

The decoloniality of the body and the arts of Aleta Valente

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Abstract | Based on the works produced by the Carioca artist and performer Aleta Valente, this article intends to discuss how her productions can be considered and analyzed according to the epistemological point of view of decoloniality, suggested by Walter Mignolo, and of contemporaneity, thought by Giorgio Agamben. In the face of these ideas and concepts, Aleta Valente makes the aridity of the suburb, hair and menstruation arguments for her art in feminist discourses of empowerment and debauchery to patriarchy and to the artistic production's system.

KEYWORDS: Arts. Decoloniality. Aleta Valente.

A decolonidade do corpo e das artes de Aleta Valente

Resumo | A partir das obras produzidas pela artista e performer carioca Aleta Valente, este artigo pretende discorrer sobre como suas produções podem ser consideradas e analisadas segundo o ponto de vista epistemológico da decolonidade, sugerido por Walter Mignolo, e da contemporaneidade pensada por Giorgio Agamben. Pensar a partir da decolonidade é reconhecer novas propostas epistemológicas e políticas para além do pensamento eurocêntrico ou fundamentalmente cristalizado sob a perspectiva de poder. Em face a essa ideia, Aleta Valente faz da aridez do subúrbio, dos pelos e da menstruação argumentos para a sua arte em discursos feministas de empoderamento e deboche ao patriarcalismo e aos sistemas de produção artística.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Artes.
Decolonidade. Aleta Valente.

La decolonidad del cuerpo y las artes de Aleta Valente

Resumen | A partir de las obras realizadas por la artista e performer carioca Aleta Valente, este artículo pretende discutir cómo sus producciones pueden ser consideradas y analizadas desde el punto de vista epistemológico de la decolonidad, sugerido por Walter Mignolo, y la contemporaneidad pensada por Giorgio Agamben. Pensar desde la decolonidad es reconocer nuevas propuestas epistemológicas y políticas que van más allá del pensamiento eurocéntrico o fundamentalmente cristalizado desde la perspectiva del poder. Frente a esta idea, Aleta Valente utiliza la aridez de la periferia, el cabello y la menstruación como argumentos de su arte en los discursos feministas de empoderamiento y burla al patriarcado y los sistemas de producción artística.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Artes. Decolonidad.
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Introduction

To think about sexuality, the body and its performativities in the arts is to develop ideas that should not be restricted to the positions that have been canonized by the artistic practices developed over several years. Suggesting the body in contemporary arts goes beyond the symmetry and proportionality of the modes of representation and goes beyond even the poetics of avant-gardes drawn from studies of schools and artistic proposals developed in the first half of the 20th century in European countries. The body in contemporary arts can free itself from itself and represent poetics that were providentially forgotten and muffled by presenting signs that would not be worthy of visibility.

The proposal to bring to light discourses that were silenced was one of the rudders of decolonial thinking developed by Walter D. Mignolo (2010) and also one of the contemporary values proposed by Giorgio Agamben (2009). Due to the harmony between the authors, it is possible to recognize that codes, identities, practices and discourses were neglected because they were not contemplated by the discourses of power.

Decolonity can also be undertaken in the elaboration of new proposals for demonstrations of feminism called decolonial (LUGONES, 2019). According to the author, the need to reflect on feminist practices and discourses beyond the Eurocentric, white and bourgeois universe becomes an epistemological need to advance and contribute to the field of discussions. Thus, from these discussions, the text intends to dialogue with decoloniality in artistic and feminist movements that offer other poetic constructions, having as reference the artistic productions of Aleta Valente.

Contrary to crystallized perspectives on the representation of the body and the arts, Aleta Valente, artist and performer, traces another panorama by reconfiguring signs and meanings that do not dialogue with stigmatized processes about sexuality and femininity. She proposes, in her productions, the decolonization of the body, the desire and the condition of being a woman by showing pubic hair, menstrual blood and experiences lived by women in situations of vulnerability.

By believing in the decolonization of the body in Aleta's works, this text intends to focus on male and female authors and concepts that would explain this phenomenon, not only as a scientific construction, but also as a political action of public recognition. The importance of creating this dialogue strengthens the interdisciplinary field that involves aspects of the arts and feminism as successful proposals to expand the representations of bodies beyond the previously known codes.

