

Party as an Inversion of Order

The party has already been studied and analyzed from different points of view, sometimes as an inversion of the daily and normative order, sometimes as work or rite. However, it remains indecipherable, not allowing itself to be labeled, expanding geographical boundaries, including voices, without asking permission. Brazil, which is particularly rich in multiethnicity, has seen its rural and riverside population sing and dance to give thanks for the abundance of fish, go out in processions, dress up in costumes, put on masks, praise the harvest or, in metropolitan areas, take to the streets in joy because of the extended holidays on holy days or pagan festivities. It is necessary to understand that the pains and pleasures of subaltern classes were incorporated into the festivities, and therefore, they celebrated, pleaded, and protested in surprising harmony.

We can observe the evocation of pleasure when the party becomes a demonstration, whether in a gregarious or solitaire way, collectively or individually. The possibility of breaking with order, acting in catharsis, or watching from the boxes and viaducts makes the party the plethora of joy and the antidote to “scare away misery”, as said Beto sem Braço, a prominent composer and samba singer of Império Serrano, quoted by historian Luiz Antonio Simas.

This exhibition borrows the title of the song “Bloco do Prazer” [Pleasure Block] and pays homage to Fausto Nilo, Moraes Moreira, and Gal Costa. It reflects on the parties and celebrations that were moments of joy, catharsis, trance, desire, and enjoyment, especially during the first years of amnesty in the 1980s, marked by an air of hope that prevailed among Brazilian arts and culture.

After so many setbacks endured by the Brazilian culture in recent years, we need to invoke freedom, pleasure, and therefore, healing. Pagans and religious festivals, rituals and carnivals, music, and dance. There are many binomials that make the act of celebrating in Brazil something to be considered sacred, proving, in Oswald de Andrade’s words, that joy (needs to be) the litmus test.

Rites of Passage

Birth, anniversaries, weddings – there are many moments when the change from one social status to another configures the notion of a “rite of passage”. Anthropologist Arnold Van Gennep, in a seminal text from the 1970s, presents three stages of the idea of a rite of passage: preparation (preliminary), action (liminal), and afterward (post-liminal). Keeping this in mind, this exhibition presents works that are interested in the three stages of rites, always accompanied by festivals and propitiation. The rite of passage is strongly evidenced in celebrations of indigenous people and Afro-descendant peoples, the alligator festival, the rites of young girls, and initiations.

The celebration also contains complex modes of coercion; ageism and gender-based violence are particularly present in Westernized birthdays, generally highlighting binary genders and, in some cases, accumulating constraints in the desires projected onto children's personalities, such as in-jokes about future marriages and the colors pink or blue of the decorations. The song “Who will so-and-so marry?”, sung at birthdays, is another example of these insinuations that are fixed in the imagination from childhood to adulthood. In addition, the party is accompanied by events that must be preserved, through photo albums and filming, once on Super 8 and VHS tapes, now on cell phones.

To a greater or lesser extent displaying luxury and wealth, rites of passage are characterized by routines and ceremonies that go far beyond the division between the profane and the sacred. And art plays a part in this by expanding boundaries and blurring incompatibilities, turning the celebration into something to be carried on even after Ash Wednesday.

Festivities, Rites, and Other Coronations

Reflections on festivities and their expressions find in *Afrographies of Memory* [Afrografias da memória] a vivid record of the coexistence of religion and culture, which permeates Brazilian identity, memory, and popular culture. These foundations reveal the richness of traditions originating from the African continent and the various layers of the social and cultural history of resistance and survival of Black communities, during and after the period of enslavement. When they incorporate their own rituals and forms of celebration, belonging, and community embracement, these communities challenge and enrich the so-called “dominant” culture.

