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Gretta Sarfaty and the images of the self:
photography as a political tool (1975-1980)

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Abstract

This article examines the photographic works and performances executed by Gretta Sarfaty between 1975 and 1980. During this period, the artist explored themes related to the feminine body, societal constraints on the quest for freedom, and the expression of sexual desire. These themes were examined through the photographic series “Diary of a Woman” (1977) and “Body Works” (1977), as well as in the performances “Enlace” (1978), “Evocative Recollections” (1978), and “Change and Appropriation of an Autonomous Identity” (1980). Other photographic series — ‘Auto-photos’ (1975) and ‘Transformations’ (1976) — focus on the stereotyped images of women and the deliberate deformation of established beauty standards.

Keywords

Gretta Sarfaty. Photography. Performance.
Feminism.

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Female body/Universal body

In a text published in 1979, Anne-Marie Boetti proposed new perspectives for interpreting women's visual production. She emphasized the importance of capturing fresh viewpoints rather than focusing on theorizations about the subject. According to her, the essence of feminism should not be to “symmetrically recover the 'theoretical and terrorist systems of the dominant culture’”. Two paths emerge for the artist who offers, as her “reference point and source of meaning, her distinctive perspective, her body and her detachment from the meanings traditionally ascribed to words and objects’”. She can pursue an 'angelic' and silent vision, distant from cultural influences. Alternatively, she might attempt to 'articulate the unspoken, reveal the unseen, by erasing, subverting, and refining the existing criteria of meaning, to inscribe new values onto aspects of reality that have, until now, been deemed insignificant.’” The woman's body, perceived as a vessel of sexual value that informs and shapes its interaction with the world, is central to this new perspective. This raises a critical inquiry: 'Where and when does sexual differentiation occur?’” Boetti answers her own question by emphasizing the significance of this distinct perspective, which she describes as “both memory and project’”. This approach enables the interpretation of certain artists' works as “an effort to outline an objectified and meaningful female 'body' through experiences that diverge from existing artistic practices” (BOETTI, 1979, pp. 134, 137).

The theme of 'sexual differentiation,' crucial to Boetti's discourse, lies outside Jorge Glusberg's conceptual framework. For Glusberg, contemporary artists' engagement with the body addresses a “primordial human urgency”, albeit in the form of “ceremonies without God, rituals without belief”. According to the curator, the human body, described as “the most plastic and ductile among significant materials, the biological manifestation of cultural action”, facilitates a resurgence of ceremonial practices in an era “deprived of transcendence and bereft of forms and structures”. These ideas were emphasized by Roberto Pontual in an article titled 'The Body is the Soul,' recalling an event at the Paris National Center for Art and Culture Georges Pompidou from February 15 to 18, 1979: the 'International Days on Body Art and Performance. Organized by the Argentine curator, the event featured thirty artists, including Vito Acconci, José Roberto Aguilar, Pierpaolo Calzolari, Les Levine, Mario Merz, Antoni Muntadas, Herman Nitsch, Dennis Oppenheim, and Nam June Paik Three female artists are specifically highlighted by the critic: Gretta, Marta Minujín, and Gina Pane. However, Lea Lublin, Orlan, and Valie Export also

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participated in the event. A “photographic sequence” by the Brazilian artist is emphasized in the main text of the article (PONTUAL, 1979); however, this work bears no relation to the pieces showcased at the Parisian demonstration, which was organized by the Buenos Aires Center for Art and Communication.

Dating back to 1976, contrary to the 1977 date reported in the article, the “photographic sequence” was a component of “Transformations”. In this series, Gretta Sarfaty challenges the ideal of female beauty through the use of grimaces and interventions on the image, imparting unusual and disturbing qualities to the facial features. This part of the body, the face, becomes a site where the political and psychological, authenticity and conformity, expression and erasure, as well as the “spontaneity of emotions” and the “silence of figures”, converge (COURTINE; HAROCHE, n.d., p. 13). The choice to arrange the sequence in two rows—where the transition from solemnity to a smile, and from there to open laughter, runs parallel to the ears' progressive enlargement—introduces a monstrous quality to the artist's face.

– should not be interpreted as a result of demands for self-censorship. The exhibition catalog showcased an additional photographic sequence from the same series, where the deformation was further emphasized by an expression of despair. Unlike the version published in the book 'Auto-photos,' this sequence was arranged in four rows, comprising a total of eight images. (1978) .1

The body in action

At that specific juncture in Brazilian history, it was impossible for the newspaper to reproduce images from the performance 'Evocative Recollections Two.' In this performance, Gretta, partially obscured by a white lace mosquito net, engaged in an erotic interplay with a black cat, a portrayal that emphasized the essence of female desire. In the catalog of the exhibition “Videoarte a Palazzo dei Diamanti 1973/1979”,

1 In 2021, the book was published in a second edition by Central Galeria, based in São Paulo. Small changes were made to the titles of each series' sections, a critical text by Mirtes Marins de Oliveira was added, and sequence number XVIII of 'Diary of a Woman' was introduced, featuring an image where the artist's buttocks occupy the foreground. Gretta's first public performance took place on November 12, 1978, during the “Vagabond Myths” event. Organized by Ivald Granato, this event transformed a parking lot on Rua Augusta in São Paulo into a vast creative space. In this collective space, where artists such as Anna Maria Maiolino, Antônio Dias, Artur Barrio, Cláudio Tozzi, Gabriel Borba, Hélio Oiticica, Lygia Pape, Marta Minujín, Rubens Gerchman, and Ubirajara Ribeiro participated, Gretta presented her performance titled “The Witch”. Dressed entirely in white, donning a turban of the same color and large glasses, the artist roamed the space, offering visitors palm readings or serving them inside a small, equally white pyramidal tent.

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presented at the Turin Chamber of Commerce in 1980, Janus refers to “a very simple story” narrated using “elementary data”: a mattress on the ground, covered by a canopy of transparent fabric and embroidered, resembling “a sailboat in an enclosed space”. On the mattress, a woman and a cat engage in play—crawling, chasing, caressing, drawing together and apart amidst indistinct sounds and noises made by the protagonist, characterized by her ‘feline and gentle movements.. Dressed in black 3, the woman “bends, lies down, crawls, tries different positions, [...] identifies herself more and more with the nature of the feline, which climbs over her body, studies it, touches it, sniffs -lives it in its way”. The cat symbolizes the artist’s soul, embodying “innocence itself”. Within this context, the canopy, “in a certain sense, blurs the boundaries between purity and sin, to which the author continually alludes, making them vague and imprecise” (JANUS, 1980, 37).

The idea of a sailboat proposed by Janus is suggested much more by the black and white photographic sequence, where the bed covered by mosquito nets plays a central role, than by the video made later and available on the artist’s website.⁴ In the photographs, Gretta gives the impression of being naked, but in reality, she was wearing a semi-transparent, skin-colored leotard and tights, for hygiene reasons and to reduce the impact of any scratches (SARFATY, 2022). In the video, static black and white recordings of Pompidou’s performance are interspersed, with her wearing a blue leotard to continue protecting herself from the cat’s scratches and the moralistic repercussions awakened by the action (DIMAMBRO, 2018, 174-175). The artist explains that the mosquito net was used to ‘create the impression of a veil, of that which cannot be touched’ (DIMAMBRO, 2018, p. 173). However, it invites contemplation of another crucial function that broadens the conceptual scope of the action. Because it simultaneously hides and reveals, the veil is defined by Jean Chevalier and Alain Gheerbrant as “more of an interpreter than an obstacle: it invites knowledge by only half-concealing”. The interplay between “what is revealed by veiling itself and what is veiled by revealing itself” (CHEVALIER; GHEERBRANT, 1991, p. 951), which underpins the 1979 performance, is much more evident in the video than in the photographic records. In these instances, the static nature of the image presents the observer with a perception that is not always clear regarding the actions depicted. At certain moments, the black mass of the hair imposes itself,

3 The artist, in reality, was wearing a blue leotard during the re-presentation of the performance in Antwerp, during which the video referred to by Janus was recorded (SARFATY, 2022).

