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Brazilian Surrealism: The Art of Walter Lewy

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BRAZILIAN SURREALISM: THE ART OF WALTER LEWY

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

in

The School of Art

by

Glauco França Adorno

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This thesis is dedicated to my father.

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A Note on sources

The goal of this thesis is to create an artistic biography of Walter Lewy (1905 – 1995). Despite a wealth of primary sources in Portuguese, no comprehensive study about the artist's journey had been written so far, especially in English. Analyzing Lewy's contemporary newspaper articles, as well as drawing from personal interviews with family, this thesis attempts to retrace the artist's trajectory, taking into consideration the political and social context of the time from which Lewy's art emerged. All sources in Portuguese were translated by the author unless otherwise indicated.

An exhibition catalog from 1974 entitled *Walter Lewy, 35 Anos de Pintura no Brasil*, was the only publication dedicated exclusively to the author. Containing essays by a few scholars, and an artist statement by Lewy himself, the publication aimed to accompany a major retrospective exhibition held in the Modern Art Museum in São Paulo.

More recently, the exhibition *Walter Lewy, Mestre do Surrealismo no Brasil*, held in the *Estação Pinacoteca* museum in São Paulo, in 2013, sought to revive artist in the twenty-first century. Assembling more than one hundred works by Lewy, the exhibition was the first to take place after the artist's death in 1995. Unfortunately, no catalog was published.

Abstract

Walter Max Lewy (1905 – 1995) was a Surrealist painter and graphic designer who worked in Brazil for most of his career. Born in Germany to a Jewish family, the artist was forced to flee Europe in the eve of the Second World War, finding a safe haven in the city of São Paulo. The city's budding modern art scene provided solid ground for Lewy's art to flourish. His achievements epitomize the global occurrence of Modernism, in its manifestations outside the traditional Western artistic centers of the world.

This thesis is the first comprehensive analysis of Walter Lewy's life and work to be written in English. It examines his body of work that consists of paintings, prints and illustrations, from the first woodcuts made in the Weimar Republic (1919 – 1933) in Germany through the massive number of Surrealist paintings the artist had produced by the end of the military dictatorship (1964 – 1985) in Brazil. The aim of this thesis is make the work of somewhat forgotten figure available to a wider audience, as well as preserve Lewy's legacy as a relevant player in the development of Brazilian modern art.

Introduction

In recent years a number of exhibitions explored peripheral aspects of modernism and its manifestations outside of Europe and North America. In 2013, for example, the Centre Pompidou in Paris organized the exhibition *Modernités Plurielles*, which focused exclusively on modernism in Asia and South America.¹ Similarly, the 2001 Guggenheim Museum exhibition *Brazil: Body and Soul* analyzed various aspects of art in Brazil, including the emergence of modernism in the country.² By investigating instances where modern artists produced work outside Western cultural centers, it is possible to reconstruct a history of modernism in its plurality across the globe.

Walter Lewy's artistic journey is a unique example of such complexities. Lewy was a Jewish painter who studied art in Germany during the late 1920's and was forced to flee from Europe on the eve of the Second World War. In 1937, he arrived in Brazil to find in exile a fertile ground for his avant-garde practice. After settling in the city of São Paulo, Lewy started to paint in the Surrealist style, engaging themes dealing with mystery, fantasy and sexuality in his art.

Launched by André Breton in 1924, Surrealism was at first a literary movement defined by the praise of the creative energy present in the unconscious mind. Surrealists embraced madness and dream-like states in the creative process, and, in doing so, strove to criticize what they viewed as the overly rational paradigms of modern society. Their method was called *automatic writing*, and consisted of producing nonsensical sentences, recording strings of free-word associations. Such efforts constituted an attempt to curtail the censoring nature of reason, allowing the authenticity of the

¹Catherine Grenier, *Modernités Plurielles, 1905-1970: Dans les Collections du Musée National d'art Moderne*: exh. cat. (Paris: Centre Pompidou, 2013).

² Edward J. Sullivan, *Brazil: Body and Soul* (New York: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 2001).

unconscious mind to come forth. The movement soon gained adepts in the visual arts. André Masson attempted to create drawings that were not bound by rationality. Artists such as Salvador Dali, Max Ernst and Yves Tanguy, however, would be the ones to introduce the fantastic iconography for which Surrealism would become famous.

Lewy's iconography could be compared to that of Dali, Ernst and Tanguy at various points of his career. All of them exploited the human condition by creating bizarre images that challenge the viewer's perception of reality. Similarities, however, were not limited to their iconography, as their personal journeys were marked by a common background. As a consequence of the Second World War, nearly all members of the Surrealist group were forced to flee Europe during the early 1940's. Indeed, exile became a milestone for most of their careers: Salvador Dali, Max Ernst, Yves Tanguy and André Breton himself were expatriates in the United States until the end of the war.³ Much like Lewy, a great deal of their work was created outside of their home countries.

The dispersal of modernists across the globe shaped the history of avant-garde groups that were already established, and prompted the rise of new schools of thought in art. Modernism in Brazil, for instance, was heavily influenced both by foreign artists, and Brazilian-born intellectuals who were educated in France, Switzerland and Germany. In acting as the bridge between Brazil and Europe, these individuals fostered the debate about modernism in the Brazilian art scene. When studied from this perspective, Walter Lewy, educated in Germany and influenced by German artistic paradigms, emerges as a key player during of the rise of Brazilian modernism.

³ Martica Sawin, *Surrealism in Exile and the Beginning of the New York School* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1995), 27.

Chapter 1

Walter Max Lewy was born in Oldesloe, Northern Germany, in 1905.⁴ His parents, the textile merchant Hermann Lewy and his wife Betty, raised the artist in a middle-class Jewish household. Hermann Lewy worked with textiles and owned a small store.⁵ While little is known about the artist's childhood, documented evidence suggests that the family relocated several times before Walter Lewy reached school age.⁶ The family had lived in Oldesloe for less than a year before Walter Lewy was born on November 10. They subsequently moved North to Kiel in 1909, and then West to Elberfeld in the same year, before settling more permanently in Dortmund.⁷

At the time of the First World War, Walter Lewy was sent to a boarding school in the Harz mountains of Germany. By the age of nine, he lived separately from his parents under a regime of strict discipline and hunger.⁸ Later in life, however, Lewy recounted these events with a rather lighthearted tone: "In six years of boarding, I learned Latin and French. I was a good student. Great in drawing, but terrible in math."⁹

Located in Seesen Am Harz, Lower Saxony, Lewy's boarding school followed the philosophy of the Reform Movement in Judaism.¹⁰ According to historian David Philipson, the Reform was a nineteenth-century movement that sought to revise traditional values of the Jewish culture in the German setting.¹¹ There was a push

⁴ Bad Oldesloe City Archives, *Birth Certificate of Walter Lewy*, certificate number 264, November 14, 1905.

⁵ Letter from Sylvina Zander (Bad Oldesloe City Archivist) to Darius A. Spieth, January 26, 2014.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ D. Knippschild (Dortmund City Archivist), *Findings Concerning the Painter and Graphic Designer Walter Lewy and His Parents*, unpublished research commissioned by Claude Martin-Vaskou and Eliana Minillo at the Dortmund City Archives in March, 2010, Private Archive, Claude Martin-Vaskou, São Paulo.

⁸ Walter Lewy, "Walter Lewy, O Pintor da Vegetação Humana," newspaper interview, *Jornal da Tarde*, São Paulo, April 25, 1973, 32.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Walter Lewy and Dirce Pires, interview by Egon and Frieda Wolff, *Depoimentos - Um Perfil Da Coletividade Judaica Brasileira* (Rio de Janeiro: Editora Erca, 1988), 92.

¹¹ Philipson, David. *The Reform Movement in Judaism* (London: Macmillan, 1907), 21.

towards rationality and universalism, and an effort to abandon practices and values that were seen as incongruous with the modern world. Under the influence of the intellectual Israel Jacobson, a greater emphasis on education was promoted in Jewish communities. Children were taught to pray in both Hebrew and the vernacular language, and songs and addresses were performed in German. Of the small number of institutions created in the 1860's, the one in Seesen Am Harz was the first of its kind, founded by Jacobson himself.¹² It is in the context of this turn towards rationality and secularism that Lewy was educated both academically and religiously. Lewy's early educational experience might have factored in his lax approach to Jewish religious customs and practices later in life.

After graduating, Walter Lewy was apprenticed as an industrial plumber. Worried about the young man's professional future, his parents insisted he learn a craft, despite his enduring aspirations to become an artist.¹³ Dortmund has been historically associated with a thriving industrial economy, especially heavy industry, so that it would not have been hard for Lewy to find educational and employment opportunities as a blue collar worker.

Lewy's formal education as an artist started in 1923, when he was admitted to the *Handwerk und Kunstgewerbeschule* (School of Arts and Crafts) in Dortmund.¹⁴ The school's curriculum and philosophy were in many ways similar to those of the Bauhaus, affording Lewy the opportunity to study drawing, painting and graphic design. At the time Lewy was enrolled, the curriculum included ornamental design, observational drawing, typography and art history.¹⁵ Pervasive throughout the curriculum was a

¹² Ibid, 19.

¹³ Lewy, *Depoimentos*, 92.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Dieter Hilbig, *100 Jahre Architektur und Designausbildung in Dortmund 1904 bis 2004* (Dortmund: Fachhochschule Dortmund, 2005), 25.

particular emphasis on drawing from models and botanic life. According to a contemporary report card, there were 16 weekly hours dedicated to drawing three-dimensional objects in a semester, and 8 hours dedicated exclusively to drawing plants.¹⁶ Further evidence of the emphasis on plants as a didactic tool emerges from the testimonial of a fellow student, Erich Palmowski, who frequented the School of Arts and Crafts of Dortmund at the same time as Lewy. Palmowski described in particular one classroom exercise that was heavily based on plant anatomy:

In my second semester, we were shown cross sections of plants, shapes as seen through the microscope. The pattern went from table to table and now each student needed to make something unique out of it. That produced very beautiful things. Interesting things.¹⁷

This emphasis on botanical studies seems even more relevant when one takes Walter Lewy's personal interest in plants into consideration. Lewy admitted that he collected exotic plants as a hobby since he was a child.¹⁸ As an adult, he would keep a greenhouse in his residence, in which he cultivated numerous plants that he used as models in his Surrealist compositions.¹⁹

The extant work of fellow art student Erich Palmowski offers more insight into what kind of influences Walter Lewy may have experienced during his artistic education. Palmowski's only surviving artwork is a woodcut print titled *Volk und Zeit* (Fig. 1), which was designed for the cover of *Vorwärts*, the newspaper of the Weimar Republic's Socialist Party. The woodcut hints at Germany's animated political climate during the early 1920's.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid, 23.

¹⁸ Walter Lewy, *35 Anos De Pintura No Brasil: Editado por Ocasão da Mostra Realizada no MAM*. exh. cat. (São Paulo: Museu De Arte Moderna, 1974), 14.

¹⁹ Walter Lewy, "Surrealista é a Vida," magazine interview by Carlos Roque, *Revista Interview*, no. 111, São Paulo, August 1988, 83.

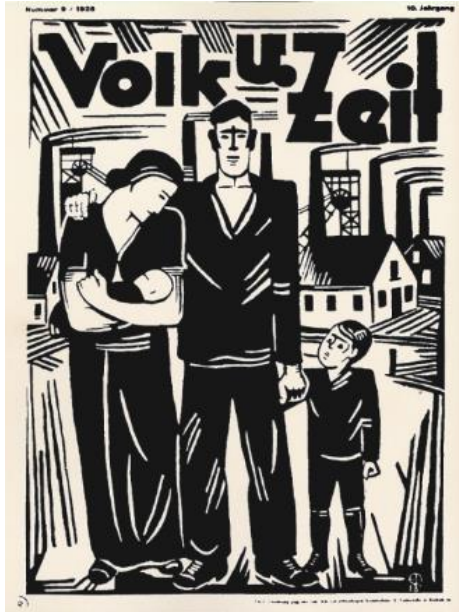


Figure 1 Erich Palmowski, *Volk und Zeit* (cover for the newspaper *Vorwärts*), woodcut, 1928.

