

## THE DISCIPLINARY AND THE DOMESTIC: HOUSEHOLD IMAGES IN THE VIDEO PERFORMANCES OF LETÍCIA PARENTE, 1975–1982

### O DISCIPLINAR E O DOMÉSTICO: IMAGENS DOMÉSTICAS NOS VÍDEO-PERFORMANCES DE LETÍCIA PARENTE, 1975–1982

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This essay focuses on Letícia Parente (1930–1991), a Brazilian video artist and scientist, whose works associated household imagery, domestic spaces, and quotidian chores and objects with violence, repression, and incarceration. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, she created a series of video performances, an approach to performance art in which she performed for the video camera, rather than for a live audience. Though Parente did not self-identify as a feminist, this essay interprets her work through a feminist reading, arguing that she navigated the multiple pressures of motherhood, housework, and her professional career by devising experimental tasks exploring her domestic chores and testing their limits to address both the gendered and racial divisions of labor and the state-sponsored violence of the Brazilian military dictatorship (1964–1985). These works include *In* (1975), which centers on the act of hanging up clothes in a closet, *Marca Registrada* (1975), which depicts sewing/embroidery, and *Tarefa I* (1982), which tackles ironing, all of which she performed in her own home. In these videos, Parente performs quotidian actions in ways that enact self-harm and confinement in order to marshal a response to gender oppression in women’s daily lives that paralleled the violence and imprisonment Brazilians experienced under the dictatorship. By enacting disciplinary ‘punishments’ (or the threat of such punishments) on herself, cloaked as daily domestic tasks, she demonstrates the ways that the same forces that structure public disciplinary society also configure the private spaces of the home.

**Keywords:** Letícia Parente. Brazil. Video Art. Feminism. Household Chores. Dictatorship.

Este ensaio centra-se em Letícia Parente (1930–1991), videoartista e cientista brasileira, cujos trabalhos associam imagens e espaços domésticos, bem como tarefas e objetos quotidianos, a violência, repressão e encarceramento. Ao longo das décadas de 1970 e 1980, Parente criou uma série de performances em vídeo, uma abordagem à performance arte na qual se apresentou perante uma câmara de filmar e não perante uma audiência ao vivo. Embora Parente não se identificasse como feminista, este ensaio interpreta o seu trabalho sob uma leitura feminista, argumentando que ela navegou pelas múltiplas pressões da maternidade, do trabalho doméstico e da sua carreira profissional, desenvolvendo trabalhos experimentais que exploram as tarefas domésticas e que testam os seus limites para abordar as divisões de género e raça no trabalho e a violência patrocinada pelo estado da ditadura militar brasileira (1964–1985). Esses trabalhos incluem *In* (1975), que se concentra no ato de pendurar roupas num armário, *Marca Registrada* (1975), que retrata a costura/bordado, e *Tarefa I* (1982), que aborda o acto de engomar, executado em sua própria casa. Nesses vídeos, Parente realiza ações quotidianas de formas que promovem a automutilação e o confinamento, com o objectivo de organizar uma resposta à opressão de género

no cotidiano das mulheres, paralelamente à violência e ao aprisionamento sofridos pelos brasileiros sob a ditadura. Ao retratar ‘punições’ disciplinares (ou a ameaça de tais punições) sob o manto das tarefas domésticas, Letícia Parente demonstra como as mesmas forças que estruturam a sociedade pública disciplinada também configuram os espaços privados do lar.

**Palavras-chave:** Letícia Parente. Brasil. Vídeo Arte. Feminismo. Tarefas Domésticas. Ditadura.

## 1. Introduction

The pages of a mid-1970s Brazilian women’s liberation booklet, *Mulher: Objeto de cama e mesa* (Woman: Object of bed and table), challenge common attitudes toward women and their prescribed roles through quirky illustrations and provocative writing. For instance, one page depicts a cartoon of a plump woman seated next to a refrigerator, its door open and its interior fully stocked (Figure 1). Smiling, the woman hugs the fridge’s open door. The words below her read: “On job application forms, many women fill in the blank under ‘occupation’ with the word: Domestic”.<sup>1</sup> This final word appears in a larger ‘girlish’ cursive lettering, seeming to emphasize a correlation between the domestic sphere and the feminine.



**Figure 1.** Heloneida Studart, *Mulher: Objeto da cama e mesa*, 1974 (p. 12). Design by Mario Pentes. © Editora Vozes Ltda.

Another page opens with the words: “Her employment: Husband,” written in bold letters to emphasize their irony (Figure 2).<sup>2</sup> A smaller typeface below reads: “To prepare

<sup>1</sup> “Um grande número de mulheres escreve nos formulários, no local em que se indaga a ocupação: Doméstica” (Studart 1974, p. 12). All translations by the author, unless otherwise noted.

<sup>2</sup> “Seu Emprego: O Marido” (*idem*, p. 14).

properly for her future profession (of wife), her education is meticulous. While the boy is on the loose, the girl is imprisoned”.<sup>3</sup> Below these words appears a cartoon of a little girl with pigtails seated on an armchair, flanked by a grandfather clock and a closed door, with a thought bubble above her head showing a busy city street. Below this image appear three sentences, each in a different typeface:

Out on the street, the boy confronts every challenge in the world by developing intelligence and muscles.

At home, the girl assimilates the little problems of her mother (the maid who stole the lipstick, the pudding that burned, the telenovela romance that ended badly).

While boys play sports, [girls] play with food.<sup>4</sup>



Figure 2. Heloneida Studart, *Mulher: Objeto da cama e mesa*, 1974 (p. 14). Design by Mario Pentes. © Editora Vozes Ltda.

Written in 1974 by Brazilian journalist Heloneida Studart, *Mulher: Objeto de cama e mesa* critiques women’s roles in Brazilian society, specifically their confinement to the domestic sphere. The booklet as a whole is characterized by playful graphic design: a variety of typographies alongside cartoons, collaged photographs, and other illustrations that dynamically interact with the text in order to explicate the author’s points. Addressed to a Brazilian urban middle-class audience, the text tackles issues from women’s sexual objectification to a critique of their expected roles as wives, mothers, and homemakers. Yet, despite the booklet’s evident feminism, the introduction, by Lima de Oliveira, states that it should *not* be understood as “an American Women’s Lib pamphlet,” and that

<sup>3</sup> “Para prepará-la condignamente para a sua profissão futura (de esposa) a sua educação é minuciosa. Enquanto o menino é solto, a menina é presa.” (*idem*, p. 14)

<sup>4</sup> “Indo para a rua, o garoto enfrenta todos os desafios do mundo, desenvolvendo a inteligência e os músculos. Em casa, a menina assimila os probleminhas da mãe (a empregada que furtou o batom, o pudim que se queimou, o romance da telenovela que acabou mal). Enquanto os meninos praticam esportes, elas brincam de comidinha.” (*idem*, p. 14)

Studart was not “a ‘feminist’ in the political sense of the term (...) [but] just a modern woman who has managed to solve the problems of the current feminine situation in an underdeveloped country”.<sup>5</sup>

The clear contradiction of this disavowal was typical of Brazilian second-wave feminism during the country’s dictatorship (1964–1985). Studart published her booklet at the tail end of the regime’s harshest years, known as the *anos de chumbo* (years of lead, 1968–1974), an era characterized by state-sponsored oppression and violence. During this period Brazilian feminism was largely subsumed within the broader struggle against the dictatorship. This fight was grounded in a range of Leftist politics and Marxist critiques that were generally opposed to foreign economic interests (mainly understood as U.S. capitalist imperialism), and in favor of a nationalist and socialist democratic platform (Puzone & Miguel 2019).<sup>6</sup> Because of this, these groups tended to characterize U.S. feminism as either bourgeois or imperialist. Studart, who had been previously affiliated with the Communist party, epitomized this tendency by framing her discussion of gender equality in terms of labor and economic oppression, rather than gender discrimination (Trizoli 2012). Like other Brazilian Leftists and feminists of the era, she also subjugated the issues of racial discrimination below the banner of economic inequality (Paschel 2018), an issue I will return to later in this essay.