4 Cf. <gretta.info/evocative_recollections.html>

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creating a contrast with the transparency of the mosquito net. At other times, indistinct forms are seen. In other instances, the interaction with the cat and the pillow stimulates the observer's erotic fantasy, distancing them from the sequence of action (Image 1).



Image 01:
Gretta Sarfaty. Evocative
recollections, 1978
Source: artist's website
<[gretta.info/evocative_ collections.html](http://gretta.info/evocative_collections.html)>

Pompidou's performance is also the basis of a set of photographs, watercolors, and canvases created between 1978 and 1980. However, Gretta clarifies that in these new works, she reproduced “the idea, the concept”, and not the specific action from before. The creation of the new works was guided by a precise process: after photographing various lace patterns, the artist made negatives of the images, applied printing screens, inserted shots of her naked body and created a sandwich placed in the photographic enlarger. The end result was a creation independent of the performance: reticulated images of the body in different poses and gestures (Interview with Gretta Sarfaty by Tálisson Melo, 2022). In them, Gretta appears covered by a black veil, defined by Romana Loda as a “pleated grid that forms areas of shadow over the naked body, making the overall vision more ambiguous and fleeting”. Evidence and ambiguity emerge as the prevailing themes in the series, where the veil overlays the body not as a traditional adornment meant to “be displayed to feed male fantasies”, but asserts itself in a more complex role. The artist uniquely neutralizes the erotic connotations traditionally associated with the female nude:

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Beneath the embroidered gauze, the limbs appear to contract, held in anomalous positions, as the interplay of light and shadows conjures illusions that are quickly dispelled. [...] She is the prisoner of the feminine mystique, skillfully utilizing the elements that have always characterized her to dismantle it and reveal the mystifying mechanisms composed of lies and oppression (LODA, 1981, sp).

Also titled 'Evocative Recollections,' the series prompts Gillo Dorfles to conjure the image of a chrysalis which, "still enveloped in its cocoon, awaits its moment to emerge into the light and metamorphose into a perfect insect". Dorfles, a renowned critic, highlights the graphic and photographic quality of the images. In these, Gretta is depicted "enshrouded, concealed, and even submerged beneath a delicate lattice of mosquito netting, adorned with elaborate nineteenth-century embroidery". More crucially, in his analysis, than the projection of the body:

The composition, characterized by varied bodily postures and the frequent presence of a cat that serves as a toy, fetish, and object of affection, highlights the sensual connection between the woman and the animal. This connection is not only a celebration of sensuality but also metaphorically emphasized. These elements are the foundational 'building blocks' that the photograph skillfully uses to either reveal or conceal.

I emphasized the terms "reveal" and "conceal" because, in these images, what we are able to interpret and decipher holds equal importance to what remains indistinguishable to us. This indistinctness forces us to use our imagination, to fill in the gaps according to our own tastes, confronting the ambiguity inherent in the photographic document.

The process of continuously—and at times, exhaustingly—deciphering an image that is inherently ambiguous and equivocal constitutes, in my view, the most compelling and novel aspect of this entire series of works (Dorfles, 1980). 5

Dorfles unequivocally believes that Gretta has managed to achieve a remarkable synthesis between the expressive, dynamic, and sculptural use of the body and the creation of a unique photographic composition in both technical and aesthetic terms.

The observer's gaze is captivated by the vibrant movement of limbs beneath the dense layer of embroidered gauze. They struggle to differentiate between the shadows cast by the embroidery on the skin and the actual contours of the mesh. Amidst the folds of the fabric, glimpses of a breast, a buttock

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or a cheek emerge, yet these are often indistinguishably merged with the cat's nose, its fur blending into the shadows projected onto the skin." This *mixtum compositum* of woman and animal (a modern reinterpretation of "beauty and the beast") coupled with the frequent depiction of the body in unconventional poses, results in a strikingly unique visual outcome. These gestures, from a purely photographic standpoint, yield an exceptionally unusual plastic effect. (DORFLES, 1980, s. p.).⁶

Cláudio Willer identifies in the series an "affirmation of a deeper, previously hidden level of reality": a "liberated expression of a feminine and bodily reality". Focusing on images that exclusively feature the buttocks, the poet commends the representation of total nudity, "revealed in its entirety", which propels the artist to articulate what is "obscured and suppressed by society". Gretta boldly reinstates what has been repressed, without yielding to traditional aestheticism. The cat, described as an "extension of sex", serves to accentuate and underscore the exposed themes. The same can be said about repetitions in different treatments. Willer does not overlook the use of photographic language as a means of expression, noting:

It seems to me that high contrast is better suited to certain types of statements. We find ourselves in a bipolar world characterized by black-on-white contrasts. Things must be articulated clearly, affording minimal role to grays and mid-tones. Gretta opts for a path of explosion and intensity – with full sexuality often manifesting itself as an explosion – thereby allowing subtleties and insinuations to be overlooked. (WILLER, 1979, sp).

Gretta's work, which Cláudio Willer identifies as a paradigmatic example of 'art as provocation,' is marked by a critical characteristic: it articulates the feminine experience directly from a woman's viewpoint, eschewing the traditional filters of a male perspective. This implies some changes, "starting with the replacement of lyricism with explosion". The culmination of the series prompts the author to reconsider an initial assertion: "Of course, aestheticism also holds its place, [...] and it's no coincidence that the lines and tracery of the final pieces in some series resemble drawings reminiscent of Beardsley's" (WILLER, 1979, sp).

⁶ In the 16th edition of *Ultime tendenze nell'arte d'oggi: dall'informale al neo-oggettuale* (1999), Dorfles includes a brief reflection on body art. He presents Gretta as one of the "most prominent" figures in the field, alongside personalities like Gina Pane, Urs Lüthi, Vito Acconci, Marina Abramovic, Rebecca Horn, and Luca Patella. However, the Brazilian artist is not included in Dorfles's list of artists, such as Arnulf Rainer, Pane, and Lüthi, who later dedicated themselves to the pictorial and graphic "transcription" of their "theatrical actions", despite this practice being common throughout their career (DORFLES, 2004, p. 164-165).

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Wilson Coutinho, commenting on the artist's statement regarding the cat and the pillow in the series—as “symbols of sensuality and feminine interiority”—emphasizes the interplay of veiling and unveiling. “The artist juxtaposes the woman's elastic body and her fluid movements with a lacy, transparent veil. This veil, far from concealing the body, delineates the opaque boundaries within which the woman isolates herself and from which she seeks liberation”. The critic, who discerns not the entirety of erotic effects, but rather the pursuit of “internal and personal liberations”, distinguishes Gretta’s work from the feminism prevalent at the time: “The woman's body is not merely an extension of a feminist rally, wherein men and bras are deemed indispensable(sic)” (COUTINHO, 1980).

Gretta Sarfaty and the political sphere

The various articles dedicated to “Evocative Recollections” highlight elements that prompt us to explore the potential connections between Gretta's work and the political realm, understood in its broader sense. This includes viewing her art as a form of dissent that reveals underlying power dynamics. Moreover, her work is described as occupying a unique space where being and appearance converge, where the real and the imaginary blend seamlessly. This intersection becomes a privileged site for the fusion of actual and virtual realities, suggesting a complex interplay of visibility and perception.” (TRIKI, 2007, 120, 123). Expressions such as 'feminine mystique' and 'feminist rally' are directly linked to the Women's Liberation Movement, which has been advocating since the 1960s for societal reforms aimed at dismantling patriarchal power. This movement seeks to challenge the oppression faced by women, a significant demographic within Western society.

Betty Friedan's “The Feminine Mystique”, published in 1963, sharply critiqued the relegation of women to domestic roles, identifying this confinement as a root cause of frustration and psychological disorders among women, including depression and an inclination towards consumerism. The author called for a change in the relationship between the sexes, aiming to end men's dominance over women and give women the possibility of achieving their own freedom and autonomy. The feminist rally is highlighted by Coutinho as emblematic through an episode that is widely misreported: the supposed burning of bras in Atlantic City during a protest against the Miss America pageant (September 7, 1968). A group of 400 feminists gathered on the city's promenade and discarded symbols of female oppression into the 'Freedom Trash Can,' including products tied to domestic chores (such as mops, pots, and pans), women's magazines (Cosmopolitan, Ladies' Home journal,

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Family Circle), and “instruments of torture” like high-heels, eyelashes, curlers, hairspray, makeup, girdles, corsets, and bras” (VAN GELDER, 1992, sp; CORDEIRO & BRITO, 2018, 150-151). The idea of a purifying fire was highlighted by journalist Lindsey Van Gelder, who drew a comparison to the burning of military draft cards by Vietnam War draftees. However, this act of feminist protest remained purely symbolic (Van Gelder, 1992 (VAN GELDER, 1992, sp).

