape: Intrinsecamente Anarquista*, 84.

<sup>60</sup>. Calirman, “Lygia Pape: A Gula e a Luxúria,” 184.

exhibition, which in its display of a range of seductive objects, stages a connection between sexuality and feminist theory during the oppressive era.

Though the film and exhibition versions of *Eat Me* are differently participatory than other examples of Pape's work, there are ways in which both the film itself and the subsequent exhibition of *Eat Me* did involve engaging with a broad public audience. For example, the exhibition at MAM-Rio was preceded by another at the Galeria Arte Global. Claudia Calirman recounts how this initial exhibit was promoted with “um commercial na TV Globo, em horário nobre” (a commercial that ran during prime time on [major Brazilian TV network] TV Globo).<sup>61</sup> It aired the portion of the *Eat Me* film that included the mouth sucking on (what looks like) a precious stone. It caused an enormous uproar and the gallery ended up closing the exhibition. It later moved on to MAM-Rio.

With its partial airing on a major network during prime time, it's possible to say that *Eat Me* involved some degree of public participation. While not the kind of haptic engagement with material objects demonstrable in her earlier works, *Eat Me*'s airing on television benefitted from engaging with an audience beyond the smaller, controlled groups of participants who took part in works such as *Ovo* or the *Neoconcrete Ballets*. Likewise, for the MAM-Rio exhibition, as Calirman writes, Pape projected “uma imagem dela sinalizando sedutoramente com o dedo indicador em sua frente, convidando os transeuntes a vir para a exposição” (an image of herself seductively signaling with her forefinger out in front of her, inviting the passersby to come to the exhibition).<sup>62</sup> Although this was later censored by the museum on the grounds that it “distráia os motoristas e interferia no tráfego da cidade”<sup>63</sup> (would distract drivers and disrupt the city's

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<sup>61</sup>. Ibid.

<sup>62</sup>. Ibid, 185.

<sup>63</sup>. Ibid.

traffic), the exhibition included other ways of inviting and engaging its public. For example, all of the items displayed at the exhibition were inexpensively available for purchase, making them accessible to buyers outside of the wealthy. The *Eat Me* exhibition did take place in a gallery space, perhaps undermining its ability to attract an audience outside of MAM-Rio's typical crowd. But, many of its features do demonstrate an attempt to identify unconventional opportunities for encouraging audience participation. And *Eat Me* also demonstrates a growing investment in a feminist approach to sexing the human subject who becomes objectified in the work of art.



Fig. 5. Lygia Pape, *Eat Me* (still), 1975, 35 mm film, Projeto Lygia Pape, Rio de Janeiro.

Claudia Calirman writes that, in the film, the two mouths

se alternam com velocidade crescente, em progressão aritmética. Pape editou o filme matematicamente, cortando as seções com fita métrica. Primeiro, ela dividiu em duas partes, depois cada metade foi cortada em duas novamente e assim por diante, em ritmo crescente. Na trilha sonora, uma voz feminina sensual diz em português, inglês, francês, alemão e espanhol a frase “A gula ou a luxúria?”

(alternate with increasing speed, according to a mathematical progression. Pape edited the film mathematically, cutting the sections with measuring tape. First, she divided them in two parts, later each half was cut in two again, and so on, in a rhythmic crescendo. On

the soundtrack, a sensual feminine voice says in Portuguese, English, French, German, and Spanish a phrase “Gluttony or lust?”<sup>64</sup>

The film *Eat Me* is not participatory in the same way that some of Pape’s earlier works were. However, like many films, *Eat Me* does involve the participation of its actors, Artur Banio and Cláudio Sampaio. And it does continue to explore a nonbinary approach to defining the relationship between human subjects and nonhuman objects. The film also intersects with other through lines of Pape’s work. For example, its method of mathematical scene-cutting demonstrates a relationship with *Divisor*’s mathematically-spaced slits, as well as the artist’s early association with concrete painting, which often incorporated mathematical or geometric approaches to layout and structure.

The mathematical approach to structuring the film also points to one of the ways in which *Eat Me* upholds Pape’s interest in subject-object confluence. Here, a series of technologically mediated cuts made to the film itself are what build toward climax. This highlights the ways in which human subjects and nonhuman objects both contribute to the film’s ironic re-presentation of women’s objectification, and to a distributed plane of sexuality. Notable for the concerns of this essay, the film also proposes a version of subject-object confluence that, unlike the generic and unsexed version staged in the *Neoconcrete Ballets*, puts forward a “notion of corporeal materiality by emphasizing the embodied and therefore sexually differentiated structure of the speaking subject.”<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>64</sup>. Ibid, 183.

<sup>65</sup>. Rosi Braidotti in Dolphijn and Tuin, *New Materialism: Interviews & Cartographies*, 33. In the film, a sexually differentiated subject can also be heard speaking; the final climactic moment is “abruptamente interrompido pela propaganda de uma concha de cozinha” (abruptly interrupted by a commercial for a soup ladle) narrated by “uma voz feminina” (a feminine voice).

