

“CULTURAL RE-VISIONS OF THE BRAZILIAN TROUPE, DZI CROQUETTES”

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Abstract: Dzi Croquettes was a Brazilian dance troupe that in the 1970s and 1980s performed shows based on extensive critical revisions of gender and sexuality as part of a contestational resistance to the authoritarian dictatorship resulting from the 1964 military overthrow. This study examines two interpretations of the troupe, Madalena Schwartz's photography of the members of the group and the 2009 documentary film by Raphael Álvarez and Tatiana Issa.

Keywords: Dzi Croquettes (dance troupe), Dzi Croquettes (documentary), Brazilian dictatorship (1964-85), cultural resistance, sexual genders (contest action of), dance and sexual identity, Madalena Schwartz, Raphael Álvarez, Tatiana Issa.

April 1964: The Brazilian Armed Forces take over the government and oust President João Goulart. March 1968: Ato Institucional 5 approved, suspending all civil rights for Brazilians and imposing draconian censorship. 1972: The creation of a dance troupe in Rio de Janeiro that will have a profound effect on the development of a culture of resistance to the military dictatorship; The first show was presented in Rio de Janeiro at 1972 Teatro da Praia, then at 1973 the troupe performs in São Paulo, first at the small night club Ton-Ton Macoute (nickname of the Haitian dictator Papa Doc Duvalier and his hungry men, an irony off course with that hard times and with the party that happened inside that night club). With the strong success they moved to a big Theater 13 de Maio at Bixigas neighborhood, also a theatrical and slam neighborhood, when they start the show with the name *Dzi Croquettes*. Their last performance was in 1980 in Rio de Janeiro.

Zieg Viu: Dzi Croquettes em Bandália

Trechos do documentário em <http://mrzieg.com/2013/03/zieg-viu-dzi-croquettes-em-bandalia/>

The origins of the name Dzi Croquettes is on disputes, the majority critics debit its name as an inspiration on the San Francisco's group The Cockettes (1969-1972), a psychedelic drag queen troupe, but what none points out is that it can be also a Brazilian ironic comment with two words, first with the English word "The" (Dzi) and also, and most important, the cheap snack croquets, which has its name pronounced in Portuguese with a French accent and two interferences the "R" and the two "tt". So, both names are "impersonating" a foreign word, one with English accent and other with French accent, as to be a foreigner has a better value than to be local.

Moreover, as a slang, this word has a direct and subtle and ambiguous reference to the phallus. Brazilian culture has always developed the double meanings with words mainly with sexual connotation. Croquet is actually a cheap meat fried dough filled with meat, the "r" and the tt also intend to make the cheap small fried dough very elegant, but is still a common dish, very popular

in Brazil. "To like a croquete" has a meaning of being a homosexual because you may like "fresh and round meat", a common term in straight or homo ghettos, because of the elongated form with meat inside, according to this way of saying things, if you are a homo you like "to put meat inside". Coquete is also another word for a prostitute (cocote), and also this can be referred to a French woman, as the common sense stated she suppose to have "sex appeal". This game with words could go forever, cocote is also a chicken, another portuguese and fresh tem term for prostitute. So The Croquettes carries also has an ambiguous meaning with being poor and "chic", so the letter R and the double tt is a kind pretending of being high class. If you mix that with the motto of the group "not a man, not a woman, people" that can be read also as people: can be both (men and woman).

Re-vision through Documentary Film

The troupe has recently been remembered in the prizewinning documentary by Tatiana Issa and Raphael Álvarez, *Dzi Croquettes* (2009). The film is old as a memoir of the troupe from the point of view, in the first instance, of the young Tatiana whose father, Américo Issa, served in the latter part of the 1970s as technical director for the troupe (Various clips of the film are accessible on the internet). In other instances, it is a history of the troupe, a characterization of the thirteen men who made up the troupe, the recollections of the five who are still living, recollections of others who were involved in aspects of the troupe's history and/or with various members of the troupe, and, finally, declarations that seek to characterize the revolutionary and deep impact Dzi Croquettes had on Brazilian culture until today. Despite the enormous importance of the troupe as part of the history of cultural resistance in Brazil during the 1964-85 dictatorships, mainly in the hard times of the beginning of the 70, to the best of my knowledge, no archival copies exist of complete performances in Brazil or Europe.(1)

Of particular importance is the way in which Issa's film contributes to the ongoing reconstruction of Brazilian culture during the period of the military dictatorship (1964-83) and the creation of a cultural record that is grounded in continuities between institutional periods as much as it recalls important ruptures. Moreover, Dzi Croquettes are part not only of a larger tradition of transgressive culture in Brazil, but specifically of queer dimensions that are integral to where Brazil is currently in sociocultural terms, particularly in urban contexts. The troupe formed by Lennie Dale (an ex american Broadway dancer), Wagner Ribeiro de Souza, Claudio Gaya, Cláudio Tovar, Ciro Barcelos, Reginaldo de Poli, Bayard Tonelli, Rogério Poli, Paul Bacellar, Benedictus Lacerda, Carlinhos Machado, Eloy Slater and Robert Rodrigues began working in the 1970s, reaching their apogee in the late 1970s in Paris (Liza Minnelli was only one of a number of international artists who promoted their work), only to eventually break up after a disastrous return to Brazil in the 1980s; various acts of violence and AIDS also took their toll.

