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Une histoire concise de la Bienal Internacional de São Paulo, 1951-2014

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São Paulo, second after Venice

The first Bienal Internacional de São Paulo took place in 1951, and in 2012 this event celebrated its thirtieth iteration. At a time when more than a hundred biennials, triennials, and other perennial exhibitions are now active worldwide, São Paulo's biennial can claim the distinction of being only the second one to come into existence. As such, it can also claim several precedents. It is not only the first international biennial to succeed the archetype of Venice, but also the first modern (and modernist) biennial and the first to be realized in a geopolitical location outside the Northern hemisphere and the canonical United States-Western European axis.

The inauguration of the Bienal Internacional de São Paulo was motivated by the combined cultural, economic, and political forces that shaped the post-war period within Brazil and internationally. It was founded by Francisco "Ciccillo" Matarazzo Sobrinho, an Italian-Brazilian industrialist who, only a few years before, in 1948, had founded the Museu de Arte Moderna de São Paulo (MAM-SP). Matarazzo's aim was "a festival in the mould of Venice,"¹ and the twin aspirations of the Bienal Internacional were, in the words of its first artistic director, Lourival Gomes Machado, "to put modern art of Brazil not simply in proximity but in living contact with the art of the rest of the world" and "for São Paulo to conquer the position of international artistic centre."²

The Bienal Internacional de São Paulo moved into its present-day permanent home, the Oscar Niemeyer-designed Ciccillo Matarazzo pavilion (originally named the Palace of Industries) only in 1957. The I Bienal took place in the environs of the Edifício Trianon on São Paulo's iconic Avenida Paulista, a site that is today occupied by

the Museu de Arte São Paulo (MASP). Its opening brought together the political and cultural elite of the country but also raised a significant counter-public of activists and trade unionists protesting against the event.³ The contention that marked the beginnings of the Bienal Internacional related to the origins of Matarazzo's MAM-SP, which acted as the organizing institution for the biennial from 1951 to 1961. Founded via an accord with Nelson Rockefeller and the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York, the MAM-SP symbolized for some that the internationalist aspirations of the Bienal were inextricably linked to US cultural expansionism. The Bienal's prizes were to be sponsored by companies interested in participating in a new regime of transnational development, ushering in an influential generation of industry-linked patrons whose philanthropic intentions could not be divorced from a vested interest in forming international economic partnerships.

The artistic direction of the Bienal, 1951-1961

The international sculpture prize at the I Bienal was awarded to Swiss Concretist Max Bill for

1. Max Bill, *Tripartite Unity*, 1948-1949, São Paulo, Museu de Arte Contemporânea da Universidade de São Paulo.

the 1948-1949 work *Tripartite Unity* (fig. 1). This iconic sculpture is often taken to represent the recently established influence of Concretism within São Paulo, and its presence reflected a decisive emphasis on abstract art at the I Bienal that was evident across national representations from Brazil, Switzerland, France, the United States, and Uruguay, as well as within a “General Section” that brought together abstract tendencies represented by younger artists from different nations of the Americas.⁴ The selection and installation of artworks was overseen by Gomes Machado, who had previously established a critical voice within the artistic milieu as founding editor of the journal *Clima*. Although fundamental to the success of the inaugural edition, Gomes Machado was superseded by Sergio Milliet as artistic director for the Bienal’s second edition in 1953.

The second edition was the type of ambitious international exhibition that the MAM-SP had striven to achieve since 1948. It also coincided with the *quadracentennial* celebrations of the city of São Paulo, the central project for which was the construction of the new Ibirapuera Park and its complex of Oscar Niemeyer-designed buildings (fig. 2).⁵ In both 1953 and 1955, the Bienal occupied two pavilions within Ibirapuera: the Palace of

Nations and the Palace of States. For the second edition, this configuration permitted a division between the countries of the Americas (whose artists exhibited in the Palace of States) and the rest of the world (European, Middle Eastern, and Asian artists were displayed in the Palace of Nations). The four countries afforded the greatest exhibition space overall were Brazil, the United States, France, and Italy.⁶ Whereas the prominence of the United States and France may be self-explanatory, the Italian emphasis was a local inflection; it signaled the influential role played by the Italian-Brazilian community in São Paulo – an emerging entrepreneurial elite of which Matarazzo was a distinguished member. The 1953 exhibition itself was, in the words of art historian Adele Nelson, “an enviable temporary museum of modern art” (fig. 3).⁷ It included extensive special exhibitions focusing on key European movements such as Cubism, Futurism, De Stijl, and Expressionism, as well as those devoted to individual artists such as Alexander Calder, Paul Klee, Henry Moore, and Pablo Picasso, whose *Guernica* provided the Bienal’s star attraction.

