

**The smile of the
extraordinary cats' (three
scenes and one dedication)**

Daniela Mattos

Scene 1: On a Sunday – not just any Sunday; Sunday, March 8th, 2015 (curiously enough, the International Women’s Day; in other words, we still need a special day to remind us there is no gender equality) –, my best friend, who is an artist, professor, writer, poet, and gay, tells me about a quarrel on Facebook. He is one of my informers who constantly updates me on the debates that take place online, since I don’t have a profile on this social network, neither I intend to (even my yoga instructor has suggested that I create a fake profile, but I am still not convinced!). Getting back to the quarrel: Maria Bethânia publicly declared, in an interview published that very morning, that “at a given time, Gal Costa withdrew herself from the music scenario.” She was talking about the pause Gal took in her career, which resulted in a hiatus that would only end when the album *Recanto* was released, in 2011. Bethânia’s words set up a commotion among Gal’s fans who fiercely defended their diva, explaining the motives or the relevance of such a pause taken by the singer – who, in my humble opinion, is one of the greatest singers in the history of pop music. My friend, like me a fan of the two marvelous women involved in the squabble, read his post on Facebook to me, in which he gave his version of the facts. He took the opportunity to show me a rough video recording of Gal’s most controversial concert (available on YouTube²): *O Sorriso do Gato de Alice /The Smile of Alice’s Cat*, directed by the compelling theater director Gerald Thomas way back in the 1990’s, more specifically in 1994. In the opening scene of the concert, a super-hot Gal Costa comes out of a pit, crawling like a cat, with her beautifully wild bushy hair, wearing silk pajamas (the color is undefined: my friend says it was dark green, but I think he was betrayed by his memory because if you look at the images, it seems more like dark blue or bluish dark grey...). My beloved friend, who attended the concert, tells me how much it affected his teenage years. He did not come out of the experience unharmed, nor was he the same: Gal’s performance of the smile of Alice’s cat transformed him.

1. Cat is a slang for cute girls in Portuguese; “Extraordinary Cats” is a reference to a famous song composed by Caetano Veloso and interpreted by Cássia Eller.

2. Available on <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uSDOwoT20TI> (accessed on March, 18th, 2015)

As I write this text, I wonder if that moment might have been the spark that ignited his becoming-woman. It seems that experience “pierced his eyes and made him sing better”; reminding me of what the *sertanejos* do to their *assum-preto* birds in rural Brazil due to the belief blind birds sing better.

You might be asking yourself, “what does that have to do with me”, “why should this almost banal anecdote stir up any interest”. I’ll tell you, it does have something to do with you. And the reason is quite simple: it is very likely that you know the two singers involved in the squabble and you most probably have a Facebook account. You may even have defended Gal or Bethânia, given those circumstances.

That furnishes us with a good example of a situation in which the public and the private become intertwined. Thence, we witness a micropolitical transition: the blurring line turning unclear the two categories. What should it be considered exclusively public or exclusively private? The particulars of that discussion are becoming weaker and mixed-matched, undergoing the same process than many other key concepts in contemporaneity. This hybridism seems to hold us hostage to the so-called society of spectacle – “all cameras on your every move” as a soap opera character used to say – transforming us into compulsory soldiers fighting in a battle we do not necessarily wish to take part in. We must make a choice, then: either we live in self-imposed exile, refraining from certain things (having a Facebook account, for example), or we deign to belong to them (still using the “book of faces” as an example, people often join it believing to be actually connected to zillions of users, those alleged “friends”). Feminists have claimed the dispersion, or diaspora (a notion that is dear to AdF.14 - Atos de Fala festival), of what it might be considered “public space” and “private space” is the heart of the matter of gender equality. Feminist theorists have been studying the relationship between private and public lives for decades, since “according to some feminist theories, privacy and intimacy are considered to be fundamental values, whereas others believe the real problem is the equivalence between private space and domination”, as Brazilian historian Flávia Birolli states. It is easier to un-