Gretta's work in “Evocative Recollections” intersects with a major trend in North American feminist art that delves into the female experience through a 'symbolic or abstract' lens. This approach is characterized by imagery of veiling, confinement, enclosure, pressures, barriers, and constrictions, alongside motifs of growth, release, opening, and the crafting of sensual surfaces (LIPPARD, 1976, 7). The concept of “grid, prison, closure” is explored by the artist in the performance “Modification and Appropriation of an Autonomous Identity”, which was presented in 1979 in Ferrara and Stuttgart, and in the following year, in Antwerp and São Paulo. (Pinacoteca do Estado). Dressed in a red leotard, Gretta moves inside a cube designed by Elvio Becheroni, while her recorded voice recites a text in Italian, French, Portuguese, English, and German, alluding to the search for autonomy at different levels.[8] The cube's structure, made of strips of white paper, is gradually torn and destroyed through firm but non-aggressive gestures. It is only upon leaving the cage that the artist makes a sudden movement. Liberation, however, is momentary. Soon after, Gretta turns around, re-enters the ruined cage, and finally crouches down, hugging her knees and bowing her head. In the book of the same name published in 1980, we encounter an incisive statement jointly authored by the two artists:

In this situation [...], Gretta's work emerges as the protagonist. By delving into her experiences as a woman—conditioned and subjugated—she embodies the core theme of humanity's intense quest for identity, autonomy, and ultimately, freedom. (GRETТА and BECHERONI, 1980, sp).

The photographic sequence of the performance, comprising twenty-eight images, presents a paradoxical vision: while the observer can follow the artist's choreography within the structure more closely, they are, however, unable to discern the nature of the

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gestures. After some indistinct movements inside the minimalist cube, Gretta decisively asserts her presence. The variety of actions performed—kneeling, bending down, standing, leaning to the side, looking up, engaging with the structure, tearing the paper, and spreading her arms as if to embrace the space—gain intensity through their photographic capture. This photographic dimension offers the body's transformation into an image a new visibility. It diverges from reality not only by capturing fleeting moments but, more importantly, by challenging the observer to question the nature of what is presented. The outcome of the sequence, as captured in the photographs, diverges from the video recording: Gretta re-enters the cube and assumes a static posture (Image 2).

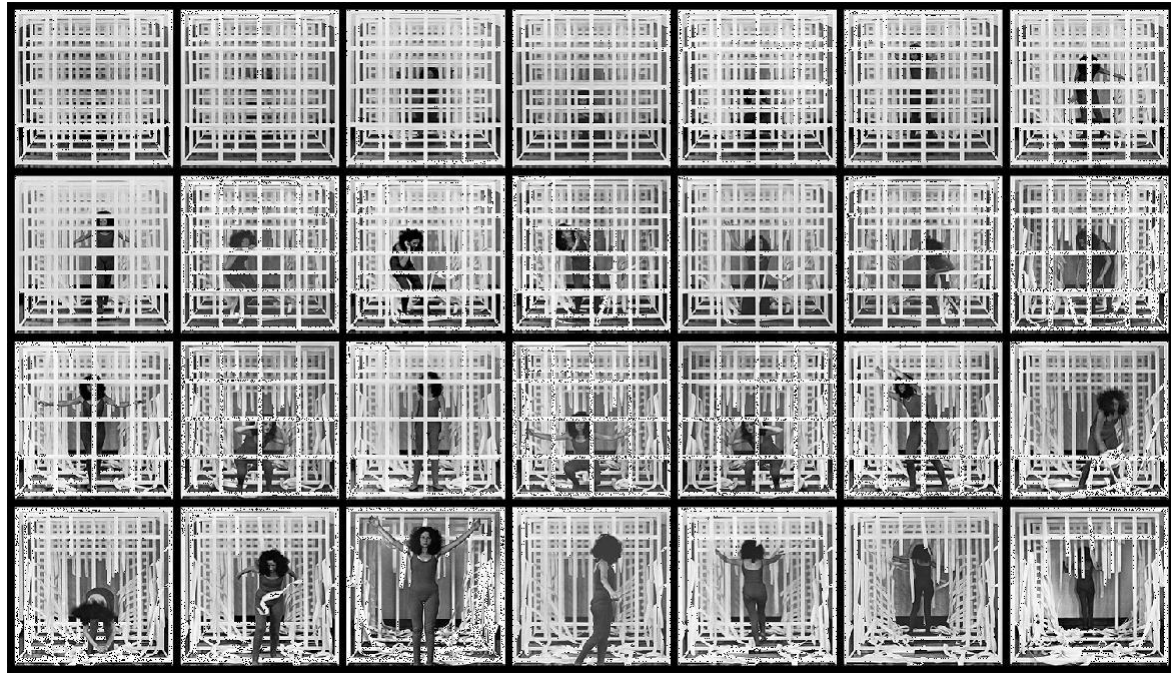


Image 02:
Gretta Sarfaty and Elvio
Becheroni. Change
and appropriation of an
autonomous identity,
1979-1980
Source: artist's website
<gretta.info/gretta_
becheroni.html>

The return to the cube creates an ambiguous note, but it is possible to imagine that the artist is searching for a new way of representation that allows her to create an image or self-image not mediated by the male gaze and, therefore, affirm her condition as an active agent of a regime different look, in which she stops being a sexual object and becomes a proponent of a libido capable of producing “effects of political and social rearrangement that are much more radical than one would like to think” (CIXOUS, 2022, 56). After all, as François Soulages reminds us, one of the central issues in contemporary art is “the freedom of bodies, of

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their images, and representations, and, correlatively, the control, surveillance, and subjection of the political and social body". Photography is one of the most suitable mediums for representing the body, as it embodies a "double tension: it is simultaneously political and individual, public and private, intimate and external" (SOULAGES, 2007, 8). Gretta's images align with two possibilities of body politic proposed by the author. The artist engages with the "cultural body", which includes both the veiled body and the publicly naked body. She also addresses the "sexual body", experienced in both private intimacy and (semi)public activity, which is influenced by and simultaneously influences eroticism and pornography (SOULAGES, 2007, 17-18).

Before public performances, Gretta had carried out in-depth examination of her own body in two series dating back to 1977: *Diary of a woman* and *Body works*. In "Diary of a Woman", the artist employs a "myopic vision"—a close and lowered gaze as identified by Gilda de Mello e Souza in women's literature (SOUZA, 1980, p. 79)—to scrutinize her own body in a fragmented and obsessive manner. This approach generates a collection of forms that are at times clear and at other times indistinct, challenging the myths surrounding beauty and the objectification of the erotic. Gretta explores a range of photographic techniques and compositions: close-ups that isolate fragments; montages that capture fractional temporal actions; assemblies of indistinct segments; and sequences of gestures, each repetition conceived as a step in an evolving series. Through the use of superzoom, the artist creates deformed images where recognizing the photographed bodily fragments as geometric shapes becomes challenging. Only the presence of markers, such as a cigarette and black socks, guides the observer's gaze towards identifying the hand, leg, and bust of the model. In this context, the cigarette does not serve the function Talita Trizoli attributes to it as an 'index of promiscuity and female freedom' (Trizoli, 2018, p. 164). This is because smoking had ceased to be a gesture of rebellion long before, having become a socially accepted act (Image 3).

