

The structure makes the body, the body remakes the structure

Ana Maria Maia

BODY AGAINST THE GRID

*Back in Brazil after 30 years, the artist GRETTA SARFATY
twists her own body in photographic series that
embody the feminist counterculture of the 1970s –
re-emerging in the present days, being more contemporary than ever.*

In a large cube composed of grid-like layers, in both vertical and horizontal stripes, Gretta Sarfaty presents herself and the presumption of her work. Wearing a red leotard, with loose hair, she makes gestures, sometimes meticulous, sometimes energetic: she moves in search of gaps. The structure creates boundaries for her body, offering her support but also limitations. The artist's rupture with the structure, in turn, proves to be possible to dribble, tear and transform the structures whenever necessary, suggesting utopias that go beyond the individual scale and reverberate in the collectivity.

The great cube in which the performance *Modification and Appropriation of an Autonomous Identity (1980)* takes place, in partnership with Elvio Becheroni (1934-2000), becomes a metaphor for social life and its founding conciliation between freedom and rules. The cube can be moral, which imposes common judgments on the routine of each person. It can be industry, which reproduces and unifies by consumption. It can be technology, which organizes systems of mindset and work. It can be hegemonic media, which regulates narratives and subjectivities. It can even be the history of art, which, at least until modernity, but in some aspects to this day, abstains in the face of Eurocentric and phallic practices. It is precisely from and despite this geometry filled with symbolism that Gretta situates her construction of body and image.

Since the mid-1970s, she has used several art forms, such as photography, engraving, painting, performance and video in order to criticize women's representations in society. Using militancy arguments prevailing at the time or the resumption of the debate in recent decades, there is no doubt that it is worth interpreting this production in light of feminism, although Gretta has never formalized her connection to the movement. Born in Greece and raised in Brazil. White and of rich origin, stunningly beautiful, married and mother of three at the age of 27. The artist had to break from the family expectations and let go of the roles she was supposed to play in her domestic and professional life. Confrontation and rupture have marked her personal journey, which to some extent justifies the autobiographical character of her work.

However, her contestatory spirit also had to do with a project shared between generations in the context of counterculture. In the confluence of gender, racial, environmental, anti-war and anti-capitalism struggles, attempts to counter the mechanisms of power responsible for safeguarding the status quo were cultivated in different parts of the world. In Brazil, as in other Latin American countries, there was also the need to resist against the civil-military dictatorship (1964-1985), which maintained a long-term state of authoritarianism and human rights violations.

For some Brazilian artists and cultural agents, the best way to state their positioning in their works was to make them tension and even extrapolate the limits

of institutions and the art market, both inevitably connected by their councils and networks with the regime and with their supporters. In addition to dematerializing traditional materials – in line with the argument coined by American critic Lucy Lippard in 1972 – it was worth acting in groups or anonymously, mimetizing themselves into the crowd, proposing ephemeral activities in public spaces, sharpening a tactical sense to circumvent censorship.

These were the environment and practices that informed the beginning of Greta Safety's career in São Paulo. In 1978, she participated in the *happening Mitos Vadios (Vagabond Myths)*, convened by Ivald Granato (1949-2016), her former teacher. This was the result of a day of demonstrations in a parking lot on Augusta street. In response to the *1st Latin American Biennial*, which was on display, the event brought together dozens of artists, including Hélio Oiticica (1937-80), Lygia Pape (1927-2004), Regina Vater (1943-), Anna Maria Maiolino (1942-), Gabriel Borba (1942-) and Artur Barrio (1945-), in addition to the common public. Greta had already been showing works in spaces dedicated to experimental art, such as The Petite Galerie, by Franco Terranova (1923-2013), in Rio de Janeiro, and the Museum of Contemporary Art of the University of São Paulo (MAC USP). The last one used to be a true creation laboratory in its early years, while directed by Walter Zanini (1963-78). This circuit was responsible for fostering production in new or even underexplored means for artistic purposes, such as: happenings, performances, urban interventions, video, photography and multi-media (artist books, photocopies, stamps or other reproducible media) suitable for conveying conceptual proposals and process records, in addition to popularizing access to art.

When invited by Terranova to perform a solo exhibition at the Global Art Gallery in São Paulo in 1976, Greta Sarfaty presented a set from the *Metamorphosis* series (1973-79), composed of quick and vigorous observation drawings, which foreshadowed the restlessness of a figuration still to come other ways in the artist's trajectory. The place belonged to Globo TV and so its listings used to be broadcast during the channel's breaks. The commercial became an opportunity for the artist to investigate television and, through testing spontaneous and non-aesthetically pleasing faces in the footage, to create a counter narrative in a structurally male media means, which was responsible for stereotyping, eroticizing and objectifying women.

The episode was a trigger for *Auto-Photos* (1977-86), the first series of a fundamental roundup of works conceived at that time at first in photography, which conveyed both accusation and mockery. With a minimal characterization made of makeup and costumes, the artist posed for foreground portraits, performing various female types. She played roles as a model and scene director, also the leading role of someone who, in that photoshoot (and in life), has broken paradigms and was everything or almost everything she wanted to be. In the final result of the series, each type was approached by means of nine snapshots arranged side by side in an orthogonal grid. The form of organization suggests a sense of multiplicity and mirroring: they might relate to different women connected by gender-related issues or to different archetypes of women and conforming complexities that can be found in a single person. Therefore, the sequences also achieve the didactic goal of declaring the portrait as a less assertive and more speculative exercise.

