

Introduction

Fearful of authoritarianism and persecution by the military regime yet disillusioned with the dogmatic tone of the orthodox left, visual artists living and working in Brazil under the military dictatorship during the late 1960s and early 1970s forged new ways of producing and displaying their work. At the time, the country's intellectual milieu was itself at a crossroads, entangled in debate over the role art should play in a society marked by social and political divisions. Prior to the military coup d'état, in 1964, the decade had started with artists favoring programs oriented toward national-popular themes—such as, the Centros Populares de Cultura, a project focused on fostering culture in slums, factories, and universities—and promoting a populist revolutionary art.

By the late 1960s and early 1970s a shift had taken place, with many artists and intellectuals now seeking a means of cultural production that was somehow ethically and politically significant but not necessarily nationalistic or ideologically oriented. They were criticized from all sides: the left accused them of being elitists lacking a social commitment to grass-roots cultural production, while the right labeled them rebels sowing the seeds of communism throughout the country. Suspicious of the predominant discourse on both the left and the right, this new group of young, rebellious

artists turned to their bodies, their land, and their thoughts, both literally and metaphorically, to produce an innovative art that solidified and advanced Brazil's position in the international artistic arena.

Moreover, as incidents of the censorship of visual art accumulated, innovation became a necessity, with artists developing more indirect modes of expression to circumvent censorship, often appropriating the strategies of urban guerrilla groups (which were being crushed by the military regime at the time) and performing quick actions or momentary interventions outside museums and art institutions. Far from paralyzing the creative production of the country, as many believed would happen, a period rife with suspicion and censorship stimulated newly anarchic practices, at times aggressive and at other times disguised in subtler modes of artistic intervention.

The military regime came to power on 31 March 1964 after a coup d'état against the left-wing president João Goulart. The military's stated purposes were to reform Brazilian capitalism and to modernize the country while freeing it from corruption and the threat of communism.¹ Some years after the dictatorship was established, artists began to distance themselves from militant discourses and to generate new artistic languages. Many visual artists found the rigid, politically engaged model proposed by the traditional left no longer feasible; likewise, the promise of freedom advocated by the guardians of an autonomous art held little appeal. How to reconcile the political agenda with artistic innovation in a country under censorship? Could artists be at once politically active on a local level and engaged in international artistic developments? Could they find an alternative to conventional models of social activism, which almost always sacrificed aesthetic quality for ideological agenda? These became crucial questions for Brazilian visual artists as they moved beyond the first years of the repressive regime and began to navigate the newly hazardous social and cultural terrain of a changed nation.

The period covered by this book, 1968 to 1975, the most repressive years of the military regime, was critical for the advent of new forms of artistic production addressing the political situation of the time as well as opening up the visual arts in Brazil to new international trends. Given their ephemeral and impermanent qualities, these new forms were perfectly suited to Brazilian artists who, in the absence of any explicit criteria regarding the government's repression of the visual arts, were living in a state of self-imposed censorship. Self-censorship came to play a major role as artists began to decipher and define the boundaries between the permissible and

the forbidden. Fearing persecution, which was often exercised arbitrarily and without warning, they took pains to avoid leaving traces of authorship in their works. More anarchic than dogmatic, they developed a metaphorical language to address the realities they faced on a daily basis.

This book is about the intersection of politics and the visual arts at a very specific moment and place. It examines the social context of the time, showing how Brazilian visual artists, at a disturbing political moment, tried to intervene in the prevailing order through their actions and art making. These artists not only opposed the political situation but also tried to reconfigure the role of viewers, question the art market, discard commodity-based objects, and challenge the power and legitimacy of art institutions.

Visual artists working under the Brazilian dictatorship were not part of a cohesive movement; they did not have an *a priori* agenda, nor did they collectively write a group manifesto. They did not necessarily participate in the same exhibitions together under any specific label, though sometimes they showed their artwork in the same seminal exhibitions, and—though each in his way sought new discourses and practices to resist authoritarianism and censorship—they never formally articulated a collective opposition to the military regime. What they shared was their determination to address the political situation, to question the role of art institutions, and to participate in the current international practices of the visual arts, thereby shaking stagnant preexisting structures.