With the German defeat at the end of the First World War in 1918, the country's future, economically and otherwise, looked dim. The Weimar Republic's economy – especially in the Ruhr valley – was driven by heavy industry, but poverty and unemployment were constant facts of life. The perceived indifference of the middle-class to the plight of the lower classes, however, spurred a reaction by artists such as George Grosz, a main proponent of the *Neue Sachlichkeit* (New Objectivity). Abandoning the introspective qualities proposed by the Expressionist movement, Grosz hoped for a new era of matter-of-factness and rationality. Extensive use of social commentary and satire enabled the *Neue Sachlichkeit* to bring the political debate once again into the field of art.²⁰

Walter Lewy was an enthusiastic admirer of Grosz and the *Neue Sachlichkeit* in his youth. In an interview, he affirmed that Grosz served as inspiration because his “combative, scathing nature” aimed at criticizing the “stupidity of the German bourgeois

²⁰ Dennis Crockett. *German Post-Expressionism: The Art of the Great Disorder 1918 – 1924* (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University, 1999), 2.

of the time.”²¹ Lewy’s education coincided with a transitional phase between German Expressionism and the New Objectivity, which was embraced by Lewy’s fellow art students in Dortmund. While all works from his time as an art student were lost, his colleague’s art assignments are descriptive of these tendencies.

Erich Palmowski’s choice of woodcut as a medium could be interpreted as a reminder of the Expressionist ideal of rustic simplicity present in the works of Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Ernst Barlach or Käthe Kollwitz. The subject matter, however, distances itself from the introspective images by Kirchner and the others in that it depicts working class individuals. In an interview, Walter Lewy mentioned that his first painting, long lost, was called *The Hunger*, and that it featured an elderly couple seated at a table, staring at an empty plate. The theme clearly expressed his concern with the drama of poverty and sympathy for the struggles of the working class.

Walter Lewy finished his education in 1927.²² At the time of completion of his coursework, the school had just been given authority to confer official degrees that were recognized by the state board. It is rather unclear what kind of qualification the school offered before the curriculum was accredited by the government. It is also unclear whether Lewy actually received the state recognized degree after the end of his four year education. In 1928, Lewy spent the summer in Vienna, and subsequently travelled through Austria.²³ Upon his return to Dortmund, he found work as a graphic artist, and was registered in the city archives as “dissident” for abandoning his religion and living away from his parents.²⁴

²¹ Walter Lewy, “Walter Lewy O Pintor Da Vegetação Humana,” 32.

²² Claude Martin-Vaskou, *Biografia Completa de Walter Lewy*, unpublished biographical research, March 2010. Private archives, São Paulo.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

The period working as a graphic designer was short but significant in Lewy's life. In a newspaper interview, Lewy commented on the influence of his surroundings on the aesthetics and the subject matter of his art. In his job as a commercial artist in an advertisement agency, he created posters and graphic material for a range of clients, including the iron and steel production industry. As a consequence, both the graphic aspect of advertisement and machine aesthetics appeared as subject matter in his paintings of the time.²⁵ He argued that this combination was not unique to his art particularly, but was a "reflection of what everyone was living through at the time."²⁶ Also in 1928, he joined the *Westphälische Künstlervereinigung* (Union of the Painters of Westphalia), and through it he participated in his first collective exhibitions in cities across the Ruhr Valley, such as Bochum and Gelsenkirchen, in the vicinity of Essen.²⁷

His career as a commercial artist in Dortmund would soon come to an end however, as the stock market crash of 1929 affected businesses all over Europe. Lewy lost his job that year and moved back with his parents, who had relocated to Lippspringe, a smaller town to the east of Dortmund.²⁸ There, he found work as a caricaturist for a newspaper, while picking up freelance work and painting on weekends.²⁹

The only surviving work from this period is a sketch from 1931 (Fig. 2). Among the few works Lewy was able to bring to Brazil in his suitcase, this study of cactuses in ink on paper reveals his fine technical skill. The subject matter also documents Lewy's hobby, collecting succulent plants rarely seen in Germany.

²⁵ Walter Lewy, "A inesgotável pintura Surrealista," newspaper interview by Miguel de Almeida, *Folha de São Paulo*, May 04, 1981, 19.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Lewy, "O Pintor da Vegetação Humana," 32.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.



Figure 2 Walter Lewy, *Cactuses*, ink on paper, 1931.

In the early 1930's Lewy's first solo exhibition featured his artworks in a small window space made available by a bank in Bad Lippspringe. One drawing, entitled *Drunk Workers*, depicted two inebriated figures having a fight, which attracted the attention of activists of the Nazi party. The work was seized and the exhibition closed on the grounds that his picture "blemished the image of the German worker."³⁰

Walter Lewy's account of the event places the exhibition in 1932. In multiple sources, the artist affirms that *Drunk Workers* was seized for being considered controversial and the exhibition was closed by authorities with Nazi sympathies. While it is possible that the event took place in 1932, it is useful to clarify that the *Machtergreifung*, the Nazi seizure of power, only happened in 1933. Legal grounds to close Lewy's exhibition before this date would have been thin. The reason for this discrepancy is unclear. Perhaps Lewy – already elderly when many of these interviews

³⁰ Lewy, "A inesgotável pintura Surrealista," 19.
Ibid.

took place – mistakenly referred to these events as taking place earlier than they occurred. Most likely, the exhibition was closed by local political figures with Nazi sympathies at their own initiative and without legal backing. At the time, Bad Lippspringe was home to only a few Jewish families. Lewy shared that because their religious and ethnic background stood out in the small town, he and his parents were at times harassed in the streets.³¹ These conflicts were undoubtedly motivated by growing anti-Semitic sentiments in Germany in the early 1930's.

Lewy later commented that the drawing was not intended as an attack, but as “an innocent joke.”³² While it is impossible to analyze the untraced drawing, the socialist views prevalent in the artist's social milieu and his admiration for George Grosz both hint at the possibility of an underlying left-wing commentary implied by *Drunk Workers*. Lewy's intentions were, however, secondary in the whole affair. It is clear that he was persecuted for his Jewish ancestry at a time when the German government attempted to eliminate Jewish culture from all aspects of public life. Moreover, censorship enforced by the military dictatorship in Brazil (1964 – 1985) at the time of the interview, might have induced Lewy to understate his youthful revolt against the establishment.

With the rise of the Nazi party to power in 1933, its ideology became prevalent in the artistic life in Germany. Strong discriminatory policies enforced by Adolf Hitler and his party were meant to suppress Jewish public life in Germany. The creation of the *Reichskulturkammer* (Chamber of Culture) in 1933 was especially relevant for the arts. The goal of the Chamber was to regulate artistic production in order to diminish any “non-Aryan” influence in the German society of the Third Reich.³³ To become a member

³¹ Lewy, “O Pintor da Vegetação Humana,” 32.

³² Lewy, “A inesgotável pintura Surrealista,” 19.

³³ Eric Michaud, *The Cult of Art in Nazi Germany*, trans. by Janet Lloyd, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004), 93.

of the Chamber, artists would need to present documents with proof of their Aryan racial origins. It was automatically illegal to all non-Aryans to participate in public life, and that included art exhibitions.³⁴ The measure rendered making a living from painting an impossible task for artists of Jewish descent, such as Lewy.

The government increased the pressure to force Jews to leave Germany voluntarily. Shortly after the first measures in 1933, Jewish citizens were treated akin to illegal residents in their own country. Lewy's only alternative as a young artist was to flee. In 1935, he moved to Rotterdam in the Netherlands, where he stayed with relatives.³⁵ The political tension in Europe, however, meant that Rotterdam could provide but temporary security. In an interview Lewy described his anxiety as he realized that leaving the continent was the only way to ensure his safety. The artist faced challenging bureaucratic hurdles on his way to safety, as South Africa and Brazil seemed to be the only two countries that would issue more permanent visas and were far away enough from the conflict to provide peace of mind.³⁶ Finally, on December 31st, 1936, following the example of a relative, Lewy embarked on a ship bound overseas. Carrying only two suitcases, he left behind his home country, to which he would only come back decades later, and his parents, whom he would never see again. They were detained and killed in the Auschwitz concentration camp a few years after his departure.³⁷

At this point Lewy perhaps did not know much about the place he was bound to spend most of his life. At the time he arrived, Brazil was in itself immersed in political turmoil. Under the dictatorship of Getúlio Vargas, the country had its own share of

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Knippschild, *Findings concerning Walter Lewy*.

³⁶ Lewy, "Surrealista é a Vida," 83.

³⁷ Knippschild, *Findings concerning Walter Lewy*.

ideological radicalism and nationalistic propaganda, ruled by a dictator who created a personality cult.

Vargas enjoyed the support of the military to depose elected president Washington Luis, associated with the organized oligarchy that had traditionally controlled the country. Accusations of corruption in a government dependent on a few wealthy families justified the *coup*. Once Vargas assumed the office as the new leader of the country, he ruled with a mix populist rhetoric and dictatorial absolutism. Proposing a complete reform of the economic and political system, Vargas drafted a new constitution in 1934 that would give him power to rule for an extended period of time.³⁸

The new constitution contained the first legislation drafted to tighten control of Brazilian borders. The restrictions became much more pronounced and were clearly an effort to maintain the “ethnic integrity” of the Brazilian population, with a special focus on curtailing Jewish immigration.³⁹ One of such restrictions was, for example, the limitation of immigrants of certain backgrounds. In most cases, the number of immigrants in a given year could not be greater than two percent of the number of current residents of the same ethnicity already established in Brazil.⁴⁰ The anti-Semitic measures, fairly common place in many parts of the world then, proved to be inspired by values not too dissimilar to those of the Third Reich. In an interview, Lewy made a snide comment, saying he was “surprised that the Nazi sympathizers of São Paulo could be as intense as the ones in Germany.”⁴¹

³⁸ Robert Levine, *The Vargas Regime: The critical years, 1934-1938* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1970), 67.

³⁹ Maria Luiza Tucci Carineiro, *Brasil, Um Refúgio nos Trópicos: A trajetória dos Refugiados do Nazi-Facismo* (São Paulo: Editora Estação Liberdade, 1996), 21.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Lewy, “O Pintor da Vegetação Humana,” 32.

Life in Brazil was, nevertheless, undoubtedly easier for individuals of Jewish descent than the alternative in Germany. It is possible that Lewy was allowed to stay in the country on the grounds that his cousin had already taken residence in Rio de Janeiro, as the government issued visas as long as a third degree relative was already a permanent resident.⁴² After months of travel by ship, Lewy arrived in Rio de Janeiro in the spring of 1937. His first impressions of the country foretold some of the subjects that would later appear in his canvases:

When I arrived in Rio de Janeiro, I was struck by the vegetation, the culture, and the customs. I was fascinated by the physical beauty of black men and women. In São Paulo, the next thing that struck me was the palm trees planted in the *Anhangabaú* valley downtown, in front of the Martinelli building, the only sky scraper in the city. I had never seen palm trees before, and was fascinated by that kind of plant with an erect trunk and leaves blowing in the wind as if it had a head of hair.⁴³

⁴² Alice Irene Hirschberg, *Desafio E Resposta: A História Da Congregação Israelita Paulista* (São Paulo: Biblioteca do Arquivo Histórico Judaico Brasileiro - Edição Especial Em Ocasião Do Quadrigenário Da Congregação Israelita Paulista, 1976), 201.

⁴³ Lewy, "O Pintor da Vegetação Humana," 32.

Chapter 2

Walter Lewy described his first two years in Brazil as an adaptation period.⁴⁴ The combination of the tragedy of forced exile with the challenges of the culture shock and the language barrier halted Lewy's artistic production.⁴⁵ Settling in the city of São Paulo, in the southeastern region of the country, Lewy was still able to use his artistic skills towards earning his living. He worked as a graphic designer for Lintas, an advertising agency created by the Lever Brothers Industries. Starting in 1938, Lewy spent six years in the company drawing and designing advertising in print.⁴⁶

Unilever was one of the first multinational enterprises of the twentieth century. Pioneer in foreign investment, it founded branches in all regions of the world, including Australia, Africa, Asia and South America.⁴⁷ Its international model also brought the concept of the in-house advertisement agency, created with the intention to publicize the products manufactured by the corporation. In the Brazilian branch, the advertisements also aimed to acquaint the consumer with the advantages of newly introduced, industrially produced goods. By associating hygiene products with international film stars, for example, Unilever hoped to make their products attractive to new buyers.⁴⁸

Figure drawing and hand-made figure composition were an important part of the graphic designer's skill set at the time, as photography still played a minor role in newspaper advertising.