Creating the impression of seeing a mirror in the camera that is far from complacent, the artist, whose face is never visible, folds inward, forming a peculiar cocoon. She gives prominence to a body part not typically considered erogenous, the foot, and presents a torso deformed by the lens's proximity. The use of accentuated contrasts between light and dark, along with a tendency to highlight abstract fragments, allows the series to be defined as an unusual landscape of the body. Here, the determining element



Image 03:
Gretta Sarfaty. *Diary of a woman II*, 1977
Silver gelatin on photographic paper
Source: artist's website
<gretta.info/womens_diary_prints.html>

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is the aim to challenge conventional erotic codes. Contrarily, Olly Beck argues that 'Diary of a Woman' should be interpreted as an exploration of female eroticism. Through a cinematic sequence that suggests the passage of time and weaves a concise narrative, the artist transforms observers into witnesses of the serene and intense moments in which a woman explores her body's eroticism. Gretta subverts “the detached, cold *páthos* typical of pornography by infusing it with a more poetic form of desire”, despite employing pornographic framing techniques. Identity, traditionally expressed through the face—, which remains unseen—is overshadowed by the emphasis on the body. However, a substantial difference exists between the pornographic perspective and that proposed by the artist. In pornography, the focus on sexual parts aims to elicit intense erotic satisfaction from the viewer. In contrast, Gretta's images transcend this approach by presenting the female body not merely as a conduit for sexual gratification but as a subject with a broader significance (BECK, 2009, sp).

O body-action-image continuum, which necessitates a new elaboration of the meaning of the visual, situates “Diary of a Woman” within the realm of performance. Here, Gretta utilizes her own body as a territory for exploration, navigating “tensions between the self and the other, between the private and social spheres, and between autobiography and history”. As Ludovica Lumer and Semir Zeki, the authors of this diagnosis, write, 'the flesh revealed itself to be the limit between what defines the self and others’ (DI MARINO, 2013, 58-59). The concept of performance is central to “Body works” (1977), where Gretta's naked body engages in a form of gymnastics. This is primarily aimed at affirming her capacity to explore the physical boundaries of creative action, a space where nature and culture converge harmoniously, free from contradiction or tension. Indifferent to the potential beauty of the executed gestures, the artist primarily aims to affirm her personal reclamation of the body. This is achieved through understanding its functions and embracing its unique characteristics. In this manner, the series may be interpreted as an endeavor to comprehend one's own body and its capabilities, disregarding the ideological and institutional distortions imposed by the patriarchal regime. This regime traditionally confines women to two restrictive identities: a “moist and dark” sensuality or “virginal purity”. Through nudity that emphasizes agility over eroticism, and the capacity to mold one's physical form according to personal vision rather than fashion dictates, Gretta brings to the forefront of the series a topic widely debated in feminist thought: the potential to revisit the roots of oppression as a means towards achieving liberation (TRASK, 1986, 131-132). (Image 4)

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By naming the 1977 photographic series “Diary of a Woman”, Gretta signals her intention to craft a narrative focused on self-reflection and self-discovery. This approach is markedly distinct from the conventional use of the diary genre as codified in the 19th and early 20th centuries, emphasizing an introspective journey rather than mere documentation. Although there are exceptions, as demonstrated by Virginia Woolf’s diaries—rich with reflections on her creative process and her writings—the majority of women’s intimate records primarily consist of daily notes. These are often accompanied by objects such as dried flowers, locks of hair, satin ribbons, anagrams, and theater tickets. Such inclusions reflect a nostalgic consciousness of the female condition in a society that relegated women to the realm of emotional relationships but denied them opportunities for a life beyond the domestic sphere. Numerous artists from the 1970s revisited the traditions of diaries and autobiographies, aiming to explore the relationships between “facts and feelings, memory and present from an isolated mental place”. This approach sought to evoke the “sequential narrative of a story and its impact on history” (BOETTI, 1979, 169-170).

Lucy Lippard underscores the significance that diaries, bold performances, and self-revelations—previously categorized as intimate—gain at this time. Many artists of the 1970s focused on themselves as their subject, reacting to prior isolation and a “general process of consciousness-raising. Some opted for an autobiographical approach; others concentrated on a self that was not immediately visible, a self that either challenged or laid bare the roles they had been assigned”. Numerous works from this era serve as the visual equivalents of “confessional literature”

Image 04:
Gretta Sarfaty.
Body works IV, 1977-2020
Mineral pigment on cotton
paper Source: artist's
website
<gretta.info/body_works.
html>

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or “diary”, not always well accepted by women writers. Defying prevailing expectations, various artists find inspiration “in real life, in real time, in real experiences”, rather than in artistic tradition:

While narcissism is not always redeemed by aesthetics, these artists have, at the very least, infused a stream of psychological insight into the nature of art as a transformative process and into the relationship between the work and the artist. Art, after all, serves as a canvas for all envisioned “new realisms”, with the artist embodying a figure of the imagination. This identity is constructed through a collaboration between the artist, society, and legend (LIPPARD, 1976, 103, 108).

Nadiesda Dimambro’s observation that the use of superzoom unveils “appearances in the superficiality of the body and in the depth of the subject”, acting as a magnifying glass on the personality and life of the series’ protagonist (Dimambro, 2018, p. 164), highlights a crucial distinction between Gretta’s work and that of a photographer like Bill Brandt, who explored the body’s image through close-up views. By utilizing a camera with a large depth of field, Brandt achieves a distorted and unrecognizable view of the female body, to which he imparts sculptural and sensual qualities. Gretta’s vision diverges from that of Man Ray, who appears to scrutinize the female body as though through a magnifying glass (DE L’ECOTAIS, 2019, p. 179), viewing women primarily as objects of desire and fantasy. This perspective is exemplified in one of his most iconic photographs, “The Prayer” (1930). In this image, a naked woman crouches and is photographed from behind, highlighting her buttocks as a pure form. The meticulous framing and close-up view form the foundation of a composition that straddles the line between the sublime and the blasphemous. This is underscored by the work’s title, which alludes to hands folded in prayer at the level of the anus. A triptych from “Diary of a Woman”, released only in 2021, allows for a more precise distinction between Gretta’s vision and Man Ray’s. The pure form of “The Prayer”, evoking a sculptural structure, stands in stark contrast to the Brazilian artist’s almost gymnastic exploration, where various somewhat uncomfortable postures are experimented with, devoid of any pursuit of idealized beauty imbued with erotic tensions.

Although the Brazilian artist achieves abstract results in various moments of “Diary of a Woman” and “Body Works”, her objectives should not be conflated with those of the aforementioned photographers. Gretta employs nudity as a means to make a political statement: she challenges the passive role

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traditionally attributed to women and underscores the unique nature of the female body, distancing it from the male gaze. The artist is emphatic about her motivation, stating that the driving force behind her work is the desire to be “a protagonist of her own autonomy and her own way of being”. While the series “Autophotos” (1975-1976) and “Diary of a Woman” showcase her condition as the “subject of the work”, it is with “Evocative Recollections” that her stance becomes more resolute:

I begin to truly experience my autonomy, sensuality, and identity, which were previously entirely marginalized, frozen, and imprisoned by this veil—a sweet veil that permits nothing, from which escape is impossible, and which cannot be unraveled. Thus, I express a persistent violence, where I, as the protagonist, am trapped yet resist, articulating and defending myself. However, the “ghetto” persists, the snare remains shut. The embodiment of my solitude is this light and flowery lace, the prison of machismo and alienation in our society. (SARFATY, 1980, sp).

In a private performance conducted in 1978 and later transformed into a photographic series and multimedia installation in 2020, Gretta mobilized the concept of imprisonment using a robust nautical rope, with which she engaged in a tense struggle to liberate herself and assert her own right to freedom. ⁹The nudity explicitly showcased in “Enlace” serves to suggest a scenario of violence and oppression, portraying the woman as defenseless. The artist, however, channels her physical energy towards liberating herself from the constraint; she gradually loosens the knots that entangle her within the rope, even though she occasionally finds herself ensnared once again. With choreography consisting of expressive gestures and precise postures—sitting on the floor ensnared in knots, lying down, rising, falling, and ultimately standing—Gretta enacts a scenario of conflict. In it, she confronts the rope that binds her, manifesting her determination to achieve freedom. In the end, her determination overcomes the deadlock: she liberates herself from the knots that restrain her, leaving the rope lying on the ground. (Image 5).

