

'This is an extraordinary volume. While concentrating on contemporary art in Brazil, and attending to its myriad historical, political, social and aesthetic ramifications, *Today Is Always Yesterday* combines Michael Asbury's characteristic critical, objective acumen with an "insider" view of Brazilian culture. Furthermore, the author presents us with much more than another book on the contemporary scene: he gives an in-depth history of Brazilian art in all of its complexity, from the Portuguese era to the post-Bolsonaro, Lula-Redux period of today. Anyone even marginally interested in the dizzyingly complex nature of Brazilian creativity will be more than pleased with Asbury's panoramic contribution.'

EDWARD J. SULLIVAN, Helen Gould Shepard Professor
in the History of Art, New York University

'Taking the colours of the Brazilian flag as the innovative framework for his elegant narrative, Michael Asbury's playful and erudite book is essential reading for anyone interested in the intersection of politics, history and nationhood in contemporary art in Brazil and globally.'

GILANE TAWADROS, Director, Whitechapel Gallery

'Asbury challenges the cliché of national identity in Brazilian contemporary art by provocatively employing the national colours as metaphors. He provides essential historical context, critically deconstructing the themes and concepts examined within the pages of this compelling book.'

ANA MAGALHÃES, Director, The Museum of Contemporary Art,
University of São Paulo



Today Is Always Yesterday
Contemporary Brazilian Art

Michael Asbury



Today Is Always Yesterday
Contemporary Brazilian Art



Michael Asbury

Today is Always Yesterday
constructs under
Brazil. Through his
nation's colonial art
Michael Asbury and
illustrate history
of the flag, a nation
symbolism and w
culture wars of re
thematically struc
book. Asbury sho
to cultural engag
and examines art
foundational myt
racial melting po
presents a comp
debates in Brazil

With 203 illustrations

In memory of Gail Brett

Published by Reaktion Books Ltd
Unit 32, Waterside
44-48 Wharf Road
London N1 7UX, UK
www.reaktionbooks.co.uk

First published 2023
Copyright © Michael Asbury 2023

All rights reserved

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval
system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic,
mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior
permission of the publishers

Printed and bound in India by Replika Press Pvt. Ltd

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978 1 78914 800 8

Contents

Introduction: Contemporary, Brazilian, Art 7

1 Order, Progress (and Love) 14

2 Green: Contemporary Art and the Founding
of the Nation 47

3 Yellow: Contemporary Brazilian Art and
Extractivism 103

4 Blue: When Was Contemporary Art? 151

5 White: A Separation that Relates 219

REFERENCES 281

SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY 295

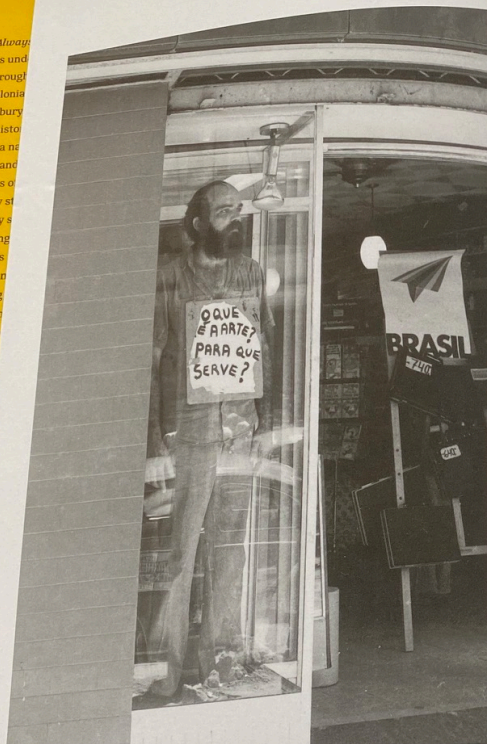
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS 299

PHOTO ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS 301

INDEX 303

Today is Always
constructs und
Brazil. Throug
nation's colonia
Michael Asbury
illustrate histo
of the flag, a ne
symbolism and
culture wars o
thematically st
book. Asbury s
to cultural eng
and examines
foundational o
racial melting
presents a con
debates in Bra