⁴⁴ Lewy, "Surrealista é a Vida," 83.

⁴⁵ Lewy, "A inesgotável pintura Surrealista," 19.

⁴⁶ Lewy, "O Pintor da Vegetação Humana," 32.

⁴⁷ David Kenneth Fieldhouse, *Unilever Overseas* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 1978), 9.

⁴⁸ Renato Castelo Branco, Rodolfo Lima Martensen and Fernando Reis, *História da Propaganda no Brasil* (São Paulo : T.A. Queiroz Editor, 1990), 324.



Figure 3 Anon. Newspaper Advertisement for Sabonetes Lever, *Folha da Manhã* (São Paulo, April 18, 1943), page 9.

A Lintas newspaper ad from the time Lewy worked in the agency (Fig. 3), illustrates this point. The hand drawn figures, ornaments, lettering and composition all require graphic design skills that Lewy had practiced in his professional past.

Walter Lewy's work in advertising did not afford him a comfortable living. Despite the financial struggle as a young immigrant artist in Brazil, however, his circumstances did not diminish his drive to become a full-time artist. Lewy started painting again in 1939, experimenting for the first time with Surrealist iconography. In order to advance his career, he joined the *Sindicato dos Artistas Plásticos de São Paulo* (Fine Artist's Union of São Paulo), participating for the first time in a collective exhibition on 1941.⁴⁹ Unfortunately, there are no surviving records of the paintings he exhibited on this occasion. At this time, Lewy also sought the company of fellow artists, and acquainted himself with other painters in the city, making connections within one of the most influential artistic networks of São Paulo in the first half of the twentieth century: The *Grupo Santa Helena*.

⁴⁹ Lizbeth Rebolo Gonçalves, *Walter Lewy: 35 Anos de Pintura no Brasil*, exh. cat. (São Paulo: Museu de Arte Moderna, 1974), 14.

In 1922, a watershed moment occurred in the cultural scene of the City of São Paulo. The *Semana de Arte Moderna* (Modern Art Week) was an initiative launched by young painters, writers and musicians to introduce modernism to the public in Brazil. Inspired by the achievements of avant-garde movements in Europe, the event comprised at the time controversial art and literature that did not conform to the conventional rules and structures followed by traditional institutions.⁵⁰ By the end of the 1930's modern art had found a secure foothold in select circles and galleries. The art market, on the other hand, was still largely reliant on academic art, which made financial prospects rather grim for modernists.⁵¹ In need of a studio space but with little financial means, Brazilian artists Francisco Rebolo, Mário Zanini, Alfredo Volpi, Clóvis Graciano and Aldo Bonadei shared the costs of renting a space in the *Santa Helena* office building in downtown São Paulo.⁵² The *Grupo Santa Helena's* atelier became the meeting place for young artists. Frequented by a number of painters and sculptors, artists exchanged ideas about painting and modernism and organized exhibitions through their relationship with the Fine Artists' Union.⁵³

Walter Lewy's connection to the group granted him access to the artistic scene of São Paulo. Within the group, Lewy was able to identify with other young artists, because they went through similar struggles. All of the group members aspired to be able to dedicate themselves entirely to their art, but at that moment, everyone, including Lewy, needed to keep jobs that were only partially related to their vocation. They were interior decorators, wall painters and carpenters, while Lewy was a graphic designer.⁵⁴ Moreover,

⁵⁰ Mário da Silva Britto, *História do Modernismo Brasileiro* (Rio de Janeiro: Editora Civilização Brasileira, 1964), 83.

⁵¹ Walter Zanini, *Arte no Brasil na Décadas de 1930 e 40: O Grupo Santa Helena*, (São Paulo: Nobel/Edusp, 1991), 28.

⁵² *Ibid*, 100.

⁵³ *Ibid*, 43.

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, 99.

many were able to sympathize with Lewy's status as an outsider, since they originated themselves from Italian immigrant families.⁵⁵

The most notable work Lewy produced while in this milieu is the limited edition portfolio of lithographs entitled *Sete Artistas Brasileiros* (Seven Brazilian Artists).⁵⁶ The publication contained a collection of prints by Aldo Bonadei, Livio Abramo, Manoel Martins, Oswald de Andrade Filho, Clóvis Graciano and Walter Lewy himself. The volume's original run was limited to four hundred copies. One of Lewy's lithographs (Fig. 4) reveals the artist's abilities as a draftsman.

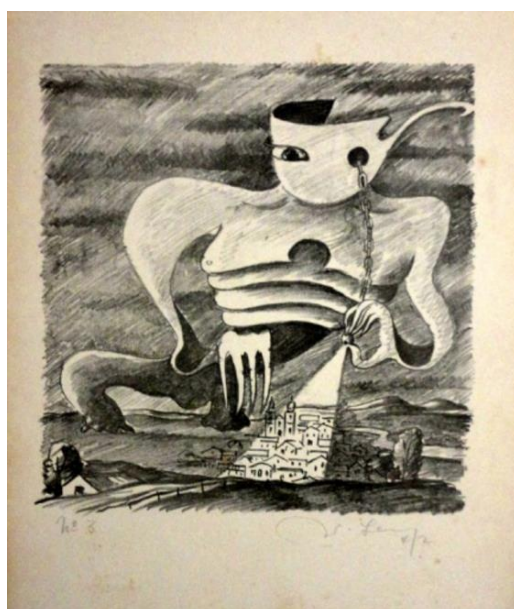


Figure 4 Walter Lewy. *Untitled (Asmodi)*, from the limited-edition portfolio “*Sete Artistas Brasileiros*” (São Paulo, 1942)

The mystical iconography depicts a character from of Jewish lore. *Asmodi* is the German variation of the name “Asmodeus,” a powerful demon first mentioned in the Book of Tobit, an apocryphal tome in both Jewish and Christian canon.⁵⁷ With a distorted body,

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Walter Lewy et. al. *Sete Artistas Brasileiros* (São Paulo: Sindicato dos Artistas Plásticos de São Paulo, 1942).

⁵⁷ Maximilian J Rudwin, *The Devil in Legend and Literature* (Chicago and London: The Open Court Publishing Company, 1931), 128.

Lewy's bizarre creature floats at night over a small town with Brazilian colonial architectural features, its left eye unplugged to shed light on the settlement. The contrast between the quiet Brazilian city and the menacing figure creates the visual tension of Lewy's print. Possibly conceived as a way to come to terms with his own trauma, this early print is reminiscent of Symbolist compositions of the likes of Odilon Redon.

Sete Artistas Brasileiros was the beginning of Walter Lewy's printmaking career. The portfolio certainly helped to make Lewy's name better known in critical circles. His next major project was a set of illustrations for the anthology *Oh, Valsa Latejante... (Oh, Throbbing Waltz)* (Fig. 4). The illustrations provided Walter Lewy with an opportunity to reach out to a wider public. Published in 1943, the volume is a collection of poems edited by Brazilian writer and art critic Sérgio Milliet.⁵⁸

Educated at the University of Bern in Switzerland, Milliet was one of the driving forces behind the Modernist movement in São Paulo. Well connected internationally, he translated modernist literature from French to Portuguese, and assisted with the organization of the Modern Art Week in 1922.⁵⁹ Milliet was best known, however, for his art criticism. In writing, he attempted to conciliate the emergence of modernism in Europe with the local art scene in Brazil, advocating for the potential of São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro to become major modern cultural hubs in their own right.⁶⁰ Milliet was also a socialist sympathizer and throughout his life was engaged in a number left-leaning political ventures.⁶¹

The issues of race and class that were addressed in *Oh Valsa Latejante...* were a pervasive theme through almost all modernist work in Brazil. Sympathy for the

⁵⁸ Sérgio Milliet, *Poemas: Oh, Valsa Latejante...1922- 1943* (São Paulo: Edições Gaveta, 1943).

⁵⁹ Lisbeth Rebolon Gonçalves, *Sérgio Milliet: Crítico de Arte*, (São Paulo: Perspectiva, 1992), 132.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid, 86.

underprivileged and the desire for social change underlie the works of leading modernist painters and writers, such as Tarsila do Amaral, Mário de Andrade and Menotti del Picchia.



Figure 4 Walter Lewy, *Cover for 'Oh Valsa Latejante...'* woodcut, 1943.

Their interest in foregrounding the plight of lower-class individuals is echoed in Lewy's illustration, in which he often rendered dark-skinned figures with African features. Lewy's choice of medium and subject matter, however, also harken back to his student days, when the Expressionists revived the woodblock technique because it was perceived as simple and rustic. One could indeed compare Erich Palmowski's woodcut from 1928 (Fig. 1) and Lewy's illustration for the Milliet publication of 1943 (Fig. 4) in order to discover numerous formal qualities they shared: the stark contrast, the structured surfaces, and the undulating lines, among others.

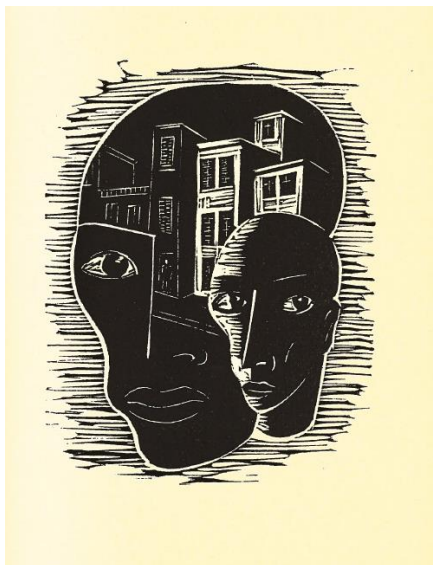


Figure 4 Walter Lewy, *Illustration for Poemas da Rua (Street Poems)* in *Oh Valsa Latejante...*, woodcut, 1943.

Not only do both artists use the same the woodcut printmaking technique and aesthetics, but they also share a similar preoccupation with social issues. Lewy's woodcut could be read as an application of the German Expressionist print tradition and the Weimar Republic's visual polemics to the context of Brazil.

Walter Lewy achievements as a printmaker and graphic designer are a significant part of his oeuvre. However, he considered painting to be his principal medium. In 1939, his return to the canvas was marked by the introduction of Surrealist themes to his art, a conceptual frame of reference to which he would subscribe for the rest of his life. One could argue that, at least initially, the depiction of the Surreal and exotic came to Lewy as a way to cope with exile, and to express his fascination with the strangeness of his new home. In a later interview, the artists describes the moment when he returned to painting:

In reality I was not settled yet, I needed to get to know Brazil better. Because as soon as I stepped here I became Brazilian, forgot Germany, which had ceased to exist. About this time I got to know everything about Magritte, Max Ernst and decided to start painting again. At this moment I had already subscribed to Surrealism, because it was the movement that expressed the subconscious directly: the other side of people.⁶²

⁶² Lewy, "A inesgotável pintura Surrealista," 19.

The first canvases he showed publicly in this new country of choice date to the end of the 1940's. Notably, Lewy's name appeared in the newspapers for the first time in 1948, in a small advertisement for a joint exhibition with Italian immigrant artist Bassano Vaccarini.⁶³ The exhibition was reviewed by Sérgio Milliet, Lewy's former patron, who, in his art criticism journal, called Lewy "cerebral, not very imaginative, but a good craftsman, and a convincing draftsman."⁶⁴ Milliet goes on to say that he much preferred Lewy's prints to his paintings.

Lewy's paintings from this time mark a period of experimentation. One of Lewy's earliest extant paintings is a composition from 1947 (Fig. 5) that exemplifies this transition. It depicts a female torso covered with spider-like eyes. The creatures seem to crawl up the nude's legs towards her the dark-skinned torso, which is partially cropped.