According to Butler (2017a, p.185), the intention of associating art with the practices of the feminist movement frees it from terminological rigidity and "(...) inspires a healthy feeling of expansiveness, resistance and subversion", that is, it promotes other ways of acting within the movement itself. In addition, according to the theoretical positions of Birolli and Miguel (2014), art can be considered feminist and activist, as proposed by Aleta, for questioning the structures of patriarchy as a mechanism of domination and subordination of women, building

other discourses and representations on the different representations of the female gender. It is important to note that the text images were kindly provided by the artist for analysis.

Theoretical Framework

To begin designing the theoretical framework for this article, it is fruitful to understand some considerations. The first is to recognize the difference between postcolonial and decolonial thinking. The post-colonial idea is supported by the condition of reflecting how Eurocentric, white and bourgeois thought offered support so that subjects and groups from European countries could constitute realities, foster cultures through the force of violence and, through this condition, establish regimes of hierarchy and subjugation of groups that did not have the same qualities of power. This is how the identities of Latin American, African and Asian communities and countries were conceived, which were, in turn, for the most part, former European colonies. However, the condition of subalternity was developed in contrast to colonial practices and discourses.

Edward Said (2007), one of the exponents of post-colonial epistemology, presents in examples and through his own experience how the identity and representations of oriental culture and peoples, in fact, were developed from the conception formed by the condition of subjects and western groups. In other words, the codes, symbols and culture of the eastern universe were constructed as being exotic or strange simply because they were different from the morals of the European colonizers. The hierarchical and superficial view of the other underlies even more the emphasis on the stratification of social representations about identities and ethnicities alien to the western universe. This condition has as a symptom the occurrence of strategies of violence against everything that is different from the self, in addition to marbling stereotyped representations of the colonized as being wild, lazy or aggressive subjects and groups.

As Peter Burke (2004) and Stuart Hall (2016) point out, the formation of stereotypes does not contribute to the evolution of processes of meaning, nor to the recognition of the condition of the *other* in the political space¹. Thus, the eastern universe, which does not only concern geographical references, but as positions of domination, was erected in reference to the western universe, drawing social, moral and economic distinctions such as civility x barbarism, modern x backward, evolved x archaic. From this point of view, post-colonial studies, which began with the struggles for independence of European colonies in the post-war period, sought to build other epistemological references taking into account the interface relationship built between colonizer and colonized.

Of course, post-colonial positions had (and still have) much to contribute to scientific knowledge, even more within the social sciences and humanities. On the other hand, the need for cultural promotion by the decolonial thinking, does not exactly promote the interface of issues between colonized and colonizers, even recognizing that some practices and discourses were silenced. The decolonial proposal goes in another direction and considers that culture and knowledge can be

¹This article understands the term political from the perspective presented by Hannah Arendt (2010, 1989). Arendt's contributions were not articulated as a decolonial movement, nor is the article's proposal to carry out this approximation. However, she recognizes politics as the organization of public space under the condition of visibility, freedom, plurality and communication of free subjects and the intention to break any of these conditions favors the emergence and prosperity of violence.

produced, promoted and fostered based on the practices themselves that were obscured or forgotten because they were considered marginal, obsolete or inferior.

According to Rosevics (2017), postcolonial studies are closer to postmodern currents and poststructuralist authors such as Michel Foucault (who understood sexuality as a device of power) or Jacques Derrida and Félix Guattari who attributed criticism and reconsideration to the contemporary moral condition. From this point of view, the post-colonial proposal, even suggesting epistemological reconfigurations, proposes to identify and analyze the antagonistic relations between the structures of power between groups and subjects that are targets of the colonizer's vigor, denouncing the strategies of domination and oppression and promoting the decentralization of narratives. From another perspective, still in the wake of Rosevics' thinking, the decolonial critique proposes as an object of study not exactly the presence and interface with colonial or power practices and discourses, but "the break with the Eurocentric tradition of decolonizing Latin-American epistemology and its canons" (ROSEVICS, 2017, p. 180).

The decolonial proposal, in addition to being involved with colonial rupture, is also related to the political question. The decolonial intention also proposes to unveil and reconfigure concepts about modernity. Conditioned on the allegory of moral, technological and scientific development, the movement of modernity that began in the 17th century and extended throughout the 1800s was an acute sign of violence as it almost exclusively contemplated the white and European reality for the use and enjoyment of the modern condition.