On the whole, the booklet suggests that like relations in the home, authoritarianism depends on patriarchal structures.<sup>7</sup> It does so by underscoring the misogynistic foundations of authoritarianism, claiming that “the ideal of the domestic and passive woman was always defended (...) in the service of the darkest regimes on the planet”.<sup>8</sup> However, Studart (1974) assiduously avoids any overt reference to the Brazilian Médici regime (which could have gotten her into trouble), by raising instead the specter of the German Third Reich: “[Hitler] thought that women should be nothing more than breeders, mothers of soldiers. This is still the secret ideal of many reactionary societies”.<sup>9</sup> Overall the booklet implies that just as the father dominates his wife and children in the home, the paternalistic dictator holds absolute power in society.

Like Studart, other Brazilian women in the mid-1970s strove to come to terms with women’s prescribed roles in the dual realms of the domestic and the public spheres during the dictatorship. Several Brazilian women artists of the 1960s and 1970s – including Anna

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<sup>5</sup> “(...) seu livrinho é, pois, mais um depoimento de sua personalidade do que um panfleto do Women’s Lib Americano... Heloneida Studart tem credenciais especialíssimas para escrever sobre mulher, apesar de não ser uma feminista, no sentido político do termo. É, apenas, uma mulher moderna que conseguiu resolver os problemas da situação feminina, logo num país subdesenvolvido.” (Lima de Oliveira 1974, p. 5)

<sup>6</sup> Following the 1964 military coup, the state outlawed rival political parties, and the Brazilian Left went underground, becoming a loose affiliation of clandestine anti-dictatorship groups who traded their specific political agendas in exchange for a united struggle for human rights. During the *anos de chumbo*, many Leftists were imprisoned or went into exile.

<sup>7</sup> This argument anticipates later Latin American feminists’ writings on authoritarianism, including the Chilean feminist Julieta Kirkwood’s (1983) theory of “domestic authoritarianism,” and French-Chilean feminist Nelly Richard’s (1986/2000) argument that military regimes, state repression, and institutionalized violence are all founded on patriarchy.

<sup>8</sup> “O ideal da mulher doméstica e passiva foi sempre defendido pelos piores homens da terra (...) a serviço dos regimes mais negros do planeta.” (Studart 1974, p. 37)

<sup>9</sup> “Ele [Hitler] achava que a mulher não devia passar de procriadora, de mãe de soldados. Esse ainda é o ideal secreto de muitas sociedades reacionárias.” (*idem*, p. 23)

Bella Geiger, Anna Maria Maiolino, Wanda Pimentel, Teresinha Soares, and Regina Silveira – were also beginning to address women’s domestic spaces, household objects, and daily chores in a range of two- and three- dimensional media, subjects virtually unexplored by their male contemporaries (Fajardo-Hill, Giunta & Alonso 2017). Like Studart, many of these women artists also disavowed any relationship between their work and feminism, despite their clear interest in women’s issues.

This essay focuses on works of video art from the 1970s and early 1980s by Letícia Parente (1930–1991), a first-generation video art pioneer in Brazil, that much like Studart’s text, associated household imagery, domestic spaces, and quotidian chores and objects with violence, repression, and incarceration. It is possible Parente was familiar with *Mulher: Objeto de cama e mesa*, as she knew Studart personally; like Studart, she did not consider herself a feminist (A. Parente, personal communication, May 8, 2020), despite her interest in gendered divisions of labor. As a professional scientist, she also did not self-identify as an artist (*ibidem*), but throughout the 1970s and 1980s, she created a number of early video performances, an approach to performance art in which she performed for the video camera, rather than for a live audience.

Video performance was a particularly apt genre for critically observing and analyzing domestic spaces and women’s domestic roles, especially when it was done in the medium of video. Although we think of video in terms of portability, the reality was the equipment was bulky and heavy, and the battery life was limited, which made it easier to use in the home or studio (Mugaas 2010). It also offered privacy to artist-performers, enabling them to avoid the risks associated with public actions or critical speech at a time when openly voicing dissent was dangerous (Shtromberg 2008). Through the ambiguous language of metaphor, which was less legible to the authorities than overt speech, artists could also cloak their critical commentaries. The circulation of these videos, moreover, was limited to underground circuits, film festivals, and experimental art venues that were ‘off the radar,’ offering further protection from surveillance, censors, and punishment (Machado 1996).

I argue that in her video performances, Parente performs domestic and quotidian actions in ways that enact self-harm and confinement in order to marshal a response to gender oppression in women’s daily lives that paralleled the violence and imprisonment Brazilians experienced under the dictatorship. Michel Foucault’s central argument in *Discipline and Punish* (1975) is that disciplinary regimes maintain power by producing “docile bodies” (Foucault 1995, p. 135), the ideal subjects of authoritarian control. In order to maintain compliance, these regimes surveil their subjects to ensure that they conform to strict laws governing acceptable behaviors, and punish them with violence when they are caught disobeying. Foucault’s well-known point is that an even more effective strategy used by these regimes is the internalization of obedience, so that subjects conform willingly. One method is the panoptical gaze, the presumption of constant surveillance even when there is none (*ibidem*).

I contend that Parente’s videos resonate with Foucault’s contemporaneous ideas, and that her use of the video camera to infiltrate her home and record her daily activities

mimics the panoptical gaze.<sup>10</sup> By enacting disciplinary ‘punishments’ (or the threat of such punishments) on herself, cloaked as daily domestic tasks, she demonstrates the ways that the same forces that structure public disciplinary society also configure the private spaces of the home. The viewer is thus invited to reflect on video and its corollary, television, as media of disciplinary control.<sup>11</sup> I argue that Parente turned to performance-for-camera to address both the social realm and to critique the regime’s surveillance and censorship practices.

I also propose that she positioned domestic space as a zone of containment and imprisonment, and that her resistance occurs not in the space itself, but through the absurdity and ironic bathos of her bodily performances, as well as her actual or implied self-harm and violence, themes I address by engaging Kathy O’Dell’s (1998) theorization of “masochistic performance art” (pp. 1–16) and Hal Foster’s (2006) concept of “mimetic adaptation” (p. 166). I argue that Parente navigated the multiple pressures of motherhood, housework, and her professional career, and used them as fodder for a series of videos she made between 1975 and 1982. These include *In* (1975), which centers on the act of hanging up clothes in a closet, *Marca Registrada* (1975), which depicts sewing/embroidery, and *Tarefa I* (1982), which tackles ironing, all of which she performed in her own home. She devised experimental tasks exploring her domestic roles and chores and testing their limits to address both the gendered and racial divisions of labor and the state-sponsored violence of the dictatorship. This essay begins with a brief synopsis of the social conditions of Brazilian women during the 1960s and 1970s, focusing on the history of Brazilian feminism, and women’s roles in Brazilian society during the period. It then briefly outlines the development of video art in Brazil to contextualize Parente’s works.

