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## Quietly Creating Change

### The Met Breuer Program



Lygia Pape, *Divisor (Divider)* (1968), performance at Museu de Arte Moderna, Rio de Janeiro (1990) © Projeto Lygia Pape. Photo credit: Paula Pape

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Whether curating, writing or collecting, I have never felt the need to track the distribution of art according to gender or race. I was mentored by feminists, and am well aware that a massive shift in the language and trajectory of art (and art viewing) since the early 1970s—towards small-scale, bright colors, narrative, intimacy, vulnerability, art that is overtly autobiographical, pluralism, and voices that were previously marginalized—has happened in large part because of the feminist movement, and the way it changed cultural consciousness.

But I couldn't help notice that in the six solo exhibitions that have been presented since the opening of the [Met Breuer](#), four have been devoted to women artists and none, I might add, to straight white men. What's more notable is the fact that this

has not felt like a self-conscious correction but instead a focus on often profound displays of work by major artistic voices.

The most recent of these is the current retrospective dedicated to Lygia Pape ("[Lygia Pape: A Multitude of Forms](#)", until 23 July), one of the most important artists to emerge from Latin America in the postwar period. (Indeed, she was one of the most unique artistic voices of the past 60-plus years anywhere in the world.)

In the 1950s, when painting became bigger, bolder and more muscular (including the work of the few women of Abstract Expressionism—who had to paint, and drink, as hard as the men), Pape was making small, gestureless paintings. She chose paper as her principal material; printmaking as her major working process; and books as her most ambitious works of scale.

She explored big ideas, some visual, others political, in soft communal packages. Even formally, Pape was an innovator, having made black, concentric pinstripe compositions a couple of years before Frank Stella's revolutionary breakthrough paintings using the same geometric form.

I have long found it remarkable that the shift from traditional rectilinear painting to environmental art to political action occurred in the United States over three successive generations of artists—while these same dramatic shifts took place in Brazil in the work of individual practitioners in a period of barely 15 years, most notably Lygia Clark, Hélio Oiticica, and Pape.

But even more notably, we should also acknowledge that the four most important artists in Brazil in the 1950s—unlike their American peers—were three women and a gay man (Clark, Pape, Mira Schendel and Oiticica). No one in Brazil—an otherwise traditional, Catholic, male-dominated society—has been able to explain this to me. In the arts there were not the barriers of gender, race, and sexuality we had in the United States and Europe.