Ancestry, the community, and its oral narratives are reflected in the festivities through images, gestures, and artifacts, in an interaction of different

temporalities and encounters, demonstrating, as recalls Leda Maria Martins, that “the Black culture is a culture of crossroads”. Black sisterhoods performed a pioneering role in challenging the symbolic paradigm of an entire Western tradition. Their festivities stand out as spaces where members play leading roles in their traditions, organizing costumes, parades, and tributes to their patron saints. The same happens with the crowning of kings and queens, a practice that recalls the places and myths of origin of those who were brought to Brazil as enslaved individuals. This symbolic inversion, by allowing members of these associations to be elected as royalty, challenges and subverts the established order, giving a new dynamic to social and cultural structures.

Dances

The confluence of elements from African and Amerindian corporealities and poetics, with their mixtures related to the very idea of erudition of body, also coming from classical European traditionalism, build a key to understanding the modern Brazilian dance presented by Mercedes Baptista in the mid-20th century. The dance of the Orixás expressed by Joãozinho da Goméia, the “scissors” step present in the frevo dance from Recife, the dramatizations of the Black body as a scene-body, unfolded from the terrible laments of colonialism, were paths for Mercedes’ concept of scenic gesture to subvert the relationships between what is defined as popular and erudite. In addition to them, it is also possible to mention Josephine Baker who, despite her geographical distance, used her own social and identity markers to reimagine and relocate her body in her favor. Looking at ancestral cadences and heritages provides an interweaving and updating of cultural manifestations and their particularities.

Festivities and Processions

The festive dimensions expand into several cultural and artistic expressions. The Iemanjá Festivals, the Noites de São João¹, the Folia de Reis², the Festa do Divino³, and other celebrations of saints bring the marks of religious confluence, which takes to the streets in an engaging combination between tradition and contemporaneity, the sacred and the profane. It is in the streets, in the open air, that people gather and give themselves to the festivities, in processions that transcend their religious aspects to compose a cultural and social landscape based on various modes and possibilities.

These processions, intrinsically linked to the city's public spaces, collectively rework their use, shaping a scenario in which the dynamics of celebrations intertwine with daily life. The movement of people, gestures of devotion, artistic manifestations, and religious rites all blend into this symbolic experience of sharing space.

The calendar, which crosses and marks the year with various festivities, recreates other ways of experiencing time, circulation, affections, and gestures in the urban fabric, making the city alive and in constant transformation to be delighted in.

The Idea of Fantasy and Character Construction

The relationship between living and fantasizing, between wearing everyday clothes and a costume has been interchanged. The party is an opportunity to break social taboos and give vent to the imagination freedom, which is often a psychological projection of oneself. "Imagination" is the appropriate term when dealing with phantasia, a Latin word used to designate the imaginary, a "mental figuration" as Dietmar Kamper, German sociologist, explains. However, what was seen as fantasy was actually linked to the very meaning of the word "identity". Brazil found itself, especially in metropolitan areas, transforming its ethnic plurality into fantasy: indigenous people, "baianas", "malandros" (tricksters, rogue and/or streetwise persons), and gypsies. And this reconfigured and, sometimes, disrespected what was characterized as ritualistic clothing, and therefore, restricted. In another sense, gender dissidence itself has been prejudiced and confused with the possibilities of fantasizing. The point is that the costume activates a double praxis, one is the sociocultural position that defines the idea of "I" in a collectivity, and the other is the sphere of commentary, mockery (a term that designated a specific popular Carnival practice), supposedly a joke. From the Greek idea of tragedy, in which masks amplified feelings and defined the narrative genres of theater (tragedy and comedy), to the Afrocentric rites and those of the indigenous peoples, in which other masks turned us into jaguars, birds, and other animals – our relatives –, we retain a sense of fantasy that is more complex than simply dressing up.

¹ It is a traditional Brazilian festival, also known as Festa Junina, which celebrates Saint John's Day with dances, typical dishes, and games.

² It is a popular Brazilian Catholic folk tradition involving a procession that takes place between December 24, Christmas Eve, and January 6, Three Kings' Day, recalling the visit of the three kings to the Child Jesus. An approximate translation would be The Festival of the Three Kings.