## 2. Brazilian Feminism and Women’s Roles during the Dictatorship

Though there have been women’s movements throughout Latin America since the turn of the 20th century, until recently, as feminist curator Heloísa Buarque de Hollanda has written, “it has always been uncomfortable for Brazilian women to hold public commitment to feminist struggles” (Hollanda 2002, p. 322). After a ‘first wave’ struggle for improved educational access and suffrage, following the rise of the Brazilian dictatorship in 1964, and during its most repressive years (1968–1974), the Brazilian women’s movement materialized from two branches of the anti-authoritarian resistance movements: a broad umbrella of Marxist and Leftist political organizations and dissident groups and the progressive sectors the Catholic Church, which formed an unexpected coalition in opposition to the regime (Miller 1990; Sarti 1989). But, when second-wave feminist texts arrived in Brazil from Europe and the U.S., many Brazilians dismissed them (Alvarez 1989; Fisher 1993; Sternbach *et al.* 1992). Simone de Beauvoir’s foundational

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<sup>10</sup> Other Brazilian women video artists also invoked the panoptical gaze through video performance, including Anna Bella Geiger and Sonia Andrade. *Vd.* Sneed (2019).

<sup>11</sup> Anne Wagner (2000) has suggested that video performance itself gestures toward the viewer, and thus registers as a process of surveillance.

The *Second Sex* (1949) was first published in Portuguese in Brazil in 1960, but many intellectuals deemed this work by Jean-Paul Sartre's wife as "cerebral," preferring instead Marxist texts (Borges 2008, p. 5; Trizoli 2012). It was not until the late 1970s that the book became more widely read, mainly among Brazilian feminists living in exile from the dictatorship in France (Candiani 2018).<sup>12</sup> When Betty Friedan visited Brazil in 1971 to release the Portuguese translation of *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), the press mocked her as an ugly, bourgeois, man-hater, and many sectors of society derided the book (Hahner 1990).

However, by the mid-to-late 1960s, a group of Brazilian women authors began to address feminist themes in their writing, while assiduously avoiding the negative stereotypes and connotations of U.S. and European feminism. In addition to Heloneida Studart, discussed in the introduction, these included the sociologist Heleieth Saffioti, the journalist Carmen da Silva, and the editor-in-chief of the Editora Vozes publishing house, Rose Marie Muraro. As local women who had gained visibility writing for popular magazines and newspapers, and who distanced themselves from foreign brands of feminism, they were well liked among Brazilian women, especially the white urban middle classes. Under the auspices of Marxism and anti-imperialism, they incorporated ideas from both de Beauvoir and Friedan in their writings, sometimes in contradictory ways, all the while disavowing an overtly 'feminist' label (Trizoli 2012).

By the 1970s, educated middle-class Brazilian women began to engage in an emergent feminist consciousness-raising as a part of a larger movement for class equality and democracy, even though Leftist guerilla groups tended to be male-dominant, hierarchical, and overwhelmingly sexist. Eventually, these women began to reject the idea that gender struggle had to be subordinated to class or democratic struggle. By the mid-1970s, Left-wing, middle-class feminists and working-class women joined forces in the fight against dictatorship. In 1979, the government granted amnesty to exiled dissidents, allowing them to return to Brazil, providing yet more space for feminist mobilization, because returning exiles brought with them feminist politics and theories from abroad, which were received with less resistance than before (Alvarez 1989). These feminists encouraged the women's movement to be autonomous from the overarching Leftist umbrella groups in which they were previously subsumed, finally permitting a broader feminist mobilization in Brazil in the 1980s (Fisher 1993).

However, while women's roles in Latin American society underwent many changes during this period, some values remained constant, such as 'Marianismo,' the cult of motherhood associated with the martyrdom and suffering of the Virgin Mary, and the 'natural' responsibilities of housework and child rearing (Fisher 1993). Military governments across South America emphasized these traditional roles, which were also in line with conservative Catholic values.

And, while Brazil underwent what political scientist Sonia Alvarez describes as one the largest and "most successful women's movements in contemporary Latin America" (Alvarez 1990, p. 3), the Brazilian art world of the 1970s and 1980s still did not fully

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<sup>12</sup> Although de Beauvoir was in Brazil with Sartre for about two months in 1960, it was not until the 1970s that *The Second Sex* became more commonly read.

embrace feminism.<sup>13</sup> As art historian Simone Osthoff has pointed out, “issues of gender have never been high on the [Brazilian] artistic-political agenda”.<sup>14</sup> Curator Paulo Herkenhoff concurs in his assertion that many Brazilian art historians and critics think that a discussion of feminism “is inappropriate in the context of Brazilian art” (Herkenhoff & Hollanda 2006, p. 190). Brazilian women artists’ own resistance to feminist readings of their work also reflects this persistent cultural taboo. Some Brazilian women have pointed out that while in the U.S., women artists were sidelined in macho modernist art movements like Abstract-Expression, in Brazil, many 20th-century women artists thrived and rose to great prominence.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, many women artists explain that they did not want their work pigeonholed as solely “women’s art” or as “feminine” (Osthoff 2010, p. 77). For instance, artist Anna Bella Geiger has stated, “there was not a space for that kind of [feminism] that was happening in the States . . . . We were struggling against the dictatorship. What can you say about feminist art in Brazil? There isn’t such a thing” (personal communication, December 9, 2012).

The hesitance among many Brazilian women artists of the 1970s and early 1980s to fully embrace an explicitly feminist position was understandable given the repressive conditions of the regime, but it also meant that Brazilian art of that period dealing with women’s issues and traditionally feminist themes was less overtly militant than its feminist counterparts in the U.S. and Europe. This reflects what Brazilian artist and theorist Roberta Barros describes as the tamer, “concealed, [and] sweet”<sup>16</sup> tone of Brazilian feminism in the 1970s. Part of that gap was political, the inability to be outspoken in the face of an oppressive military dictatorship, and the fact that the women’s struggle was subsumed into a unified resistance to the dictatorship and imperialism. While the extent to which Brazilian women artists of the 1970s engaged Brazilian feminist discourse varies, the predominance of household imagery in their imagery indicates at the very least an awareness of these debates.<sup>17</sup>

Despite the dictatorship’s conservative emphasis on women’s domestic roles, its economic policies of the mid- and late-1970s paradoxically helped middle-class (mainly white) women to find work outside the home. General Artur da Costa e Silva’s administration (1968–1969) and that of his successor General Emílio Médici (1969–1974) enacted policies that favored business, promoted foreign investment, and undertook massive development projects. This resulted in the so-called Brazilian ‘Economic Miracle,’ a period during which urban middle- and upper-class women saw their

<sup>13</sup> On resistance toward feminism in Latin American art, *vd.* Fajardo-Hill (2017, pp. 21–22).

<sup>14</sup> “(...) questões de gênero nunca terem sido uma prioridade na agenda artístico-política” (Osthoff 2010, pp. 75–76).

<sup>15</sup> Some examples include Tarsila do Amaral (1886–1973), Lygia Clark (1920–88), Anita Malfatti (1889–1964), Maria Martins (1894–1973), and Mira Schendel (1919–1988).

<sup>16</sup> “(...) menos aguerrido, escamoteado, [e] doce” (Barros 2016, p. 25).

