

Suely Rolnik

# Avoiding False Problems: Politics of the Fluid, Hybrid, and Flexible

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Hybrid cultural cartographies of all kinds are being sketched out alongside new and complex existential territories that are made and unmade in an irreversibly globalized world.<sup>1</sup> To present within these dynamics a choice between refusing or celebrating cultural universes marked by cultural hybridization, flexibility, and fluidity would be to put forward a false problem, for these dynamics constitute our present reality, created through the struggle between various politics. The real difference to be found, therefore, lies in the forces at play in the sketching of its cartographies. This is what I intend to explore here, following the trajectory of this question as it has appeared in my own work, for the first time in the 1980s with the formulation of the concept of “anthropophagic subjectivity.”<sup>2</sup>

I have reworked this concept from time to time since then – not to “correct” it, but to give voice to the singularity of the process that invokes and reconstitutes it, and also to address contexts for which it might be productive again. Its most recent reappearances were mobilized by contemporary art, which has become, since the mid-1990s, a privileged arena for the struggle of forces that outline the cultural cartographies of the present.

## The Other in the Flesh

The notion of “anthropophagy,” as proposed by the modernists, harks back to a practice of the indigenous Tupinambás.<sup>3</sup> It was a complex ritual that could continue for months, even years, in which enemies captured in battle would be killed and devoured; cannibalism is only one of the ritual’s stages – and the only (or almost only) registered in the European imaginary, probably because of the horror it instilled in European colonizers. Although the cannibalist stage of the ritual is, curiously, the same stage that was privileged by the modernists in the construction of their argument, it seems that another one altogether would offer us an important key to the questions I want to address. The anthropologists Manuela Carneiro da Cunha and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro described this part of the ritual: “having killed the enemy, the executor would change his name and have scars made in his body during a long and rigorous period of reclusion.”<sup>4</sup> And thus, over time, names would accumulate following each confrontation with a new enemy, along with the engraving of each name in the flesh. The more names recorded in a body, the more prestigious their bearer. The existence of the Other – not one, but many and distinct – was thus inscribed in the memory of the body, producing unpredictable becomings of subjectivity.

It follows from the same logic, according to



Leonhard Kern, *Menschenfresserin* (Female Cannibal), 1650.





### Anthropophagic Know-How

In the 1960s and 1970s, various Western countries reached the high point of a long process of absorbing modernism's inventions: an entire generation was embodied in a broad and daring cultural and existential experiment. In a movement that has been named "counter-culture," they overflowed the restricted territory of artistic and cultural avant-gardes. It was a widespread reaction to the disciplinary society characteristic of industrial capitalism, with its identitarian subjectivity and culture that composed the figure of the so-called "bourgeois" in its post-war Hollywood version.

This was also the case in Brazil, where the local avant-garde's anthropophagic ideas were then reactualized, revived, and transfigured into a crucial feature of other movements in the cultural field. (Tropicalism, the most widely known, was only one expression among many of this.<sup>7</sup>) This revival gave Brazilians a certain know-how when it came to experimenting with other politics of subjectification, of relating to the Other, and of creation pursued collectively on an international scale.

It was undoubtedly my intense involvement with this experience, and the need to actualize it conceptually so as to integrate it into a cartography of the present, that some years later led me to conceive of the notion of "anthropophagic subjectivity." Broadly, this subjectivity is constituted by the absence of an absolute and stable identification with any repertoire, and the absence of blind obedience to any established rule, giving rise to a plasticity of the contours of subjectivity (instead of identities); a fluidity in the incorporation of new universes, alongside a freedom of hybridization (instead of ascribing a truth-value to any particular universe); and a courageous experimentalism taken to its limits, alongside an agility with improvisation that created new territories and their respective cartographies (instead of fixed territories with their predetermined and supposedly stable languages).