Figure 5 Walter Lewy, *Untitled*, 1947, oil on canvas. Private collection

The torso ambiguously blends in with the landscape, as the curving lines of its body mirror the geological formation of the landscape in the distance. The ambiguous spatial

⁶³ Anon., "Exposição Lewy – Vaccarini," newspaper advertisement, *O Estado de São Paulo*, São Paulo, February 27, 1948, 8.

⁶⁴ Sérgio Milliet, *Diário Crítico*, 8 vols. (São Paulo: Arquivo Historico Do Departamento De Cultura, 1950), 6:60.

aspect of the composition and its erotically suggestive forms would evolve to become hallmarks of Lewy's paintings.

The vast panorama with distant cliffs in the background is reminiscent of compositions by celebrated Surrealist artists, such as Salvador Dali and Yves Tanguy. Even the color scheme of ochres and blues could be compared to one of Dali's masterpieces such as *The Persistence of Memory*. Walter Lewy was, at this point in time, attempting to come into his own as a Surrealist painter.

In all of his Surrealist work, Lewy refused to give his canvases a title. He believed that the image should convey the message on its own, and that one should not attempt to use language to explain a painting. For Walter Lewy, labeling a Surrealist painting with words would "impose on the viewer a pre-conceived opinion that might not correspond with what the viewer would feel or imagine on their own."⁶⁵



Figure 6 Walter Lewy, Detail of *Untitled*, 1952, oil on canvas. Private collection.

Lewy would, however, date all his paintings and include a monogram of his initials (Fig. 6) on the bottom of the canvas. Despite the idea that the public must be free to intuitively interpret his work, Lewy was keen on establishing his authorship of each piece. Perhaps because of concerns over forgery, he also often added an impression of his fingerprint to his signature. Through this act, Lewy documents both his profoundly

⁶⁵ Walter Lewy, "Uma convicção no Surrealismo e a confiança nos jovens," magazine article, *Revista Auxiliar*, May/June, 1975, 17.

personal claim to his creativity and his aspiration to style himself as an artistic genius. Asserting thus his authorship at a time when he was still unable to make a living as a painter could be seen as a hopeful gesture, a belief that one day his production would be marketable and proper identification would be necessary.

During the early 1950's, Walter Lewy's iconography became geometrical, at times abstract. Although he still considered himself a Surrealist, his production started to become less figurative and gave way to a greater emphasis on shapes and colors, as seen in this playful abstract composition from 1951 (Fig 7).



Figure 7 Walter Lewy, *Untitled*, 1951, oil on canvas. Private collection.

This period in Lewy's career coincided with a second wave of Modernist accomplishments in Brazil. Rich in architectural innovations inspired by the Bauhaus and the International Style, this moment in history was epitomized by the construction of the new capital of the country, Brasilia, by Lúcio Costa, Roberto Burle-Marx and the internationally famous Oscar Niemeyer.

With the direct election of Juscelino Kubitschek to the presidency in 1956, Brazil enjoyed an optimistic period of prosperity. The idea of progress appeared as the answer to the struggles of the poor, and Kubitschek's government plan dubbed *Cinquenta anos*

em Cinco (Fifty years in Five) proposed to accelerate growth by investing heavily in an industrialized economy. A significant part of the plan revolved around relocating the Brazilian seat of government from the traditional Rio de Janeiro to a new capital, to be built completely from scratch.

In 1957, architects Lúcio Costa and Oscar Niemeyer won the commission for the project with daringly new plans for the city.⁶⁶ Costa served as the main urban planner and Niemeyer designed most of the public buildings. Roberto Burle-Marx also gained prominence as the mastermind behind several landscape designs associated with Brasilia. Clearly influenced by the International Style of Le Corbusier – with whom Niemeyer had studied – the city became a tangible modern manifestation of Brazil's futuristic aspirations.

Walter Lewy was acquainted with these leading figures of his time, particularly with Roberto Burle-Marx. Burle-Marx was born in São Paulo, but his sojourn in Germany as a young man during the late 1920's allowed him to visit European avant-garde exhibitions of Pablo Picasso, Paul Klee and Ludwig Kirchner, artists whose work at the time was inaccessible in Brazil.⁶⁷ Applying the formal liberties of the European avant-garde in the Brazilian context, Burle-Marx contributed to a period of Brazilian art and design when modernism became linked with ideas of national identity. Lewy, besides enjoying a personal friendship with Burle-Marx, produced artwork following a similar formula as the famous landscape architect during this period of his career. Lewy and

⁶⁶ Styliane Philippou, *Oscar Niemeyer: Curves of Irreverence* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2008), 218.

⁶⁷ Lauro Cavalcanti, "Roberto Burle Marx, the Permanence of the Unstable" in *Roberto Burle Marx: The Modernity of Landscape*, eds. Lauro Cavalcanti, Fares El-Dahdah and Francis Rambert. (Paris: Cité de L'architecture et du Patrimoine, Institut Français d'architecture, 2011), 32.

Burle-Marx also shared the love for exotic plants. Burle-Marx became famous for utilizing Brazilian native plants such as bromeliads in his landscape design.⁶⁸

Later in his life, Lewy would acknowledge the influence of the “colorful Brazilian landscape” in his work. According to the artist, his paintings were gradually becoming more and more Brazilian, as he grew more comfortable in his new environment. Lewy could now proudly write that: “Europe is distant from me, I have naturalized myself as a Brazilian citizen, this is where I live, this is where I work. I feel Brazilian. Here I build my art and my family.”⁶⁹

A more problematic connection linked Lewy to Oscar Niemeyer. In a newspaper interview, Lewy recounts the story of a couple of designs he sent to Rio de Janeiro for a juried show in 1953, which, after being refused, were never sent back. Lewy claimed that his motifs (Fig. 8) were plagiarized by Niemeyer – then resident in Rio de Janeiro and part of the jury. He furnished a preparatory drawing to the façade of the most famous building in Brasilia (Fig. 9), designed by the architect, as evidence. According to Lewy, the *Palácio da Alvorada*, the seat of the President of Brazil, is largely based in one of his paintings.⁷⁰



Figure 8 Walter Lewy, *Untitled*, 1953, oil on canvas.

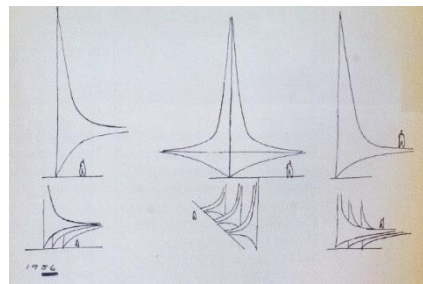


Figure 9 Oscar Niemeyer, *Sketch for the Palacio da Alvorada*, 1957, pencil on paper.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Walter Lewy, *Walter Lewy: 35 Anos de Pintura no Brasil*, exh. cat. (São Paulo: Museu de Arte Moderna, 1974), 29.

⁷⁰ Anon., “Um pintor no Surrealismo diário,” newspaper article, *Folha de São Paulo*, São Paulo, January 04, 1980.

The incident reveals how this new modernist style had become dominant in the Brazilian visual arts of the early 1950's. Moreover, it is interesting to note the environmental influence that the Brazilian art scene exerted on Lewy's work. The artist's acquaintances with well-known painters and architects fostered his involvement with the artistic milieu of the city in general. Lewy started to become fully committed to the advancement of modern art, investing part of his time to help create modern art spaces in Brazil. The artist was one of the founding members of the *Clube de Artistas e Amigos da Arte de São Paulo* (Artists and Art Friends's Club) in 1948.⁷¹ The Club's activities culminated in the creation of the *Museum de Arte Moderna* (Modern Art Museum) in the same year, and the first São Paulo Biennial of 1951, a seminal event that changed the course of modernism in Brazil.⁷²

In an effort to raise the booming industrial city of São Paulo to the status of a cultural capital, the Italian-Brazilian industrialist Francesco Matarazzo and his wife Yolanda Penteado funded the organization of an international visual arts exhibition dedicated to modern art in the early 1950's.⁷³ Owner of the largest corporation in Latin America at the time, Matarazzo inherited a massive industrial conglomerate that comprised many of Brazil's leading businesses at the time, from steel to ports, from wheat to soap.⁷⁴

Matarazzo and Penteado were patrons of modern art and were eager to foster São Paulo's cultural potential, transforming the industrial city in an international cultural hub. Towards that end, they joined forces with Nelson Rockefeller, then director of MoMA in New York City, who endorsed the creation of São Paulo Modern

⁷¹ Martin-Vaskou, *Biografia Completa*.

⁷² Leonor Amarante, *As Bienais De São Paulo: 1951 a 1987* (São Paulo: Editora Projeto, 1989), 13.

⁷³ Lourival Gomes Machado (artistic director in the first *São Paulo Biennial*), introduction to *I Bienal de São Paulo* – October 1951, exh. cat. (São Paulo: Museu de Arte Moderna, 1951), 21.

⁷⁴ Ronaldo Costa Couto, *Matarazzo: Colosso Brasileiro* (São Paulo: Planeta, 2004), 17.

Art Museum (known as MAM: *Museu de Arte Moderna*) as the “honorary tropical wing” of MoMA.⁷⁵

In 1951, the idea to create the Biennial came to fruition. Largely modeled after the Venice Biennale – to which Matarazzo had been an envoy in the Brazilian delegation – the São Paulo version called for artists all over the world to send their works to Brazil, competing for a grand prize.⁷⁶ The socialite Yolanda Penteado used her personal connections in the European artistic scene to convince artists to participate.⁷⁷ The *Bienal de São Paulo* quickly became a major venue for the promotion of avant-garde aesthetics in South America. Already in the first edition, the exhibition roster contained names such as Pablo Picasso, Alberto Giacometti, Fernand Léger, Max Ernst, André Masson and Yves Tanguy.⁷⁸



Figure 10 Walter Lewy, *Untitled*, gouache on paper, 1951.

Walter Lewy was included with an untitled composition in gouache on paper (Fig. 10) and two other works which had passed the jury’s muster.⁷⁹ The painter, then aged forty-six, reached a milestone in his career. Shown side-by-side with many of the leading artists of the art world, Lewy’s work also shared the same venue with two of the

⁷⁵ Amarante, *As Bienais De São Paulo*, 14.

⁷⁶ *Ibid*, 12.

⁷⁷ *Ibid*, 14.

⁷⁸ Anon., *I Bienal de Arte de São Paulo – October 1951*, exh. cat. (São Paulo: Museu de Arte Moderna, 1951).

⁷⁹ *Ibid*, 47.

most admired artists who influenced his style and subject matter: George Grosz and René Magritte.⁸⁰

Despite controversial reviews, the exhibition was a success.⁸¹ Never before did the Brazilian public have so easy an access to as many great names of international art. The first edition of the Biennial also marked the establishment of São Paulo as a cultural interchange. The growing metropolis attracted a considerable number of practicing modern artists, turning it into a touchstone of modernism in Brazil. The continuous São Paulo Biennial exhibitions helped entrench this tradition.

Besides being included in the first São Paulo Biennial of 1951, Walter Lewy's work was featured again in São Paulo Biennials over subsequent years. His work featured in the second edition of the show in 1953, and in the third, taking place in 1955. In the fourth edition of the Biennial, a reformed jury famously refused Lewy along with a number of famous Brazilian artists. The incident generated public outcry.⁸² He was admitted again on the sixth edition, in 1961, and included in the eighth edition in 1965. In recognition of his contributions and his participation, he prominently featured in a special room in the tenth edition of the Biennial, in 1969. Likely due to political reasons – which will be explored further in this thesis – 1969 marked the last time Lewy's work featured in the São Paulo Biennial. Nevertheless, the prominence of the exhibition played a key role in continually increasing Lewy's popularity during the 1950's and the 1960's.

After being admitted to the first Biennial, Walter Lewy's reputation was definitely enhanced. While Lewy enjoyed recognition as a participating artist, he was still unable to

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ The exhibition took place in a time when art critics still debated the validity of abstract and conceptual art. Many were accepting of modernism, but others still condemned avant-garde art as nonsensical or lazy. For examples of these reactions, see: Amarante, *As Bienais De São Paulo*, 17.

