

Título	Tamar Guimarães and the Ghostwriting of History	Autor	Dieter Roelstraete
Data	2012	Artista	Tamar Guimarães
Publicação	Tamar Guimarães. Paris: Maison D'art Bernard Anthonioz e Jeu de Paume, 2012.		

Social Sculpture on the Banks of the River Marne

Tamar Guimaraes and the Ghostwriting of History

At bottom, the specter is the future, it is always to come.
It presents itself only as that which could come or come back.
Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx*¹

Two of Tamar Guimaraes' best known works, *A Man Called Love* (2007) and *Canoas* (2010), represent two different strands in the Brazilian artist's research-heavy practice that, at first sight at least – or seen from the perspective of their subject matter – appear somewhat hard to reconcile: the very ephemeral, quasi-spectral business of paranormal folk tales, urban sagas and hearsay on the one hand, and the much sturdier source material of architecture and architectural history on the other hand. The former recounts the haunting story of Francisco Candido Xavier (1910–2002), a psychographic medium who authored – well, not quite: merely *transcribed* – more than 400 books in his lifetime, all of which were said to have been dictated to him by the dead.² The latter centrally revolves around a cocktail party at Oscar Niemeyer's hauntingly beautiful Casa das Canoas, an icon of tropical modernism tucked away in the well-heeled southern suburbs of Rio de Janeiro. Both *A Man Called Love* and *Canoas* touch upon the complexity of twentieth-century Brazilian social and political history, but do so in divergent ways – by focusing on Xavier's unwitting alignment with the conservative forces in Brazilian society during the military dictatorship in *A Man Called Love*, and by circumscribing, more forthrightly, the matter of class and race in *Canoas*. Prompted to imagine the possible conjoining of these diverging research interests and impulses in a single thematic figure, the contours of a *haunted house* become visible – and that, in a sense, is what is at the heart of Guimaraes' project, conceived and developed in close collaboration with Danish artist Kasper Akhøj, for the Maison d'art Bernard Anthonioz in Nogent-sur-Marne.

The ghost that haunts the Maison d'art Bernard Anthonioz is that of Antoine Watteau (°1684–†1721), the foremost painter of his time, best remembered today for his bucolic depictions of the French aristocracy's so-called *fêtes galantes* – though his most widely analyzed work, *L'enseigne de Gersaint*, from 1721, appears to have relatively little to do with the theatrical cult of gallantry. Legend has it that Watteau died in the arms of the aforementioned Gersaint inside the 17th century villa – built at a time when the Parisian noblesse started leaving the cramped city in droves for the rural idyll of the Marne valley – that is now home to the art center. Although Nogent-sur-Marne truly is the place where Watteau came to breathe his last, it appears he passed away in another house, one no longer in existence today; the villa's dubious claim to being a site of art-historical significance as Watteau's last earthly domicile was actually part of an elaborate campaign by its one-time occupants to save the house from the wrecking ball in the early years of the last century. This anecdotal shard of apocryphal art history, in which historiography, biography and local

¹ Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, London: Routledge, 1994, p. 48.

² Wrote, co-wrote or ghostwrote? Appropriately, the life-story of the spiritualist medium Francisco Candido Xavier is not so much the *subject* of *A Man Called Love* as it is a medium in turn for a much more complex narrative, channeling questions of class, gender and race in modern, post-war Brazil. Similarly, the immediate narrative motif of Guimaraes' more recent (and very aptly titled) *The Work of the Spirit (Parade)* (2011), appears in the cinematic guise of a ballet troupe trying their hand at Léonide Massine's modernist masterpiece *Parade* from 1917. On a deeper, effectively spectral level, however, her film scrutinizes the processes through which the convergence of symbolic and not-so-symbolic capital in art reproduces Massine's immaterial legacy as something akin to a "work of the spirit."