With 203 illus



Introduction: Contemporary, Brazilian, Art

In 1978 the artist Paulo Bruscky stood in a shop window in Recife with a hand-painted sign hanging from his neck. It read: 'What is art? What is it for?' (illus. 1). The questions were directed at passers-by going about their daily life, unaware that the action they were witnessing was a work of art. In fact, a double manoeuvre was being played out. By placing himself outside the 'proper' place of art, Bruscky was likely making a statement about the status of art as commodity. Furthermore, the displacement itself commented on hierarchies of prestige across cultural institutions and, possibly, on the perceived marginality of his home town compared to the São Paulo-Rio de Janeiro cultural axis, and further still to such international centres as New York, London and Paris. Against such hierarchical expectations, Bruscky was concurrently corresponding with artists from around the world, independent of any gallery or institutional support. Thus his *O que é arte? Para que serve?* (What is Art? What is it For?) subverts assumptions about the place of cultural encounters through a carnivalesque act, a reversal that sought to instate agency to the artist working on the margins of accepted institutional frames.¹

We may refer to the questions in Bruscky's performance as analogous to the approach adopted in this book. Its subtitle, *Contemporary Brazilian Art*, is constituted by three words, each evading simple definition: what is the contemporary? What is national about art? Indeed, what is art? Rather than straight answers, these questions invite further questions. The subject at hand is often conflated into narratives, debates or controversies that, while focusing on the definition of one term, take the meaning of the others for granted. As such it is often presumed that the phrase 'contemporary Brazilian art' simply refers to recent art from a country named Brazil. The presumption is nevertheless unsatisfactory, for it considers the term 'contemporary' as a mere periodizing category, Brazil as a homogeneous entity and consequently art – that most evasive of terms – becomes constrained by vague notions of time and place. To reflect on such terms may therefore not only enlighten what is meant in each case but

¹ Paulo Bruscky, *O que é arte? Para que serve?* 1978, documentation of performance at Livraria Moderna, Recife, Brazil.



8 Modesto Brocos.
A redenção de Cã, 1895.
oil on canvas.

9 Antonio Manuel, *Sabor doce para bocas amargas*, 1975, photograph.



from one of Rio's most notorious favelas). Holding banners and wearing Otteica's *Parangolés* capes, the action sought to break down hierarchies between high art and popular culture, questioning the 'proper' place for these to be staged.¹⁰

In 1967 artists Nelson Leirner and Flávio Motta proposed an urban intervention in São Paulo entitled *Domingo das bandeiras* (Flag Sunday), where fellow artists were invited to produce flags to be sold to regular passers-by in a public square. In São Paulo the event was marred by interdiction: accounts differ on the precise motive, some arguing that the flags were seized by the military police who confused the event with the activity of informal street vendors, while others state that the event had been judged as an unpatriotic provocation.¹¹ Flag Sunday was held the following year in Rio de Janeiro. Taking place in General Osório Square in the affluent neighbourhood of Ipanema, it was allowed to run without further interventions. It received enthusiastic response from local artists, among them Hélio Otteica, who displayed his flag *Seja marginal, seja herói* (Be an Outlaw, Be a Hero; illus. 10).

More than half a century since the 1964 coup d'état, we are witnessing incidents that invite us to find Otteica's intervention as relevant today as it was in the mid-1960s. Its provocative slogan, 'Be an Outlaw, Be a Hero', still holds much of its original power and ambivalence. We might think of recent incidents involving self-righteous vigilante violence in Rio de Janeiro and the accompanying propaganda, circulated on social

Green: Contemporary Art and the Founding of the Nation

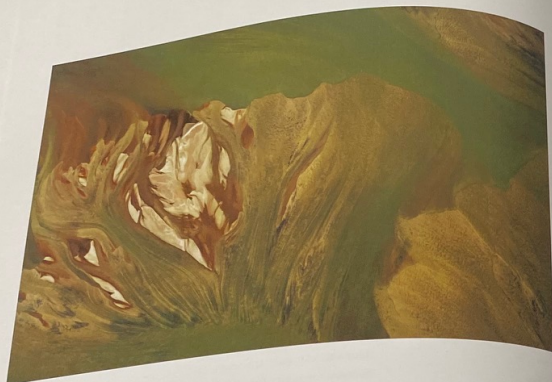


25 Vitor Meireles, *A primeira missa*, 1860, oil on canvas.

On 22 April 1500 a fleet of ships commanded by the Portuguese navigator Admiral Pedro Álvares Cabral landed on what was believed to be an island east of the longitudinal line set by the Treaty of Tordesillas.¹ That treaty had been decreed by Pope Alexander vi in 1494 as a resolution for a territorial dispute between the kingdoms of Portugal and Spain. The disagreement arose following Christopher Columbus's return from his first voyage to the Americas with news of the discovery of several Caribbean islands including today's Cuba and Hispaniola, now divided between Haiti and the Dominican Republic. Both islands were promptly claimed by Spain, the sponsor of Columbus's expedition, raising concerns by the Portuguese crown that Spain would establish a monopoly on the New World. The treaty ran pole-to-pole along a meridian 370 leagues west of the Cape Verde islands. It declared all land discovered to its west to be rightfully Spanish and that to its east Portuguese. The subsequent Treaty of Zaragoza of 1529 set a similar meridian east of the Maluku Islands in present-day Indonesia, effectively establishing a ring around the globe and dividing it between the then principal maritime powers, Portugal and Spain.