The situation of poor countries or of subjects and groups in conditions of vulnerability (blacks, Asians, Latin Americans and Africans) was not contemplated in the promotion of modernity; on the contrary, these groups became a reason for exclusion and rejection by the modern condition. Spaces of freedom and visibility did not become effective for public debate in modernity and, therefore, the need to decolonize thought. The quality of understanding of decolonial thought becomes fruitful in the field of social sciences and humanities because it includes new perspectives on the political and epistemological issues presented, but also on artistic manifestations. Walter Mignolo (2010) points out that the arts can offer with more intensity the condition of being decolonial because their manifestations value the:

(...) aesthetic and institutional disobedience. The aesthetic is openly political and decolonized (...) the imperial characteristics of negation (...) is one of its many ways to disarm this montage and build decolonial subjectivities². (MIGNOLO, 2010a, p. 15).

In another study, Mignolo (2010b) believes in the formation of the *grammar of decolonity* that claims the power of other-theory as the foundation of the dissident body. The idea of other-theory attributes this understanding from other ways of thinking about the representation of meanings and knowledge that operate outside the statutes of current discourses. The grammar of decolonity offers another hermeneutic construction, now plural, with the aim of realizing that conflicts and splits are fundamental to arouse discussions and ways of thinking decolonizing,

² Original: "(...) desobediencia aesthetica y institucional. La estética es abiertamente política y decolonizadora (...) las características imperiales de la negación (...) es una de suas tantas formas de desarmar ese montaje y construir subjetividades decoloniales" (MIGNOLO, 2010a, p. 15).

including the body and art. From this perspective, there are the bodies of peripheral and subordinate subjects, of gays, lesbians, transsexuals, transvestites and other strata that do not forge the so-called developed or socially recognized reality. In this context, the work and representations of Aleta Valente's body can also be found in her public performances and in the images distributed on her social network profiles.

Decolonity and contemporaneity of the body and the arts by Aleta Valente

Aleta Valente is from Rio de Janeiro, suburban, in addition to being her own fantasy. In social networks, she keeps the avatar ex-miss-febem, in allusion to the figure of the song *Kátia Flávia*, by Fausto Fawcett. Visual artist and performer, she spent two moments in academics, but did not complete the Arts course at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ). She is a resident of Bangu, a peripheral neighborhood recognized for being one of the most populous in the state capital and for being the address of one of the largest prison complexes in the country. This environment is also the stage for many of her artistic expressions, from which she disseminates part of her work and disseminates humor, irreverence and insults.

In dialogue with the decolonity on the canvas of this research, Aleta's works and performances were considered perverse and political, according to Amaral and Arias Neto's (2018) point of view. For the authors, the artist's works are perverse not because they present some repugnant or abject point, but because they challenge power structures as a power of creativity and re-signification of values and meaning. In addition to the understanding of perversion by the common sense of being some degrading manifestation, perversion, in this case, it is seen as the practice that destabilizes forces and promotes confrontations with crystallized codes and practices (ROUDINESO, 2008), in addition to being a creative power (DUFOUR, 2013).

In another study on Aleta's performance, Ivana Bentes (2017) considers that the artistic practices and visibility in the artist's networks are operations outside the biopolitics condition thought by Michel Foucault, who values the control and discipline of bodies and subjectivities. Still in the wake of the author's thinking, also supported by Michel Foucault, Aleta's manifestations can be considered a symptom of the aesthetics of existence, as subjects who act as resistance to the orbit of discourses and codes of the world to act better. The aesthetics of existence produces subjects through other languages and encourages the movement of freedom and relationships of existence in counterpoint to the order of standards and conventional norms. To the author:

This reflective author subject, who makes themselves, their body, their life the matter of a continuous aestheticization, distances themselves more and more from the figures of the artist, the author, marked by the logic of the spectacle and the work to become celebrities or influencers. Figures that, in this flowing aestheticization of their lives, dispense with a work and present processes with disruptive or normative potential. (BENTES, 2017, p. 94).

In addition to the considerations pointed out by the authors, which are fruitful for the analysis in progress, Aleta's works can be decolonized because they resignify

the values of the arts, of exhibition and also of artistic poetic composition.