³ The Divine Holy Spirit Festival is a Catholic celebration held in May or June, which begins on Alleluia Saturday and ends on Pentecost Sunday. The festival features popular elements that have been incorporated – religious syncretism – such as the figure of the Emperor, the raising of the flagpole, etc.

Trance and Catharsis

Here, trance and catharsis are revealed as elements profoundly rooted in human experience, manifesting through artistic expressions and symbolic representations that permeate our world and existence. These concepts are explored in several manifestations from African-derived religions, their rituals, their incorporation, and the complexities of life itself when we find ecstasy, libertinism, transgression, chaos, and the surrender of insubordinate bodies, all reflected in the aesthetic intentions of the works. In this context, the boundaries between sacred and profane, between faith and orgy, intertwine, evoking reminiscences of raciality framed by the religious culture resulting from the diaspora and its rich material and immaterial culture.

This is how we connect with the aesthetic of Candomblé, with the presence of Umbanda entities and their enchantments, as well as with the expressions found in the street demonstrations and other aspects that provoke the rich performances of bodies. These observations lead us to explore the semiotics of these events and their various modes of recording and announcing.

Block of Myself Alone

“In the Block of Myself Alone / I do everything and I’m nothing / I’m the samba and the tired fantasy revelry (...) Alone, I’m the city / I’m the deserted crowd / Dancing feet and open hand / In search of a fulfilling life”, say the lyrics of the 1968 song by Marcos Valle and Ruy Guerra. The song refers to the carioca journalist Júlio Silva, a unique character who, between 1919 and 1979, paraded alone through the vibrant streets of the Rio de Janeiro’s Carnival. Dressed as a clown, Mister Júlio wielded an improvised and rudimentary banner made of Styrofoam and a broomstick, which read in large letters: Block – Myself Alone – 1st and Only in Brazil. Each year, the reveler handed out poetry, marchinhas [Carnival songs], and trinkets while reciting improvised verses, expressing his appreciation for celebrating Carnival unaccompanied. If the Carnival block is a collective celebration, enjoying one’s own block, alone, implies performing freedom and absurdity.

Blocks and Street Demonstrations

In the bustling streets of Rio de Janeiro, the Carnival blocks, with their vibrant practices, not only occupy public spaces but also entangle discourses that call for the rights to the city. They diversify the occupation of these spaces, unfolding into festive and protest demonstrations. When people take to the streets to play and have fun, dressing according to the block's theme, they not only reinterpret the use of the places, but also change the temporal dynamic: they move from everyday routine to the celebration of the present.

Samba, with its captivating melody and pulsating percussions rhythms, traces a winding path through the city's alleys. In these places, musicians gather to play, to weave stories that exalt and strengthen community ties, opening doors to the new social interactions that are revealed, perceived, and heard there.

The street, in turn, plays a crucial role in the search for new ways of existing. With energy and courage, the dissident and disobedient bodies claim presence and voice, challenging the established norms and proposing new paths for the public sphere.

In this dynamic, the street transcends its simple function as a place to pass through or to party. At times, it becomes the stage for resistance, suspending conventional norms and revealing itself as a territory of insurgency and transgression.

Back to Painting

The difficult years of the Brazilian military dictatorship were also a powerful period of cultural production, subversion, and reinvention. Strategies to circumvent censorship reconfigured meanings, metaphors, and senses; everything could be obvious, or not! The violence used exhaustively by the repressive agencies had different targets and interests. However, it was in art, and especially in mass artistic languages, such as music, that the paranoid and violent instinct exercised its most sordid persecution.

The decade that was marked by the horrors of the dictatorship gave way to the 1980s, which was traversed by two major movements: the amnesty law and, soon after, the Diretas Já [Direct elections now] campaign. In the visual arts, the return to painting emerged as a repositioning in relation to the conceptualism of the previous decade; gestures, colors, vibrations, and joy regained the protagonism of two-dimensionality. This feeling of freedom and the vigor of the rebellion also heralded a long-lasting movement in Brazilian rock. It was in this scenario that the AIDS epidemic reconfigured an entire ethical stance towards the body, and sexuality and desire directly interfered in the conduct of pleasure.