Pape focuses on women in her description of the film's ironic objectification, but *Eat Me*, in its exploration of subject-object confluence, also provides a further opportunity for dissolving gender binaries. The film alternates between two mouths, one surrounded by hair and the other hairless. Many critics have deemed these the masculine mouth and the feminine mouth. However, like the apparently gendered duo in *Neoconcrete Ballet II*, whose opposition is complicated by its male participants and color scheme, the opposition of binary gender categories in *Eat Me* is complicated by several factors. For instance, two male actors lend their mouths to the film. So the very objectification of women that Pape seeks to ironize in fact involves the objectification of men. And, as Vanessa Rosa Machado has pointed out, though one mouth is surrounded by hair and the other is not, both of these mouths are suggestive of the vagina.<sup>66</sup>

If the sexualized reduction of a woman's body to parts is what results in its disempowering objectification, something quite distinct takes place in the *Eat Me* film. With visible teeth, the mouths recall the *vagina dentata*, linking (as the refrain "Gluttony or lust" does) eating and the threat of sexual consumption. In this way, the film depicts, as Pape has noted, "a mulher como objeto de consumo" (the woman as an object of consumption)<sup>67</sup>— something that can be doubly understood as both a woman who is consumed as an object of sexual desire, and as a woman who is herself an object *that* consumes. Here then, Pape charts a path for a revised understanding of the relationship between objects and women, one that sees a potential for empowerment in objectification and presents an embodied, but fluid depiction of sexual difference.

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<sup>66</sup>. Vanessa Rosa Machado, "Arte e Espaço Público Nos Filmes de Lygia Pape," *Revista de pesquisa em arquitetura e urbanismo* 7, no. 1 (2008): 103.

<sup>67</sup>. Mattar and Pape, *Lygia Pape: Intrinsecamente Anarquista*, 84.

Pape's work at large shows an interest in proposing challenges to the divide between subject and object by mutually constituting them in a work of art. *Eat Me* represents a particularly productive exploration of the nonbinarism of subject and object in part because of the ways it posits the subject as embodied and sexed, without reifying binaries in the arena of gender. Braidotti writes that "because the gender system captures the complexity of human sexuality in a binary machine that privileges heterosexual family formations and literally steals all other possible bodies from us, we no longer know what sexed bodies can do."<sup>68</sup> Counter to such theft, *Eat Me*, with its embodied approach to subject-object confluence, provides an opportunity, as Braidotti goes on to say, "to rediscover the notion of the sexual complexity that marks sexuality in its human and posthuman forms."<sup>69</sup> *Eat Me* presents an exploration of this complexity and continues Pape's decades-long investigation into the productive indistinguishability of subject and object. This is made possible not by renouncing the avant-garde provocations or theoretical investments of earlier neoconcrete experiments, but by expanding their scope. As a result, her work contributes an important reminder that nondualistic approaches to conceptualizing (and making) objects of art can be fertile ground for resistant and emancipatory politics.

Braidotti has taken note of some feminists' suspicion toward "deconstructing a subject-position, which historically they never gained the right to."<sup>70</sup> but argues that there are "opportunities offered by the decline of the unitary subject position upheld by Humanism"<sup>71</sup> that can be taken up by a posthuman approach. She describes how, "since the second feminist wave of the 1970s, feminist interdisciplinary knowledge production took to task the universalism, the

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<sup>68</sup>. Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, 99.

<sup>69</sup>. Ibid.

<sup>70</sup>. Ibid, 47.

<sup>71</sup>. Ibid, 54.

binary structure of thought, and the teleological vision of progress that are built into the humanist project of human emancipation.”<sup>72</sup> This essay argues that Lygia Pape’s aesthetic practice constitutes a similar attempt at seeking emancipation by way of an approach that we may call, in retrospect, posthuman.

Like those working under the umbrella of feminist posthumanism, Pape demonstrates a commitment to overturning binary structures of thought—particularly those that adhere around subject and object, and in the context of gender. Where apparent gender binaries might present themselves—such as in the *Neoconcrete Ballet* or *Eat Me*—Pape finds opportunities for complicating their mutual opposition and inviting fluid and nondualistic alternatives. Her work also offers critiques of the “unitary subject position upheld by Humanism.”<sup>73</sup> This presents itself most strongly in her investigations of a mode of subject-object confluence that resists the generic or universal in favor of embodied and contextually embedded subjects whose complex economic, social, or sexual relations inflect the meaning of the works they help to compose. This arises, in part, by way of her oeuvre’s frequent emphasis on participation, as seen in works such as *Divisor* or *Ovo*. But, it also manifests strongly in the *Eat Me* exhibition and film, which takes up a more direct exploration of the ironies and opportunities afforded by the confluence of objects with sexually embodied subjects.

It is notable that Pape’s work predates much of the discourse around feminist posthumanisms that would develop later, and that her aesthetic investigations took place in Brazil and (in part) during years of military dictatorship. Braidotti comments that posthumanism “is the opposite of the grandiose and aggressive universalism of the past, which is replaced by a

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<sup>72</sup> Braidotti, “Posthuman Feminist Theory.”

<sup>73</sup> Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, 54.



situated and accountable perspective.”<sup>74</sup> She goes on to specifically cite posthumanism’s potential to displace Europe “as the alleged centre of the world.”<sup>75</sup> What Pape’s work shows us, is that in Brazil from the late 1950s through the 1970s, the artist was contributing a lively set of aesthetic explorations that not only echo, in advance, many of the values later prized by posthumanism, but have the potential to contribute to shaping the discourse going forward.

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<sup>74</sup>. Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, 53.

<sup>75</sup>. *Ibid.*

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