Milliet continued to act as artistic director for the next three biennials, providing a continuity that was fundamental to establishing the event internationally in its early years. He also contributed a decisive emphasis on the Bienal’s potential pedagogical function, for both artists and the broader public, and this characteristic

2. Interior view of the Ciccillo Matarazzo pavilion, Parque de Ibirapuera, São Paulo, date unknown.

3. Visitors in the Picasso Room of the II Bienal de São Paulo in 1953.

has continued to distinguish the approach of this event. The 1959 edition was the last to be organized under the auspices of MAM-SP. From 1961 onwards, an autonomous foundation was instated, the Fundação Bienal de São Paulo (FBSP); endorsed by Brazilian president Jânio Quadros and his secretary of culture, the critic Mário Pedrosa, it could now receive financial support from both city and state governments and thus was no longer tied, explicitly, to private patronage.

Pedrosa also acted as artistic director for the 1961 edition, which provided a platform for his mature art-critical approach, complemented by a collateral event hosted by the IV Bienal, the II Brazilian Congress of Art Critics. Aside from national representations, Pedrosa established, via a series of special exhibition rooms, a retrospective museological focus on both Western and non-Western art-historical perspectives, as well as on a newer tradition of Brazilian Modernism, represented by rooms dedicated to artists such as Milton da Costa, Oswaldo Goeldi, Livio Abramo, and Alfredo Volpi.⁸

Self-censorship meets experimentation

In distinction to the first ten years of the event, the subsequent editions of both the 1960s and the 1970s were organized not by a single artistic director but rather by a collective of “advisors,” which, in 1963, included both Milliet and Walter Zanini, who had recently become director of the Museu de Arte Contemporânea da Universidade de São Paulo (MAC-USP). Although the event was now independent of the MAM-SP, Matarazzo was to remain the director of the FBSP until 1975.

The repressive regime that took governmental power in Brazil after a military coup in 1964 showed its first explicit effects on the Bienal Internacional in 1967. A work by artist Cibele Varela was removed to prevent potential offense to the Brazilian authorities, and Quissak Junior's *Meditations on the National Flag* was excluded because the constitution prohibited the use of national symbols for non-official or non-patriotic ends. The 1967 edition also included a substantial exhibition of North American Pop Art, including works by Jasper Johns,

Robert Rauschenberg, Roy Lichtenstein, Claes Oldenburg, Robert Indiana, and Andy Warhol. Johns was among a list of memorable prize-winners that included Michelangelo Pistoletto, Tadeusz Kantor, and David Lamelas.

1969 marks a watershed in the history of the Bienal Internacional; its tenth edition holds a firm place in history because it was the object of an international boycott. Initially proposed in Brazil by Pedrosa, as president of the Associação Brasileira de Críticos de Arte (ABCA),⁹ the boycott gained international momentum through the production and circulation of a dossier of evidence of cultural repression.¹⁰ It was adhered to by artists worldwide,¹¹ including several of those invited to represent Brazil who were at that time temporarily residing in Europe.¹² International solidarity, however, was not matched with consensus within Brazil; a group of artists (including Claudio Tozzi, whose work had been directly targeted by censorship¹³) accepted the invitation to participate, and the leftist critic Mário Schenberg remained committed to his role as curator of the section of invited Brazilian artists that included Mira Schendel.¹⁴