Against the artifice of femininity

In her works from 1975 to 1980, Gretta rebels against the bodily discipline imposed by the constructs of femininity. Reported



Image 05:

Gretta Sarfaty. Enlace,
1978-2020

Mineral pigment on
cotton paper

Source: artist's website

<gretta.info/enlace.html>

⁹ The work was presented at the exhibition *Farce. Language, fracture, fiction: Brazil-Portugal*, held at Sesc Pompeia in São Paulo from October 20, 2020, to January 30, 2021. The exhibition was curated by Marta Mestre and Pollyana Quintela.

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by Mary Wollstonecraft in 1792, the concept of the female mind shaping itself to the body from childhood, “seeking only to decorate its prison”,’ as cited by Bordo (1997, p. 233), was vigorously revisited in the 1970s by Andrea Dworkin. Dworkin’s work focused on the social construction of sexuality, beauty, and femininity:

Beauty standards dictate in precise terms the relationship a person will have with their own body. They prescribe one’s mobility, spontaneity, and posture, as well as the uses one can make of their body. These standards explicitly define the dimensions of physical freedom. And, of course, the relationship between physical freedom, psychological development, intellectual possibilities, and creative potential is intrinsic.

In our culture, no part of the female body has been left untouched or unchanged. [...] From head to toe, every feature of a woman’s face, every part of her body is subject to modification, alteration. [...] From the age of eleven or twelve until death, women devote a significant portion of their time, money, and energy to grooming, shaving, applying makeup, and wearing perfume. It is both common and mistaken to claim that transvestites, by adopting feminine clothing and makeup, caricature the women they seek to emulate. However, a genuine understanding of their romantic ethos reveals that these individuals deeply engage with the essence of what it means to be a woman, navigating through a romanticized construct. (BORDO, 2020, 14).

Intuitively, and as she prefers not to create “on top of theories”—as she mentioned in her February 2017 interview with Nadiesda Dimambro (DIMAMBRO, 2018, p. 41)—Gretta advocates for a type of bodily transformation that challenges the ‘myth of beauty.’ Naomi Wolf describes

this myth as a monetary system akin to the gold standard. Like any system, it is shaped by politics, and in the modern Western world, it represents the latest and most effective set of beliefs designed to preserve male dominance. By placing women on a vertical hierarchy based on a culturally imposed physical standard, it manifests power dynamics whereby women are compelled to compete unnaturally for resources controlled by men. (WOLF, 2021, 29).

Regarded as the gateway to the inner world, the face becomes a focal point for discourse and censorship, predicated on the belief that its beauty must be systematically crafted through means such as makeup, which Georges Vigarello describes as “the only possible truth” (2004, 220). Transformed into a “second skin”, makeup renders the distinction between natural beauty and constructed beauty not just false [...]

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but intolerable". Interpreted as the result of incessant work, beauty progressively becomes a "product worthy of being manufactured and sold on a large scale", with cosmetics being one of its spearheads. From the 1960s onwards, the cosmetic industry began studying skin aging, "contributing to the modification of the meanings and perceptions of what skin is, particularly in relation to wrinkles". As a result, impeccably smooth skin emerged as the beauty ideal during the 1960s and 1970s. Hairstyles were straight in the 1960s but became more voluminous in the following decade, epitomized by the beauty model of Farrah Fawcett. Feminine sensuality was further defined by 'glossy lips,' as noted by Sant'Anna (2014, pp. 118-119, 127, 135). In a universe where the myth of youthful beauty prevails, censorship manifests in the efforts of magazines to erase signs of aging on women's faces. These publications often avoid featuring photographs of older women, and when they do include celebrities over 60, extensive measures are taken to make them appear more beautiful, essentially, to look younger. In this manner, women are deprived of their fundamental freedom to "imagine their own futures [...] and to be proud of their own lives. [...] Eliminating the signs of age from a woman's face is tantamount to erasing her identity, power, and history" (WOLF, 2021, 125-126).

Gretta challenges this homogenized perspective of the face in her "Autophotos" and "Transformations" series. In these works, she undermines the ideal of feminine beauty through the "mechanical-optical transformation of the character itself". As Gillo Dorfles writes:

The artist's face [...] was broken down into a series of extremely dramatic and even disturbing images, in which the mouth, eyes, and hair were twisted, rendered absurd, or subjected to a mimicry that evoked horror and desolation,

à dissociation. These faces, while often retaining the sweetness of the original, were frequently transformed into hideous masks, resembling the grimaces of Erinyes or vengeful Furies. This transformation represents a deliberate stance against the falsely hedonistic and hypocritically pleasant portrayal of women as objects, both in contemporary society and historically.(DORFLES, 1980, sp).¹⁰

10 In Greek mythology, the Erinyes are female representations of revenge. The sisters Tisiphone (the avenger), Megaera (the spiteful one), and Alecto (the relentless one) are depicted as winged beings with open mouths and serpentine hair, wielding instruments of torture for those who violated moral order or committed blood crimes against their own family. These instruments include torches, whips, and firebrands. These figures are called Furies in Roman mythology.

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The Italian critic does not fail to point out the difference between Gretta's work and that of exponents of body art engaged in the deformation of the human image. The Brazilian artist's distinctive use of the camera enables a clear distinction to be made between the self-provocation of painful stimuli, as typified by Gina Pane and Marina Abramovic, and the exploration of deformations superimposed on the photographs themselves, a technique explored by Arnulf Rainer (DORFLES, 1980, sp). The Portuguese critic Egidio Álvaro also establishes a comparison highlighting the differences between Gretta and the Austrian artist:

While Rainer manipulates photographs of his body or face with strokes of paint and color bleedings to achieve mutilation effects, Gretta opts for significant deformation. Whereas Rainer finds a form of blissful contemplation in the bodily and artistic effects he creates, Gretta unflinchingly addresses the social and psychological connotations embedded within her imagery. The modification of the face and the resulting deformation are used to explore the nuanced realms of loneliness, fragmented communication, and the pervasive fear people have of embracing their own body, their uniqueness, and their originality (ÁLVARO, 1976, sp).

Álvaro also distinguishes Gretta's proposal from a work by Lygia Pape, "Hot Tongues," in which "social criticism, bitter observation" are evident. In Gretta's work, "above all the personal elements count,"¹¹ according to Álvaro's assertion. However, this statement overlooks the political aspect of Gretta's work, which employs her own body and face to demonstrate that she is not dealing solely with individual physical entities, but with discourses produced by society regarding the constructed female appearance, shaped by norms and prohibitions. Intuitively, yet attuned to her era, Gretta recognizes that the body is a "site of political struggle" and an "instrument of power", its physiology and morphology molded by histories and practices of containment and control (BORDO, 1997, 232, 235).

The focus on the body and appearance was influenced by a prevailing concept of the era, articulated by Charlotte Bunck in 1968. She contended that personal life is inherently political and that, ultimately, political issues are personal (BORDO, 1997, 233). Gretta intertwines art and life in this political stance. The use of distortion is linked to the quest for an identity unencumbered by stereotypes, driven by the desire to reveal to others "what I was like inside and what I could achieve as an artist". A body

¹¹ It is not clear what work this is, as Pape does not have any work with this title.

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art allows her to express her “desire to be taken seriously for my artistic ideas, not to be judged by appearance. I was reacting to sexism” (DIMAMBRO, 2018, 42, 44-45). In an article published in 1979, Frederico Morais demonstrated his grasp of this dual purpose. The critic, placing Gretta's work within a wider context alongside artists such as Lygia Clark, Lygia Pape, Wilma Pasqualini, Regina Vater, and Iole de Freitas, identifies in her diverse interpretations of the body a novel perspective on the female condition, one proposed by a subject previously considered “futile”. After describing the “Autophotos” series as “expressionist, almost Goyesque”, where the woman confronts the “camera mirror to discover her own face—or rather, her identity”—Morais asserts that Gretta, in fact, reveals the very absence of a face,

Or the quest for it. This represents a desperate and painful journey towards her own affirmation as both a woman and a being. It is precisely the use of the camera as a means of exploration that sets her creative work apart from the more conventional forms of body art. These, when veering into acts of physical violence against one's own body, manifest a certain pathological aspect, as seen in the works of Gina Pane, Marina Abramovic, Vito Acconci, and the Vienna Actionist group. Similarly, Gretta distinguishes her work from Arnulf Rainer, who incorporates aggressive graphics into his photographs, confining himself to showcasing “the mechanical-optical transformation of his own character”, a process that, as I have previously mentioned, is no less painful (MORAIS, 1979).