⁸² Amarante, *As Bienais de São Paulo*, 34.

live solely from his paintings. Yet, the growing fame provided him with more opportunities in his career as a graphic artist. At this time, Lewy was able to start a partnership with the *Editora Civilização Brasileira* publishing house, for which he worked as an illustrator for many of its publications over the years.⁸³

In 1956, Lewy illustrated the first Brazilian edition of *Metamorphosis*, by Franz Kafka. Translated into Portuguese by Brenno Silveira, the luxury edition featured large format (13,5 x 9,5 inches), and was printed in only one thousand copies, marketed to collectors and specialized libraries.⁸⁴ Lewy's book cover (Fig. 11) echoes the somber literary content.

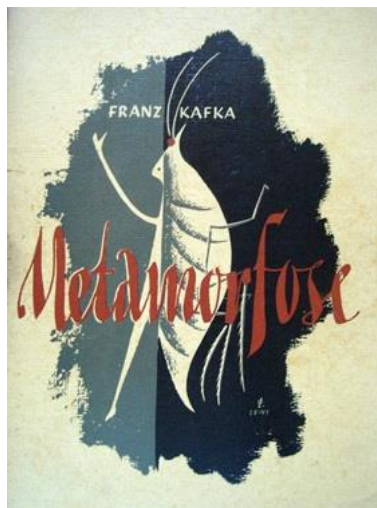


Figure 11 Walter Lewy, *Metamorphose* book cover, lithograph, (São Paulo: Editora Civilização Brasileira, 1956).

Inside the book, Lewy further documented his skills at inserting graphics within the text. His attention to detail and his innovative spirit are most palpable in the designs for the chapter numbers (Fig. 12). The series parallels the bizarre metamorphosis undergone by Gregor Samsa, the main character of the book, who, without explanation, wakes up transformed in a giant insect.

⁸³ Walter Lewy, *Depoimentos*, 93.

⁸⁴ Denise Bottmann, "Kafka no Brasil: 1946-197," *Revista da Universidade de São Paulo*, vol. 24 (2014), 223.



Figure 12 Walter Lewy, Chapter Number illustrations for *Metamorphosis*, by Franz Kafka, lithograph, 1956.

After *Metamorphosis*, Lewy would go on to illustrate a number of titles for the same publisher, becoming a fixture in the Brazilian publishing market throughout the fifties and sixties. Among the notable names of literature to whom Lewy lent his artistic skills were the Brazilian novelist Machado de Assis, the Jewish-American writer Sholem Asch and works by the British historian Arnold J. Toynbee.⁸⁵

Lewy's employer and owner of the publishing house was Ênio Silveira. A wealthy socialist sympathizer with an aggressive and successful business model, Silveira is today remembered for his commitment to publishing controversial books and wrestling the government for the rights of a free press, even under the harsh dictatorship that was about to take control of the country.⁸⁶ Lewy's association with this literary figure is not surprising considering the aesthetics and themes he engaged in his previous work. Through the 1950's and the first half of the 1960's, Lewy would continue to produce graphic work that addressed social issues, until the *coup d'état* of 1964 made defying the *status quo* simply too risky.

⁸⁵ Lewy, "Surrealista é a Vida," 83.

⁸⁶ Jerusa Pires Ferreira, *Editando o Editor: Ênio Silveira* (São Paulo: Editora da Universidade de São Paulo, 1992), 59.

Chapter 3

In 1961, Walter Lewy illustrated the *Brasilianisches Tagebuch* (Brazilian Journal), a collection of German poems related to Brazil which resonated with the artist's political views. In this small volume, the German writer Benno Alfred Aust explored the experience of living in São Paulo as a poor immigrant. Addressed to fellow German speaking expatriates, he wrote the poems in a style reminiscent of Bertolt Brecht, but never missed an opportunity to refer to local landmarks and observations of injustice relevant to the Brazilian experience.⁸⁷ In the poem *Ich wohne im Bairro* (I live in the neighborhood), he describes the struggles of working class men and women who rely on public transportation to go to work in the city, engaging in the process issues of race and class:⁸⁸

*Dann wäre er ja in Nichts
das etwas Bessere
Für das er sich doch eben hält
In weitem Abstand zu mir
Un den farbigen Arbeitern:
Den vom Hell zum Tiefdunkel
Getönten und gekräuselten
Weiblichen wie männlichen
Arbeitern und Büroangestellten
Mit denen ich für 50 Centavos
am Morgen*

*In that case he would not
Be something better than that
For which he has just taken
himself
Keeping a far distance from me
And the workers of color:
Those from light to deep dark
Tanned and curled hair
Female as well as male
Workers and clerks
With whom I share for 50
centavos
in the morning*

⁸⁷ Benno Alfred Aust, *Brasilianisches Tagebuch: Eintragungen in freien und gebundenen Versen aus den Jahren 1951 – 1960*, translated by Darius A. Spieth, in collaboration with the author (São Paulo: Livraria Kosmos Editora, 1961).

⁸⁸ Ibid, 13.

*Im Bond, nein
Meist auf dem Aussenbrett
Und oft (wie ich schon sagte!)
Hängend am Bond
Zur Stadt und zur Arbeit fahre.*

*In the tram, no
Most of the times on the outside
board of the tram
And often (As I said before!)
Holding on outside the tram,
Going to the city to work.*

Also a Jewish immigrant, Aust used poetic language to empathize with lower-class workers. He sees himself in the same light as average Brazilian citizens who suffer through poverty in the big city. Many of these workers were migrants as well, coming to large cities from rural areas in the North of the country to find work. The poems utilize metaphors, such as the public transportation system, to criticize the unfair social divide, shedding light on the otherwise invisible Brazilian working class.

Walter Lewy's illustrations in the *Brasilianisches Tagebuch* are in tune with the author's motivation to discuss the social dilemmas of the country. In an illustration for the *Brazilian Diary*, schematic figures placed in a landscape represent individuals of a lower social standing going about their daily chores outside a simple hut (Fig. 13).



Figure 13 Walter Lewy, *Illustration for Vor der Hütte des Caboclo in Brasilianisches Tagebuch*, linocut, 1961.

Poet and artist engage the political debate with a clear agenda. Lewy's ideals in particular seem consistent throughout his career, whether in the context of his art education, his role models or the people with whom he worked. The tide of Brazilian politics would soon turn, however, and raising social questions would become increasingly dangerous.

In 1960, left-wing candidate Jânio Quadros was elected President of Brazil. His sympathies with Russia, China and Cuba, however, amidst the tensions of the Cold War, caused the opposition to take action, eventually coercing Quadros to resign. His successor announced, in 1964, a series of social reforms that included government confiscation of private land. These policies created political unrest, which led the military to mobilize and take control of the government by force. An oppressive military dictatorship ruled Brazil from 1964 to 1985. Censorship of media and strict press regulations were a fact of daily life, and open criticism to the government was illegal. The threat of Communism was used as an excuse to justify the radical actions of the dictatorship, leading from the *coup* to the violence, persecution and torture of those who opposed it.

The vast majority of the primary sources available on Walter Lewy date from this period. Since social commentary in art and in writing was extremely risky, it seems likely that artists such as Lewy chose to excuse themselves from making political statements that could be interpreted as inflammatory. It is, however, precisely during this period that Lewy's fame and artistic recognition peaked.

In December 13, 1968, the regime instated the *Ato Institucional número 5* (Institutional Act number 5), which consisted of a series of amendments to the Brazilian Constitution put in place to ensure the dictatorship would prevail. The dissolution of

Congress, the revoking of political rights of the members of the opposition and heavy press censorship were among its most radical measures.⁸⁹

An iconic newspaper cover foretells the struggle with censorship in the coming decades. On the issue of the day following passage of the Act, a major newspaper of the time, *Jornal do Brasil*, ran the amendment as a main headline. While on the body of the text the news items detailing the act are rather descriptive and seemingly impartial, on the upper left corner of the cover a box stands out. Disguised as a small weather forecast, the cover (Fig 15) featured a cleverly encrypted, prominently displayed message of disapproval that escaped the censors.



Fig 15 Cover for “*Jornal do Brasil*” December 14, 1968. Rio de Janeiro.

The box reads “*Dark weather. Suffocating temperatures. The air is unbreathable. The country is being swept by strong winds. Min 38C in Brasilia, Max 5°C in Laranjeiras.*”⁹⁰ The headline, on the other hand, embraced an objective tone: “Government instates Institutional Act and puts Congress in recess indefinitely.”⁹¹

⁸⁹ President Artur Costa e Silva, “Ato Institucional 5,” *Diário Oficial da União*, year 106, issue 241, Brasília (December 13, 1968), 1.

⁹⁰ Translation note: The word “*Tempo*” in Portuguese could mean both “weather” and “time.” The expression could be interpreted as “dark times.”

⁹¹ *Jornal do Brasil*, cover page, Rio de Janeiro, December 14, 1968.

As art historian Claudia Calirman pointed out, it was the French newspaper *Le Monde* which exposed the political repression of the government to the international art community through the article “Les Dix Commandements de la Censure Militaire,” based on a letter that the newspaper intercepted.⁹² The correspondence was from the President Costa e Silva to the Chief of Police of São Paulo, and it detailed in ten items how press censorship should be administered. The letter affirmed that it was necessary to “respect the regime,” and it strictly forbade the publishing of any text that portrayed the government in any sort of negative light. The press could not acknowledge the censorship measures, which initiated a period where the lack of freedom of speech was the norm in newspapers and magazines, along with their allied broadcast media, fine arts, literature and music.⁹³ The police acted as an enforcer against any form of opposition. Torture was widely used, as the Ato Institucional 5 allowed police to raid homes and arrest citizens without warrants. The new development created a constant air of suspicion and paranoia, as the punishment for disobedience was arbitrary and arrived unannounced. The dictatorship, initially labeled as a transitory government, lasted for 21 years, until 1985, when the first elections with civilian candidates took place. It was in this political context that Walter Lewy transformed into a thriving representative of Brazilian modernism, who had acquired a reputation for his mastery of technique and his fidelity to Surrealism.

Before the *coup*, the iconography in Lewy’s paintings already pointed to a heightened interest in thinking about space in a more three-dimensional fashion. In an untitled composition from 1962 (Fig. 16), the association with a naturalistic setting is

⁹² Anon., “Les Dix Commandements de La Censure Militaire,” *Le Monde*, Paris, January 14, 1969, 5.

⁹³ Claudia Calirman, *Brazilian Art under Dictatorship* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2012), 10.

suggested by the colors in the background. Gradually transitioning from black to orange along the canvas, it reminds us of a hazy sunset.



Figure 16 Walter Lewy, *Untitled*, 1962, oil on canvas.

The undefined shape is more solid than in previous works: the pronounced highlights on the right side of the structure allows us to interpret it, for example, as a mysterious tower in an imaginary landscape. Interestingly, after the dictatorship took over the Brazilian government, Lewy's iconography became more and more figurative. Perhaps in a move to attain more introspection in his art, Lewy started to add objects of his affection to his Surrealist landscapes. Beginning in the late 1960's and through the 1970's, three of his personal passions would heavily influence his iconography: science fiction, exotic plants and sexually suggestive forms.

As previously stated, Walter Lewy admitted he was always fascinated with botany.⁹⁴ During his university years, he often visited a botanical garden in Dortmund in

⁹⁴ Walter Lewy, *35 Anos De Pintura No Brasil*, 6.

the vicinity of campus.⁹⁵ The garden was probably located in the complex that is today known as *Rombergpark*, which housed a major collection of rare plants at the time.⁹⁶ As discussed before, many of his exercises while in art school were based on plant anatomy. As part of his curriculum he took an entire course dedicated only to drawing after plant life. Moreover, Lewy famously collected and cultivated rare plants throughout his life in Brazil. He spent endless hours caring for his collection and kept an outdoor greenhouse in every residence in which he lived.⁹⁷



Figure 17 Walter Lewy, *Untitled*, 1968, oil on canvas.

Another composition from 1968 (Fig. 17) shows how Lewy's applied his knowledge about plant life to his paintings. The iconography departs from previous formal experiments to engage in a clearly figurative style. The leaves of a bizarre organic form are depicted in detail with veins and texture that add to the realistic appearance of the composition. Moreover, the bright circle on the top left corner

⁹⁵ Martin-Vaskou, *Biografia Completa*.