derstand her quote when we look at what happens in Brazil on a daily basis – the news in any major newspaper show violence against women still runs rampant, in both public and private lives. The aspects of sheer violence are as perverse as diverse. Several women die because they have to resort to unqualified doctors and abort under substandard surgical conditions (abortion is still an illegal practice in Brazil), just as we witness women killed by their partners, or ex-partners, many times for reasons as simple as a split up. Here, we can clearly see the ambivalence between what might be deemed a public fact or a private one. These issues are domestic, since they are connected to the daily lives of numerous women and generate situations that occur in private, but they also carry public aspects, since they unfold from old-age behaviors and the curtailment of rights that still persist in our society. Fortunately, the debate about the right to a safe abortion, or the expression of intolerance towards any kind of aggression against women, has been more and more in the open. People in general talk about it, the press discusses it, and even political campaigns address the subject – even though the latter uses it as a bargaining chip. Moreover, we must remember something we take for granted, although we should not: it is up to the woman to choose what she wants to do with herself and to herself, and the decisions about her own body and her own subjectivity should be taken solely by her. This is something that the state and the religious fundamentalists do not take into consideration and, what is worse, intend to keep as a secret so that women don’t realize it.

Proceeding with the video, my friend points out: “Look how slim Gal was!” He kept on and told me that Gerald Thomas, the genius of experimental theatre as well as an active member of the counterculture movement, which was a breath of fresh air during the heavy years of the military dictatorship, forced Gal Costa to lose weight for the memorable performance/concert. People would often see the singer eating only chicken slivers and green salad, if she would eat at all. We are on the thresholds again: does that mean the singer decided to undergo a restricted diet in her private life in the name of a deep commitment to

her career, or was it a reflex of a tyrannical beauty standard in which thin women are revered and fat women abhorred? Also, isn't the standard imposed by the director the same that women have been imposing on themselves for centuries (ever since the corset and maybe before that) so that they might become an example of a beauty *modus operandi* that pleases both the current standard and the male (and female) desire expressed in the way they look at them? I'll leave the answer to all of you who have come to this line of my text. The lyrics of *Relance*, composed by one of Bethânia's brothers, Caetano Veloso, and recorded by Gal in the superb album *India* in 1973, might be useful for our reflection here: "Stop, notice; Cite, recite; Save, exempt; Return, revolt; Treat, retreat; Hide, reveal; Touch, retouch; Prove, reprove; Claim, complain; Deny, disown; Leap, note; Hit, repel; Hurt, refer; Break, dance; Move, agitate; Invent, shimmy; Spin, revolve; Run, resort; Kill, terminate; Die, be reborn; Die, be reborn; Die, be reborn"³.

Cut.

Scene 2: Chicago, -20° Celsius. We are in the bucolic Hyde Park, the neighborhood that houses the University of Chicago. It is October, fall season (try to imagine the most freezing weather you have ever experienced in your entire life – this one was probably worse) of 2013. A young Brazilian woman from Rio de Janeiro city, who had just pursued her doctorate, arrived there for three months, and is about to start her research on feminism – she is beginning to understand herself as a feminist. She spots a very welcoming bookshop. She walks in. There's a bell by the door, typical of the local bookshops. The shop smells of new books, there's a myriad of them around, a labyrinth of pages. The heating is providential and brings her instant relief. Amidst the scent of new books, and the skimming through book spines, there it comes the "aspiration to the great labyrinth". No, it was not the famous book by Hélio Oiticica, the artist/

3. In the original: "Pare, repara; Cite, recite; Salve, ressalve; Volte, revolte; Trate, retrate; Vele, revele; Toque, retoque; Prove, reprove; Clame, reclame; Negue, renegue; Salte, ressalte; Bata, rebata; Fira, refira; Quebre, requebre; Mexa, remexa; Bole, rebole; Volva, revolva; Corra, recorra; Mate, remate; Morra, renasça; Morra, renasça; Morra, renasça".