The troupe's name also refers to the fact that the thirteen members all projected a beef masculine persona. This was not a cute transvestite clan whose programs were designed for a tourist audience interested in a little spicy gender play. As one impresario who worked with them underscores, none of them had any interest in being a women—that is, transgendering or transexuality was not the base of their routines. Rather, they were primarily interested in question established gender conventions and identity and in deconstructing the rigid conventions of gender that were integral to allegedly decent Brazil and whose dominance was particularly enforced by the masculinism of the military regime, with its emphasis on hypermasculinity and patriarchal ideologies.

The gender-fucking of Dzi Croquettes (there is really no other word for what they were about) ridicules gender conventions, such that the apparently grotesque surface of their performances

underscore what is the more grotesque nature of the enforcement of gender categories. This is summarized by the often repeated assertion in the documentary, both at the level of the archival footage of actual performances and at the level of interviews and voice-over narration that they were “neither men or women, but [rather] just people.” The use of the pronoun *gente* in Portuguese is crucial here, since, while it means people, it is a first-person inclusive plural, subsuming within its pragmatic realm both the persons speaking and the persons being spoken to—that is, the spectator of the performance.

This abolition of the boundary between we the queer performers and you the privileged audience (some of whom may have come to see, as it were, monkeys in the zoo performing on stage for them) is a fundamental discourse principle of Dzi Croquettes’s performance texts. And, of course, it is a fundamental discourse principle of Issa’s and Álvarez’s documentary. One cannot respect the universe of the documentary without acknowledging that the movie house audience is a part of the performance. The risks that Dzi Croquettes took, with the censorship of Brazilian (and Portuguese) censorship in the mid-1970s, the risks that they took with their own bodies in the creation of performance persona (which included imprisonment, physical deterioration, and early death), and, fundamentally, the risks that they took in the creation of routines that audiences and critics at the time found difficult to categorize were all part of the defiance of fossilized cultural categories, authorized artistic expression, and violently imposed social subjectivities. If the dictatorship exercised violence in the interplay between what was permissible and what was banned, the performance routines of Dzi Croquettes would be symbolically violent acts of defiance designed to disrupt cultural complacency. In the end, the troupe performed as much—perhaps a bit more—abroad than in Brazil (they performed in Lisbon, Paris, London, but never New York, despite the fact that their lead dancer, Lennie Dale, came out of Broadway and they had the endorsement of Liza Minelli). We need to remember that Liza Minelli (1942) is also a star of “Cabaret” a musical film made on 1972 which made a great success in Brazil, and because of its deep criticism to Nazism, a great success inside the Brazilian Intelligentsia.

But, in the manner of much of Latin American culture, the critical success of their foreign work legitimated them for Brazilian culture.

There is, of course, an immense pale of nostalgia to this documentary, but not because Issa is remembering the “little clowns” of her childhood, as much as they are an important memory for her. Rather it is the way in which, in terms of the history of Brazilian art, Dzi Croquettes came and went so fast. By the end of the 1970s, the troupe had fragmented significantly. Four were early victims of AIDS (including Dale), while one died of a stroke. Three were murdered under circumstances never fully explained, and the remaining five have long since gone onto other careers, only some in performance. In general all the artistic forms of contestation were dismantled with the new democratic era that was arising at the end of the 1970’s.

The consensus that the films structure is designed to confirm is that the group provided an effective counter discourse that manage to avoid the heavy censorship, giving voice to new ways among Brazilians of viewing gender construction, and provided discourse elements that will become integral to the gay movement and the development of queer culture in Brazil. Almost forty years later, the *borboletas* (butterflies) of one of their famous routines at their show can stand as an icon of a performance response to one of the ugliest eras of social and cultural life in Brazil. As Wagner Ribeiro, one of the founders, asserts repeated: “nothing is done without love,” and love in multiple conjugations abounds in the Dzi Croquettes phenomenon.