This complex moment of reorganization of civil society, after long years of military dictatorship, heralded a decade of economic crisis and hyperinflation that was also marked by the audacity to evoke a body for partying through tropicalism [Brazilian cultural movement], carnival balls, protests, and rebellions.

Pleasure Block and Gal Costa

The transition from dictatorship to democracy in Brazil was a remarkable and complex moment in our history, in which freedom emerged as a fundamental value. In this context, the song “Bloco do Prazer” [Pleasure Block], composed by Fausto Nilo and Moraes Moreira in 1980, gained even more significance, as it evoked the image of a carnival block as a symbol of euphoria, freedom, and resistance. Gal Costa, one of the most iconic voices in Brazilian music, has contributed immensely to the country's culture, and her masterful interpretation of the song echoed like an anthem of collective celebration. With her unmistakable timbre, Gal Costa brought to life the lyrics that invited: “Come, my love, like crazy / ‘Cause life is short / And I want much more”. The song, sung by Gal’s vibrant performance, reflects the spirit of the time when the Brazilian Society sought to reaffirm its right to expression and joy.

In the early 1970s, the most complex period of the dictatorship, it was on stage – the sacred place – that some artists took a stand. There, they proposed significant transformations, as can be seen in the show and album, - Fa -Tal - Gal a Todo Vapor [- Fa – Tal – At Full Steam], produced by Waly Salomão. The artists Luciano Figueiredo and Oscar Ramos visually designed the double album, while Gal Costa's performance and positioning on stage, combined with the sophisticated visuals, were important gestures of the counterculture in Brazil. Then, she released the album Índia [Indigenous] in 1973, directed by Waly Salomão, which was censored visually – the album was released in black packaging because the cover image did not please the censorship agencies – and sonically, as one of the songs could not be broadcast on radio. The artist’s performance on stage and her repertoire full of a mixture that highlighted the popular reinvented the instance of the modern.

In the early 1980s, Gal Costa released a set of songs, including marchinha and frevo, on different albums, which expressed this need for reinvention. “Festa do interior” [Countryside Party], “Massa Real” [Real Mass], “Onde está o dinheiro?” [Where Is the Money?], “Balancê” [Balancê (dance step, sway)], “Pegando fogo” [On Fire], along with many others, indicated the “Bloco do Prazer” [Pleasure Block].

Frevos and afoxés

Frevos and afoxés form the two embryonic bases for understanding the sounds present in axé-music, in the street Carnival and in the electric trios [a vehicle equipped with a stereo and a stage] created by Dodô and Osmar.

Frevo, marked by the interaction between music and dance, has its origins in Recife and emerged in the 19th century from a mixture of musical genres of the time: imperial modinha, maxixe, quadrilha, marching bands, polka, capoeira, pastoril, etc. It was in the workers' fanfare that Frevo became popularized and recognized as a musical genre and was later subdivided into three modalities: street frevo, frevo-canção [frevo-song], and block frevo.

Known as “street candomblés”, afoxés have in their manifestations the religious, mystical, and aesthetic aspects that link them to the cults of the orixás [divinities worshiped in African and Brazilian religions]. However, they go beyond the confines of the terreiros [place where some Afro-Brazilian cults are celebrated], being suitable for public exposure in their traditional Carnival parades, which were consolidated in the 1950s after black processions and clubs became recurrent in the late 19th century. To this day, the group's parade is accompanied only by percussion instruments, and their members are all men, with no female presence in the procession.