<sup>17</sup> It was not until the late 1980s and early 1990s that Brazilian artists and critics began to more explicitly confront feminism(s) and adopt a feminist label. In 1991, Heloísa Buarque de Hollanda presented her essay, “O Estranho Horizonte da Crítica Feminista no Brasil” (The Strange Horizon of Feminist Criticism in Brazil), at the Ibero-Amerikanisches Institut Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Berlin, which she later published. In the late 1990s, artists, critics, and scholars organized a series of feminist debates about Brazilian art history at the Museu da República in Rio de Janeiro (*vd.* Osthoff 2010, p. 78). Barros (2016, p. 14) has pointed out that in the scholarly field of literary studies in Brazil, there was less resistance to feminist theories.



standards of living substantially increase (Alvarez 1990). While middle-class women were still largely responsible for managing their households in their roles as wives, mothers, and homemakers, new activities also became available to them, including increased opportunities for higher education, and access to technical and professional occupations outside the home. However, these opportunities were made possible to them with the help of low-paid domestic servants, who were usually women of color (Amaral 1993). It was against this conflicted historical, racial, and economic backdrop that Parente reflected on the shifting attitudes toward women and their roles in the home and the workplace in their video performances.

### 3. Video Art in Brazil

Artists' reflections on the domestic sphere were made even more effective through their use of video, a relatively new medium at the time, that was particularly suited to documenting private/domestic spaces and daily life (Shtromberg 2008). However, video equipment was not widely accessible to Brazilian artists until 1974. Although the Sony Portapak was available to a handful of U.S. artists as early as 1965, few Brazilian artists were initially able to purchase the device due to its cost. Video art eventually blossomed in Brazil in between 1974 and 1975, due to external stimulation from the U.S. in the form of an exhibition titled *Video Art*. In April 1974, Suzanne Delehanty, director of the Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA) in Philadelphia, asked Walter Zanini, director of the Museu de Arte Contemporânea da Universidade de São Paulo, to recommend some Brazilian video artists for an upcoming global survey of contemporary video art to be held in early 1975 at the ICA (Delehanty 1974). Zanini saw Delehanty's inquiry as an opportunity to instigate new video production. By October, he was finalizing a list of artists' names, and in December 1974, he wrote to say several Carioca artists had completed videos, and that he would send them for her approval (Zanini 1974).

Zanini had managed to spearhead this initiative by reaching out to artist Anna Bella Geiger, who had previously worked in film, and who borrowed a Portapak camera from a filmmaker acquaintance named Jom Tob Azulay, who had recently returned to Brazil from Los Angeles with the camera (Cocchiarale 2007).<sup>18</sup> Geiger asked some of her students from her art classes at Museu de Arte Moderna do Rio de Janeiro (MAM Rio) to participate (Geiger 2007). Ultimately, Zanini's and Geiger's leadership helped form the Rio-based group that would come to be known as the video art 'pioneers,' which included among them Leticia Parente.<sup>19</sup>

It is likely that Geiger and her circle initially used the Portapak system known as the 'Video Rover 2,' which had been launched in 1969, as well as the EIAJ-1 format of half-inch, black-and-white, open reel tape (Shtromberg 2016). The two-piece unit included a hand-held camera (with built-in microphone), and an almost 19-pound VTR

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<sup>18</sup> Azulay, an acquaintance of Geiger, was a filmmaker who brought his own Sony Portapak that he had acquired in the U.S. to Brazil. He lent the camera to Geiger so she and the others could experiment with the medium, and he acted as the cameraman.

<sup>19</sup> The group also included Sonia Andrade, Fernando Cocchiarale, Ivens Machado, Paulo Herkenhoff, Miriam Danowski, and Ana Vitória Mussi.

(video tape recorder), a unit slung over the shoulder in a plastic case, that contained a half-inch, reel-to-reel, helical scan tape recorder (Denning 2017). Editing was not possible (beyond rudimentary in-camera editing), and the image quality was not high. These limitations determined the form of early videos.<sup>20</sup> Because of the inability to edit, artists usually shot their videos in one take, with either static framing, or the use of simple zooming (Parente 2007). They had a 30-minute capacity, a 45-minute battery life, and were much heavier than Super-8 cameras, which may also explain why many of the early videos were often shot inside or nearby artists' homes (Cocchiarale & Motta 2002; Iop 2016). Parente and others in this group of early video artists explored the relationship between private/public space and the personal/political body.<sup>21</sup> They also understood video's central attributes to be its ability to record time and to synthesize image and sound. Parente exploited these features to emphasize the real-time unfolding, duration, and tedium of daily domestic activities.

#### 4. Letícia Parente: Hanging, Sewing, and Ironing

When Parente began making video art in the mid-1970s, she was a mother of five children in her mid-40s. She had also already established a successful career as a scientist. After receiving a bachelor's degree in chemistry in 1952 in her native Salvador da Bahia, and marrying in 1955, she moved to Fortaleza in 1959, where she began teaching undergraduate chemistry courses at the Universidade Federal do Ceará in Fortaleza in 1961. In 1971, she moved to Rio de Janeiro to pursue a master's degree in chemistry at the Pontifícia Universidade Católica (PUC), while also taking art classes in the workshops of Ilo Krugli and Pedro Dominguez (Parente 2011). In 1974, she began taking courses in 'art research' taught by artist Anna Bella Geiger at MAM Rio. Through these classes she first experimented with video, eventually becoming one of Brazil's video art 'pioneers,' working with this medium until the mid-1980s. As a mother, a science professor, and an artist, Parente confronted the working mother's classic challenge: striking a balance between her career and her duties at home, and at a time when there were still very few mothers who were also professionals in Brazil.

##### 4.1. *In* (1975)

In one of Parente's earliest video performance works, titled *In* (1975, Figure 3), she represents the household chore of hanging up laundry and placing it inside a closet.<sup>22</sup> The one-minute, black-and-white Portapak video opens with a shot of a closed white closet door, framed from a fixed point. The artist appears before the camera, wearing white pants and a long-sleeved shirt. As she walks into the frame, the camera pans down to her legs,

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<sup>20</sup> The exception is Parente's much later *Tarefa I*, which was taped in 1982, on color Betamax, a later consumer-level analog-recording and cassette format of magnetic tape for video, developed by Sony and released in 1975.

<sup>21</sup> Examples of such works by Anna Bella Geiger and Sonia Andrade are addressed in Sneed (2019). Other artists in this group tackling these themes were Miriam Danowski and Ivens Machado.

<sup>22</sup> *In* was one of the first videos Parente ever made. It is unknown why she chose to title the work in English, rather than Portuguese ("dentro").

revealing that she is barefoot. She opens the closet doors, and stands in front of the empty closet, divided up into different shelves. She steps inside, and nonchalantly climbs onto the shelving, which boosts her up toward a rod at the top, from which a single coat hanger is suspended. It looks as if she is walking into a framing device that functions to contain her body. Once inside, she reaches for the hanger; the camera pans up and then zooms in for a close-up of her upper body.

Grimacing, she struggles to wedge the hanger under the shoulders of the backside of her shirt near her neck. For a moment it looks like she is hanging herself, a particularly eerie image given the fact that the closet is empty and contains only her body. In the background, we hear the city sounds outside – beeping horns and a rhythmic banging noise – that add a sense of tension to the difficulty she confronts in cramming the hanger’s wiry protrusions into her clothes and trying to make them conform unnaturally to the contours of her body. Once she has positioned the hanger into place, giving her the bizarre appearance of having a flattened and stretched out humped back, the camera pans back out to show her whole body in the closet. She quickly reaches for each closet door to shut herself inside. The camera lingers on the closed doors for several seconds before cutting to black.



**Figure 3.** Leticia Parente, Stills from *In*, 1975. Video (original in black-and-white, half-inch, reel-to-reel, Portapak) with sound, 1:18 mins. Directed/performed: Leticia Parente, Camera: Jom Tob Azulay. Collection of André Parente. Courtesy Galeria Jaqueline Martins.