I used this concept for the first time in 1987, in my doctoral thesis, published in 1989<sup>8</sup> – the same year as the end of dictatorship of Brazil and the fall of the Berlin Wall.<sup>9</sup> I highlight this to show that in that specific context it was important to name and reaffirm the politics of subjectification we had invented in the 1960s and early 1970s, in the heart of the counter-cultural movement. This politics had been the target of the dictatorship's truculence throughout the 1970s and early 1980s, which had reactivated and hardened the identitarian principle – as is often the case with regimes such as these.<sup>10</sup> When I wrote "Anthropophagy

and Schizoanalysis" in 1994 for a colloquium on Deleuze's thought, it was still necessary to affirm this mode of subjectification.<sup>11</sup> But the goal then was to point out the relationship between what I designated as anthropophagic subjectivity and the conception of subjectivity we find in the work of Deleuze and Guattari, and therefore to understand the wider reception of the two strains of thinking in the clinical field in Brazil.<sup>12</sup>



When I took up this concept one more time, in a 1998 essay commissioned for the catalogue of the twenty-fourth São Paulo Biennale (whose theme was precisely anthropophagy), I felt called upon to tackle another problem: the politics of subjectivity and cultural production invented by the generation of the 1960s and 70s, which started to be instrumentalized by transnational finance capitalism, then establishing itself across the planet.<sup>13</sup> Transformed in this operation, the instrumentalized micropolitics of the counter-culture generation have subsequently become the dominant form of subjectification. (with some authors describing this new regime as "cognitive" or "cultural" capitalism<sup>14</sup>). I will not describe this process here, as I dealt with it in depth in 1989 and more recently in several essays.<sup>15</sup> Although the beginning of such change dates back to the late 1970s in Western Europe and North America, in Latin America and Eastern Europe – with the dissolution of totalitarian regimes from the mid-1980s onward, largely engendered by neoliberalism itself – it had taken at least two decades for its perverse effects to be felt and posed as a problem, as is bound to be the case with any cultural transformation of this scale. Only now is it possible to perceive these effects, which imposed the need to distinguish the politics of plasticity, fluidity, hybridization, and

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creative, experimental freedom characterizing what I had called anthropophagic subjectivity. I described these differences at the time by advancing the concepts of “low” and “high” anthropophagy, inspired by the Anthropophagic Manifesto itself.<sup>16</sup> I also called them, following Nietzsche, “active” and “reactive” anthropophagy.

### Politics of Creation

The criterion I adopted in order to distinguish the politics of anthropophagic subjectivity was based on a reaction to the process that sparks the work of creation. I referred then to the paradoxical dynamic between the map of established forms and representations, with its relative stability, and the worldly forces that never cease to affect our bodies, redesigning the diagram of our sensible texture. This dynamic inflicts the given territories and their respective maps, placing the parameters orienting our sense of the present in a state of crisis. It is in this abyss and in the urgency to produce sense that the work of thought is called into being. At the point of this initial impulse of creative will, its different politics are discerned by what is tolerated in the collapse of our senses, the plunge into chaos, and our fragility. In order to

briefly describe this shift, I pointed to two opposite poles in this process, which obviously do not exist as such, for reality presents many more hues in between.

To initiate a creative act with a plunge into chaos, so as to give a body of images or words to the sensations that call for them, means to participate in the emergence of a consistent cartography of oneself and the world, which bears the imprint of otherness. This is a complex and subtle process requiring a great deal of work. And is this not similar to what the Tupinambás sought in their prolonged and rigorous reclusion during the course of the anthropophagic ritual?

However, instead of listening, creation can result from a refusal to listen to chaos and the effects of otherness on our body. In this case, the cartography is created through the consumption of ready-made ideas and images. The intention here is to rapidly reconstitute an easily recognizable territory under the illusion of silencing the turbulence provoked by the Other's existence. What is produced, then, is an aerobic subjectivity with an acritical plasticity, adequate to the mobility required by cognitive capitalism. And here it matters little whether the ideas and images consumed originate in mass culture or its

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Brazilian new wave film director Glauber Rocha in front of a *Raging Bull* poster.





Lygia Pape, *O divisor* (*The divider*), 1968. Work as recreated for the 29th São Paulo Biennial, 2010.

erudite, luxury counterpart. On the micropolitical domain, things are distinguished not by their social or economic class belonging, nor by the place they occupy in any hierarchy of knowledges, but by the forces that invest them.