⁹⁶ Hermann Josef Bausch, *75 Jahre Botanischer Garten Rombergpark* (Dortmund: Klartext-Verlag, 2004), 15.

⁹⁷ Heloisa Machado, "A Dirce Real do Surrealista Lewy," newspaper article, *Folha de São Paulo*, São Paulo, October 03, 1974, 14.

resembles a full Moon against the dark sky, an element that completes the illusion that the composition exists as a world in its own. Lewy's painting departs from the idea of ambiguous forms suspended in space, and now turns the shapes into markers of an imaginary but recognizable location.

The ambiguity inherent in sexual forms informed another key aspect of this imagery. Organic curves suggestive of female breasts can be recognized in the contours of the leaves, and the brightly colored foliage that frames the plants could be interpreted as long and luscious locks of female hair. The figures appear as both plant-like structures and representations of the female sexuality, couched in a botanical exploration of human forms. This ambiguous parallel between the female anatomy and plant life appears in many other works from the period, and becomes a hallmark of Lewy's production during the end of the 1960's.



Figure 18 Walter Lewy, *Untitled (Surrealist Landscape)*, 1968, oil on canvas.

In another work in this category from 1968 (Fig. 18), Lewy continued to paint sexually suggestive plants. In visual metaphors that could be compared to the work of American artist Georgia O'Keeffe, he endowed the composition with flowers that are suggestive of the shape of female genitalia. At the same time, Lewy reintroduced the device of the

Moon in the upper left corner of the painting to create a more realistic space. Planets and stars allowed Lewy to introduce ideas about alternate realities and extraterrestrial life into his art.

A detail in the background of a composition from the following year (Fig. 19) sets the tone for the science fiction theme: in addition to the Moon, a small planet looms distantly on the horizon, suggesting that the scene itself takes place on another planet. The interest in outer space themes is especially relevant when one considers the impact of the Apollo 11 mission – the first manned mission to land on the Moon – which also took place in 1969. Broadcast on television, the event was followed by a large number of people across the world, and inspired the creation of films, books and art, marking a milestone in the science fiction genre.



Figure 19 Walter Lewy, *Untitled*, 1969, oil on canvas, private collection.

In an interview, Walter Lewy's son, Leslie Pires Lewy, revealed that reading science fiction books was his father's favorite pastime.⁹⁸ At the end of his life, his collection comprised more than five thousand books of the genre, and Walter Lewy had

⁹⁸ Leslie Pires Lewy (son of Walter Lewy), in discussion with the author, May 20, 2015.

read most of them. His collection included authors such as H. G. Wells, Isaac Aasimov and Jack Vance. Lewy also enjoyed the work of Jules Verne and Edgar Allan Poe.⁹⁹

1969 marks another seminal moment in Lewy's career, when the tenth edition of the São Paulo Biennial took place. As one of the pioneers of modernism in Brazil, Lewy had participated in most editions of the Biennial, since its inception in 1951. In recognition of his participation and his role as a pioneer of modernism in Brazil, the curator of the show created a separate room entitled *Fantastic Art and Surrealism*, which prominently featured Lewy's work, as well as the work of artists such as Guacira Sampaio Rocha and Geraldo Telles de Oliveira.¹⁰⁰

The tenth Biennial was the first exhibition after the passing of the *Ato Institucional 5*, the federal decree issued by the dictatorial government in 1968.¹⁰¹ The amendment also concerned the arts, since it legalized censorship and allowed the regime to consider "subversive" or "degenerate" content in literature and the visual arts as a matter of national security.

The Biennial was heavily censored, since all content that could be considered either inflammatory or obscene was immediately prohibited. In response to the political situation in Brazil, a number of artists from foreign countries, including France, Holland, Sweden, Greece, Belgium, Spain and the United States, organized a boycott of the international pavilions.¹⁰² The French delegation led the protest, after the art critic Gerald Gassiot-Talabot had published in the *Nouvel Observateur* an essay announcing the withdrawal of works by nine artists whom he had previously selected for participation in the São Paulo show. In his text, Gassiot-Talabot evoked the student

⁹⁹ Lewy, "Surrealista é a Vida," 84.

¹⁰⁰ Anon., *X Bienal de São Paulo – Setembro a Dezembro 1969*, exh. cat. (São Paulo, 1969), 46.

¹⁰¹ President Artur Costa e Silva, "Ato Institucional 5," *Diário Oficial da União*, year 106, issue 241, Brasília (December 13, 1968), 1.

¹⁰² Calirman, *Brazilian Art under Dictatorship*, 26.

uprisings of May 1968 in France as an example for not acquiescing to an authoritarian and culturally stagnant regime.¹⁰³

Some Brazilian artists joined in withdrawing from the exhibition, but took care not to publically state their reasons.¹⁰⁴ A whole wing dedicated to *Concrete Art*, an emerging Brazilian avant-garde movement, had to be cancelled for lack of participation.¹⁰⁵ Marc Berkowitz, who wrote the preface for the catalog of the Brazilian pavilion at the 1969 Biennial, commented on the absence of the artists with incomprehension, but did not mention the underlying controversy in order to avoid drawing the unwanted attention from the military regime.¹⁰⁶

However, a number of artists, both Brazilian and international, took a different stance in this situation. *New York Times* columnist Grace Glueck, representing the opinions of American artists, argued that participating could have a more positive impact than passive absence.¹⁰⁷ Several prominent artists took part in the exhibition including, for example, the foremost representative of Viennese Fantastic Realism, Austrian painter Ernst Fuchs.¹⁰⁸ Focusing Christian themes, Fuchs submitted a number of works, such as *The Sorrowful Rosary*, which earned him the grand prize of the exhibition.¹⁰⁹

Lewy was one the artists who chose to participate in the X Biennial, where he showed his work in the Special Pavilion of Fantastic Art and Surrealism, which was open to Brazilian artists only. Interestingly, his name was not mentioned in the official catalog. A note in the appendix sought to explain the absence:

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid, 27.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Anon., *X Bienal de São Paulo – Setembro a Dezembro 1969*, exh. cat. (São Paulo, 1969), 33.

¹⁰⁷ Grace Glueck, “No Rush for Reservations,” *The New York Times*, July 6, 1989, 31.

¹⁰⁸ Anon., *X Bienal de São Paulo*, 30.

¹⁰⁹ Anon., *X Bienal de São Paulo – Setembro a Dezembro 1969*, appendix (São Paulo, 1969), 4.

On the list of Brazilian artists, due to the delay in accepting the invitations or in providing the final list of works, there are several mistakes regarding the omission of names and number of works. We regret the lack of reference to the veteran Walter Lewy, who exhibited twenty three canvases in the Room of Fantasy Art and Surrealism.¹¹⁰

Lewy was the most prominent artist to be featured in the Surrealist room. His contribution to the exhibition consisted of twenty-three works, a number far larger than any other artist included. Even his most prominent colleagues were represented with only six or seven works each.¹¹¹

One can only speculate how Lewy reacted to the boycott. The lack of freedom of speech is a significant obstacle in obtaining honest testimonials, since all printed publications were censored. However, Lewy was likely hesitant to play his role. In a 2010 interview, his widow, Dirce Pires, explained that his political views remained unchanged through the years. Lewy sympathized with left-leaning political figures in Brazil, but mostly kept his views to himself.¹¹² Twenty-five years after the end of the dictatorship, she felt she could talk openly about these aspects, concluding her observations with the words “we can talk about it now.”¹¹³ It could be argued, thus, that despite reservations about the authoritarian government, Lewy chose to exhibit his works as a way to honor the invitation and to receive the benefits of his compliance with the new status quo – perhaps in hopes that his art could make a positive impact.

But despite the censorship controversies, the Biennial was successful in attracting a number of visitors, many of whom were not even aware of the political

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Anon., *X Bienal de São Paulo*, 33.

¹¹² Dirce Pires (Walter Lewy’s wife), unpublished interview with Olivio Guedes in September 10, 2010. Private Archive of Claude Martin-Vaskou, São Paulo.

¹¹³ Ibid.

dilemmas playing out in the background.¹¹⁴ Lewy's prominence in the exhibition further aided to popularize his iconography, launching him on to a path of great achievements during the 1970's.

¹¹⁴ Calirman, *Brazilian Art under Dictatorship*, 33.

Chapter 4

During the 1970's Lewy's iconography kept evolving. The plant-like forms that composed the artist's imaginary worlds gradually gave way to architectural structures and objects that suggested the presence of humans. Pyramids, pedestals and other man-made objects started appearing in Lewy's desolate fields, leading to the seminal point when he included again the human form in his compositions after a long abstinence.

In previous works Lewy sometimes endowed his fantastic plants with human features, whereas now he added greenery to human forms. Previously, a leaf with sinuous curves and luscious hair suggested, rather vaguely, female anatomy. Now, as if in an advanced stage of a mystical transformation, full-length figures appeared in drapery, like in an untitled composition from 1972, where two monumental figures stand in the landscape, their melon-shaped faces sprouting leaves. (Fig. 20).



Figure 20 Walter Lewy, *Untitled*, 1972, oil on canvas.

They are devoid of facial features. Their leafy heads are reminiscent of cactuses, probably inspired by specimens the artist kept in his greenhouse. Their pose and their hands confirm that they are indeed human, or at least humanoid creatures. Moreover, the scene includes man-made objects such as an oversized key and keyhole, but dominant aspects are the monk-like robes. Lewy's fantasy landscapes were now perhaps intended to serve as meditations on the human condition. The figure on the left holds a key hole, through which the viewer can peek into a second landscape. As the keyhole reveals an alternative reality inside the painting, the painting itself reveals a new reality to us. One could argue that the figures represent the artist's role in society: the one who makes it possible to access different worlds by virtue of their creativity. In this sense, the holder of the keyhole and the bearer of the key are the closest Walter Lewy has ever gotten to a self-portrait.

In time, other human figures would be featured in Lewy's oeuvre. Perhaps the most important one was his ultimate female archetype: the blue woman. The figure first appeared in 1971 (Fig. 21) as a chiseled architectural torso standing in a barren land. The organic derivation of the figure, however, can be attested by the long, flowing hair that covers its face.



Figure 21 Walter Lewy, *Untitled*, 1971, oil on canvas.

From this point onwards, female figures became prominent features of his compositions. A giant female who roams deserted fields, the blue woman is an archetypal device. Without a distinct identity, her hair often covers her face, so as to deny the figure's individuality (Fig. 22). Appearing in oneiric settings, the blue woman is metaphor, not a portrait. Whenever the woman's face was not covered, she has no facial features (Fig. 23).



Figure 22 Walter Lewy, *Untitled*, 1972, oil on canvas.



Figure 23 Walter Lewy, *Untitled*, 1976, oil on canvas.

Walter Lewy's wife, Dirce Pires, not surprisingly, was often associated with the iconic character in Lewy's paintings during the 1970's.¹¹⁵ An aspiring actress, Dirce had previously modeled for Brazilian painter Emiliano Di Cavalcanti, who participated in the Modern Art Week of 1922, and was Walter Lewy's friend. Lewy and Dirce met through Di Cavalcanti and started living together in 1956.¹¹⁶

At the height of Lewy's fame during the 1970's, several newspaper articles sought to attract readers by making the well-known artist more personable. Focusing on Lewy's personal life, his marriage and his children, periodicals often commented on the contrasts between the artist and his wife. Lewy was 50 years old when he met Dirce, who was 23.¹¹⁷ The artist also had a strong educational and intellectual background, while his wife was an uneducated lower-class woman from the countryside.¹¹⁸ Perhaps the most controversial contrast between the two, however, was the fact that Dirce was a black woman, in a time where interracial marriage, although legal, was not common in Brazil.

The stereotype of the *mulata*, a black or mixed race beauty, has been part of popular lore about Brazil since the nineteenth century. In Brazil, the term is also a trope which compares the attractiveness of the *mulata* to the exoticism and the natural beauty of the land.¹¹⁹ Happy and extrovert, she is sometimes innocent and virtuous, at other times a sensual temptress. Di Cavalcanti, for example, became famous for his portraits of young, sensual, dark-skinned girls. The association of the *mulata* became interconnected with the idea of Brazil itself, as the country acquired the reputation of a

¹¹⁵ Machado, "A Dirce Real do Surrealista Lewy," 14

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Dirce Pires, unpublished interview with Olivio Guedes.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Mariza Correa, "Sobre a Invenção da Mulata" (On the Invention of the Mulatto woman), paper presented at the annual meeting for the Conference: Ethnic and Racial Relationships in Latin America, Brazilian Anthropology Association, April 1996, 42.

luscious paradise land, filled with beautiful, accessible women: an objectification that would often be viewed critically in later years.