The Pope's blessing suggested a divine right to the land, one that was reinforced by Cabral's first actions upon landing. After finding a natural port to anchor, today's Porto Seguro (Safe Port), Cabral ordered a cross to be erected and declared that the land be called the 'island' of Vera Cruz (True Cross). In reporting the discovery to King Manuel I of Portugal, the expedition's scribe Pêro Vaz de Caminha recounted events in detail: the first sighting of land, the encounter with the natives and the first mass celebrated on site. The letter went missing within the archives of the Portuguese National Library only to resurface in Brazil (formerly Vera Cruz) three centuries later, when the Portuguese prince regent Dom João vi, fleeing Napoleon Bonaparte's Iberian campaign, arrived in Rio de Janeiro in 1808 with his entire court and all the associated regalia his ships could possibly carry, including a hastily packed Portuguese National Library.² The letter thus made a circular trajectory, both geographically and symbolically. It departed from Vera Cruz towards

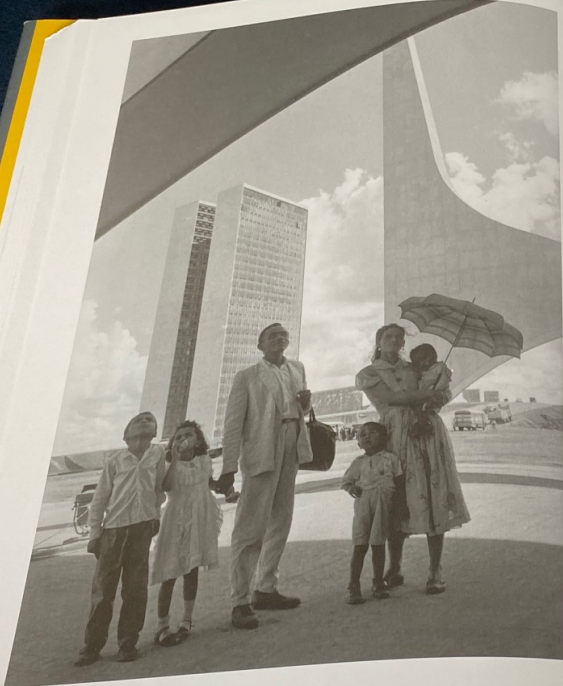
Yellow: Contemporary Brazilian Art and Extractivism



73 Julia Pontés, *Number 23*, from the series 'Ó Minas Gerais | My Land Our Landscape', 2016, photograph.

Julia Pontés's *Number 23*, from her ongoing series 'Ó Minas Gerais | My Land Our Landscape', has an undeniable painterly quality (illus. 73). The brown, pink, yellow and green hues that flow across its surface seem to be the product of previous encounters, former mixes. The picture's substance is thick, heavy, unquestionably viscous. One may even admit that, considered purely as image, the work is exceedingly beautiful, its palette overwhelming. When these first impressions are juxtaposed with knowledge of its subject-matter, the work becomes sickening. The multiple references to contemporary and historic events suggested by the series title and subtitle come to the fore with the revelation that what faces the beholder is not a painting, but a photograph taken by a drone overlooking a reservoir of mining detritus. The longing for home invoked by the popular song 'Ó Minas Gerais' subsides into a metaphoric, all-encompassing sludge, as the name 'general mines' suggests. Considered the unofficial hymn of the state, the song is itself a product of former mixes, inspired by a popular Neapolitan waltz, with different lyrics adapted over time. These range from exaltations of nostalgia and longing for one's homeland to descriptions of the region's mineral riches, the state's role as the stage for the failed independence conspiracy of 1789 and other historical regionalist evocations.