Both politics of creation I have just described bear all the characteristics I included above in what I called the “anthropophagic subjectivity”; however, they are both entirely distinct from one another, and differ essentially in the way they incorporate the disruptive effects of the Other’s existence into the invention of the present.

To sum up, it was clear by then that, in order to respond to industrial capitalism (with its disciplinary society and its identitarian logic), it was necessary to oppose a fluid, flexible, and hybrid logic that had been appropriated from the 1960s and 70s. It has now become a mistake to take the latter as a value in itself – since it came to constitute the dominant logic of neoliberalism and its society of control. It is, therefore, within this logic – between different politics of flexibility, fluidity, and hybridization – that the struggles take place around tracing the cartographies of our globalized contemporaneity.<sup>17</sup>

### Pimp My Anthropophagy

In a more recent essay I wrote on this subject,<sup>18</sup> I felt the need to create the new notion of “flexible subjectivity,”<sup>19</sup> so as to make explicit the historical context I had in mind – the politics of subjectification of the 1960s and 70s and its capitalistic clone – and to retain the qualification of “anthropophagic” for its Brazilian version. In this essay I described with greater precision the process that led to the instrumentalization of the counter-culture generation’s micropolitics; I also pointed out the confusion that many people of the 1960s and 70s generation experienced when confronted with the two politics of flexible subjectivity and the state of pathological alienation caused by this confusion. Finally, I examined the specificity of these effects in countries just coming out of dictatorial regimes – in particular those whose past had been marked by a singular and daring experimentalism, such as many countries in Latin America and Eastern Europe. In these contexts, paralyzed by the micropolitics of dictatorships, such experimentalism was reactivated with the establishment of cultural capitalism only to be directly channeled into the market, but without first passing through the elaboration of the wound in the potency of creation, which would be a condition for the reactivation of poetic-political vitality. This means that the advent of the new regime tended to be constituted in these countries as a

veritable salvation. Cultural capitalism seemed to liberate the forces of creation from their repression, and, furthermore, to celebrate and empower them to exercise a prominent role in the construction of the world to come. This aggravated the confusion between the counter-cultural politics of subjectification and creation and its post-capitalistic pimping version alike, hence the negative effects that derived from it.<sup>20</sup>

In Brazil, a third factor compounded this complex situation, which is precisely the presence of the anthropophagic tradition. If this played a role in the radicality of the counter-cultural experience of young Brazilians in the 1960s and 70s, it now tends to contribute to a *soft* adaptation of the neoliberal environment, as the country proved to be a veritable athletic champion of market-friendly flexibility.<sup>21</sup> Elicited chiefly in its more reactive side, this tradition produced what I have called “anthropophagic zombies.”

### What’s Art Got To Do With It?

It is no coincidence that this movement manifests itself most strongly in the territory of artistic production, as it is directly affected by the situation I described above. In the last ten or fifteen years, the visual arts have enjoyed greater power than ever before in drawing the cultural cartography of the present. Besides the prominence generally acquired by image throughout the twentieth century, international art exhibitions have become a privileged device in the development of transnational narratives. They concentrate and compose, in a single space and time, the largest possible number of cultural universes – be it on the side of the works or that of the public.

I suggested at the beginning of this text that asking the question of whether to refuse or celebrate the cartographies marked by cultural hybridization, flexibility, and fluidity would result in putting forward a false problem. It is just as false to pose the question of the pertinence of art’s role in the invention of such cartographies. The forces at work in each artistic proposal are what matter. What matters are the ways in which creation starts from the turbulences of contemporary sensible experience and the extent to which artistic practice is the consequence of frictions, tensions, and impossibilities that are implicated by the complex and singular construction of a globalized society at each moment and in each context. In the field of visual arts, those forces are embodied not only in the works themselves, but in their exhibitions and the curatorial concepts they articulate, in the critical texts that accompany them, and the directives of the museums that host them – and also, of course,

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in all of the artistic practices that take place in a drift beyond the institutional territory of art.