Título	Tamar Guimarães and the Ghostwriting of History	Autor	Dieter Roelstraete
Data	2012	Artista	Tamar Guimarães
Publicação	Tamar Guimarães. Paris: Maison D'art Bernard Anthonioz e Jeu de Paume, 2012.		

power politics intersect, became the basis for Guimaraes and Akhøj's most recent experiment in hauntology, culminating in the re-enactment – better still: the staging – of the exact kind of *fête galante* that one may well imagine to have come to the dying Watteau in a death-bed vision (if one were to imagine Watteau a confused inhabitant of the early twenty-first century).³

What exactly is, or was, a *fête galante*? According to Julie Ann Plax, who published the definitive tome on the subject, the social practice of the *fête galante* was “a form of elite behavior, enacted and perpetuated for specific reasons. Beyond the activity of men and women entertaining themselves in pursuit of love and music, *fêtes* signified social identity. The *fête galante* was perfect for the conspicuous display of two fundamentally aristocratic conditions: leisure and exclusivity.” [One could be forgiven for thinking that Plax is describing a scene from Guimaraes' *Canoas* – there is muffled talk of the quality of the champagne on offer in one of the film's scenes, after all.] “Not only did *fêtes galantes* define and codify the behavior appropriate for aristocratic leisure, but they were also opportunities for displaying elite behavior. *Fêtes* were occasions that endowed total idleness with a recognizable form and purpose. In turn, participation in and performance at *fêtes* signified an individual's membership in an exclusive circle. One might view the *fête galante* as a ritualistic proving ground for the elite.” [One could be forgiven for thinking that Plax is describing a day in (certain segments of) the global art world – as Guimaraes knows only too well, and this is a confusion that is played out in both *Canoas* and the current project.] Crucially, “elite behavior at *fêtes* was marked by a refusal to succumb to the liberating nature of a *fête*” – by a strenuous resistance to nature and naturalness as such: “to succumb to one's impulses or to be taken unaware was a sign of rude inferiority.” Indeed, “what distinguished the elite from the common folk was the ability to control these liberating forces in a way that allowed the individual to profit from them: to test their limits. To do this required a distancing from and mediation of experiences that were raw and erotic. This mediation was accomplished through a highly ritualized and artificial mode of behavior (...). Under the guise of an artificial second self, the individual was free to enjoy the erotic pleasures and dangers of a *fête* indirectly, filtered through an aestheticizing refinement and distancing.” According to Plax, this process of refining and filtering, masquerading and distancing, “the transformation of the self into a work of art” – performing a self rather than merely being one's self – is an integral part of the cult of so-called *honnêteté* without which the artifice of *fêtes galantes* would have been devoid of meaning.⁴

I have quoted at length from Plax' study to prepare the reader for the jolt of this concluding paradox: how are we to reconcile the rules of the game laid down in the *fête galante* with the cult of *honnêteté*, i.e. (in its present-day translation) “honesty”? Even if we concede that *honnêteté* did not mean the same thing in the 17th and 18th century as it does today, some notion of sincerity was evidently always at its heart, and the *honnête homme* sounds like the last person we would expect to encounter in one of those lavish spectacles of make-believe recorded by Watteau in such tellingly titled classics of the Rococo style as *The Pleasures of the Ball* (1717), *Venetian Entertainments* (1717) or *The*

³ “Hauntology,” or *hantologie* in the original French, is a term derived from Jacques Derrida's philosophical reconsideration of the Marxist legacy in *Specters of Marx* published in 1993; it phonetically conflates the shaky business of haunting (*hanter*) with the much sturdier stuff of ontology. Works such as Guimaraes' *A Man Called Love* but also *Tropical Blow-Up* (2009), one iconographic source of which is the dubious 19th century tradition of spirit photography (so compellingly documented, some years ago, in a historical exhibition titled *The Perfect Medium*), hover around the edges of hauntological research, and the same could certainly be said about some of Kasper Akhøj's most exemplary works, most prominently among them his ongoing project *Welcome (To The Teknival)*, which likewise revolves around a house steeped in legend and myth, namely Eileen Gray's iconic E.1027 villa in Roquebrune-Cap-Martin. In the context of the present essay, we could conceive of Guimaraes and Akhøj's ' hauntology as an archeology of rumors and myths rather than objects and facts.

⁴ Julie Ann Plax, *Watteau and the Cultural Politics of Eighteenth-Century France*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000, p. 111-112.

Título	Tamar Guimarães and the Ghostwriting of History	Autor	Dieter Roelstraete
Data	2012	Artista	Tamar Guimarães
Publicação	Tamar Guimarães. Paris: Maison D'art Bernard Anthonioz e Jeu de Paume, 2012.		