Also emphasized by Dorfler, the artist's use of photography is said to demonstrate her openness to chance, assuming the accuracy of the story recounted by Olney Krüse regarding her exploration of this new language. According to the critic, the distortions, which he termed “psychophoto” or “psychopainting”, were suggested due to a technical error. Captured by an anonymous professional in Buenos Aires Square, Gretta was captivated by a peculiar light that “appeared between her eyes, stretching from her mouth to her forehead” (KRÜSE, 1976, sp). However, the true story behind the artist's fascination with the technical deformation of images significantly diverges from the ‘fable’ Krüse crafted to promote her work. (SARFATY, 2022). During the presentation of “Metamorphosis” at the Art Global gallery in 1976, part of the Globo network, Gretta chose to deviate from the conventional pattern of advertisements that the broadcaster typically allocated to the exhibitions of its artistic division within the programming schedule. Not finding it interesting to be shown painting in the

12 In characterizing Rainer's work, Morais uses Dorfler's idea about the series *Autophotos* and *Transformations*, by Gretta.

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studio, she thought of an advertisement that would discuss her work. In the Globo studio, while experimenting with the buttons on the editing console, he inadvertently captured an image of his own face. Upon manipulating it, he encountered a result that was both intriguing and compelling, leading him to embrace distortion as an artistic technique from that point forward (Interview with Gretta Sarfaty by Tálison Melo, 2022).

This episode led to experiments in the camera obscura, producing pronounced distortions and grimaces in front of the lens, and, in some instances, involving the use of zoom. The deformations characterizing the “Transformations” series are viewed by Romana Loda as manifestations of sarcasm from someone accustomed to being observed,

who then takes the liberty to look back without reticence and to judge. The classic situation is inverted in relation to the standards that demand a passive woman, possessing a perfectly smooth, static face and an unmistakably erotic expression. A stereotypical and therefore abstract face, non-existent in everyday life (LODA, 1981, sp).

The critic posits that breaching this norm led to a disruption of traditional canons, affirming that both the woman's face and her identity “can become autonomous subjects, capable of experiencing and conveying authentic emotions, beyond merely induced or conventional ones”. With her photographs, Gretta brought to light the deep motivations of an existential malaise (LODA, 1981, sp). The “Transformations” series is preceded by “Autophotos”, which can be viewed as a preliminary exploration for the significant alterations the artist would later apply to her face. Testing her versatility in adopting varied roles, Gretta portrays herself in “Autophotos” in multiple guises: as a seductive office worker wearing glasses (on two occasions), a naive, freckled girl with pigtails, and a more mature woman playfully sticking out her tongue at the camera. She embodies various facets of femininity, with a countenance that is alternately serious, smiling, shouting, or making faces. Created in 1975-1976, Gretta's images predate Cindy Sherman's seminal *Untitled Film Stills* (1977-1980), which similarly delve into the exploration of multiple female personas. Contrary to Cindy Sherman's meticulous treatment of photographs emulating fictional film stills, the Brazilian artist opts for the contact sheet format, indicating a preference for a raw and provisional expression.

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As models and photographers of their own works, Gretta and Sherman adopt distinct approaches to self-portraiture. While the North American artist creates fictitious self-portraits embodying stereotypical and anonymous characters, the Brazilian artist, right from the title, challenges the genre by presenting faces stripped of any intimate or self-revealing qualities. Despite their differences, the representation strategies of both artists ultimately converge in the creation of a series of masks that engage with the codes of femininity, conceived as a cultural stereotype. In this context, the individual self becomes indistinguishable from the archetypal figure (FABRIS, 2004, 58-59; BUCI-GLUCKSMANN, 2007, 94-95). In the Brazilian series, it is impossible not to notice the emergence of disruptive elements in certain compositions. In "Autophotos I" (1976), the seductive demeanor of the employee with glasses and the modesty of the young woman with braids are juxtaposed with an expression of despair, transitioning to a pacified visage (Image 6). A similar technique is employed in 'Autophotos III' (1976), where the solemn expressions of two figures are placed within a narrative of escalating unease, culminating in an overt scream—a harbinger of the despair depicted in "Transformations". Autophotos II (1975-1976) is characterized by the juxtaposition of banal seduction stereotypes, grimaces, and a frozen scream.



Image
06:

Gretta
Sarfaty.

Autophotos I, 1976

Silver gelatin on
photographic paper

Source: artist's website
<[gretta.info/auto_photos_p
rints.html](http://gretta.info/auto_photos_prints.html)>

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“Transformations” immerses the viewer in a realm characterized by horror and despair. The application of superzoom across numerous images in the series results in pronounced distortions, which Gretta manipulates with a nuanced understanding of timing. This technique crafts sequential narratives reminiscent of a horror film. At certain points, the facial performance is rhythmically driven by an alternation between close-ups that intensify the horror and sequences that build it up progressively. In the book “Auto-photos”, an open mouth in a desolate scream is transformed into a cinematic montage, evoking the imagery of a failed projection (“Transformations IV”). While the use of fragments in a photomontage serves to underline the performer's profound discomfort, moments exist where she mitigates the escalating tension through a caricatured visual approach (“Transformations IX”). In this instance, Olly Beck observes a woman who mocks her own metamorphosis into an alien, embodying a gesture of defiance against conventional stereotypes (BECK, 2009, sp). Berta Sichel, in turn, suggests viewing the artist known for her deformations as “a modern Medusa with many heads”, emphasizing that a woman, even when deformed, remains a woman (SICHEL, 1993, sp).

The interplay between an intensely expressive foreground and a montage replicated in the third frame distinctly aligns Gretta's approach with the cinematic universe. The face in the foreground, illuminated directly by a light that casts no shadows, imbues the figure with an unexpected *páthos* within a context overwhelmed by terror and discomfort. Endowed with an unusual beauty, the artist's face in “Transformations V” transcends physicality to become more of an idea than a natural occurrence. This unique portrayal invites comparison with Roland Barthes' reflections on the face of Greta Garbo. This captures “the delicate moment when cinema is on the verge of distilling existential beauty from essential beauty, [...] where the clarity of carnal essences transitions to a woman's lyricism” (BARTHES, 2006, 72 -73). There is a unique charm in the depiction of this sequence that, in some ways, diverges from the overall tone of the series. It showcases Gretta's receptiveness to the varied facets of the female condition: a quest for personal beauty emanating from her innermost self, accompanied by a message of bewilderment and perplexity (Image 7).

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Image 07:

Gretta

Sarfaty.

Transformations V,
1976 Silver gelatin on
photographic paper

Source: artist's website
<gretta.info/
transformations_prints.

html>



Cláudio Willer is correct in suggesting a continuity between 'the distortions of conventional and stereotypical postures' and works that engage with the body:

the mirror, which once projected blurred or distorted images of our selves in the tradition of the mannerists [...] shatters, allowing a new reality to emerge. Alternating movements of the creative process lead us from descending metaphors to ascending signs, shifting from the denial of a certain type of reality to the affirmation of a deeper, previously concealed, level of reality. The questioning of repression leads to the subsequent affirmation of what has been repressed: the socially concealed and the submerged otherness. Progressing from the study of the feminine condition—that is, of what is conditioned— arrive at a liberated exploration of feminine and corporeal reality. (WILLER, 1979, sp).

Gretta and self-writing

Gretta elaborates her reflection on the meaning of womanhood in a patriarchal society through two distinct phases. Her nonconformity with conventional gender roles leads her to adopt an exacerbated stance, manifested in the pursuit of unconventional and anguished representations.