Parente’s absurd act appears to reference torture and imprisonment. Artist Myriam Gurba (2017) has even suggested that it may have specifically referenced Vladimir Herzog’s impossible ‘suicide’ and the incongruity of the Brazilian military’s lies surrounding his murder while in police custody.<sup>23</sup> Though prison officers claimed to have found Herzog hanging from a strip of cloth near a window in his cell as an apparent suicide, there was evidence on his corpse of torture by electric shock. Whether Parente intends to reference Herzog specifically, or torture by hanging more generally, she performs a commonplace-

<sup>23</sup> Herzog was a Brazilian journalist who was tortured to death while imprisoned by the dictatorship’s military police force, which later claimed he had committed suicide.

act-turned-macabre, and thus invites a reading of the work as a critique of the dictatorship.<sup>24</sup>

It also implies imprisonment and containment through its framing. The use of the camera's zoom feature to focus on close-ups of her body as she fumbles with the coat hanger emphasizes the confinement in this cramped space. The viewer's sense that Parente is performing the act for a single cameraman in an otherwise empty room brings the spectator into an intimate relation with the space. The television monitor, on which spectators would have originally viewed the work, also functions as a framing device, further enclosing her. The low-grade picture quality of the half-inch video tape inadvertently helps to enhance the feeling of anxiety the video provokes. Multiple black horizontal lines intervene in the image, creating a visual disturbance that causes tension and a sense of unease. The audio recording is distorted, exaggerating the background sounds and the hum of the camera itself, further amplifying this disquiet. The result is a somewhat jarringly loud soundtrack for an activity that is essentially silent. The tonal dullness of the grays with a lack of contrast between light and dark, and the low picture resolution generate a humdrum sensibility to an activity that is anything but.

Parente's portrayal of the closet as a space of imprisonment is also gendered. Architectural historian Mark Wigley has described domestic architecture as placing women on "house arrest" (Wigley 2007, p. 335). According to Wigley, the patriarchal western imaginary has historically framed women's sexualities as "overflowing" and as a threat to men's boundaries, requiring their confinement within artificial boundaries and their obedience to "the law of the father," which the containing walls of the home epitomize (*idem*, pp. 338–339). Like Wigley's contention that homes function as masculinist enclosures for containing and controlling women, I argue that Parente uses the confining space of her own closet to suggest that the same paternalistic systems that confine and repress women under authoritarianism also structure the home.

While her action invokes torture, it is not literally painful. Art historian Elisa Iop has described such actions as "fictional/theatrical self-aggression".<sup>25</sup> Yet, Parente's gesture does imply self-harm and visually evokes violence and pain. It thus recalls the kinds of U.S. and European performance art of the same period that involve self-harm, sometimes described as 'masochistic performance art'.<sup>26</sup> Several art historians use the term to describe U.S. and European performances of the 1970s that involve self-harm, including those by Vito Acconci, Chris Burden, Barry Flanagan, and Gina Pane, and it is a useful concept for thinking about Parente's works as well (Vergine 1974/2007; Jones 2007). Art historian Kathy O'Dell (1998) has analyzed these types of performances by focusing on their photographic documentation to argue that viewers of masochistic performance make a tacit agreement with the artist by choosing to witness their violent

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<sup>24</sup> One of the most infamous torture methods of the Brazilian dictatorship was to leave prisoners hanging upside down from a pole for hours, with their heels and wrists tied together. *Vd.* Uchoa (2014) and Romero (2014).

<sup>25</sup> "autoagresión ficticia/teatral" (Iop 2016, p. 19)

<sup>26</sup> Though masochism—a psycho-sexual disorder that is named for Leopold von Sacher-Masoch—is often associated with the sexual gratification that one attains from physical pain, abuse, or humiliation, it can also be used more loosely to mean a general "willingness or tendency to subject oneself to unpleasant or trying experiences" (American Heritage Dictionary, 2020).

acts, entering into an implicit ‘contract’ with them; this results in the spectator’s complicity in the masochistic act being performed and makes them aware of their responsibility in the broader social contract.<sup>27</sup> Hence, Parente provokes a productive tension between spectator and audience, perpetrator and victim, and imprisonment and liberation, utilizing her mundane tasks to transgress and resist social and political codes of conduct.

O’Dell (1998) further argues that one reason masochistic body artists engaged in self-harm was to address the volatile social and political issues affecting their lives, including alienation in everyday life and in the domestic sphere, and the experience of being both a subject and object through performance, themes also of concern to Parente in her attention to the social trauma caused by the dictatorship, its effects in the home, and her objectification of her own body. Through theatrical self-aggression, Parente marshals similar strategies to call attention to the tensions between violence in the public, political realm of the dictatorship and her relative safety within the domestic sphere. Parente feigns hurting herself as a mode of connecting with the broader social sphere, especially those that had actually been imprisoned, abused, and tortured.

Though Letícia Parente’s son André Parente claims she did not read feminist literature (A. Parente, personal communication, May 8, 2020), critic Rogerio Luz contends that she *was* concerned with “the situation of women in society,” but did not intend her work to be “political-ideological” (Luz 2011, p. 66). Thus, she hedged on taking a direct or militant feminist position, perhaps wishing to maintain a covert form of critique in the face of the dictatorship’s retribution toward dissenters.<sup>28</sup> Using her own body as a site for theatrical torture, Parente’s iconography – a closet, a hanger, and implied clothing – is explicitly coded ‘feminine’ and references traditionally female household labor. It also directly recalls Studart’s message in *Mulher: Objeto da cama e mesa*, that the domestic sphere was like a “jail” imprisoning women.<sup>29</sup>

#### 4.2. *Marca Registrada* (1975)

In a second video from the same year, *Marca Registrada* (1975, Figure 4), Parente explores another aspect of women’s traditional domestic work, specifically sewing and embroidery, to critique broader social repression. The approximately ten-minute, black-and-white, half-inch Portapak video, also shot in one continuous take, depicts the artist sewing words with thread into the sole of her foot. The video opens with the camera panning the artist’s bare feet, ankles, and her nightgown hemline as she walks across a tiled floor of what appears to be a kitchen or a patio. She sits, but we do not see her face. The camera zooms in on her hands delicately holding a thread, which is blurry for a few seconds before the camera finds its focus. She carefully attempts to guide the thread through a needle grasped between her fingers, which she accomplishes only after some

<sup>27</sup> For O’Dell (1998), the social contract refers to hegemonic power. She compares these tacit contracts between viewer and performer to Sacher-Masoch’s sexual “masochism contracts.”

<sup>28</sup> While André Parente (2020) denies that Letícia identified as a feminist, according to Elisa Iop, Parente has women as the central issue in her works, however, without making explicit mention of a feminist art program (Iop 2016, pp. 203–204, 244).

<sup>29</sup> “a mulher as vezes se transforma em carcereira de si mesma.” (Studart 1974, p. 22)

struggle. As her hand pulls out of the frame, the camera pans down through a field of blurry gray, finally arriving at a close-up shot of the bottom of her foot.



**Figure 4.** Leticía Parente, *Stills from *Marca Registrada* (Trademark), 1975.* Video (original in black-and-white, half-inch, reel-to-reel, Portapak) with sound, 10:33 mins. Camera: Jom Tob Azulay. Collection of André Parente. Courtesy Galeria Jaqueline Martins.