Charms of Life (1718).⁵ This, however, may well be an apparent contradiction only, based on the erroneous assumption, so central to our contemporary imagination, that role-play, play-acting and masquerading are fundamentally disingenuous practices meant to obscure or obliterate a presumed or presumably real self, a person's essence, a core of human truth – that art, in short, is life lying to itself. This assumption is one of the subjects tackled in Richard Sennett's classic of contemporary sociology *The Fall of Public Man*, certain chapters of which could be (re-) read, in the present context, as a eulogy to Watteau-esque gallantry as a kind of public performance art, or at the very least as a dependable source for the beautification of the social world – a social sculpture through and through.⁶ In a chapter devoted to the tortuous history of the private/public dyad, Sennett reminds us that, until sometime in the 19th century, “the public realm was the place in society reserved for adult play,” and that the public was conceived of as a human *creation*, whereas the private was viewed as the human *condition*.⁷ As the stage upon which unformed selves encountered one another, the public sphere required a degree of creativity in the fashioning of these selves that could properly be called “artistic”; each man and each woman – the *fêtes galantes* were on the whole exceptional in their attempts, if only theatrical, to institute some measure of gender equality within their narrowly defined playing field – was compelled to conceive of him- or herself as a *medium* for the channeling of certain intuitions, ideas, concepts, aspirations. Think of the *fête galante* as an early installment of the more modern concept of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* or “total work of art”; of the participants' bodily appearance as the material from which this artwork is sculpted; of the malleable self, indeed, as this particular genre's ever-evolving medium.

This talk of the medium inevitably brings us back to the work by Tamar Guimaraes referred to in the opening sentence of this essay, namely *A Man Called Love*, as well as to the recurring theme of the specter and its hauntology, the haunter and the haunted, in her work as a whole. Ostensibly, the subject of Guimaraes and Akhøj's most recent project, *The Last Days of Watteau*, appears to be the interweaving of 18th century French art history with 21st century mores; likewise, the ostensible subjects of earlier works are equally historical. Yet as an archaeologist of rumors and myths Guimaraes does not merely excavate the past: looking to find ghosts, phantoms, spirits, rather than the solid material traces of their spectral lingering among the living, the artist is certain to come across revenant beings – someone or something set to return, i.e. someone or something *yet to come*, *à venir*. Hauntology, as Jacques Derrida put it in his *Specters of Marx*, is a matter, in essence, of repetition: “a specter is always a *revenant*.”⁸ The question then becomes, what is being repeated in the staging of a *fête galante* in the twenty-first century? What is coming back (and from which future?), or brought back to life? What, in addition to the resident ghost of Jean-Antoine Watteau, is haunting this house, the Maison d'art Bernard Anthonioz? Haunting itself perhaps, and art's peculiar, inexhaustible

⁵ It would lead us too far to provide an exhaustive definition of the complex historical phenomenon of the *honnête homme*, but Plax offers a few leads beyond the standard understanding of a “sincere refinement of tastes and manners,” as the *Encyclopedia Britannica* has it: “from the very beginning the French *honnête homme* focused on manners, fashion, and ornamental skills.” The courtier, *honnête homme* at his most conspicuously exemplary, “shines at court and wins the king's confidence through his good behavior, through his exemplary appearance, manners, dress, skill in conversation, and noble activities, and above all, through his cultivation of a pleasing and polished nonchalance.” *Ibid.*, p. 113.

⁶ Any mention of the notion of social sculpture must acknowledge the term's deep anchorage in the work of Joseph Beuys, an artist whose concerns seem very far removed from the present context. Beuys' long-standing and thoroughly documented interest in spiritualist traditions, however, certainly ranks him as a hauntologist of the first order.

⁷ Richard Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man*, New York: W.W. Norton, 1992, p. 94-98. Sennett also notes that “the limiting of public space to adults had an interesting genesis; it came in part from the gradual distinctions made between childhood and adult forms of play.” Although he does not venture to specify these various adult forms of play, it is obvious that the development of art played an important role in their crystallization.

⁸ Jacques Derrida, *op. cit.*, p. 11. Derrida, incidentally, is buried in Ris-Orangis, a mere twenty kilometers away from Watteau's final resting place in Nogent-sur-Marne.

Título	Tamar Guimarães and the Ghostwriting of History	Autor	Dieter Roelstraete
Data	2012	Artista	Tamar Guimarães
Publicação	<i>Tamar Guimarães</i> . Paris: Maison D'art Bernard Anthonioz e Jeu de Paume, 2012.		

version of it in particular: the role-playing, the masquerading, the make-believing, the never-ending ghost-writing of history.