samba dancer/creator of *Parangolés* in the 1970's. The aspiration targeted her, Anaïs Nin, a writer who lived her life to the full, whose subconscious was extraordinarily rich, and who bequeathed us her imagistic and fantastic writings. The book is *The House of Incest*. It is a thin, mere 72 pages book, but full of oneiric, sexualized images and stories. The title made the Carioca woman feel a little embarrassed, but it also sheer attracted her. While she was figuring out how she would explain to her daughter or son – who, by the way, are yet to be conceived – what that book was about, and why she was interested in it, she pulls the book out of the shelf. In the first verse of that precious gem carved with words and images, the writer says: "All that I know is contained in this book written without witness, an edifice without dimension, a city hanging in the sky". Thud! That was not the first time Anaïs had that effect on the Carioca girl, who was once again on her knees, surrendered, in love. The collages that accompany the texts are also jaw-dropping, made by the surrealist Russian artist Val Telberg to further embellish the writer's poetic prose– Anaïs was in on it.

The recently PhD Carioca woman had already fallen deeply in love with Anaïs, it was an old love affair. In 2003, a critical year in the life of that Carioca, she stumbled upon *Delta of Venus*, a hidden pearl within her boyfriend's library. Whenever she read that book, either while commuting across the city in the comings and goings from work, or even while going to her psychoanalysis sessions, she experienced unforgettable and delicious erotic sensations or feelings.

Back to the bookshop in Chicago, on the same shelf where she found *The House of Incest*, the Brazilian woman found an infinity of *Diaries* written by Anaïs Nin and decided to take a look at them. The writer's diaries were published just after her husband's death, as Anaïs' wished. Anaïs, a liberated woman both in her writing and her sexuality, did not want to make her personal experiences public before the death of her man, after all, despite being a free spirit, Anaïs was a married woman. Her partner, her beloved one, her chosen for life companion, did not inhibit her sexual freedom and her desire for experiences with other

partners. However, their behavior most probably was not accepted by society at that time.

Perhaps society today would still judge this kind of behavior in a sexist way, even though polygamy is very common in contemporary life, for both men and women (despite being forbidden in conventional marriages). So, it was the writer's decision to spare her partner the moralist comments and any embarrassments that her conduct might have brought his way while he was still alive. She then kept the memory of her experiences to herself, poetically and literarily recording them in her diaries, waiting for her husband's death to publish them. "Oh, my love, this is true love", as would claim the popular Brazilian song from *Gang 90 & Absurdettes*⁴, back in 1980s.

Still in Chicago, our Carioca woman, who is an artist besides pursuing a doctorate, heard something about a documentary called *The Punk Singer*, based on the biography of the underground rock and roll singer Kathleen Hanna. Amid the several very interesting stories, two scenes in the film caught the attention of that specific spectator, the Carioca artist. In one of them, she identifies the punk singer, no one less than the beautiful, effusive, and disconcerting person who bounced and kissed Kim Gordon on the cheek in Sonic Youth's video clip *Bull in the Heather*. The Carioca woman remembers loving to watch this video clip in the 1990's. Dancing to that song in the clubs she used to go to at that time was something she enjoyed even more.

In another scene, Kathleen, the punk singer and vocalist from the adorable band *Le Tigre*, talks about a call from a journalist who phoned her at home to ask questions about her husband, a member of the Beastie Boys, a prominent band in the USA. She promptly replied: "I could put him on the phone, but he's too busy doing my laundry." Checkmate. The punk singer conveys her anger, showing the journalist how annoying it is to be treated as "someone's wife" – "Very annoying, indeed unbearable!" – the Carioca artist thought to herself. Once again, we see public and private

4. Telefone by Márcio Vaccari and Júlio Barroso (1983): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_zmeRTUkCX0 (visited on 03/18/15)

spheres closely intertwined, in this case related to the routine of a couple of white North-American artists, when the singer one of them decides to be ironic about a sexist situation and show that she is much more than her man's woman.