Tupinicópolis

Carnival composer Fernando Pinto made this career with the group Império Serrano in the 1970s, scoring samba songs such as “Alô, alô, taí, Carmen Miranda” [Hello, Hello, There You Are, Carmen Miranda]. In 1980, Pinto was hired by Mocidade Independente de Padre Miguel, and in 1981, he created the samba hit “Como era verde o meu Xingu” [How Green Was My Xingu]. In 1987, the emblematic theme “Tupinicópolis” brought to the avenue a critical view of tropical “touristification” concerning the tradition of indigenous peoples, which were appropriated and exploited by capitalism. Amazônia was mischaracterized by an exploratory and metropolitan project: “And the oca became a taba / The taba became a metropolis / Here is the great Tupinicópolis”. And what could compose the elements of Brazilian identity became commerce and industry: “Saci Nightclub / Boitotá Shopping Mall”. Fernando Pinto also worked as a visual artist in exhibitions in the 1980s.

Moraes Moreira

In 1967, lyricist Galvão, born in Juazeiro, in the north of the state of Bahia, asked Moraes Moreira, born in Ituaçu (Bahia), to set his poems to music. Like this, the musical group Novos Baianos was formed with the participation of Baby Consuelo, Pepeu Gomes, Dadi Carvalho, Bola, Baixinho, Jorge Gomes, and Paulinho Boca de Cantor, which scored big hits in the 1970s such as “Acabou Chorare” [It is Over Crying], “Tinindo Trincando” [Jingle Jangle], “Swing de Campo Grande” [Swing From Campo Grande], among many other songs. Moraes Moreira was the first composer to sing on a trio elétrico (truck or trailer adapted with sound equipment for the presentation of live music) by Dodô and Osmar in 1975. Moraes went on to a solo career, opening his repertoire to various other partnerships, such as the one with Fausto Nilo, who produced songs on anthological albums like Bazar brasileiro [Brazilian Bazaar] e Lá vem o Brasil descendo a ladeira [Here Comes Brazil Going Downhill]. The singer, musician, and composer always performed with his guitar and gained fame and prominence in Brazilian popular music.

Fausto Nilo

Poet, lyricist, and composer, born in Quixeramobim, in Ceará, Fausto Nilo arrived in the capital, Fortaleza, during the years of debauchery in the 1970s, under the vigilant eyes of the dictatorial military regime. He had many partners, such as the musicians Belchior, Fagner, and Moraes Moreira, whose songs were recorded by exponential MPB singers, such as Nara Leão, Gal Costa, Maria Bethânia, and Simone, among others. In his lyrics, Fausto Nilo, who also happened to be an architect, paid attention to political messages that provided alternative visions to the military regime by proclaiming freedom and joy in romantic lyrics set to popular and traditional rhythms, such as frevo (dance from Recife) and samba. “Bloco do prazer” [Pleasure Block], a partnership with Moraes Moreira, rescues the atmosphere of political openness and democratic freedom, speeding up the sound of the old marchinhas [Carnival songs], to encourage people to indulge in the momentary and cathartic passions of Carnival.

Clóvis Bornay

Clóvis Bornay has been a constant and unmistakable personage in Rio’s Carnival for 77 years and one of the pioneers in the introduction of gala balls in Brazil, which took place at the Theatro Municipal do Rio de Janeiro and featured prizes for the most luxury costumes. Over the years, Bornay won several awards, and his repeated success earned him the title of “hors-concours” of Carnival balls in 1961. As a carnival organizer, he worked for the samba schools Salgueiro, Portela, Mocidade Independente, Unidos da Tijuca, and Viradouro. He always brought innovations. For example, he came up with the idea of highlighting some prominent representatives of the theme samba at the top of the floats, which became his indelible mark on the Brazilian Carnival.

He has also worked as a museologist at the Museu da República, and his trajectory was marked by the diversity in his work as an actor, carnival organizer, teacher, costume designer, researcher, curator, performer, cultural agitator, and LGBTQIAPN+ rights activist.

More than a carnival organizer, Clóvis Bornay was also known for his outlandish personality and magnetic charisma. His presence was always felt at parties and social events when he charmed everyone with his sharp wit and exuberance.

Despite his success and acclaim, Bornay also faced challenges throughout his life, including prejudice and discrimination due to his gender identity and sexual orientation. However, his determination and undeniable talent helped him overcome these obstacles, becoming a symbol of pride and resistance for the LGBTQIAPN+ community.