

Título Tamar Guimarães: Canoas
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Pablo León de la Barra: Dear Tamar, I hope you are well. Where are you? (I am in Mexico now!). In the Summer of 2010 you invited me to attend a party at Oscar Niemeyer's Casa das Canoas in Rio de Janeiro. I remember how I wanted to go, after years of being obsessed with that particular house. The party was thought to be filmed and to be an art project. In another work, done a year and a half later with Kasper Akhøj in Paris, *The Last Days of Watteau*, a party, a fête galante, which took place at the Hôtel Salomon de Rothschild, was also central to the work. I remember we talked about parties in films that we loved, from Peter Seller's *The Party*, to scenes in movies by Antonioni and Fellini. Can you tell me more about this fascination you have with the idea of the party, the situations and conversations that happen in them, and what is it that interests you of them?

More later, yours, love, Pablo

Tamar Guimarães: Pablo dear,

I like parties, especially the ones to which I am not officially invited, when I come as a friend of one of the guests. And since I can't take my welcome for granted, these spaces seem more alluring, as if I had to hurry to take in the place, décor and the genie that circulates there summoned by the collective body of party guests. The promise of a party is that one could open up for others and enter a flow of intensified emotional forces, like a sort of minor carnival.

Thinking of the Biennial – that exercise in national image projection – I invited people who might have been going to the opening days of the Sao Paulo Biennial at the Ciccillo Matarazzo pavilion in the Parque do Ibirapuera to a more intimate pre-party at Niemeyer's house. You would have been the perfect party guest!

Canoas was shot with a mix of actors and non-actors in staged situations. I invited persons active in the Brazilian cultural scene, friends and friends of friends, for a staged party, to channel up some of the last four decades of Brazilian history (from the inception of the military rule to the present).

As an initial premise, when I met and interviewed the guests prior to shooting I had proposed to each of them that instead of housing for the masses, modernist architecture in Brazil was in most cases a luxury item for the wealthy, and that the servant classes, which are an ubiquitous reality in the lives of Brazilian middle and upper classes, remain an inbuilt commodity in the pleasure machine which this architecture serves. I was saying we weren't far from a masters' house and slaves hut system but that we were far from the Brazilian racial democracy that Gilberto Freyre talks about in his book *Casa-Grande e Senzala* from 1933 (*The Masters and the Slaves: a study in the development of Brazilian civilization*). I was also insisting on Freyre because of a suggestion that Brazilian modernism was nostalgic for the sensuality of colonial architecture and the farming estates. These were the main suggestions the guests were to respond to.

We had nine actors and actresses and the others were formal guests. But I had invited others. Some, like the secretary of culture of São Paulo, never came, others, like an architect and urbanist connected to the IPHAN (Instituto de Patrimônio Histórico e Artístico Nacional) sent an offended last minute note declining the invitation. Something in

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my communication with him involving the words 'orgiastic' and 'riot' must have given him the impression we would be shooting porn.

With a few exceptions (for example, the French speaking group talking by the pool, who were instructed to improvise on the poor quality of Brazilian champagne) the other guests were 'playing themselves' to varying degrees. They were placed in precise situations (I had very little film stock and couldn't do many retakes) and were asked to repeat things I had heard them say before, either in private conversation or in public talks – as was the case with Suely Rolnik's performance in the film.

Perhaps the issue of social class and the irony in Canoas were transparent to different publics, but to some extent foreign audiences missed the historical references beyond Lygia Clark and the gentler humour.

But in terms of reference to other films it wasn't La Notte, or Peter Sellers in The Party that I had in mind but the restaurant scene in Jacques Tati's Play Time, in which a waiter gradually comes undone as the inaugural night of an elegant restaurant advances into a precariously yet perfectly balanced entropy.

Play Time is one of my favourite films – in part because Tati precludes plot and main actors to a large extent and instead allows for an intersection of characters weaving across each other.

PLB: Having lived outside Brazil for so many years, gives you a critical distance that allows you to see things Brazilians take for granted and don't want to see. On the other hand, being from there makes you avoid the easy romanticisms of Brazilianess to which too many foreign artists easily fall prey, specially when dealing with the 'rediscovery' of Oiticica, Niemeyer, Clark, Bo Bardi, for whom a kind of art tourism has developed. Would you like to talk more about this in relation to Canoas?

TG: The film has many direct and indirect references and citations to people and things that I both love and admire but also doubt.

The first time I went to Casa das Canoas, which is the house Oscar Niemeyer built for himself and his family in the early 50s, I was accompanying, almost begrudgingly, a Belgian friend who is in the habit of pilgrimaging to modernist monuments around the world. We were coming back from Burle Marx's gardens which is what I had wanted to see but of course I was stunned by the house and happy at my friend for dragging me along.