These artists were interested in neither propagandistic modes of expression nor the art of protest. They abandoned traditional forms such as painting and sculpture in favor of ephemeral actions and interventions. They adopted a number of strategies to reconcile the competing demands of Brazilian national politics and the international art scene, including the use of degradable and decomposing materials, their own bodies, the media, the readymade, and language. The body of artistic work produced during the two decades of military dictatorship in Brazil is vast and diverse. Virtually no individual active in the cultural and artistic sphere of the period was unaffected by the dilemmas imposed by the regime, and each developed his or her own practice in response. This book is not intended to be a survey of either the artistic production of the era or of all the artists engaged in the struggle against censorship and authoritarianism. It does not claim to represent all trends in the visual arts that took place during the period covered here; other forms of politically engaged art were in place at the time, many embracing a much stronger nationalistic and populist tone than the works

analyzed here. There are other books that focus on politically militant art,² as well as volumes that survey the cultural production of the period in terms of theater, music, literature, and cinema.³ While artists from many cities in Brazil were actively engaged in all forms of protest against the dictatorship,⁴ this book focuses only on the practices of three major artists—Antonio Manuel (b. 1947), Artur Barrio (b. 1945), and Cildo Meireles (b. 1948)—who lived and worked in Rio de Janeiro during the years covered here in an attempt to define their particularly innovative mode of response to censorship and repression under the Brazilian dictatorship. These artists successfully managed to develop their own modified versions of international trends, such as body art, media-based art, and conceptual practices to address a very specific and local situation, creating new hybrid forms that embraced both a political tone and a strong drive toward artistic innovation and visual excellence. Rather than confront the system overtly, they invented ways to get around it, discovering novel methods of questioning authority, both that of the regime and that of the prevailing art institutions of the time.

Antonio Manuel, Artur Barrio, and Cildo Meireles will serve as case studies to demonstrate this new vision of artists who rejected the politics of the right but nevertheless were not interested in the cultural policy of the orthodox left. Working independently in their disparate individual practices they created an innovative visual language that became emblematic of the period. These three artists are far from being the only figures to represent this historical moment in Brazilian art, but their works have the strength to seize the points of convergence, contradictions, and dilemmas faced by artists under the military regime. Taken together, the three case studies give a comprehensive view of the new artistic vocabularies being adopted at the time as the most interesting and suitable way of both negotiating the local political scene and participating in the international artistic discourse.

The AI-5 Effect

In the years immediately following the coup, the military regime at first did not forbid the circulation of cultural output from the left. On the contrary, as attested by the seminal essay “Culture and Politics in Brazil, 1964–1969” (1970) by the Brazilian literary critic Roberto Schwarz, “In spite of the dictatorship from the right, there was a relative cultural hegemony of the left in the country.”⁵ The autonomy of the left in the artistic and cultural fields lasted until the end of 1968, when Ato Institucional #5 (Institutional Act #5)

was established by the military government. The AI-5, as it became known, was undoubtedly the most severe in a succession of increasingly repressive measures issued during the first years of the regime. The dictate, originally intended to be in effect for one year, would define the interchange between Brazilian civilians and their government for a decade, until its long-awaited, eagerly anticipated demise on 31 December 1978.

Suspending political and civil rights and sanctioning torture as a means of intimidating political opponents,⁶ the AI-5 marked a drastic change in the country's political and cultural atmosphere. Its immediate results were the widespread arrests of students, intellectuals, politicians, artists, and journalists, among other members of society, and censorship of the media and the arts.

For some time the national mood had been tense: earlier that year, on 28 March 1968, the military police had shot a seventeen-year-old student, Edson Luis, the first death to result from the ongoing confrontations between students and the military force. The country was appalled and incensed by the shooting. Banners displayed during his funeral vividly expressed the country's outrage: "The old people in power, the young ones in the coffin."⁷ In the months after, growing numbers of students, representative sectors of the Church, artists, workers, and liberal professionals began mobilizing against the military regime. In June 1968 the converging forces reached a turning point with the *Passeata dos 100,000* (March of the 100,000) in downtown Rio de Janeiro.⁸ The march took place without incident, but soon after the demonstration agents of the military stormed and burned the headquarters of the *União Nacional dos Estudantes* (National Union of Students) in Rio de Janeiro.⁹ Street demonstrations were soon listed among the actions prohibited by the regime.