Borboletas também sangram

Bayard Tonelli (trecho)

(...) Borboletas também sangram e sofrem
Nos campos de batalhas Nos lares, escritórios E ao se verem preteridas Postas
de lado por exuberantes Lagartas oportunistas Ao tomarem o centro do jardim
(...)
(Song Butterfly from the show)

Re-vision through Photography

There is something legendary about the hungar born, Madalena's Schwartz (1921-1993) emergence as one of Brazil's most important photographer, and perhaps her most important portrait photographer. (2) Her discovery, in 1966, of the camera in middle age (one her son won in a school competition) and her sudden awakening to its artistic possibilities are really quite remarkable. Even more remarkable is that, prior to her becoming totally professionalized, most with her portrait work for some of the most important newsprint and editorial houses in the country, is the story of her frequenting the bars, cabarets, and transvestite performance venues of Sao Paulo's limitless and always morphing night life. At a time when this world was undergoing intense scrutiny by the military regime put in place in 1964, especially for what today we would call its contestational queer dimensions, Schwartz was there, making friends with the performers and winning their confidence to photograph them in both their performance splendor and in the various stages of construction and deconstruction of their persona.

Photographs often engage in self-portrayal, as though a candid image of them engaged in their work might somehow serve to legitimate the often jarring aspects of their art. This collection is no exception, and very early on (page 9) there is the image of Schwartz with her camera in hand, mouth open in concentration, shooting an image that is outside the range of the self-image. The decor behind her looks very much like a banquet setting rather than a cabaret space, but the effect is the same: this somewhat portly Jewish matron having entree with her camera into some of the most intimate spaces of Sao Paulo life.

Schwartz is perhaps best known for her work with the famous transvestite/cross-dressing/gender fucking dance troupe, Dzi Croquettes. Dzi Croquettes were not simply transvestite performers. Rather, they strove to organize complex numbers that involved the troubling of gender and sociopolitical commentary (two engagements that were not, to be sure, unrelated). What is memorable about them, in addition to the complexity of their performances, was the way in which they deconstructed cultural icons, including transvestite performance as such, at a time in which both the right and left in Brazil and Latin America were firmly anchored in heteronormativity.

Schwartz worked exclusively in black and white, which clashes jarring with the display of color one immediately associates with Dzi Croquettes as evidenced in existing archival images and their world as portrayed in the Alvarez-Issa documentary. But Schwartz's black-and-white format is profoundly effective in capturing the ambiguities, the transformations, the details hidden behind the exuberant performances of nine central figures of the troupe.

There is no indication as to who chose the title for this posthumous collection (Schwartz died in 1993, and much of her work has been published posthumously by the Instituto Moreira Salles, which archives and controls the bulk of artistic photography in Brazil), but it is an apt title, because the focus of Schwartz's images is not on the finished product (although there is much of that), but on the process of becoming, which is, one might stress, the essence of the performative

ideology of Dzi Croquettes: not static images, but those in the process of forming; not static identities, but those in the process of organization; not anchored signs, but those in the process of inserting themselves transgressively and in a destabilizing fashion in otherwise unquestioned semiotic systems. The images of performers who, despite manifest secondary and tertiary male sex characteristics, are in the process of adding female ones without erasing the former; artists who are captured an amalgam of putatively conflicting sexual characteristics; artists whose performance persona reveal in full view the hand that de/constructs them. None of Schwartz's images are glossy production numbers: somehow Schwartz is able to transmit imagistically the not always agreeable sounds and smells of the work of performance. Art is work in the considerable exertion involved in its fabrication, and art is work in the complex photographic compositions Schwartz enabled with her camera.(3)

Artistic photography remains understudied in Latin America, and even more so when it involves some of the important coordinates present in this volume: women's cultural production, that of ethnic minorities, and queer lives on the margins of decent society. Remarkably, there is little queer photography as yet in Latin America (Graciela Iturbide in Mexico, Marcos Zimmerman in Argentina, Pedro Meyer, also in Mexico), and there is a lot to be said for this work done in the oppressive 1970s in Brazil by a Jewish housewife who refused to limit the use of her newfound interest to family events. The adequate scholarly analysis of Dzi Croquettes has finally been undertaken by Lobert, which places the troupe in its proper historical and social context. The work by Issa-Álvarez from the perspective of documentary filmmaking and by Schwartz from the perspective of artistic photography contributes equally important entries in bibliographic record of this important dance troupe.

NOTAS

(1) Information on the history of the group may be found at the Enciclopedia Itaú Cultural: Teatro website. Rosemary Lobert provides a superb historical and interpretive analysis of Dzi Croquettes. It is interesting to note that Lobert's work first began as an M.A. thesis in social anthropology presented in 1979 at the Universidade Estadual de Campinas, São Paulo, Brazil. Thus, Lobert had direct access to the group during the first version of their work.

(2) I examine Schwartz's photography in my *São Paulo: Perspectives on the City and Cultural Production* (98-111), including a detailed analysis of some of her images of Dzi Croquettes.

(3) The Dzi Croquettes group, while it is featured in the collection--and rightly so: an adequate sociohistoric interpretation of its revolutionary artistic work remains to be given--do not provide the only images for *Crisálidas*. The dossier opens with a large set of images of the show business personality, Elke Maravilha, whose work (although she never did cross-dressing), is very much related to the extravaganzas of Dzi Croquettes, and images of a number of other performers round out this marvelous collection.

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