Still thinking about the hardships of the second sex, the Carioca woman thought that, besides Anaís Nin and Hugh Guiler, other intellectual and artist couples are interesting examples of how marriage may no longer serve as a means of domination. She also remembers that brand new forms of marriage have been created: Lilya and Osip Brik (especially if we consider the triangle formed with Vladimir Maiakovsky); Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre; Cassia Eller and Maria Eugênia Vieira Martins... there must be others, many others, artists or not, intellectuals or not. Let them come!

Cut.

Scene 3: Saturday, March 7th, 2015. Location: The Museum of Contemporary Art in Niterói. It is the closing night of the individual exhibition called *A Roof of my Own* (the title pays homage to Virginia Woolf's book *A Room of One's Own*, about women and fiction). At sunset, the Brazilian Carioca artist, coincidentally the same character from the previous scene (who also happens to be the author of this text), goes around the museum forecourt inviting people to take part in the collective performance *The Butterfly Effect*, conceived by her, together with the museum's director, Guilherme Vergara.

The group gathers on the front ramp and, one by one, they pick up a carved wooden fan that will supposedly help them endure the heat inside the galleries caused by a failure in the air-conditioning system. The walls of the galleries inside the museum have become projection surfaces and the flashlights from the participants' cellphones serve as a light source lamp to project the image of the carved Chinese fans onto the walls, covering the (post-) modernist architecture with lace patterns made of shadows.

After going around the museum, the guests are invited to gather in the main room to watch the premiere of the video-performance *Make Over*. The video was shot on the same week of the event, especially for the occasion, and was part of the homonym project (under develop-

ment since 2006). An incidental sound invaded the museum and became the soundtrack to that soundless video: it was a loud thunderous storm (“the dive of the sky”, according to the feminist Carioca artist). In the projected performance, the artist puts on her red lipstick and starts spreading it out, from her lips onto her whole face, until she becomes another, a red-colored other (“she looks like Hulk”, said a child who watched the video). The video-performance was projected on a wall right next to nothing less than a Lygia Clark painting that depicts a faceless woman (Lygia Clark has always been a reference to the Carioca artist). It was crystal clear that the fifty years that separate those two works of art were not enough to pull that two women apart. Lygia, a free woman, a diva in the right measure, dedicated her entire life, and almost all of her assets, to her work. We cannot say for sure, but the Carioca artist believes that Lygia’s intention with her faceless woman painting, and her own performance itself converge conception wise. When the Carioca covered her whole face with red lipstick, she not only transformed herself, but she also erased the identity of a specific being, allowing other people, regardless of gender, to mirror themselves in it.

The performance witnesses were as interesting as heterogeneous – as was the strong mysterious bond that developed throughout the event – and ranged from a Dutch curator, Tanja Boudoin, to anonymous visitors who had never set foot in a museum before. The situ(action), accompanied by thunder and lighting, also received the bright blessing of Oxum and Ogum deities.

Another public/private scene, art that derives from life and life that derives from art. The *lifeart* of the woman from Minas Gerais who painted a faceless woman in the 1950s, which, decades later, would be side by side with the *lifeart* of the woman from Rio de Janeiro, expressed in her performance (that made her use up virtually every lipstick she had) filmed at her friend’s house – her beloved friend Alexandre Sá, artist, poet, and gay, mentioned in the first scene above. Works of art shown to the public, eternally fed by the domesticities and inventions of their creators and of

those who decide to dedicate their time to give a proper gaze to it. Another day, a day like any other at the house of muses, full of public/private diasporas filled up with heat and affection.

Cut.

Fade out.

(End of summer, 2015. I dedicate this text, with my love and admiration, to Marguerite Duras, Hélène Cixous, Patti Smith, and Cassia Eller.)

