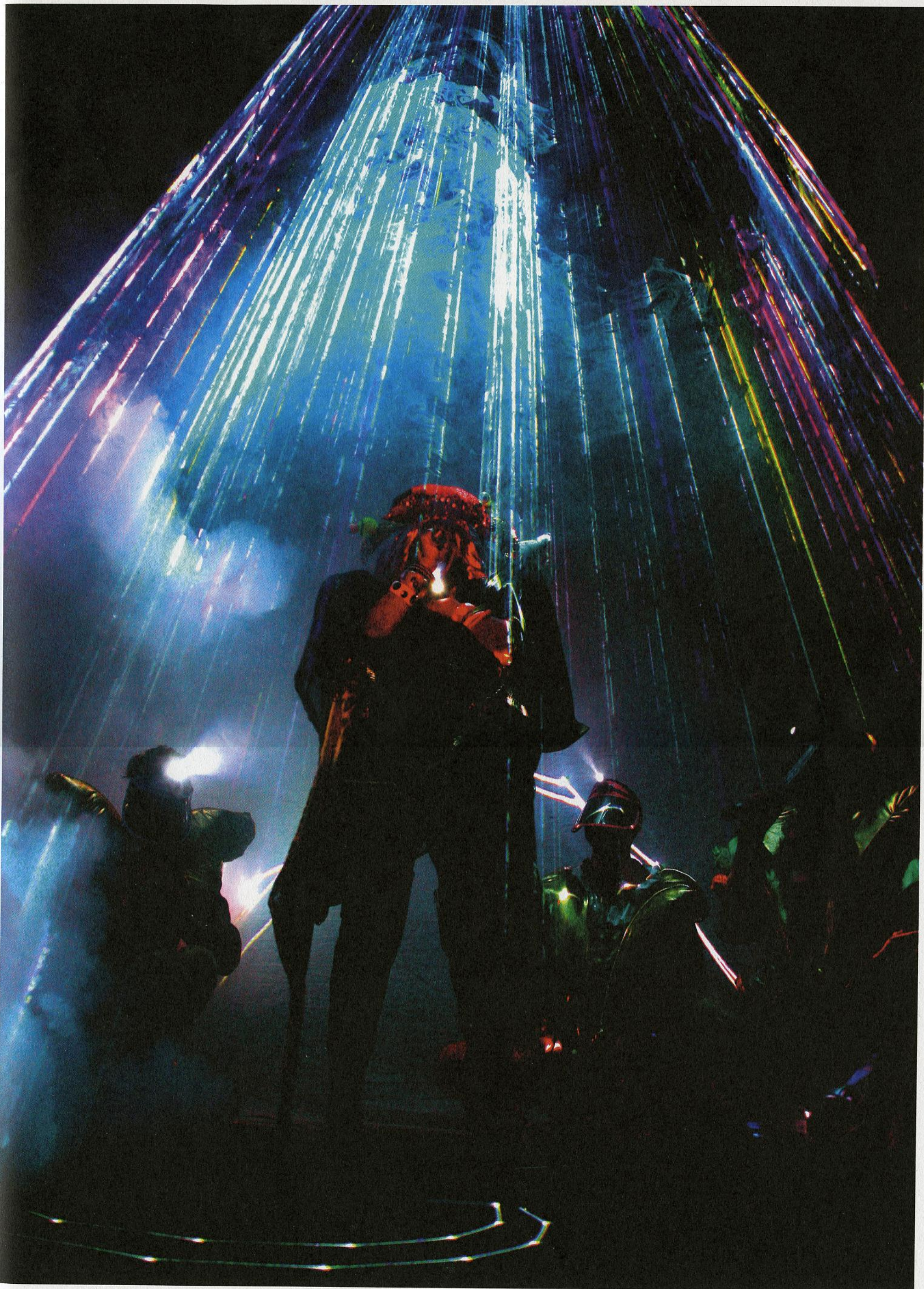




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We believe that a change has taken place on a DNA level. We are talking about a generation that is capable of absorbing all the different layers of information, a generation that is able to exist in different dimensions and to easily commute between them.