The desire to raise suspicions on a repertoire of representations motivated Greta Safety's research in photographic post-production, for which she had a fundamental dialogue with the architect and professor Julio Abe Wakahara (1941-2020). These

researches culminated in *Transformations* (1976-86), a simultaneous series and somehow complementary to Auto-Photos. Appropriating analog portraits that she had already expanded, the artist set out to produce even more provocative images. By folding specific parts of paper and fixing them with metal pins, she concluded that it could create distorting effects on the image of her face. Photographed again, the manipulated portraits lost human contours, gained large ears, flattened foreheads and cheeks flattened to the sides. With extremely rudimentary methods, as in surrealist collages, Gretta's craft parasitized photography as a technique and belief system, a system that has underpinned the false promise that a capture of the real can be feasible, when it is always subjective, relative and ideological.

Among the many myths that patriarchy has formulated in history about women, there is one in particular that this work brings to light. It is the stigma of madness, a classic attempt to silence insurgent personalities through a diagnosis that delegitimizes them even before coming across their arguments, or precisely not to. Despite showing lighter and funnier scenes, which show with lucidity the formal manipulations of the artist's still smiling physiognomy, the series gains dramatic intensity and revisits stereotypes built in common sense to attest to female insanity. For instance: the wide-eyed and shaggy hair of the witch, the air suspended in the throat of the hysterical, the suffragist's resilient affront to the veto... all wide-open mouths framed in close-up, their cries echoing in many images, even being voiceless. The way it is photographed, however, these gestures preserve ambivalences. It can relate to both the emotional torment fabrications projected on women as to the reinstatement of a power that is inalienable to them.

With these photographs and their unfoldings, Gretta Sarfatty volunteered to dispute a social imaginary representation of female madness. The migration of the series to drawing and engraving in dry tip prolonged the time of the artist's relationship with the scenes depicted, allowing her to delve even deeper into themes and taboos that they rise. In painting (*Transformation paintings [1975-7]*), this experience added the breaking of naturalism through fields of vibrant colors, which converse with the stripping of pop-art and the new figuration, but above all, sharpen the expressiveness of the represented figure. Gretta has taken on her drama and affections through this chromatism, applied in loose and apparent brushstrokes. If the pictorial gesture resists in art history as an index of authorship, it was invested here to demarcate the tone and standpoint in a public debate. After performing, recording and editing these gender constructions, the artist colored them herself. She thus seems to have spent the time and her own pleasure in making herself up and enjoying the freedom to be monstrous.

Any woman, every woman

Throughout the 1970s, several female artists carried out experiments using their own bodies to establish their critical view on cultural castrations related to the condition of being a woman. In Brazil, as well as Gretta, names such as Vater, Maiolino, Letícia Parente (1930-91), Iole de Freitas (1945-), Sonia Andrade (1935-), Anna Bela Geiger (1933-) and Vera Chaves Barcellos (1938-) have made iconic works in various media, video art to be highlighted. The emergence at that time of the first portable cameras enabled the exercise of self-filming and, consequently, of breaking hegemonies and hierarchies of audiovisual discourses in the institutional or industrial spheres.

It is curious to note that, in these works, discussions about identity and

resistance to forms of standardization used to be focus on the faces of artists, or at least imposed to them. If this is the point where subjectivities are recognized and negotiated, what would then fit the rest of the body and, consequently, faceless representations? Distinguished in this aspect from all the other works of Gretta Sarfaty mentioned in this text, *A Woman's diary (1976-86)* may offer some answers. In the series, the artist is photographed naked, in shots that fragment her body and always exclude her head. Studio-neutral framing, light and background help erase any clue that can contextualize and singularize it. Anonymous, she becomes once again ambivalent: both her objectified body, dominated in its generic form, and her empathic body, sensitive to what escapes her. The burden of being any woman, in the judgment of men, runs along with the chance to be every woman, on the path to her own desire.

The images express a nudity that does not serve the idealization of the idyllic body, characteristic of classical art, nor to the fetish of the erotic body, whose concept building in cinema and advertising takes place in a constant game of “show some, hide some”. Gretta established a direct relationship with the camera, eliminating mediation or distance. Her photographic diary approaches a policy of representations that only takes place in presence and, therefore, presupposes listening and the maximum possible complicity between photographer, machine and portrayed subject, being them co-responsible for the final creation.

All of these series were backed by long-term research, which lasted until 1986. In 1978, however, they were gathered, at the stage of the *Auto-Photos* publication, launched by Massao Ono, an important editor in the independent market, which included artist books. At that time, Gretta had been between São Paulo and Milan, until 1983, when she moved to New York and drastically reduced her personal and professional contact with Brazil. The almost thirty years of absence may explain the reception gap and historiography of the artist's legacy in the local circuit.

Her return in 2015 reestablished interrupted processes, which involved resonating works little shown, but which belonged to museum collections. Also, finding records and projects in their documentation centers; networking in institutional and commercial circuits and establishing conversations with other generations. The reissue of *Auto-Photos* in 2021 by the Central Gallery is part of this movement still in the course of Gretta Sarfaty's reunion with the country, the critical environment, the culture audiences and the current issues of feminist art. Just in this state of entropy – in which identity agendas and gender activism are strengthened as much as a conservative turn, supported by the management of the federal government – dialectics and disobedience remain a driving force. For the new or the old reasons, the structures continue to inform the body and the body remains eager to transform the structures.