

Gretta Sarfaty`s experimental exercises and transgressions in Auto-Photos, Transformations and A Woman`s Diary – Mirtes Marins de Oliveira.

The debate about the stereotyping of the image of women in the media and in the field of artistic product took off in the Western world in the 60`s and 70`s in the context of countercultural criticism of modernist assumptions. Such debate was inserted in the proliferation of technological means, as well as in the growing interest in its expressive possibilities. The feminist agenda has been received with prejudices since then and still needs to be considered. In Brazil, the issue was covered by the dictatorial environment of censorship and violence, not only by the repressors but also by a society that was largely conservative and thus concerned with maintaining the status quo.

Nowadays, the return of this struggle with much more complex contours reinforces the need to look at and revisit the courage of women artists of that period, who were very active, suffered antagonisms, and paid a high price from a personal and social point of view to make sure their voices were heard. This is the case of Gretta Sarfaty and her work.

Thus, by returning the book *Auto-Photos*, a work by Sarfaty, to the circuit, Central Gallery fulfills a fundamental initiative to provide a contemporary artistic and feminist beacon in terms of historical, critical, and programmatic rescue, bringing new insights to the debate on the social construction of gender while examining the role of art and feminism in this sphere. The contact with the artist, in full activity, and with her work also allows us to reflect on the nuances, contradictions, and actualities of legitimate historical struggles, which still deal with the permanence of stereotypes and prejudices that are propagated in the regime of networks and in new political, economic, and social configurations.

Auto-Photos came about from Sarfaty`s experiences with the language of video, in a commercial recording on the Globo Network to publicize and exhibition at Galeria Arte Global. In that participation the artist realized that the body in movement and its representations were a field of interest for her artistic work. Restless, the artist incorporates the curiosity to master new technologies and languages and starts working with photography, which had not yet reached its present-day popularity. This territory of choice focuses on an environment of questioning artistic action`s definitions and limits, its role in society, and even its expressive validity and ambiguity.

The acute perception of the circuit`s operation made Sarfaty seek involvement in the artistic scene in exhibitions and actions that denote her alignment with the experimentalism of the 1970`s, especially with body art as it was called at the time. As an example, we have her participation in the provocative and libertarian event organized by Ivald Granato in a parking lot on the street Rua Augusta, Mito e Vadios, in 1978, which also includes Hélio Oiticica, Anna Maria Maiolino, Artur Barrio and many others interested in inciting a critical reflection on the I Bienal Latino-Americana, which intended to aggregate the production of the continent and occurred in the same year and around the same theme as *Mito e Magia*.

Sarfaty`s memories of that decade are vivid and full of detail and allow contact with the history of important agents who, absent today, collaborated to consolidate the artistic axis between São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro. The axis was linked to the circuit and to international debates, in which the artist also participated energetically, organizing and

experiencing historical performances that still await greater attention and in-depth study, such as the opera *La Maja-Goya Time*, 1985, New York in which over eighty artists participated. Conceptually elaborated by Sarfaty and produced by the artists Butch Morris and Sandro Dernini, *Goya Time* is a multi-disciplinary event that included in its script the experimental melting pot of the period, seeking the historical and critical deconstruction of the artistic field.

Auto-Photos also marks the partnerships with other local historical personalities, such as Julio Abe Wakahara, an extremely important figure in the artistic system for his proposals in the fields of architecture and art, with whom she studied photography. And with Masao Ohno, the editor of the work, whose presence at the time was a guarantee of graphic design and quality content. In the publication Ohno acted as a stimulator and promoter of young artistic production. In this way, republishing *Auto-Photos* is also recovering part of the historical construction and contemporary art in the country of the pioneers who invested energy and work in an effort to consolidate a new circuit in a globalized model.

The volume intersperses three series of photographs, *Auto-Photos* (1975), *Transformations* (1976), and *A Woman's Diary* (1977), with the opportune addition of material made but not published in the period due to its transgressive character, a quality which remains current today.