Her works cannot always be found in conventional spaces such as museums, galleries and exhibitions, however, one of her works could be visited at the São Paulo Museum of Art (MASP) in the exhibition "History of Sexuality"³. On the occasion, she exposed one of her *selfies* that is part of the "No Pregnant Series" collection, also published on her profile on social networks. In the image she appears wearing white clothes and on her underwear there is a red stain as if it were menstruation with the caption "The patriarchy is leaking. Misogyny is leaking out. We will not be censored." This work was the reason for her being verbally flogged by netizens and much criticized for giving visibility to menstrual blood. Her works can be considered decolonized precisely because they offer other perspectives on the woman's body and its biological processes that, despite being natural, are hidden and muffled by a normative cultural perspective of body control.

In addition, the decolonity of her work is also perceived by its subversion to the canons of artistic practices, especially with regard to the stereotypical poetics of femininity in photographs and in her performances. According to Goldenberg (1998), the performance proposal is a decolonized manifestation by recognizing other possibilities of artistic production as it is a discursive initiative of social activism, political protest and that forges the very violation of the limiting boundaries of representation between public and private. In addition, the author shows that performance values the fluidity of languages and intentions and these values are very present in Aleta's works.

In another study, Goldenberg (2001) considers that the performance manifestation, in addition to being dissident, deterritorializes the exhibition spaces and there is no exclusivity in the presentation, thus, spaces and audiences can be floating. On another note, as it is morally provocative, the performance opens up the possibility of being scary and impactful, and these qualities, for Goldenberg (2001), reveal the roots of the taboos and fears that surround us. When performing her performances, Aleta decolonizes the female body, in addition to expressing with irony and mockery confrontations with machismo, sexism and misogyny by invading the public space with her proposal.

Aleta presents unconventional feminist discourses and practices, qualities desired by decolonized morals. Pubic hair and menstruation are not sign arguments commonly found in artistic practices. These elements, as Sibilía (2006) points out as a critic, are qualities "always even worse: of invisibility" (SIBILIA, 2006, p.277), for defying the current moral codes and, thus, bringing synesthesia that should not be shared. From this perspective, Aleta's proposal can be considered decolonized, supported by Pinto and Mignolo (2015). According to the authors, the decolonial proposal is articulated with the intention of offering and promoting efforts for "subjective, epistemic, economic and political detachment or disengagement in the face of domination" (PINTO; MIGNOLO, 2015, p. 384) which, in the case in question, promotes irony and mockery of sexist and sexist values and the capitalist system.

From another point of view, decolonized morality produces resistant subjectivities that, as Lugones (2019) points out, manifest themselves *infrapolitically*; that is, they are actions that usually open spaces in public

³ The exhibition remained on view from December 2017 to February 2018.

manifestations and that are not necessarily institutionalized by government policies, but promote legitimacy, voice and visibility in the public space. That is why the author considers that infrapolitics:

(...) marks an inward look, in the politics of resistance, towards liberation. It shows the power of oppressed communities in the construction of meanings of resistance and of people resistant to the constitution of meanings and social organization through power. (LUGONES, 2019, p.362).

The proposal to also decolonize the practices of feminism is part of Aleta's works when her works reinvent other proposals of manifestation. In another work, she mocks the fine arts when she suggests the reconfiguration of the origin of the world. In mockery of Gustave Courbet's work, "*L'origine du monde*", painted in 1866, the artist presents on canvas a vagina in a very realistic and natural way with pubic hair in evidence. On the other hand, Aleta photographs herself in a position similar to the canvas of the end of the 19th century, however with her vagina smeared in blood and entitles the work "*L'origine du nouveau monde*".



Figure 1 Work *L'origine de nouveau monde*

Source: Reproduction kindly provided by the artist

Possibly, the author's intention is not the desire to annihilate the established practices of the arts, but to make her artistic proposal a decolonized manifestation in the field of the arts and also of speeches against the oppressive forces on the condition of women in patriarchal societies. Presenting the vagina with blood, even more so with this title, suggests the possibility of thinking about how it is possible to remake other initiatives of power of creation and creativity, in addition to subverting codes and signs that can achieve visibility.