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Above all, her work is driven by a profound interrogation of the myth of female beauty and its associated norms. The artist, despite claiming not to be guided by theories, believes in synchronicity and the potential coincidence between her artistic exploration and the thoughts of others (DIMAMBRO, 2018, 41). It is intriguing to explore the intersections between her poetics and Hélène Cixous's perspective in the essay "The Laugh of the Medusa," published in 1975. In the political/poetic text, the author advocates for "the invention of a new, rebellious form of writing", articulated on two levels.

à This approach will enable women to "carry out the ruptures and transformations indispensable in history" when the moment of liberation arrives. (CIXOUS, 2022, 51).

By employing images instead of words, the artist makes her mark on the art world through the two levels proposed by Cixous. Individually, she reclaims her own body, which society has transformed into a stranger, thereby becoming "the cause and origin of inhibitions". By representing herself, she manifests an "uncensored relationship [...] with her sexuality, with her being a woman", and learns to control how she is perceived. In this manner, she unconsciously heeds the author's advice, which encourages her to "kill the false woman who prevents the living one from breathing. Inscribe the breath of the entire woman." In social terms, by taking the floor, she enters into history, "which has always been constituted based on her repression". By breaking free from the "trap of silence" and confronting the dominance of existing discourse, Gretta establishes a space for herself and women in general that diverges from the traditional roles prescribed for them. This concept aligns with Cixous's notion of "transcending the confines of marginalization or confinement to the harem" (CIXOUS, 2022, 51-53).

After asserting herself as a creator challenging the portrayal of women as mere sexual objects, the artist delves into an exploration of her own sexuality in the performance "Evocative Recollections." This endeavor challenges the cultural myth linking female pleasure solely to the phallus. The interactions involving the cat and the pillow symbolize the pursuit of self-gratification and the endeavor to assert control over one's own sexuality on terms defined by the individual, rather than by a partner. In rejecting societal control over the female body, Gretta aligns herself once again with Cixous's vision, which anticipates a time when women will have the agency to express their own sexuality freely,

Their infinite and mobile complexity, their eroticization, the brilliant combustions emanating from such a tiny yet immense region of their bodies;... about the adventure of such drives, journeys, crossings, paths, sudden and slow awakenings,

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the discovery of a shy zone, soon to emerge. The woman's body, with its thousand and one dwellings of ardor, as she breaks free from it—destroying the yokes and censures—articulates the profusion of meanings that in every sense runs through it. [...] (CIXOUS, 2022, 63).

Gretta's performances for the camera or in front of the public, marked by autobiographical aspects and the perception of her own body as a "visual territory" (SCHNEIDER, 1997, 35), are the result of an awareness shared with other artists who sought to give rise to a new sensitivity, distinct from the masculine modes of configuration. As Lucy Lippard highlighted in an article published in 1976:

When women use their bodies in their artwork, they are utilizing their *selves*; a significant psychological factor transforms these bodies or faces from object to subject. [...] An artist's self-view is necessarily complicated by social stereotypes. [...] A woman who uses her own face and body has the right to do whatever she wants with them, but a subtle abyss separates the use that men make of women to sexually arouse themselves from the use that women make of themselves to expose this affront.

[...] Men can use beautiful, sexy women as neutral objects or surfaces, but when women use their own faces and bodies they are immediately accused of narcissism. There is an element of exhibitionism in all body art, probably a legitimate result of the choice between exploring yourself or someone else. However, the degree to which narcissism underpins and affects work varies immensely. As women are considered sexual objects, it is assumed that every woman who presents her naked body in public is doing so because she thinks she is beautiful. She is a narcissist and Acconci, with his less romantic image and pimply back, an artist (LIPPARD, 1976, 122, 124-125).

Against the grain of erotic imagery

Gretta's view of photography as a privileged instrument for materializing her ideas about the female condition parallels the role of technical images in disseminating and solidifying an erotic imaginary. This imaginary often centered around the male figure as a powerful recipient of lascivious glances, impudent offers, insinuating poses, and promises of pleasure. Such imagery was particularly transmitted through intimate postcards that gained popularity in Paris in the last decade of the 19th century (FARINA, 1981, 22).

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Developing the first photographic nudes aimed at attracting the observer's gaze to provoke them (NOËL, 1986, sp), the images disseminated by this unique type of postcard quickly became widely consumed. They featured various scenarios proposed by literature and visual arts, including mythological (goddess-woman) and Edenic (sin-woman) settings, boudoirs (the toilet as a beauty workshop before love), small living rooms (queen of rest and conversation), or inviting sofas (love offering). While the scenography remains consistent, the postcard woman diverges from her literary and artistic counterparts by embodying a real body, "a tangible materiality of flesh, devoid of excessive ethereal idealizations", thus asserting "a demand for authenticity" that resonated with a burgeoning positivist mindset (FARINA, 1981, 16-17).

The exposure of the female body coincided with efforts to lend a scientific veneer to theories asserting the innate inferiority of women. These theories posited that women, with their smaller heads and brains, were governed by their genitals rather than reason, with their sole purpose being the propagation of the species. Among the representatives of the dissemination of such ideas, the figure of the Italian doctor Paolo Mantegazza stands out. His works are characterized by

a balanced mix of scientific knowledge and prejudices, anecdotes and clinical cases, exotic experiences and chivalry, romanticism, and positivist conceit. Contemporary society could therefore find in them answers in line with common mentalities regarding the problem [...] of women and sex.(FARINA, 1981, 23-24).

In *Fisiologia della donna* (1893), the author intended to offer an "objective" description of female nature, but the final result yields little new information. Being naturally inferior (although morally better), a woman must be, above all, beautiful. Her beauty is enveloped within her body, which, when exposed, becomes the most coveted prize for male intelligence and strength (FARINA, 1981, 25). Given these assumptions, it is unsurprising that the treatise includes, amidst discussions of theories about female nature, a list of bodily features believed to stimulate male desire: prominent buttocks, breasts, modesty of the "love nest", "luxuriant hair", "dimples on the cheeks, back, and hands", the "equator of beauty" (waist), pubescent lips;

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blue veins visible beneath the thin skin of the neck and chest (MANTEGAZZA, 1893, 60, 307, 315, 323).

The beauty of women highlights the role that nature has bestowed upon them in the “great mystery of reproduction”:

Sexuality is embodied in the fatty roundness of her hips, limbs, and particularly her thighs.

Sexual are the thin ligaments of the joints; sexual is the small head, the low forehead; characteristics that lend her body a singular fineness, a voluptuous elegance.

Sexual is the shorter height compared to men [...] Above all,

sexual is the smallness of the hands and feet.

Sexual is the length of the hair, [...] which enhances the tactile treasures of voluptuousness and alters the body's elegance with its various shapes, subtly concealing all its beauty (MANTEGAZZA, 1893, 316-317).

Mantegazza is certain that women understand “the value of their own beauty, which they cultivate and perfect through art, exercise, the tactics of seduction, and the strategies of coquetry.” The relationship between the two sexes does not do without it:

We view the woman through the prism of desire, and in return, she regards us similarly; her beauty appears more perfect as it stirs sexual desires within us, thus promising greater voluptuousness in its possession. And this is how women think and desire in relation to us (MANTEGAZZA, 1893, 266, 305).

The author merely condensed and lent a scientific veneer to prejudices ingrained in society, prompting Ferruccio Farina to suggest a comparative exercise between excerpts from *Fisiologia della donna* and intimate postcards produced in France and Italy between 1890 and 1914:

The purported “scientific” nature of these “fragments” aligns so seamlessly with the depiction of women in our intimate cards, characterized by their assumption of ‘realism,’ that we found it meaningful to propose a parallel reading, juxtaposing each image with a phrase from Mantegazza. While we acknowledge that our selection of approaches was guided by a certain mischief, a penchant for the grotesque, and paradox, the underlying truth remains that both texts and images

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Thus united, they correspond reciprocally and are witnesses of the same mentality, as both are the dissemination of an image to be lived between utopia and everyday life and tell us today the feminine dream of our ancestors (FARINA, 1981, 25, 28).