Janaina Wagner's film *Lobisomem* (Werewolf) focuses on a similar theme (illus. 74). The film shows the devastation caused by the iron ore industry in the state of Minas Gerais. It captures a ravaged landscape from a bird's-eye view. Distant roads become visible, while the camera slowly hovers over the black and white landscape. The contrast only emphasizes the scale of the devastation, revealing, shockingly, that the footage is shot in colour. There is a certain reminiscence here of Sebastião Salgado's well-known photographs of the mines of Serra Pelada, in the northern state of Pará, from 1986, which convey the apocalyptic dimensions of the open pit mine while emphasizing the seeming insignificance of the individuals within such a scene: the multitude of bodies, uniformly covered from head to toe in mud, are dwarfed by the gigantic scale of the man-made abyss.¹



109 René Burri/Magnum
Photos, Brasília, 1960,
photograph.

invested an imagined place with divine legitimacy, Brasília restaged the ritual of its inaugural mark by ignoring the reality on the ground.³ Unsurprisingly, Vera Cruz had been one of the names proposed for the new capital.⁴

Caetano Veloso's 1968 song 'Tropicália' remembers the new capital with poetic concision: 'Over my head the airplanes, under my feet the lorries'. Its opening lines capture the sharp contrast between the ideal modern citizen flying into the wilderness of 'Brazil's central plateau', while its narrator speaks from the ground and on behalf of the thousands of common labourers, the so-called *candongos*, brought from across the country to construct the modern city. As if confirming Mário Pedrosa's prediction that 'Brazil is a country condemned to modernity', a photograph by René Burri depicts one working-class family standing in awe, not unlike the Amerindians in Vítor Meireles's *First Mass*, gazing upwards at the radiant new city on the day of its inauguration in 1960 (illus. 109).

Commissioned for the exhibition 'Tropicália: A Revolution in Brazilian Culture', *A mudança* (The Move) by Marepe (Marcos Reis Peixoto) consists of a life-size 'toy' truck made from wood planks, plastic mesh and other common construction materials.⁵ Through Caetano's song, we may place Marepe's lorry in conjunction with Fabiano Marques's *Plano Piloto planador* (Pilot Plan Glider), a tongue-in-cheek model glider constructed according to Lúcio Costa's futuristic plan for the new capital (illus. 110, 111).

Marcel Gautherot documented the construction of the new city in the middle of nowhere during the late 1950s, capturing that monumental effort (illus. 112). While Niemeyer's sensual architectural curves, his domes and pillars, demanded intense and cheap manual labour, Costa's urban zoning was originally intended to accommodate those workers within the city's diverse social strata. However, such a plan was quickly undermined by real estate speculation, making it financially impossible for common labourers to afford living in the city they helped build. Their temporary housing built on the outskirts of the modern city, using leftover



160 Daniel Senise, 2892, 1993–2011, installation view, Casa França-Brasil, bedsheets over wood structures.

White: A Separation that Relates

Between 1993 and 2011 Daniel Senise created an installation that consisted of two long white panels facing each other, entitled *Branco* 2430 and *Branco* 462 (White 2430 and White 462). The addition of their numbers gave the work its title, 2892. The panels were composed of segments forming different grid patterns on each side. Upon closer inspection, those patterns revealed themselves to be composed of double and single white bedsheets (illus. 160).¹ Senise's project began by donating new bedsheets to a motel and to a cancer hospital. At the end of their use, the sheets were returned to the artist, stretched and later placed within a gallery space. On one side are those used by the motel (White 2430), on the other, those from the hospital (White 462). The enigmatic title of the work refers to the estimated number of bodies that have passed through both groups of sheets. The distinct pattern of each grid is determined by the previous use of the sheets, the association of the double bed with sex, and of the single bed with terminal illness. The installation invoked temporality, framing the time between the moment of conception and of death. The apparently blank 'walls' stand as parentheses between which the viewer passes. Walking through the work, one becomes conscious of one's own being, one's own life. The work appeals in this way to ontological enquiry. It speaks at once of a multitude of bodies inviting reflection on one's own singular being.

One is reminded, in this sense, of Lygia Pape's *Divisor* (Divider), which also played with the idea of the body and its separation from the surrounding world. *Divisor* consisted of a large loose white sheet with holes interspersed across it, into which participants could insert their heads (illus. 161).² The impression of disembodiment generated new psycho-phenomenological relationships among participants. Indeed, the connection between the work of art and its surrounding space had been a central concern of Neoconcrete art. Senise's work demonstrates how that legacy has become a significant trope within contemporary art practices whereby the advent of participatory art in the 1960s expanded to involve the body of the spectator itself. Tatiana Grinberg has produced a number of works that draw on similar 'disembodied'