While Lewy certainly admired his wife's beauty, one needs to dig deeper than stereotypes in Lewy's case. Dirce was vital in Lewy's sales and career during his early years in Brazil. Since she worked as a seamstress, she often took Lewy's artworks to her wealthy client's houses and attempted to sell them.¹²⁰ At one point in their lives during the 1960's, the family struggled as Lewy was not even able to buy new canvases to paint. In an interview to a newspaper in the 1970's, she recounted that she often bought inexpensive checkered cotton textiles which she bleached so he could stretch them on self-made stretchers and paint them.¹²¹ She affirms that in some of his paintings, it is still possible to see the texture of the cotton she was unable to remove completely. Walter Lewy and Dirce lived together for twenty years before they officially married in 1977.¹²² They had two children: Evelyn Pires Lewy and Leslie Pires Lewy.

A strong figure in Lewy's life, Dirce certainly influenced Lewy's iconography. In an interview she affirmed that the blue woman is a representation of herself in fantastic form.¹²³ The archetypal nature of the figure, however, has to be taken into consideration. Lewy's intention was to remove the woman from a place in the familiar world to the viewer, and to include her as an integral part of the fantastic setting. In this sense, the woman's blue skin is a symbolic device to represent more accurately what he intended: the *idea* of a woman. The blue woman is blue *because* she is not his wife. She is the archetypal figure of the feminine, and, as Dirce says, "she was inspired by his

¹²⁰ Machado, "A Dirce Real do Surrealista Lewy," 14.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Anon., "A arte do encontro," newspaper article describing Lewy's wedding ceremony, *Diário de São Paulo*, (São Paulo, April 07, 1977), 42.

¹²³ Dirce Pires, *Walter Lewy, O Pintor do Silêncio*, video interview in unpublished documentary, directed and produced by Claude Martin-Vaskou (São Paulo, 2010).

fascination with herself and her body,” but was not intended as a fantastic portrait of his wife as a person.¹²⁴

After the invention of the blue woman character, human figures became more common in Lewy’s iconography. A painting from 1974 (Fig. 24) contains what appears to be a procession in a barren land. Wearing colorful garments, the group



Figure 24 Walter Lewy, *Untitled*, 1974, oil on canvas.

marches through an open field carrying runic-like poles crowned with mysterious symbols. On the top right corner, a cluster of female breasts secrete large drops of water, irrigating the desert landscape. In Lewy’s painting, the figures appear organized in a ritualistic fashion. The appearance of such symbolism followed Walter Lewy’s trip to the Brazilian state of Bahia, in 1970, during which he was accompanied by fellow modernist and friend Di Cavalcanti.¹²⁵ Lying in the northeast region of Brazil, Bahia flourished as a trade center during colonial times, due to its geographic location. The state is known for its rich cultural diversity, and the predominance of African inspired religions, such as *Candomblé*, which mixes Christian lore with animistic traditions.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Daisy Peccinini, *Walter Lewy: Mestre Surrealista no Brasil*, article for exhibition promotional flyer (São Paulo: Fundação José e Paulina Nemirowsky e Ministério da Cultura, 2013), 5.

During his trip, Lewy witnessed rituals and the folklore of *Camdomblé*, and soon thereafter, ritualistic scenes appeared in his iconography. Lewy commented on these figures, affirming that he did not seek to represent any particular religion, but are rather figures that are “mystical, and representative of a general idea of spirituality.”¹²⁶

The year 1974 certainly marks the beginning of Walter Lewy’s most popular period in Brazil. In this year, the Museum of Modern Art of São Paulo organized a retrospective exhibition of Lewy’s work entitled *Walter Lewy: Thirty-Five Years of Painting in Brazil*.¹²⁷ The exhibition displayed three hundred and twenty-five works by the artist.¹²⁸ Including essays by a number of scholars who praised Lewy’s long career and commitment to Surrealism, the catalog provided an overview of his paintings from the 1940’s until the 1970’s.¹²⁹ Perhaps his most high-profile exhibition to date, Lewy was lauded by critics and public. On the same year, the artist won both the prize of “Best Painter in São Paulo” by the São Paulo Art Critics Association, and the prize of “Best Painter” by the Brazilian Art Critics Association.¹³⁰ The latter paid for a study trip abroad with all costs covered. Lewy and his family traveled extensively through Europe between December of 1974 and first weeks of 1975.

In a newspaper article after his return, Lewy commented on his trip, highlighting his visits to the British National Gallery in London, The Rijks Museum and the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam, the Louvre in Paris, and the Prado Museum in Spain.¹³¹

¹²⁶ Walter Lewy, *Walter Lewy on Exhibition*, artist statement reproduced on exhibition promotional material, São Paulo, Galeria Bonfiglioli, May 1975.

¹²⁷ Anon., *Walter Lewy: 35 Anos de Pintura no Brasil*, exh. cat. Museum de Arte Moderna de São Paulo, 1974.

¹²⁸ Anon., “Trinta e cinco anos da pintura de Walter Lewy,” newspaper article, *A Gazeta* (São Paulo: February 27, 1974), 42.

¹²⁹ Anon., *35 Anos de Pintura*, 34.

¹³⁰ Anon., “Lewy, Surrealismo Premiado,” newspaper article, São Paulo, *Jornal da Tarde*, September 13, 1974.

¹³¹ Fernando C. Lemos and Nelson Merlin, “Europa: Crise de Criatividade,” newspaper article, *Folha de São Paulo* (São Paulo, February 09, 1975), 34.

Interestingly, he complained about what he called a “creativity crisis” in Europe’s artistic centers. While pleased with his visits to museums, Lewy “struggled to find contemporary artists who excited him.”¹³² He reserved especially harsh commentaries for Salvador Dali, who, in his view, “had become a commercial artist, now only good to spread his prints all over Europe.”¹³³ Lewy’s popularity continued to grow until 1976, when the artist was invited to exhibit at the *Galerie Debret*, located at 28, rue La Boétie in Paris. Lewy traveled to Paris to oversee the preparations for the exhibition.¹³⁴ In the same year, Lewy had one artwork included as the only Brazilian painter, in the *Onzième Biennale Internationale d’art de Menton*, in a small village in the south of France.¹³⁵

Such accomplishments prompted the government to take note the artist. After the exhibition in Paris, the Legislative Assembly, a branch of the government of the state of São Paulo, included in its journal an official tribute to Lewy, detailing his career and emphasizing his positive artistic contributions to São Paulo state’s cultural scene.¹³⁶

Walter Lewy became an artist who was held in high regard by governmental institutions. Given the heated political atmosphere in Brazil during the 1970’s, Lewy’s position was a privileged one. Intense censorship often targeted artists as *provocateurs*, as the regime feared ruses in which artworks and books would be used as means to incite disobedience and revolt.

Indeed, fomenting revolt was precisely what a number of contemporary artists all across Brazil were attempting to do. At this time, conceptual art was on the rise.

Artists such as Cildo Meireles, Arthur Barrio and Antonio Manuel were experimenting

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Anon., “Walter Lewy na Samarte,” newspaper article, *Última Hora*, Rio de Janeiro, April 05, 1976.

¹³⁵ Anon., *Onzième Biennale internationale d’art de Menton : Palais de l’Europe, juillet-août-septembre 1976*, (Menton, France: Association Biennale de Menton, 1976).

¹³⁶ Theodosina Rosário Ribeiro, “Homenagem Oficial ao Pintor Walter Lewy, requerimento no. 2145,” *Diário Oficial Executivo*, Governo do Estado de São Paulo, March 3, 1976.

with happenings, body art, performances and ready-mades, employing these new artistic practices to criticize the dictatorship. Their method consisted, for example, in organizing performances that would happen before the police could be notified, or in creating objects that would be left in public spaces without claim of ownership – a form political and artistic activism described by Calirman as “a sort of *guerrilla art*.”¹³⁷

Walter Lewy did not support the dictatorship. His early work and influences reveal a preoccupation with social issues, such as equality and freedom, that implied a rather liberal political leaning. Moreover, his wife, in an interview, confessed that Lewy was supportive of left-wing political figures who opposed the regime.¹³⁸ One can only speculate how distraught Lewy would have been when witnessing a militaristic dictatorship take over Brazil, much like the one he left behind in Germany during the 1930's.

In the official Brazilian scene, however, Walter Lewy increasingly emerged as a voice of orthodoxy. Lewy clearly valued craft over conceptualism, and many times condemned the rise of abstraction as laziness. In a newspaper interview, he commented that “abstract painting is a worthless fad. If it had sustenance, abstract painting would have resisted. In abstraction there is nothing else to be done, every possibility has expired. What we see today is monotonous repetition.”¹³⁹

As interviews and newspaper articles about Walter Lewy proliferated, his personal views on art became better known to the wider public. Through the press, his public persona as one of Brazil's foremost modernist painters was wholly formed during the 1970's. Lewy came across as a straight forward, no non-sense Surrealist master: he despised contemporary art, and insisted on the importance of traditional art

¹³⁷ Calirman, *Brazilian Art under Dictatorship*, 30.

¹³⁸ Dirce Pires, unpublished interview with Olivio Guedes.

¹³⁹ Walter Lewy, “O Pintor da Vegetação Humana,” 32.

education.¹⁴⁰ Lewy appeared in the press as an antithesis to the experimental and conceptual art practiced by the younger generation active in Brazil since the 1960's. In one such newspaper interviews he remarked:

[Contemporary artists] are youngsters induced to do something they themselves do not understand, encouraged by irresponsible 'art critics' and by the interest of certain art dealers. I see no way out of this complete misunderstanding of what art really is.¹⁴¹

He further expounded his ideas by arguing that art education should start with proper drawing and art history lessons, blaming the ineptitude of his younger contemporaries on a lack of formal training.¹⁴²

From a political point of view, such a reactionary response could be seen as a contributing factor to Lewy's success during 1970's. His insistence on traditional education was widely reported in newspaper articles and interviews. Lewy's positions were well received by the censors, because they reinforced the idea that experimenting with art was foolish. By labeling many Brazilian contemporary art forms as illegitimate, these articles undermined the political message behind those artistic positions which claimed to resist the regime.

Moreover, the lack of apparent political content in Lewy's subject matter was convenient for those seeking to maintain the *status quo*. In a time when openly criticizing the government was a criminal act, Lewy concentrated his efforts on introspective paintings that restricted themselves to the realm of dreams, avoiding engagement in political affairs.

¹⁴⁰ Ana Maria Ciccacio, "Lewy, 80 anos: Continuo Criando," newspaper article, *O Estado de São Paulo*, São Paulo, 1985.

¹⁴¹ Walter Lewy, "Walter Lewy, 80 anos, Contra a Bienal," newspaper interview, trans. by the author, *Jornal da Tarde*, São Paulo, (November 11, 1985).

¹⁴² Ibid.

Indeed Lewy's imaginary landscapes continued to evolve during the late 1970's. In this period, one can observe the consistency of Lewy's method: By adding elements of intrigue to each composition, the artist sought not only to evoke a world that was recognizable, but also hinted at mystery. Lewy's paintings were always one or two steps away from a perfectly illusionistic landscape. In this untitled composition from 1978 (Fig. 25), the harmony between the mountains and the lake is disturbed – if ever so slightly – by large floating slabs and oversized raindrops, instilling a sense of wonder.