The artist decisively pricks the needle into her foot, stitching the thread into the top layer of her skin. The sewing continues for the duration of the video. Anchoring the thread into tiny points in the skin, she creates shapes, first on the ball of her foot, then her on arch, and last on her heel. Slowly a word (in English) appears – ‘MADE’ – spelled out with crude lines of thread. At the end of the letter ‘E’ she cuts the filament with a tiny pair of scissors, and begins again in the middle of the foot, spelling out the word ‘IN’ using the same rudimentary lettering. At the end of the letter ‘N’ she clips the string with the scissors, and plunges the needle into her heel, sewing until she spells out the word ‘BRASIL’ (the Portuguese spelling of Brazil). She cuts off the thread at the end of the ‘L,’ and the camera zooms out to reveal the entire sole of her foot which now reads: ‘Made in Brasil.’ She then sews back over the ‘S,’ the ‘I,’ and the ‘L’ one more time with the thread, apparently to make them more legible. At the end, she places her foot back down on the ground and calmly walks away.<sup>30</sup>

Art historian Elena Shtromberg (2016) has argued that this work addresses a range of issues from state-sanctioned censorship and economic imperialism to consumerist objectifications of the female body. The phrase ‘Made in Brasil’ was likely borrowed from the refrain of Tom Zé’s song “Parque Industrial” (Industrial Park) – ‘Because it’s

<sup>30</sup> This work recalls the 1970 photo-performance of a similar title, *Trademarks*, by U.S. conceptual artist Vito Acconci, but it is unknown if Parente was familiar with that work.

made, made, made in Brazil.’ The title of Parente’s video ironically implies that by ‘trademarking’ her own body, she is objectifying it like a product for sale (Shtromberg, 2008). Her strategic use of two English words – ‘Made in’ with the Portuguese word for Brazil, ‘Brasil’ – could be seen as a critique of U.S. involvement in Brazilian economic affairs.<sup>31</sup>

These readings are persuasive, but do not account for the work’s relation to gender. The most important aspect of the work is that the action Parente performs – embroider – is uniquely gendered, and references women’s bodies, labor, and domestic space. Like most of Parente’s other videos, she performed *Marca Registrada* inside her own home. The building she lived in at the time happened to be called ‘Edifício Brasil,’ or Brazil Building (Maciel 2011). Thus, the work was not only ‘Made in Brasil’ – her country – but also, literally made in the building in which she resided. Read through a feminist lens, at the heart of the video is the artist’s meditation on her own pain and its relationship to domestic space and the traditionally ‘feminine’ domestic task of embroidery, now wielded as an instrumentalization of corporeal and gendered violence.

Sewing and embroidery have a specifically gendered history in Brazil, as they do across the Americas. Dating back to the colonial period, social protocols deemed sewing and needlework to be the exclusive domain of women as ‘virtuous’ activities for elite women and girls who were trained exclusively in the ‘domestic arts’: sewing, spinning, weaving, and embroidery, as well as cooking (Socolow 2014). Throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, elite women were confined to the home, and received a very limited education, which focused on sewing and embroidery, and only enough math to manage a household (Myscofski 2014). In the early 20th century, middle-class housewives were still expected to spend their time embroidering and sewing, along with light housework (presumably assisted by a domestic servant) (Hahner 1990). In the Brazilian cultural imaginary, as elsewhere in the West, sewing was strictly coded as women’s work.

By inflicting pain on her own body through a task socially expected of women, Parente connects women’s prescribed roles to specific forms of repression by the state. She engages the normative domestic activity of embroidery, repurposing the activity as self-injury, as a mode for appropriating the language of economic imperialism to convey a subversive message about the exploitation of Brazil’s resources for export. Not only does the artist use her own body as a site for exercising free speech, but she also short-circuits the link between freedom of expression and a gesture symbolic of torture – prolonged electrocution applied to the soles of the feet was a common technique among the military police at the time (Gurba 2017). By sewing on the bottom of her feet, Parente seems to allude to this form of torture, the evidence of which she then hides from view as she stands and calmly walks away.

By sewing on her own body as a form of precise and unflinching self-harm, Parente associates this ‘feminine’ activity with pain. But, whereas in *In*, Parente did not actually harm herself, in *Marca Registrada*, she did: describing her experience, she claimed: “It’s an agony! It’s afflicting, because the needle goes in, hurts my foot”.<sup>32</sup> In this way it more

<sup>31</sup> Shtromberg (2008) has even suggested that the phrase might directly reference U.S. involvement in the 1964 coup that installed the military dictatorship.

<sup>32</sup> “É uma agonia! Dá muita aflição, porque a agulha entra, fere o meu pé (...)” (Parente 2011a, pp. 98–99)

closely parallels the masochistic body art practices by U.S. and European artists of the 1970s discussed by O'Dell (1998). Nelly Richard (1986/2000) has also explored masochistic body art in Chile in the 1970s and early 1980s – which she terms “painful acts” (p. 208) or “acts of mortification” (p. 211) – as sacrificial, mobilizing pain to approach the border between the individual and the collective. Interpreted from this perspective, Parente’s prolonged, repeated, and painful puncturing of her skin with the needle can be read as a gesture intended to unite her with those that had been tortured by the state as a way to share in that pain, even though she had not personally experienced that form of punishment.<sup>33</sup> O'Dell (1998) suggests that in witnessing masochistic performance art, audiences experience the self as ‘other’ and the ‘other’ as self. She describes this as a tacit contract between artist and audience, one that implicates the spectator more directly in the experience of the pain that these artists inflict on themselves. While watching *Marca Registrada*, viewers undergo such intersubjective identifications with the performer, wincing in anxiety as Parente dutifully completes her task. Not only are her actions torturous, but it is torturous to watch.

Parente implicates the viewer in her act through the video medium. She forces us to observe the action unfold up-close and in real-time: in our impatient curiosity to discover what words Parente is writing, we cannot look away, exacerbating our discomfort. With its low resolution, dull tonal variation of grays, and screen ‘tearing’ (horizontal lines that interrupt the image), the video’s distortions enhance the agonizing duration of the action by presenting it in real time, as torturously slow. The close-up images of the foot, which André Parente (2011) has argued were intended to dismantle the “soothing, Cartesian image of the body” (p. 14) not only give the viewer a sense of close physical proximity to Letícia Parente’s body, but also lead to a sense of the duality of the coherent subject, as sadist and masochist. The performance and the medium work together to equate sewing and embroidery with durational torture.

Letícia Parente (1985/2011a) explained that an inspiration for *Marca Registrada* was “a popular custom in Bahia in which one embroiders with a thread on the palm of the hand and on the sole of the foot”.<sup>34</sup> This anecdote underscores Claudio Costa’s assertion that despite Parente’s “educated middle-class” background (i.e., racial whiteness), her impulses were rooted in her “her affinity with the urban-folk culture”<sup>35</sup> (i.e., Afro-Brazilian culture). As such, she utilizes not just a ‘feminized’ practice, but also an ethnographic one rooted in the Afro-Brazilian customs of the Brazilian Northeast where she grew up. So, in addition to being coded ‘feminine,’ sewing has also been historically ‘raced’ in Brazil (Myscofski 2014). While European colonizers brought needlework and lace-making (*renda*) skills to Brazil, it was Afro-Brazilian women who took on such work during slavery, and embroidery is still associated with Afro-Brazilian culture and women laborers to this day (Buckridge 2016). By alluding to an Afro-Brazilian custom, Parente

<sup>33</sup> One method the regime used in executing prisoners so that their bodies could not be identified was known as ‘sewing’ them up: machine gunning their bodies from head to toe, so that they were riddled with bullet holes and thus disfigured. *Vd.* Kornbluth (2014).