As Beauvoir (2016) presents, desire, pleasure and enjoyment in patriarchal society were not reserved with emphasis to women, but were rights consecrated to men "while women are confined to marriage: for her the carnal act; not being sanctified by the code, by the sacrament, is fault, fall, defeat, weakness" (BEAVOUIR,

2016, p. 126).

In another aspect, in addition to being decolonial, the work of Aleta Valente can be considered contemporary from the considerations of Giorgio Agamben (2009). As mentioned earlier, modernity was restricted to the European bourgeoisie, excluding subjects and groups from other continents or who did not belong to privileged classes. This critique of modernity is also part of Agamben's thinking about the formation of knowledge in contemporaneity.

For the Italian philosopher, contemporaneity presents a particularized relationship over time that does not exactly consist of the commitment to the production and reproduction of conventionally established practices. For him, those who adhere to current discourses cannot be considered contemporary because they cannot promote the detachment that the condition requires of conceptual reconfiguration. In addition, Agamben also recognizes that the quality of being contemporary is to be aware of the gazes of one's time and not only perceive what is targeted by light, but also perceive that the shadows and practices that are obscured are also part of the contemporaneity. According to the author, "a contemporary is only someone who does not allow themselves to be blinded by the lights of the century and who manages to glimpse the shadow part of it, its intimate obscurity (...) of your time." (AGAMBEN, 2009, p. 63-64).

This way of understanding contemporaneity recognizes fractures about the present. According to the author, at the same time that there is an intention to contemplate the darkness, there is a proposal to perceive in the immense darkness the possibility of the existence of light that, "directed towards us, infinitely distances itself from us" (AGAMBEN, 2009, p. 65). That is, at the same time that darkness is present among us, it is not exactly part of us, hence the gap discontinuity to understand the present time according to the contemporaneity suggested by the author. However, chronological time is not enough to signify contemporaneity, this quality of time carries within itself "something that urges within it and that transforms it (...) And, in the same way, recognizes in the darkness of the present the light that, without ever being able to reach us." (AGAMBEN, 2009, p. 65-66).



Figure 2 Work Material girl

Source: Reproduction kindly provided by the artist

The understanding of the faces of contemporaneity can be recognized in Aleta's

works and performances when she brings what is in the obscurity of the subject and in the limbo of political visibility. Even in a mocking tone, the aridity of the suburban periphery is also part of her artistic settings. In *"Material girl"*, she appears on civil construction rubble waving to interlocutors. The title of her performance bears the same name as the song performed by Madonna, since 1984, when the singer criticizes the individualistic and frivolous behavior of the consumer society. In *"Brics Woman"*, apparently at the same time she produced *"Material girl"*, Aleta gets on all fours in front of a wall of stacked bricks. In another production, only a half-open mouth marked by herpes offers the plot of *"Sexy with herpes"*. Elements and situations that could not possibly be portrayed in conventional art situations are arguments used in Aleta's production. Subtlety and lightness are not part of the poetic formations of her works. Aleta is contemporary for bringing to light the thickness and sterility of scenes that, possibly, integrate the daily life of regions that are under obscurity.



Figurd 3 Work *Brics Woman*

Source: Reproduction kindly provided by the artist

Following the thinking of Lugones (2019), Aleta's performance flirts with decolonial resistance because it highlights the fractures caused, that is, it is a symptom of the quality of breaking the colonial order and provokes the promotion of "creative ways of thinking and behaving" and which are antithetical to the logic of capital" (LUGONES, 2019, p. 372). Her works are symptoms of the present, but which are forgotten and, in the same proportion, they become powers of criticism and resistance to the decolonization of the body, sexuality and politics.

In the performance *"Sabrina"*, from 2016, Aleta stages a true passage about the reality of incarcerated women. The artist reconstructed the scene in which an inmate gave birth to a child inside the penitentiary, but was deprived of medical and hospital assistance. The event was covered by the press and the caption chosen by Aleta to record the performance was an excerpt from an article published at that time: "the inmate came out of isolation with the baby in her lap and the umbilical cord still in the uterus". Through the demonstration, Aleta elaborates the discourse of neglect in the face of the prison reality faced by pregnant women and the subhuman condition in which these women find themselves.