—ASSUME VIVID ASTRO FOCUS, Artist

The politically charged installation *a very anxious feeling* at John Connelly Presents in New York City in the summer of 2007 exhibited the contents of the storage space of the gallery. Ladders, plinths, and whatever else that usually belongs in the janitor's closet were wrapped in custom-made wallpaper. Its three dimensional print could be read using masks that were handed out at the door by attractive transvestites. Four letter words emerged from the wall and revealed amongst others: AIDS, BUSH, IRAQ, LOVE, HOPE, EVIL, PRAY, and so on. And this winter at Art Basel Miami Beach 2007, avaf rolled out a specially invited and extraordinarily dressed team of voguers, b-boys, and skaters to perform on a one-of-a-kind skate ramp. The beach was on fire, adults and children were dancing, and the circus that is the international art world turned into a real carnival.

Geir Haraldseth: Whenever I encounter avaf I'm always struck by all the references, all the different pointers in the work, whether it is formal issues or content. It could be Tropicália, Queer Culture, Miami Bass, or skateboarders, all mixed together in collage and performance work. I was reading Carlos Basualdo's writings on the idea of cultural cannibalism, and specifically in a Brazilian context, Anthropophagy. It seems to run through Brazilian culture, whether it's visual arts, music, literature or film. For example, the Brazilian Tropicália movement that originated in the late 1960 and which recently had a revival with major exhibitions touring the US and Europe. Anthropophagy struck me as an interesting approach to view avaf. How do you see avaf in terms of Anthropophagy? And what is your relationship to Tropicália?

avaf: There is definitely a connection, an inspiration, a background – whatever you want to call it – to Tropicália. As a (non) art movement it's probably the one that is the closest to the ideas of avaf. The interesting thing, though, is that we believe that the Anthropophagy ideas behind Tropicália have, in fact, been strengthened and potentialised over the past ten years. In the world we live in we are not just more exposed to the Other, but we are also bombarded by an unprecedented amount of information. We are learning to absorb and transform

this massive load of information more rapidly. We truly believe in the power of the internet and its capability to share and improve exponentially our perception and knowledge. In many ways, Anthropophagy is part of avaf's interest in the concept of contamination – eat the other and let yourself be eaten. Contaminate and be contaminated. Be *contagious*, which was our first neon piece. We believe also that there's a new human species breeding from all this experience. We believe that a change has taken place on a DNA level and when that change has been processed it will separate new, already existing, generations from previous ones. We are talking about a generation that is capable of absorbing all the different layers of information, a generation that is able to exist in different dimensions and is able to easily commute between them. And this is the core belief of all avaf projects. Share, generosity, contaminate, be contaminated, devour, be devoured, travel, spread.

Geir: So there's a change from the devouring of other cultures and of the Other to a more viral contamination that will evolve into a new human species? Wow. I guess there are similarities to Tropicália, which had a very strong political motive of change. It was not just about fun and dance, but I feel the political nature of Tropicália is often downplayed when it is being reassessed and represented in a contemporary context. How does that relate to avaf, where enjoyment, strong colours, dazzle, sex, 3D, plastic and fun take up a lot of the space? Do you feel the political nature of avaf is downplayed in the contemporary art world?

avaf: The political aspect of Tropicália is underplayed in an international context as people are not that aware of Brazil's military dictatorship which began in the mid 1960. In Brazil it is simply impossible to deny that – be that through the lyrics of popular songs or through sensorial experiments and experience. There's nothing *apolitical* intrinsically in *colours, fun, sex*. Fun also means lowering your barriers, besides also being related to or creating a community. It is a matter of being conscious of what gives you pleasure and being able to sustain it, repeat it, and fight for it. It is extremely political. Our projects have incorporated the power of a celebratory event more and more, as we believe there is a ritualistic force there – which usually takes place at our openings.