Figure 25 Walter Lewy, *Untitled*, 1978, oil on canvas

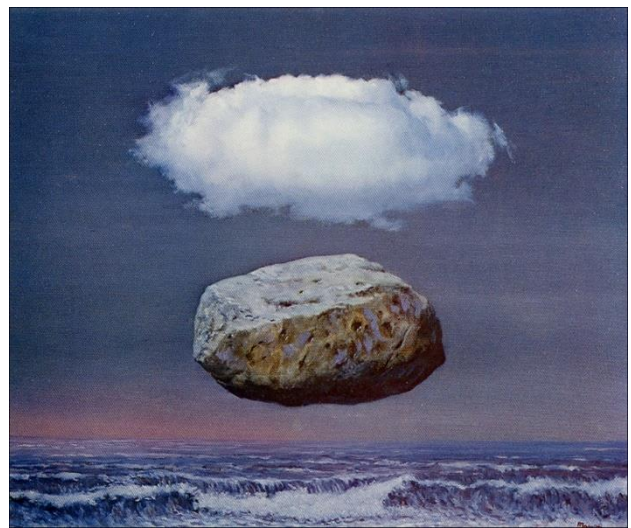


Figure 26 René Magritte, *Clear Ideas*, 1958, oil on canvas.

Lewy's works from this time are reminiscent of his favorite artist and most important influence: the Belgian Surrealist René Magritte. The gravity-defying stones mirror the giant floating rock over the sea in Magritte's *Clear Ideas* (Fig 26), of 1958. Both artists aim to infuse an otherwise convincing illusion with supernatural elements, challenging the viewer's notion of reality.

Towards the end of the decade, the repetitiveness of Lewy's work came under fire. In a harsh review of one of his exhibitions in 1977, art critic Jacob Klintowitz berated Lewy for what he called "a stale and poor Surrealist exhibition that, for its

predictability and formulaic nature, negates the historical Surrealism, which was about innovation and automatism.”¹⁴³

Such criticism would later reflect on Lewy’s sales. Perhaps due to the relaxation of censorship laws in the early 1980’s, abstract and contemporary art became more popular in the Brazilian artistic mainstream. The sixteenth edition of the São Paulo Biennial of 1981, in which Lewy did not participate, marked the end of the boycott by international artists, and the full integration of conceptual art in the Biennial.¹⁴⁴ By this point, Lewy’s art may have been considered outdated by a large portion of the artistic community.

Lewy’s finances started to suffer. Aged 75 in 1980, sales of his paintings were stagnating. In a newspaper interview, he affirmed that people with bad intentions would “haggle with him for lower prices, promising to re-sell the paintings in Europe, and then proceed to sell them for low prices in Brazil, causing an inflation of his works in the market.”¹⁴⁵ Having difficulties to find spaces for solo exhibitions, the artist often blamed his unwillingness to flatter important gallery owners to advance his own agenda.

As an alternative to sales, Lewy decided take on students as a way to improve his financial situation. Returning to an occupation that he had already embraced during the 1970’s, Lewy taught painting to aspiring artists in his own home.¹⁴⁶ Former student Barbara Gras described Lewy as a tacit teacher, who would not interfere with the content of his students’ works, but would emphasize the importance of technique.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴³ Jacob Klintowitz, “A pintura de Lewy, em torno do banal,” newspaper exhibition review, *Jornal da Tarde*, São Paulo, May 16, 1977.

¹⁴⁴ Amarante, *As Bienais De São Paulo*, 131.

¹⁴⁵ Anon., “Um pintor no Surrealismo diário.”

¹⁴⁶ Anon., “Lições de um mestre Surrealista,” newspaper article, *Folha de São Paulo*, São Paulo, September 02, 1980.

¹⁴⁷ Barbara Gras (Walter Lewy’s painting student), in discussion with the author, July 07, 2014.

Among other things, Lewy taught Gras how to work with transparent oil glazes, and to avoid black: dark colors had to be mixed until the palette acquired the desired hue.

Lewy's orthodox views of Surrealism and emphasis on technique created tension between himself and the art world in the 1980's. Ever loyal to his principles, he felt that his financial struggles should not affect his practice. According to his son Leslie, Lewy's wife Dirce had numerous quarrels with her husband when she insisted that he alter his work to make it more palatable for the market. Each time, Lewy refused.¹⁴⁸

In the same vein, the eighteenth edition of the São Paulo Biennial, in 1985, became a point of contention in the press between Lewy and the organization. By 1985, the dictatorship had faded and the country transitioned to a democracy. To Lewy's dismay, the removal of the repression caused the doors for experimentation to swing open in the Brazilian artistic scene. In a number of interviews Lewy voiced his discontent with the São Paulo Biennial, the exhibition that had launched his career thirty years prior. Speaking to the newspaper *Jornal da Tarde* he expressed his opinion:

The first Biennials were fabulous. They brought serious painters from all over the world. Now fads take over the Biennial and art in general. And for painters that have a certain technique, there's no place. I am not going to this Biennial, I hate going through such things. If I'd go, I'd become very depressed.¹⁴⁹

Lewy was more than eighty years old when he spoke out against the Biennial. His resistance to accept the changing artistic paradigms is understandable, for an artist whose practice relied so much on mastery of technique. The Biennial of 1985 included, for example, conceptual and performance artists such as Marina Abramovic, whose focus on the conceptual aspects of art did not take into account the fundamental

¹⁴⁸ Leslie Pires Lewy, in discussion with the author.

¹⁴⁹ Anon., "Walter Lewy: 80 anos e contra a Bienal." newspaper article with direct quotes. *Jornal da Tarde*, (São Paulo: November 29, 1985)

principles Lewy believed to be the cornerstones of the artistic practice: traditional education and mastery of craft.¹⁵⁰

The friction between dedication to his principles and the mounting financial difficulties became ever more strident. For most of his life, Lewy refused to work with art dealers. In 1988, however, the artist's financial situation attained such a low point that he reached a verbal agreement with Argentine entrepreneur Aldo Marchand.¹⁵¹ While Marchand had amassed considerable wealth from a perfume business, he had no previous experience in managing artists.¹⁵² It is safe to assume that his understanding of art and its market was fairly limited. Such limitations, however, did not impede Marchand from putting forward suggestions to Lewy. Seeking to improve sales, the businessman recommended that Lewy add more vibrant colors to his palette. The artist agreed to the suggestions. Lewy's works from the 1990's (Fig. 26) are filled with saturated hues that give the painting a much lighter tone. Playful and dynamic, Lewy's attempt to make himself more marketable all but eliminated the somber and meditative landscapes of the past.



Figure 26 Walter Lewy, *Untitled*, 1993, oil on canvas.

¹⁵⁰ Anon., *18ª Bienal de São Paulo*, exh. cat. (São Paulo: Museu de Arte Moderna, 1985), 66.

¹⁵¹ Regina Ricca, "A jovem pintura de nosso maior Surrealista," newspaper article, *Jornal da Tarde*, São Paulo, June 04, 1989.

¹⁵² Anon., "Marchand," newspaper article, *O Estado de São Paulo*, São Paulo, April 13, 1990, 40.

Aldo Marchand offered Lewy a fixed salary in exchange of exclusive sales rights to his production.¹⁵³ The businessman also provided Lewy with much needed exhibition space, as the number of galleries interested in Lewy's work dwindled towards the end of the 1980's.¹⁵⁴ Lewy's relationship with the dealer initially yielded good results. In 1989, the artist was invited to exhibit in Saint Paul de Vence in France, at the Chagall museum.¹⁵⁵ The exhibition spurred another wave of articles about Lewy, celebrating the accomplishments of the "Great Surrealist Master," and lauding Lewy's story as a long battle for recognition.¹⁵⁶

In 1990, Lewy's dealer arranged an exhibition at the *Brazilian-American Cultural Institute* in Washington, DC.¹⁵⁷ Marchand paid for the transportation of 18 paintings by Lewy. He conceived of his investment as an attempt to break in the American art scene.¹⁵⁸ Rather impulsive, Marchand convinced Lewy and his family to sell their house and belongings and to move to the United States. Marchand claimed that once on American soil, Lewy could meet gallery owners and perhaps launch his career abroad.¹⁵⁹ In a recent interview, Lewy's son denounced the dealer's plan as vastly over optimistic.¹⁶⁰ Within three months, the family was forced to move back to Brazil. Without a house and largely in debt, Lewy's financial struggles became even more aggravated after he had returned. Due to the economic turmoil of the early 1990's in Brazil, Aldo Marchand – with no legal obligations towards the artist, since there was no contract – cut business ties with Lewy and stopped paying him a salary.¹⁶¹ The

¹⁵³ Leslie Pires Lewy, in discussion with the author.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵⁵ Ricca, "A jovem pintura de nosso maior Surrealista."

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

¹⁵⁷ Anon., "Marchand," newspaper article, *O Estado de São Paulo*, São Paulo, April 13, 1990, 40.

¹⁵⁸ Leslie Pires Lewy, in discussion with the author.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

termination of the agreement had long-term repercussions on Lewy's sales as well. According to his son, most clients stopped looking for artworks directly at Lewy's house, thinking that Marchand still represented the artist.¹⁶²

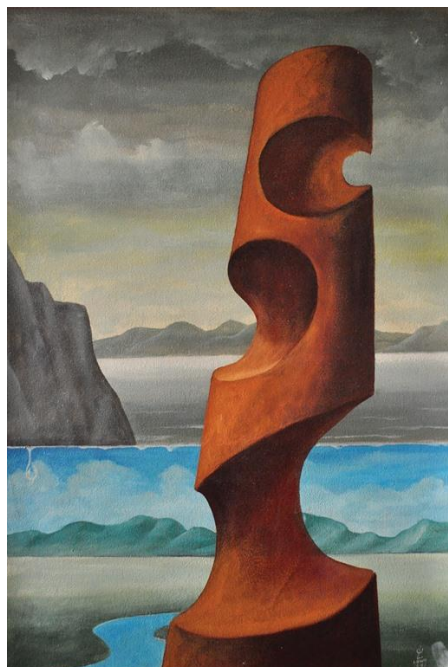


Figure 27 Walter Lewy, *Untitled*, 1991, oil on canvas.

An untitled canvas from 1991 (Fig. 27) contains a recurrent symbol in Walter Lewy's work from his last five years. According to the French collector and independent scholar Claude Martin-Vaskou, the appearance of the double horizon in Lewy's work is a visual representation of the artist's meditations on afterlife.¹⁶³ Martin-Vaskou interprets the iconographical choice as a premonition of the aging artist's demise, a representation of a "different world" in which he would exist after death. In fact, in fragile health and struggling to paint, Lewy passed away on December 18, 1995, in São Paulo.¹⁶⁴

¹⁶² Leslie Pires Lewy, in discussion with the author.

¹⁶³ Claude Martin-Vaskou (independent scholar, collector of Walter Lewy's work and owner of the rights of reproduction of Lewy's oeuvre), in discussion with the author, May 20, 2015.

¹⁶⁴ Registro Civil da República Federativa do Brasil, *Certidão de Óbito de Walter Lewy*, no. 115055, São Paulo: archived in December 21, 1995.

Conclusion

Walter Lewy painted more than five thousand paintings throughout almost sixty years of his life in Brazil. Despite being a pioneer of Surrealism in the country, his unique journey is often passed over in surveys of Brazilian art history. The reason for this omission is unclear.

Perhaps the financial struggle Lewy faced at the end of his life played a role in his relative obscurity. Due to the large number of his paintings still in circulation in the market, often at low prices, the value of each artwork failed to appreciate overtime. Lewy's fame faded as he struggled to exhibit and to produce work as an elderly painter. The shifting taste of art collectors also has to be taken into consideration.

The omission of Lewy's name in the canon of Brazilian modernism is nonetheless unjustified. The artist definitely deserves a more prominent place in the academic study of Brazilian art, and he deserves that his contributions to the Brazilian art scene of the late twentieth century be recognized in the larger historical context.

Above all, Lewy was a pioneer of Surrealism in South America. His unique take on abstract compositions, followed by the gradual transition into figurative work explored multiple aesthetic tenants of modernism. But what makes his art even more interesting is how his paintings interweave with Lewy's life: as an expatriate, he saw in his canvases a way to cope with the tragedy of exile and the perceived "strangeness" of the tropics.

Lewy's vision constitutes an important chapter of the formation of modernism in Brazil. His work is imbued with historical dimensions, especially when viewed through the lens of various periods of social and political turmoil through which he lived. This

unique journey adds to the pluralism of Brazilian art in the twentieth century, and to the multi-faceted nature of Surrealism.

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Vita

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