<sup>34</sup> “um costume popular na Bahia em que se borda muito com uma linha na palma da mão e na sola do pé.” (Parente 2011a, pp. 100–101)

<sup>35</sup> “(...) a personalidade de Letícia, sua proveniência de classe média educada, afinada com a cultura popular-urbana estejam presentes.” (Costa 2007, p. 8)



draws on its connotations with gender and race to subtly reveal the contradictions toward women's roles and racial divisions of labor within the masculinist disciplinary orders of authoritarian violence and economic imperialism. As such, she also reveals some of the slippages within Brazilian feminism and the Brazilian Left more broadly, which in their overconcern with economic imperialism, demonstrated blind spots when it came to race.<sup>36</sup>

### 4.3. *Tarefa I* (1982)

Parente makes these ambivalences around the intersections of gender and race even more explicit in *Tarefa I* (Parente 1982, Figure 5), a video performance that explores another domestic activity: ironing clothes. Made later than the first two videos (which were among the first in her oeuvre), Parente created *Tarefa I* during the period of Brazil's transition to democracy, just three years before the end of the dictatorship.



**Figure 5. Leticia Parente, Stills from *Tarefa I* (Chore I), 1982. Video (original in color Betamax) with sound, 1:56 mins. Performers: L. Parente and Dona Raimunda, Production: Cacilda Teixeira da Costa. Collection of André Parente. Courtesy Galeria Jaqueline Martins.**

Like the previous two works, she presents her performance for a single camera operator. However, unlike the other works, she does not perform alone, but with another woman. The approximately two-minute video opens with a medium shot of an ironing board placed in front of what appears to be the same closet doors from *In*. The artist, clothed in a white jumpsuit, awkwardly straddles the board, before struggling to lie face down on it, removing her glasses, and situating her arms so that they are curled beneath her body. The frame cuts off her head, so that we mainly see her stretched-out body. Then another woman enters from the left. Dressed in a maid's uniform, we see that she is a person of color, but her upper body and face are not visible and exceed the top of the frame; we only see her torso, arms, and the bottom of her dress behind the ironing board. She enters carrying an iron, and unceremoniously begins to 'iron' Parente's stretched-out backside. Parente's pose remains rigid, like a dead body, while the other woman rubs the iron firmly and meticulously across the clothing on her back, buttocks, and legs. She works quickly

<sup>36</sup> U.S. and European second-wave feminists have also been critiqued for privileging the experiences of white middle-class women, and ignoring those of women of color.

and efficiently, stretching out sections of the clothing to iron them. The camera pans to the right to record the movement of the iron down toward Parente's legs, but by this point it is obvious that the action is a pantomime, and that the iron is actually turned off because of the speed at which she works and the fact that the clothes do not flatten.

By permitting the other woman to 'iron' her body, Parente objectifies it: it evokes both clothing and a lifeless a corpse. In this way the video functions as a critique of both the monotony of housework and the dictatorship's violence. Unlike Parente's earlier videos, she recorded *Tarefa I* in color Betamax, rather than the black-and-white, reel-to-reel Portapak.<sup>37</sup> Even so, like the previous tapes, its image quality is rather low. It is overexposed with extreme contrasts of light and dark, and some of the lights and whites are completely washed out. Despite being color, there is not a broad range: the lights appear yellowish and the shadows are violet. As with the previous videos, there is some image distortion, including slight screen tearing and a low resolution, but there is enough color and detail to discern that Parente is white and the other woman is black. The emphasis on her neutral affect and impassivity functions as a bleak commentary on the gendered division of household labor and its internalization by half the population. As Katia Maciel writes: "The artist is calm like an empty suit; she doesn't move, she doesn't complain, she simply lies there. . . . In the mistress-maid relationship there is no tension, just silent complicity" (Maciel 2011, p. 50).

However, the other woman's role, her agency, and her "complicity," or lack thereof in this work are ambiguous. The fact that the woman ironing Parente, named Dona Raimunda, was her actual housekeeper in real life (A. Parente, personal communication, May 25, 2020), complicates the idea that their roles are reversed – that it is the domestic servant who performs the 'abuse,' and the artist who is the 'complicit' victim. André Parente (2011), for example, has argued that his mother purposefully utilized her own housekeeper in order to critique gender, class, and racial discrimination, and that the black woman performs a symbolic punishment on the white woman as a form of retribution for the history of slavery or colonialism. Like the theatrical acts of aggression in Parente's previous videos, the housekeeper's action recalls a form of state-sponsored torture and abuse, but this time not one associated with the dictatorship, but rather one dating back to the slavery period: human branding. Even so, her ironing is not aggressive or cruel; in its banal execution, it appears ironic and bathetic.

André Parente's (2011) description of *Tarefa I* as a "Tropicalist version" (p. 36) of Manet's *Olympia* (1863), in its depiction of a prone white woman and a black maid, undermines his claim that *Tarefa I* takes an overtly critical perspective toward the intersection of gender, class, and race: such images have been historically interpreted as reducing them to types and erasing their individual identities.<sup>38</sup> Though Parente objectifies herself and submits herself for 'abuse,' she still has agency; the individuality

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<sup>37</sup> Released by Sony in 1975, Betamax was a consumer analog format of half-inch magnetic tape for recording color video.

<sup>38</sup> Racist images of black servants, such as the maid in *Olympia*, are a tradition in European and Brazilian art stretching back to 18th century painting (vd. Lathers 2013; Pollock 1999). By contrast, Denise Murrell (2018) has argued that the black maid in *Olympia* did not represent an exotic 'other,' as much as a new cultural hybridity in 19th century France and the evolving aesthetics of modern art.

and agency of the housekeeper – whose face we do not see, whose body serves as a stand-in for any black domestic servant, and for whom it is unclear how much of a choice she had in participating in this project as the artist's employee – are not as clearly apparent.

Rather, the work takes a more subtle approach to critiquing racial and gendered divisions of labor than those André Parente identifies, one that requires a brief synopsis of Brazilian histories of race. Because most of the Brazilian population is mixed-race, racial oppression in the country was and continues to be manifested through 'colorism,' derived from the racial classifications and hierarchies of the *casta* systems of the colonial period, in which people of lighter-skin tones reap more structural and societal benefits than those with darker skin tones (Tharps 2017). This widespread miscegenation led to a long-standing social myth that Brazil was free of racial discrimination, founded on the concept of 'racial democracy' by the Brazilian sociologist Gilberto Freyre (1933/1936), who contended that because of the pervasive racial mixing in Brazil's colonial past, racial prejudice simply did not exist in Brazil. By midcentury, the myth of racial democracy had become entrenched, and many Brazilians believed that prejudice in the country was related solely to class, not race (Kraay 1998). For these reasons, despite a professed commitment to equality for the working classes, Brazilian second-wave feminism, like the Brazilian Left, was largely indifferent to racial inequality.<sup>39</sup>

Despite this lack of acknowledgement that racial prejudice exists in Brazil, Brazilian women of color have historically been subjugated by three-fold discrimination: colorism, sexism, and economic discrimination (Amoo-Adare 2004). Since the colonial period, Afro-Brazilian women have been the primary workforce providing household work for middle- and upper-class families. While the so-called 'Economic Miracle' led to increased opportunities for middle-class white women, who like Parente, were able to find jobs outside the home in technical and professional fields, women of color largely continued to live in poverty.<sup>40</sup> While white women were increasingly professionalized, in the Brazilian cultural imaginary they were still held responsible for maintaining the home. They were able to resolve this paradox and enter waged work, only through their dependence on the female service sector of poorer women of color.