Brazil after the AI-5 was a changed nation, marked by disillusionment with traditional politics, rejection of the military regime, and disbelief in all forms of authoritarianism. The country had entered the most repressive and violent phase of its military rule, the so-called *anos de chumbo* (lead years). In many ways surpassing the fallout from the coup in 1964, this tumultuous era saw the forced exile of left-wing professors, journalists, and artists, the censorship of arts and the media, and the extinction of a once-forceful guerrilla movement.

The regime enjoyed considerable support nationally: the conservative sector of the Church and many Brazilian landowners and industrialists, seeking security and wary of the spread of communism, social reforms,

and the increasing popular movements, were in favor of the military government at home.¹⁰ Throughout the early to mid-1960s rampant waves of strikes crippled vital segments of the economy, such as railroads, ports, and the steel industry, at times threatening to shut down the country's commerce altogether. To some sectors of the embattled populace, the armed forces were seen as guarantors of order and protection against turmoil. The U.S. Department of State, fearing the influence of Cuba and the Soviet Union, had embraced a strong anticommunist agenda in its Latin American foreign policy, paying much attention to Brazil.¹¹ After the coup the United States lent its support to the military regime, giving it a veneer of legitimacy on the international stage.

The climate of social unrest affected countries in Latin America and beyond. In Bolivia, the tragic death of Che Guevara on 9 October 1967 had transformed the Argentine guerrilla leader into the hero of an entire generation. The United States was entering a period of unprecedented social transformation as well, with increasing discontent over the Vietnam War giving rise to a countercultural movement, and the assassinations of Sen. Robert F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr. creating a turning point in the fight for civil rights in 1968. In France, May 1968 saw a prolonged series of student uprisings—the Sorbonne was occupied, and the Latin Quarter became a battlefield between the police and students, the students carrying signs that read, “It Is Forbidden to Forbid,” “Youth in Power,” and “Be Realistic, Ask for the Impossible”—becoming a watershed moment in the country's shift toward a new liberal moral ideal. Elsewhere in the international arena, the Soviets had invaded Czechoslovakia, and hundreds of students and leftist demonstrators in Mexico City were crushed by military forces. In countries throughout the world there was an urge to go beyond traditional forms of social and political struggle. For this reason the situation in Brazil, which might have commanded international attention in a less chaotic world, was left largely to the Brazilian people, to forge their own way forward both politically and culturally.

A Visual Tale of an Era

By analyzing the activities of three artists at a critical juncture—critical in terms of both their careers and the historical arc of Brazil as a nation—this book will provide a context for understanding the impact of the AI-5

and other forms of control exercised over the visual arts, recounting the censored exhibitions, artistic interventions, actions, and manifestos that arose in reaction. Each chapter will profile a specific artist's mode of visual response to the dictatorship, with testimonies from artists, curators, and art critics providing a framework for understanding this complex historical moment. It is a particular view of the period as seen through the lens of three idiosyncratic artists, avoiding transforming this narrative into an all-encompassing account of the artistic responses to the military dictatorship.

To create a probing portrait of this moment in time, the book employs a contextual approach: analysis of oral histories; unpublished documents and letters exchanged within the international art community; documents, newspapers, and magazines from the time; pivotal critical texts; and artists' and curators' manifestos, all give a sense of the energetic exchanges among artists in Brazil as well as in the international realm.

The first chapter gives a broad political and historical account of the period, outlining the repressive actions and censorship of the visual arts by the military regime, through the cancellation of art exhibitions, the confiscation of works considered to be subversive, and the persecution of artists and intellectuals. This account is given in extensive detail, as is that of the international backlash to Brazil's political situation, culminating in a major boycott of the X Bienal de São Paulo (X São Paulo Biennial) in 1969. Also important are the debates among the major supporters and adversaries of the X São Paulo Biennial within Brazil, the United States, and Europe.