Mega-exhibitions have become one of the main sources of empty and shallow prêt-à-porter cartographies, adaptable for consumption in any point of the globe. Nevertheless, against the grain of this tendency, other forces are at work, investing in different ways in the construction of cartographies that emerge from the tensions of contemporary experience rather than from their denial. Through them, the poetic power of art is affirmed, giving body to the sensible mutations of the present. Making them apprehensible results in the opening up of new possibilities for individual and collective existence – lines of flight away from sterile modes of living that provide support for nothing but the production of capital. Is this not precisely the political potency of art?

x

Translated from the Portuguese by Rodrigo Nunes.

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1  
This essay is a revised version of a paper presented at the colloquium *On Cultural Translation. A Conference on Artistic Practice in a Context of Cultural Translation*. U-TURN Quadrennial for Contemporary Art in collaboration with the University of Copenhagen, the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Art, and Lettre International (Copenhagen, November 24, 2007).

2  
The strong singularity of the Anthropophagic Movement in the international context of modernism is still relatively ignored outside of Brazil. The 1928 *Anthropophagic Manifesto* by Oswald de Andrade – poet, playwright and experimental novelist – is its most well known reference.

3  
The generic name of Tupinambá refers, in fact, to a great variety of indigenous groups that inhabited the vast territory taken hold of by the Portuguese colonization, where it “founded” Brazil.

4  
Manuela L. Carneiro da Costa and Eduardo B. Viveiros de Castro, “Vingança e temporalidade: os Tupinambás,” *Anuário Antropológico* 85 (Rio de Janeiro: Ed. Tempo Brasileiro, 1986). This is how the authors describe the ritual: “A prisoner, after having lived for a few months or even years among his captors, would be killed publicly in front of the community. Adorned with feathers and body painting, he would carry out arrogance-packed dialogues with an equally bedecked executioner. ... Ideally, the killing should be done with a single blow of the Ibirapema [ritual stick], which should crack his skull.” Only then was the body devoured, following a rigorous ritual of distribution of its parts, and the killer would go into reclusion.

5  
According to the same authors, the Portuguese wanted to employ the practice of capturing enemies in order to acquire slaves, which the indigeneous people resisted. When it was not possible to escape the colonizers’ orders, they would rather offer family members as slaves than surrender their captured enemies and let go of the anthropophagic ritual, with the public killing and all its other stages.

6  
This is how Brazilian anthropologist Darcy Ribeiro describes it: “Colonisation in Brazil was carried out as a persistent effort to establish an Europeanness adapted to these tropics and embodied in these miscegenations. But it always ran up against the stubborn resistance of nature and the whims of history, which made us

thus, despite those grand designs: so opposed to whitenesses and civilities, so internally un-European as we are un-Indigenous and un-Afro.” Darcy Ribeiro, *O Povo Brasileiro. A formação e o sentido do Brasil* (São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1995). No page number?

7  
It is the case of the work of Lygia Clark, often included under Tropicalism, when the artist explicitly declared that she had nothing in common with the aesthetic of the movement. On this topic, see also the interview given by Caetano Veloso to Suely Rolnik for her archive: “Lygia Clark, from the object to the event: activation of a work’s memory and context.”

8  
Suely Rolnik, *Cartografia Sentimental. Transformações contemporâneas do desejo* (São Paulo: Estação Liberdade, 1989, out of print). Second and third revised editions, with a preface (Porto Alegre: Sulinas / UFRG, 2006, 2007).

9  
A coup d’état in 1964 put Brazil under the yoke of a military dictatorship that lasted until 1985, when the first civilian president was elected, indirectly. The first direct elections took place in 1989.

10  
Both counter-culture and militancy, the two poles of the 1960s and 70s generation’s movement, were the target of the regime’s terrorism in Brazil.

11  
Suely Rolnik, “Schizoanalyse et Anthropophagie,” Alliez, Eric, ed., *Gilles Deleuze. Une vie philosophique* (Paris: Synthélabo, 1998), 463–476. Brazilian translation: Suely Rolnik, “Esquizoanálise e Antropofagia,” *Gilles Deleuze. Uma vida filosófica* (São Paulo: Editora 34, 2000), 451–462).