The *Auto-Photos* series is a recurring theme for artists of that generation. The repetitive stereotype, therefore mechanical, that frames the image of women in mass media, is on the horizon of other young artists such as Cindy Sherman, Hannah Wilke, Regina Vater, Martha Rosler, Marcella Campagnano, Katalin Ladik, Leticia Parente, Ana Mendieta, Renate Bertlmann and all the artists who were part of the *Womanhouse* (1972) exhibition group, among them Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro. In different works, the proposal for a feminist approach in the artistic field also pointed to and overthrow of the conceptions that crystallized the image of the Western Women. Overcoming this barrier was a minimum condition to act in a world that considered the Cold War vectors as something overcome. In the works of these different artists, a critical and sarcastic observation of the models that characterize the supposedly universal roles in the definition of a feminine essence is operated, nothing more than a flat emblem of the historical function denoting the exploited, oppressed, and marginalized condition of women in different places and moments. Here, perhaps, it is appropriate to expand upon Cindy Sherman's comment on her own work, which refuses to define her productions as self-portraits.

These artists all represent, deceive, and operate under the empty cover of what women's role would be in a world centered on male power, in which it is objectified. In *Auto-Photos*, Sarfaty embodies an actress role and already outlines what will be radicalized in the other series, with distortions that are still bodily exercises in a conceptual framework that uses the background of female images in mass media.

In *Transformations*, the exercises of the contorting face gains the technical support of manipulated photography that stretches and inflates but never intends to destroy its formal coherence. In a sense, she seems to want to breathe a breath of emotional life into the empty shell of the woman's image in the media by enlarging and distorting certain parts of the body, in particular organs of sense – eyes, nose, ears, and mouth. In this regard, the preponderance of the mouth in this photographic series points both to its

place of transit of food, therefore important for the production of vital energy, and to its quality as an expressive organ, an exposure of what is thought and felt. In these images the previously stereotyped woman gains human condition based on the most direct sensoriality, taste. But the prominent presence of teeth and tongue is also intriguing, since they instigate the emergence from childhood, of involuntary memories that we cannot get around and that dominate us because they are inscribed in our bodies.

With this view, in a game of transgression and retreat to the limits of the body, Sarfaty adds another value to her work by aligning this production with her interest in the historical expressionist matrix. Different expressionisms are reference and motivation for the artists in the languages of drawing and painting – Kokoschka, Munch, De Kooning, among others, as well as cinema, its light and dark and its dense atmosphere. Her face, which appears initially interpreting the buzzwords about women on magazine covers, films soap operas and advertisements, gains in Transformations, with photographic deformation, a monstrous, a desperate, and torn character. It also evidences a stereotype of madness, another face of the oppression suffered by people who are enclosed physically or in social roles. Parallelism and dialogue with the work of Francis Bacon are inevitable when affirming the animality of the body that dispenses with protocols, hierarchies, and social rules in narratives that show the fetish image of women in the process of fragmentation and controlled transmutation. Undoubtedly, the relationship with video is preserved in the presentation of images that seek to capture displacements and changes in physical, emotional, and social states.

In the series A Woman`s Diary Sarfaty seeks the experimental exercise and transgressor of the domain of the body, its manipulation and sensual release by using unusual cutouts and perspectives in the treatment of the image of the photographed body. It presents parts of her body, treated as a sculptural and textural element captured in action by the photographic record. But the proximity between camera and photographed subject is intimate, possibly at the limit of flattening, evoking the experiences that Hudson Jr, also fascinated by the image of the naked body in performance, would make in the following decade. The plasticity of manipulated matter is reinforced and captured in the photographs, and its formal ambiguities provoke the curiosity of the observer, who is faced with both unusual relationships and components of daily relationships between bodies at the same time. As a derivation it is understood, by these images, that the artist`s territory is this one that mixes art and life, without borders, always trying to transgress imposed formulas and rules. The model portrayed – the artist herself – refuses and plays with the patterns that would incite desire from a tradition centered on artistic narratives of male matrix. Again, it presents the game of expansion to the frontiers of the recognizable, but never loses its unity and cohesion.