When Heloneida Studart (1974) writes in *Mulher: Objeto da cama e mesa* that in order to gain equality, Brazilian middle-class women should reject their domestic duties and join the workforce alongside men, she also acknowledges that to do so, they would need to rely on domestic servants. Writing much later, art historians Aracy Amaral (1993) and Simone Osthoff (2010) have also highlighted the widespread reliance of middle- and upper-class, often lighter-skinned Brazilian women on cheap domestic labor by poorer women of color, pointing out that it was precisely this system that enabled many white women artists to balance their family responsibilities with their careers. The Afro-Brazilian feminist Lélia Gonzalez (1982) also addressed this inequity in her essay, "A Mulher negra na sociedade brasileira" (The black woman in Brazilian society), which

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<sup>39</sup> Brazilian feminist activists and scholars did not fully address the intersections of racial and gender discrimination until the 1980s. *Vd.* Lovell (2009) and Paschel (2018).

<sup>40</sup> Only recently have domestic labor laws been established in Brazil. However, under the current far-right administration of Jair Bolsonaro, who voted against the 2013 amendment, this legislation is under threat. *Vd.* Acciari (2018) and Getirana (2018).

critiques white Brazilian feminists for ignoring the socioeconomic subordination of the Afro-Brazilian women who worked as domestics in their own homes.<sup>41</sup> During Brazil's transition to democracy in the mid-to-late 1970s, the *Movimento Negro* (Black Movement) gained momentum, inspired by the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements in the U.S. and decolonization struggles in Africa, culminating in 1978 with the founding of the *Movimento Negro Unificado Contra a Discriminação Racial* (Unified Black Movement Against Racial Discrimination) (Caldwell 2007). However, Gonzalez (1982) and other Afro-Brazilian feminists did not always find a place for themselves in the Black Movement, criticizing the sexism they encountered in it, as well as the racism they encountered in the Brazilian women's movement.

According to André Parente, Letícia supported the Black Movement and other anti-racist causes, though she did not specifically read texts by black feminists like Gonzalez (A. Parente, personal communication, May 8, 2020). However, as a middle-class Brazilian of European decent, not encumbered by the doubled or tripled oppression of race or poverty, Parente benefitted from Brazil's racist system, just as other middle and upper class Brazilian women did and continue to do. So, while Parente did raise five children and was responsible for numerous daily household chores (in addition to her professional career), she still relied on the labor of a black working-class woman to help her accomplish it all. Even so, *Tarefa I* is one of the only video works of the period that grapples directly with gendered divisions of labor, and the intersections of class, race, and gender oppression, and thus is a key work for understanding Brazilian social hierarchies of the 1970s.<sup>42</sup> Though Parente was complicit on one level with the kinds of structural forces that have historically exploited women of color as domestic laborers and maintained their marginalized positions, she was among the first to bring the question of race into art discourse around women's domestic work and patriarchal disciplinary structures in the domestic sphere.

Much like *In*, and *Marca Registrada*, *Tarefa I* represents an internalization of the cruelties of structural racism and authoritarianism, an artistic strategy that Hal Foster (2006) has termed "mimetic adaptation," and which he describes as a survival technique achieved through "exacerbation, whereby an excessive identification renders the given condition absurd" (p. 166). In other words, in mimetic adaptation artists assume or identify with repressive conditions or hegemonies by inflating them through hyperbole as a mode of subversion. It is through Parente's mimetic adaptation of this system – excessively identifying with gender and racial divisions of household labor through the extreme absurdity of her act and her deadpan execution – rather than an overt critique, that Parente indirectly reveals the problematic raced divisions of labor in middle-class Brazilian homes. As such, her relationship with her housekeeper is ambivalent, underscoring some of the deeper contradictions embedded in Brazilian second-wave

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<sup>41</sup> *Vd.* also Caldwell (2007), Nascimento (1976), and Hollanda (2019).

<sup>42</sup> Other notable examples include Ivens Machado's video performance *Versus* (1974), depicting alternating shots of the artist (who is white) and another male performer (who is black), until they appear to merge and nearly kiss each other; and Rita Moreira and Norma Bahia's video-documentary titled *Mulher e Raça* (Women and Race 1978), taped in Rio de Janeiro, that confronted gender and racial preconceptions toward black Brazilian women.

feminism in its concern with labor and class consciousness, but imperviousness to racial hierarchies. Thus, we can read *Tarefa I* as revealing the complicity of white bourgeois women with these broader social hierarchies, ones bolstered by the dictatorship; showing this internalization of repression thus represents a subtle form of subversion.

## 5. Conclusion

Heloneida Studart's *Mulher: Objeto de cama e mesa* took pains to reassure readers that its author was not a feminist, but rather “a mother of an exemplary family, raising her children rigorously according to her convictions”.<sup>43</sup> Even so, she consistently depicted the domestic realm as a space of imprisonment in which the typical Brazilian housewife was “locked between four walls”<sup>44</sup>, and argued that the key to women's liberation was work outside of the home. In short, she sent very mixed messages: paying lip service to women's roles as homemakers, while critiquing the home as a prison. At the time, the *anos de chumbo* were at their apex; Brazilian citizens and dissidents – including many women – were being locked away and tortured in prisons.

Through the video performances discussed in this essay, Parente's works corroborate Studart's observation that the same disciplinary forces underpinning authoritarianism also undergird domestic space and private, daily life. Furthermore, as I have shown, to articulate these critiques, Parente used two distinct strategies of subversion: performances of self-aggression and mimetic adaptation.<sup>45</sup> In some examples, her self-aggression is theatrical, as in *In* and *Tarefa I*. In others, she performs actual self-harm or presents the possibility of real pain, as in *Marca Registrada*. She uses this real or possible pain not only to connect with others who had been physically abused by the state, but also to implicate the viewer in the act and make them aware of their complicity in certain social hegemonies. By acting out these gestures with little affect, she inflates these repressive attitudes to reveal their inner contradictions, which are underscored by the camera's matter-of-fact, documentary-style recording of the acts unfolding in real time. Parente's *Tarefa I*, in particular, lays bare her and other Brazilian middle-class women's internalization of the contradictory Brazilian social order, revealing problematic ambivalences toward race among the Brazilian Left and second-wave feminists.

**Funding:** This research was funded in part by The City University of New York's Fellowship in Interdisciplinary Research in the Service of Public Knowledge (2018), Knickerbocker Award for Archival Research in American Studies (2016), and Marian Goodman Travel Grant (2016), and by a Getty Foundation Connecting Art Histories Grant (2015).

**Acknowledgments:** This essay is adapted from a chapter of my doctoral dissertation, completed at The Graduate Center, The City University of New York (CUNY), USA. I would like to thank

<sup>43</sup> “(...) [ela] é também mãe de família exemplar, criando seus filhos, rigorosamente, conforme suas convicções (...)” (Lima de Oliveira 1974, p. 5)

<sup>44</sup> “trancafiada entre quatro paredes” (Studart 1974, p. 34)

<sup>45</sup> Throughout this essay, performances of self-harm have been termed differently – “fictional/theatrical self-aggression” (Iop 2016), “masochistic body art” (O'Dell 1998), and “painful acts” or “acts of mortification” (Richard 1986/2000) – each with its own specificities and nuances.

my dissertation committee, Anna Indych-López, Claire Bishop, Edward Miller, and Adele Nelson, as well as Ana Gabriela Macedo and the Research Team on *Gender, Arts and Post-colonial Studies* (GAPS) at the University of Minho (Braga, Portugal) for their feedback on this project. I also thank André Parente for his email correspondence replying to my questions.

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[Submitted on February 18, 2020 and accepted for publication on May 13, 2020]