After marvelling at the house it struck me that it was fairly small and felt more like a house where the owners would spend weekends. Had I squinted I might have been able to see women in cocktail party attire roaming around by the pool. No doubt this was the case several times in recent years when the house was the stage for fashion shows, as well as a set for film and television.

Later that day and for a few weeks I thought about filming there – a film in which one would see the preparations for a party – that's all I knew at the time. Six months on I was invited to propose a project for the Sao Paulo Biennial and that's when I started working on it.

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Reading about the house, I came across an account by Richard J. Williams suggesting that during the 50s and Juscelino Kubitchek's presidency, Casa das Canoas had been a "critical part of Rio's cultural infrastructure, providing a regular setting for cocktails for visiting dignitaries and intellectuals. The erotic charge of the house was no doubt more imaginary than real, but equally, there is little doubt that it helped to contribute – along with the beaches and the floorshow of Copacabana, and the genuinely uninhibited revelry of Carnival – to the myth of Brazil as an erotic paradise. (...) The house in this scenario is far more than the European Modernists ever really envisaged. Far from being a 'machine for living', this is a riot of orgiastic pleasure."

I spoke with Niemeyer's daughter in 2010 and she had no recollection of this. She said they didn't live in the house for long. It was the only house in the area then and not easy to live in. When Kubitchek took Niemeyer to build Brasilia in 1957, Niemeyer's wife and daughter moved to a flat in Copacabana.

My initial idea was to visually reproduce the accounts which helped to fuel and maintain the glamorous image of this indeed extremely beautiful house - the play of light, the curves, water, the Atlantic forest remnants which surround it, etc.. For example the house as recounted by the architect Ernesto Rogers: "I doubt that I shall ever forget that scene: the sun was just dipping below the horizon, leaving us in the dark sea of orange, violet, green and indigo (...) incense and the hum of insects; a vast rhapsody beginning in the roof vibrated down the walls and their niches to finish in the pool, where the water, instead of being neatly dammed up, spread freely along the rocks in a kind of forest pool."

Canoas was made for a Biennial at a point when economic growth turned to euphoria about the future. In 2010 there was an incredible mood of optimism in Brazil . An optimism that came together with economic confidence (with newly found oil, relatively little damage from the economic crisis which hit Europe and the US and with the promise of improved urban infrastructure and further economic gain to be had with the world cup and the Olympic games). But Brazil wasn't only economic uplifted – we were also further away from the bleakness of the dictatorship which ended in 1985 and much of what had been left hidden for nearly 30 years was surfacing with greater force.

I wanted to produce an echo chamber in which to bounce the developmental euphoria of the 1950s - when the then president Juscelino Kubitchek spoke of '50 years in 5' – onto what were our contemporary stakes.

PLB: In Glauber Rocha's seminal 1965 text *Aesthetic of Hunger* he developed his manifesto of what Brazilian cinema should be: "Cinema Novo's miserabilism is opposed to the digestive cinema championed by the oldest critic from Guanabara, Carlos Lacerda: films about rich people, in their houses, in luxury cars, happy funny fast films without messages, films with purely industrial aims. These are the films that stand in contrast to hunger, as if in luxury apartments, filmmakers could hide the moral wretchedness of an nebulous and fragile bourgeoisie, or as if the technical materials and sets themselves could hide the hunger that is taking root in this very uncivilization. Above all, as if through this tropical landscape apparatus, the mental indigence of the filmmakers who make, this type of film could be dissimulated." In *Canoas*, you portray a modernist luxury house, and a party of the Brazilian elite in order to talk about that which is not present. Would you like to talk more about this?

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TG: I didn't know Glauber's Aesthetic of Hunger until yesterday, when you mentioned it, but it has two targets - the Brazilian elites and onlookers from developed countries whom he accuses paternalism and of longing for Primitivism - and Glauber includes ethnographers in that category, if we take the anecdote in which he called Jean Rouch (whose films he admired) a colonialist during an argument at a hotel lobby.

He talks of hunger as an ontological condition for Latin America and asserts that Cinema Novo understands the hunger that Europeans and Brazilians in their majority can't or don't want to understand - a hunger produced by economic and cultural subordination. He describes a state of philosophical atrophy and impotent aesthetic forms, which, dully managed by cultural offices nevertheless generates carnivalesque exhibitions and biennials, conferences and cocktail parties worldwide.

The question of what or who is being portrayed in Canoas is not straightforward. I prefer indirect speech and I'm in the business of veiling some of what I want to talk about, but I actually think 'hunger' was in fact present in the room.