12  
In Latin America in general – and more so in Brazil – the works of Guattari, Deleuze, Foucault, and the entire philosophical tradition in which they are included (Nietzsche in particular), had a strong influence on the field of psychiatry, which resulted in a critical attitude, interested in problematizing the politics of subjectification in contemporaneity and confronting the symptoms derived from them. In Brazil, this singularity spread across therapeutic work in public institutions and private practices (even among psychoanalysts), as well as in academic training, where several universities offer PhD programs on these lines of investigation. Just to give an idea of the scope of this movement, the group of thirty professionals in charge of the Ministry of Health during Lula’s

first term all came from this background.

13  
Suely Rolnik, “Subjetividade Antropofágica / Anthropophagic Subjectivity,” Paulo Herkenhoff and Adriano Pedrosa (eds.), *Arte Contemporânea Brasileira: Um e/entre Outros*, XXIVa Bienal Internacional de São Paulo (São Paulo: Fundação Bienal de São Paulo, 1998), 128–147.

14  
The notions of “cognitive” or “cultural capitalism,” put forward from the end of the 1990s, primarily by the groups of researchers presently associated with the French journal *Multitude*, are in part a development of the ideas of Deleuze and Guattari on the status of culture and subjectivity in contemporary capitalism.

15  
Some of these essays can be found in the bilingual edition of *Brumaria* 8: “Arte y Revolución. Sobre historia(s) del arte,” Documenta 12 Magazine Project, 2007. In German, the majority of them can be read in *Transversal* 11/06 (Machines and Subjectivation) and 05/07 (Extradisciplinaire). See <http://transform.eipcp.net/>.

16  
The notion of “low anthropophagy” appears in the *Anthropophagic Manifesto*, which qualifies it as the “plague of the so-called cultured and christianized nations.” See Oswald de Andrade, “Manifesto Antropofágico,” in *A Utopia antropofágica, Obras Completas de Oswald de Andrade* (São Paulo: Globo, 1990). Available in English at [http://www.antropofagia.com.br/antropofagia/en/man\\_antropo.html](http://www.antropofagia.com.br/antropofagia/en/man_antropo.html).

17  
It is obvious that the focus here encompasses only a part of the politics of subjectification and creation, which confront each other in our times. Other forces are involved in this struggle, among which the fundamentalisms that have, precisely, appeared with the installation of neoliberalism and its capitalistic flexibility. In this kind of regime, the identitarian principle is reactualized in its most extreme forms.

18  
Suely Rolnik, “Zombie Anthropophagy,” in Ivet Curlin and Natasa Ilic, eds., *Collective Creativity Dedicated to Anonymous Worker* (Kassel: Kunsthalle Fridericianum, 2005). Bilingual edition (German/English). In Spanish/English: “Antropofagia zombie,” in *Brumaria* 8: “Arte y Revolución. Sobre historia(s) del arte,” Documenta 12 Magazine Project, 2007.

19  
The notion of “flexible

subjectivity” is partially inspired by that of the “flexible personality,” suggested by Brian Holmes, which I develop from the viewpoint of the process of subjectification. See Brian Holmes, “The Flexible Personality,” in *Hieroglyphs of the Future* (Zagreb: WHW/Arkzin, 2002).

20  
Eastern Europe and Latin America share these situations that allowed the installation of capitalist flexibility to generate similar effects like those suggested in the text (something that would merit a common investigation). Nevertheless, an entirely different phenomenon comes into play in some countries in Eastern Europe in the same context, which is the rise of fundamentalisms of all kinds, as previously mentioned in note 17.

21  
Some of the signs of this phenomenon are: Brazilian agencies are often awarded top prizes in international advertising competitions; Rede Globo’s TV soap operas are shown in over 200 countries; Brazilian women, according to statistics, highly identify and subject themselves to the standard ideals of the feminine body established by the media, which places Brazil at the top of the world ranking in consumption of cosmetics, diet products, and plastic surgery.