To begin a critical assessment, on both the national and international levels, of the consequences of censorship of the visual arts in Brazil, the renowned Brazilian art critic and curator Frederico Morais made available crucial documents such as letters, dossiers, and statements from artists and intellectuals who participated in the boycott of the X São Paulo Biennial. Among these figures were Pol Bury, Waldemar Cordeiro, Hans Haacke, Gyorgy Kepes, Mário Pedrosa, Pierre Restany, and Vassilakis Takis.

Chapter 2 examines how, in the face of the political situation, Brazilian artists employed new forms of artistic expression as a response to the military regime. Forging innovative visual languages, they succeeded in challenging the dictatorship while at the same time staying beneath its radar. The chapter charts the emergence of body art and media-based art, taking as a paradigm the work of Antonio Manuel, who used his own naked body as a form of protest against the authoritarianism and arbitrariness that char-

acterized both the military regime and the art institutions of the time, and who appropriated the media to expose the state of censorship in the country. This chapter offers an overview of the alternative local exhibitions that took place in Rio de Janeiro, exhibitions which revealed new trends in Brazilian art imbued with both a libertarian drive and a political tone. In the absence of the participation of prestigious national and international critics and artists, major institutional exhibitions, the X São Paulo Biennial chief among them, were rendered irrelevant and were largely disregarded by the artistic community; this created a vacuum which was filled by local exhibitions, unexpectedly launching new artists and new trends in the visual arts.

Chapter 3 explores the ways in which Artur Barrio created site-specific artworks in public spaces, merging political content with nonpermanent artistic practices. His visceral *trouxas ensanguentadas* (bloody bundles)—parcels of animal bones and meat resembling dismembered human body parts, which were anonymously placed on riverbanks and in public spaces—are discussed as a guerrilla-based strategy for opposing the military regime. This chapter also addresses Barrio’s use of inexpensive perishable materials as a means to forge a new visual aesthetics for underdeveloped countries, a parallel to Hélio Oiticica’s concept of an avant-garde art in an underdeveloped country, which Oiticica outlined in his essay of 1967 “Esquema geral da nova objetividade” (General Scheme of the New Objectivity).¹² Barrio’s ephemeral works were meant to be experienced outside the institutional framework of museums and galleries and to promote the ultimate destruction of the art object through its self-decomposition.

Chapter 4 considers the innovations of Cildo Meireles, recounting measures the artist took to incorporate a strong critique of the military regime into his conceptually based art practices. Michel Foucault’s theories on how mechanisms of control and surveillance are socially constructed are instrumental in dissecting the strategies developed by Meireles to defy the dictatorship. This chapter draws parallels with major international art movements of the period and traces how Meireles’s practice differs from the trajectory of conceptual art as it developed simultaneously in the United States and Europe. It also examines Meireles’s participation in the groundbreaking exhibition *Information*, held at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1970.

The three artists considered in this book forged new vocabularies to produce work that was a transformative force, not only from political repression but also from the stagnant conservatism pervasive in Brazilian culture.

There is no easy way to identify how these works of art were received, as the media were censored during the military dictatorship. There is no register of how many people might have seen the exhibitions discussed here, or might have bought some of the works in question. This book does not attempt, therefore, to speculate upon the successes or failures of these artistic endeavors; rather, it attempts to outline the creation of new artistic paradigms that harnessed international practices to address a local political situation.

This book examines the exhibitions in which these new manifestations took place, considering the central role of art institutions, in particular the Museum of Modern Art of Rio de Janeiro—not only the exhibitions that took place, but, equally important, the ones that were canceled because of censorship. In this way, it traces the shift from institutional spaces to street actions and the emergence of site-specific artworks that arose at a time when permanent works of art with any rebellious connotation became highly visible targets of the repressive regime. The heated debates and controversial issues that defined the period; the major players among its advocates and detractors; the disputes and tensions that led to artistic breakthroughs: all are in the foreground of this book. By gathering these diverse materials together and combining them with a critical account of three artists' activities during the period, I hope to create a narrative of creative advancement in the face of regressive politics that is, in its simplest form, the archetype of artistic ingenuity: bold invention born, in spite of impossible odds, out of a desire for expression.