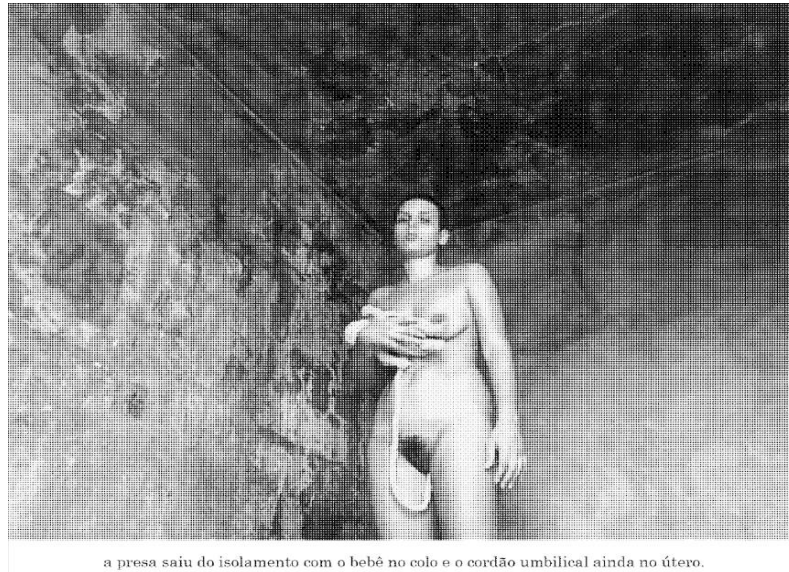


Figure 4 Work Sabrina (2016)

Source: Reproduction kindly provided by the artist

By establishing a relationship between art and feminism, Aleta meets the understanding of Butler (2017) that some lives are precarious because they are considered unworthy of belonging to the public space, however there is resistance and indignation from bodies:

(...) when bodies come together with the purpose of expressing their indignation and representing their plural existence in the public space, they are pleading broader demands: these bodies ask that you recognize and value them, so that they can exercise their right to appear, their freedom and claim for a livable life.⁴ (BUTLER, 2017b, p. 33).

Butler's understanding is associated with Arendt's perspective on politics, which, in turn, dialogues with the decolonial proposal of offering visibility and with Agamben's idea of modernity by bringing to light the diversity and plurality of representations that are deliberately excluded. To a large extent, Aleta's work is articulated with the purpose of escaping from the stereotyped representations of desire and from the representation strategies of women and the feminine by promoting the decolonization of the body. In addition, Aleta can be considered contemporary for fracturing the vertebrae of her time, making use of Agamben's thinking, by turning the spotlight on marginality that is invisible in the same proportion that it is highly contemporary to our time and there is no way to deny it.

Final considerations

The proposal to decolonize the body and artistic manifestations does not cease to be a political action from the moment it values the recognition and visibility of marginalized subjects and groups. This consideration strengthens the text's hypothesis of considering that Aleta Valente's works and performances can be

⁴ Original: "(...) cuando los cuerpos se reúnen con el fin de expresar su indignación y representar su experiencia plural en el espacio público, están planteando a la vez demandas más amplias: estos cuerpos solicitan que se los reconozca, que se los valore, al tiempo que ejercen su derecho a la aparición, su libertad y reclaman una vida vivible". (BUTLER, 2017b, p. 33)

considered decolonized, since she brings up discourses and representations silenced by power strategies.

From another point of view, her works can also be considered contemporary because they manage to attract attention and promote representations of meanings that hide in the darkness of the present time. Producing these actions is to promote other senses of the arts and representations of the body. Decolonizing is also opening spaces for the recognition of other universes and other discursive proposals for political action and also for the practices of the arts and feminism.

Aleta is not alone in this decolonial endeavor. The need to reconfigure the arts, representations of the body, sexuality, gender and feminist actions can also be seen in the performances and works of artist and professor Fernanda Magalhães. She presents a series of productions that bring to light silenced elements as a standard of health and representations of the female body. In 2016, she staged the manifesto "Grassa crua", in criticism of the technologies of control and discipline of the body. Fat, on top of a tiny bench, the artist undresses to the point of total nudity and shows the anguish of following the colonizing discourses about the body. The theme of the body is recurrent in Fernanda's works, for example, in 1995 when she launched the series "A representação da mulher gorda nua na fotografia", in which she presented fat women, including herself, in hybrid techniques of photography, collage and paint. These women become decolonized when, from their universe and contextual condition, they manage to reconfigure subjectivities and representations.

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