É Against this enduring view of women, which persisted in Western society during the second wave of feminism, Gretta undertakes the task of deconstructing beauty myths and asserting a sexuality independent of male desire. While the images featured on intimate postcards, which later became archetypes for publications circulated in the form of illustrated magazines, maliciously and provocatively highlight the body points emphasized by Mantegazza, the Brazilian artist's approach is diametrically opposed to this ideology. The contrast between the two approaches starts with the subjects who offer their bodies to produce the images. In the former, the models portraying the Eternal Feminine were typically "voluptuous women", setting aside their daily routines (posing in art academies and private studios, household chores, or engaging in prostitution) to embrace the illusion of embodying, if only temporarily during the photoshoot, the timeless myth of Venus.(FARINA, 1981, 16). According to Steiner (2001, p. 240), the model embodies both the individual human being and the ideal form. However, in Lippard's view, the model's distinctive feature is the loss of her identity, as she represents the transformation of woman into something determined by the artist (LIPPARD, 1976, 108).

In Gretta's approach, this loss of identity is circumvented as the artist assumes dual roles – both creator and model – with the objective of self-discovery. This endeavor not only seeks to redefine the trajectory of art but also serves as a critical interrogation of patriarchal society as a whole. In her defiance of patriarchal norms, Gretta subverts the traditional objectification of women by rendering the face as a grotesque mask, presenting abstract interpretations of the body, and openly expressing her desires in public. Through these acts, she rejects the process of reification, thereby politicizing her individual experience and challenging the pervasive male gaze by bringing her personal concerns into the public sphere, the artist may be perceived as acting narcissistically. However, adopting Amelia Jones's perspective, this attitude carries no negative connotations. In addition to proclaiming her own needs and particularities as a subject, Gretta establishes a close relationship with the observer at the moment she displays her own body in action, creating the possibility of the circulation of a current of desire between two social entities and subjectivities (JONES, 1998, 47, 52). The artist shows that she is

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aware of this possibility when she remembers the Parisian public's reaction to *Evocative recollections*. The cat's fright from the noise caused by the audience and the lights compels her to abandon the idea of using "slow movements." To prevent her partner from escaping, she begins to make "sudden and quick" movements, eliciting various reactions from spectators: boos, applause, and requests for an encore (DIMAMBRO, 2018, 175).

The deconstruction of the female image based on two models of representation — exacerbation of stereotypes and decomposition of "beautiful appearance" thanks to purposeful deformations —, the cold view of the body treated as a set of forms not always capable of recognition, and the game of veiling/unveiling demonstrate that Gretta is guided by the intention of contesting the central axes of erotic art. The artist contrasts the smooth faces of her models, characterized by expressions that are sometimes candid, sometimes lascivious, sometimes frank, and sometimes furtive, with masks of despair and anguish.

The frontal nudes, shamelessly exposed buttocks, and almost always exposed breasts are critically juxtaposed with body fragments that, at times, give the impression of autonomous and isolated forms. When photographing what Paul Valéry defines as "My-body", Gretta expresses the same sense of estrangement described by him. The poet believes that "My-body" is a "strange, asymmetrical space, in which distances are exceptional relationships. I have no idea of the spatial relationships between 'my forehead' and 'my foot', between 'my knee' and 'my back'...." The poses assumed in "Diary of a Woman," "Body Works," and "Evocative Recollections" could be analyzed in light of the idea of "My-body" as "the closest, constant, and also most variable thing," intimate and mysterious at the same time, capable of surprising events.: "Sometimes, some of its parts or regions manifest themselves, illuminate themselves, and assume an importance before which everything else pales, imposing their incomparable sweetness or rigor on the moment." (VALÉRY, 2020, 270-271).

This vision of a foreign body is enhanced in the photographs in the book "Evocative Recollections," in which the artist's interaction with the mosquito net gives rise to forms that are almost always indeterminate and indistinct, close to graphic stains marked by sharp contrasts of black and white. At times, when adhering to the body, the canvas generates floral motifs on Gretta's body, giving the impression of delicate tattoos. In other instances, the lack of sharpness in the images appears to confront the observer

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with metamorphoses and changes that suggest the formless—understood as something beyond form, removed from visibility, residing on the margins, in the shadows, pauses, cracks, and interstices of language, identities, and history (SUBRIZI, 2000, 32). By imbuing the photographic works with greater ambiguity than that presented in the performance, the artist further diminishes the erotic charge of the collection, removing its sexual connotation from the veil. Mantegazza, for example, had no doubts about its role in love games and in art:

The veil halts desire at the threshold of the temple, a door not fully open, but slightly ajar; it embodies a continuous and prolonged evolution of aesthetic admiration. It is the semi-dressed nude, the mist that conceals yet reveals; it is nature enhanced by artistry, the epitome of beauty magnified a hundredfold by our imagination—yearning yet hesitant, longing yet elusive. In sum, it encapsulates the most potent elements of beauty.

The veil represents the pinnacle of artistic luxury, yet many sculptors and painters, adept at portraying the beauty of a naked woman, falter when tasked with draping her in the intricate folds of veils. And to veil something beautiful skillfully is more challenging than to expose it naked: it's a secondary creation, akin to what civilization is to wilderness. The nude represents the anatomy of beauty, while the veil embodies anatomy and physiology; it encompasses nature and art, delicacy following strength, elegance following form, grace following wealth. It epitomizes the modesty of art—more demanding, refined, and nuanced than the modesty that conceals the mysteries of love. (MANTEGAZZA, 1892, 326-327).

A comparison between Gretta's images and certain intimate postcards featuring veils will starkly illustrate the distinction between a woman's gaze upon her own body and a man's gaze upon the female form. While the Brazilian artist blurs the boundaries between her own body and the diaphanous surface that envelops it, the anonymous models from the late 19th century and the beginning of the heyday use the veil to arouse the observer. The veil can embrace the hips while leaving the rest of the body exposed, especially the breasts. It can be casually draped over one arm to accentuate the naked body seen from behind. It can be incorporated into a stretching exercise that reveals everything without concealment. It may cascade from an armchair to the floor, drawing attention to the buttocks. It can lend a more lascivious air to a sensual pose. Light garments and combinations also serve as veils, transformed into "instruments of lasciviousness." As Mantegazza wrote in his 1893 book, if the dress does not make a woman more beautiful, it can, however,

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lead people to guess "what cannot be seen" and add to "the beauty of nature the fascination of the unknown, which can be guessed", performing an aesthetic function. Loose hair on the shoulders and breasts was another form of veil, and could sometimes lead a woman to experience "the glory of considering herself clothed" (MANTEGAZZA, 1893, 215, 217, 241).

To the veils commonly found in what's dubbed "beauty pornography," which indoctrinates youth to "sexualize images devoid of insights into women's desire" (WOLF, 2021, 194, 232), Gretta juxtaposes her network, "a delicate and feminine canvas, yet remarkably resilient" (SARFATY, 1980, sp), showcasing a quest for self-awareness capable of reshaping perceptions of oneself and one's place in contemporary society. Through numerous images of her face and body, the artist aims to illustrate her defiance against the societal control imposed on women, which expects them to be beautiful and desirable while stifling the expression of their own desires. The selection of photography as the medium for dismantling the myths of female beauty and chastity is deliberate, as Gretta intentionally adopts the most potent means for shaping and proliferating images that established standards of appearance and behavior unattainable for women to defy.

In her exploration of the female condition, the artist works with an extended temporality. On one hand, it mobilizes memory when challenging cultural stereotypes about femininity. On the other hand, it explores the present moment when transforming the body into a site of transit and inescapable tensions, challenging crystallized views. As Tálisson Melo observed, Gretta "unfolds the images she made of herself in a series of repetitions, an obstinate gesture that materializes a crisis, with questions about the condition of women and the stereotypes of femininity that attempt to format and limit her life potential" (MELO, 2022, sp). In this process, the artist employs photography in a unique manner, aiming to achieve "an unreal reality [...] transforming it into a plastic-visual metaphor." (AULER, 1978, sp). By denaturalizing the photographic image through distortions, deformations, fragmentations, and montages, Gretta demonstrates her commitment to the search for a new vision of women, free from the many prejudices that have weighed on her since a primordial past. However, she is aware that achieving freedom is an arduous and long struggle, as demonstrated by the expressions of despair and pain in the physiognomic scenes.

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