A communal celebration of awakening that is very different from the conservative and judgmental view related to drug culture, to people getting out of themselves. We want to bring people deep inside their souls, their bodies, and their beliefs. We want to entice alertness and conscience, which are, from our point of view, also intrinsic elements of Anthropophagy. The act of devouring the other means also knowing yourself. The rituals we propose are rituals of consciousness. You connect with yourself in order to fully connect with others. Colours, we suppose, are the last taboo in the stupid art world where they can't match concept and colours together. There is as much plastic as wood (if not more) in our latest installations.

Geir: Does Tropicália fit as a form of exoticism? Perhaps it was not initially intended as such, but the way that Tropicália has been devoured back into western society, it seems to be something of an exotic force. Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) provided a critique of Exoticism and Orientalism and has been extremely important for the post-colonial discourse of the past three decades. Still, it seems to be a valid way of seeing and presenting things, especially in art. How do you see the validity of "the Other" as a marketing tool in contemporary art? And what about the reception of avaf's work? Does the exoticism tag exist for avaf?

avaf: Exoticism was a concept also to be devoured. One of Tropicália's main icons was Carmen Miranda, the precursor of what is now known as a Brazilian identity under the universalising and stereotypical American culture's eyes. At the same time that she was an agent of America's imperialism, she was also contaminating it from within. In many ways, she became the personification of Anthropophagy. Tropicália believed in and utilised the power of the media, as a powerful vehicle for ideas. It believed in the dissemination of these ideas to the masses, and music was its most powerful agent or personificator. It's easier for people, especially critics, to relate to works historically by labelling and trying to pin down references and ancestors. As we said before, our world, our genes, our perception has changed and old-isms will not explain what is happening NOW. We would like to propose a test or an exercise to critics: stop relating to the past when writing about an artist's work. Let's stop talking about Old Masters, and

let's try to perceive contemporary ones. It's soooo easy to relate colour to psychedelia or carnival, but that's really a bore.

Geir: I hear you. I guess I have to do that test later. But I want to return to the idea of the exotic. Most often, the exotic has been based on geographical divides, which in turn indicates a cultural divide. But there are also other deviations considered exotic in western culture. Other "others", if you wish, I guess they are most often described as sub-cultures, queer, transgender, and so on, which is also a part of avaf's vocabulary. One specific example that comes to mind are the masks made for the exhibition *a very anxious feeling* at John Connelly Presents. The masks covered half the face of the wearer and they were a bit wonky. The face was taken from a photograph of a transvestite and then you added 3D lenses to the mask. What were the ideas behind the masks? Transform the gallery viewer into the Other? And how does the mask fit into avaf's story? I've seen different versions of this type of mask in a lot of your work.

avaf: At first the idea of making and wearing masks came out of necessity, pretty much. We wanted to disguise ourselves at openings to avoid being recognised. Then we realised the power of release unleashed by wearing a mask. We decided to produce different masks for the different shows we were developing. Transsexualism is an icon for us. A persisting taboo. A burst of sexual and body freedom. The tranny masks were initially made for our show at MOCA L.A. We made an installation that was an homage to club culture and how intrinsically related this history is to the birth of gay rights and the forming of a gay community. The masks also had special lenses attached to their eyeholes which would make all the lights in the installation multiply. We had lots of lights in the exhibition, especially neon and in the end people would be wearing the masks all the time.

Geir: I love the extra-sensory idea behind the masks, the parties and the performance. It's an excellent way of losing oneself. The crowd at the Miami Beach performance was really into the show and it seemed like a family event even though you had scantily clad voguers, freakish circus performers, and tough b-boys. I guess it's a viral dissemination of avaf and the Other and I really hope there isn't a cure!

—Geir Haraldseth