By 1971, the boycott had severely affected the exhibition's international prestige. International agencies maintained a diplomatic but distanced mode of participation until political change became apparent in the early 1980s. The intervening editions between 1969 and 1981 were marked by the exodus of a generation (including Pedrosa, Lygia Clark, and Hélio Oiticica) that had gained international prominence in the 1960s. Artists and writers opposed to the regime operated at risk of arbitrary arrest, and critical cultural practice could not confidently benefit from explicit dissemination or prominent criticism. By the mid-1970s, however, the once focused, artist-led boycott had lost much of its attention and participation. The five editions that followed received little coverage in the international press, and their history hasn't been widely examined.¹⁵

Despite being invisible to the international mainstream, the Bienal remained active between 1969 and 1981. Its constituency was altered by the boycott, and this, alongside attempts at structural reforms within the organization, generated far-reaching debates concerning the

by new international paradigms (notably Harald Szeemann's *documenta 5* of 1972) but also by local competition: experimental practice was supported by other annual exhibitions, including the *Salão de Arte Contemporânea* (1966-1975) at the Museu de Arte Contemporânea Campinas and the *Jovem Arte Contemporânea* (1963-1974) at Zanini's MAC-USP, which occupied a space directly adjoining the third floor of the Bienal pavilion.

4. Partial view of the XII Bienal de São Paulo in 1973, featuring *Faixa de Segurança* (Safety Crossing), a collective work by Grupo Segurança (Alberto Cechi, Eduardo Pereira, Laura Machado, Monica Oliva, and the Road Workers Service of the Municipal Council of Jundiaí).

event's local and regional significance. In 1972, the Fundação Bienal initiated a series of national biennials (*Bienais Nacionais de São Paulo*), held in the years in between the international event, and in 1978 it hosted, for the first and only time, the *Bienal Latino-Americana de São Paulo*.¹⁶ Artists for the *Bienais Nacionais* were chosen by regional juries from "pre-biennial" exhibitions across the country, and this selection process returned a constituency of artists with the capacity to contest the dominant Rio de Janeiro-São Paulo axis, as well as revealing the work of younger artists and collectives.

Without resolving into a permanent structural shift, various experimental practices, including video, slide installations, performance, and urban interventions were accommodated during the 1970s. An "Art and Communication" section in 1973 brought in group proposals from cities across Brazil to be placed on the third floor of the Bienal pavilion alongside a special room dedicated to Waldemar Cordeiro. In 1979 (the first edition to be held without Matarazzo as president), a newly created Council of Art and Culture (CAC) altered the regulations for national representation so that artists were required to submit proposals according to a set of thematic categories, including "urban archaeology," "contemporary propositions," "video-art," and "spatial poetry" (fig. 4). In 1970s São Paulo, the Bienal's attempts to innovate were not only provoked

The Return of the Curator

The next Bienal to command significant critical interest internationally did not take place until the XVI edition in 1981, curated by Zanini, who was appointed in the wake of his departure from MAC-USP in 1978. Zanini selected artists who reflected those with whom he had worked at MAC-USP over the course of the preceding decade, including international artists who had visited the museum or maintained contact with Zanini via postal networks. His 1981 edition spotlighted ephemeral media such as artists' books, video, and mail art and comprised performative actions by artists such as Hervé Fischer (France), Francisco Iñarra (Spain/Brazil), and Antoni Muntadas (Spain). He replaced the traditional system of national representation with a series of different thematic "nuclei" and reflected forms of practice that had developed in Brazil over the 1970s, including a "live" mail art exhibition that grew to a length of nearly 3,000 meters as post progressively arrived at the Pavilion.

The 1983 edition, again curated by Zanini, also marked a re-introduction of private sector funding,¹⁷ a factor that was to later have a positive impact on the celebrated XXIV Bienal, organized with industrialist Júlio Landmann as president of the FBSP and Paulo Herkenhoff as chief curator. This 1998 edition comprised four sections: traditional national representations, an international "historical nucleus" selected

5. Catalogue of the XXVIII edition of the Bienal de São Paulo (2008), in the form of a weekly journal, p. 176-177.

according to the perspective of the Brazilian Modernist theory of *antropofagia* (or cultural cannibalism), an exhibition of international contemporary art, and an exhibition of contemporary Brazilian art, which was included at the suggestion of Landmann. The

event was a critical success, and it also had a landmark budget, which secured the inclusion of Brazilian and international works of significant historical importance. Corporate sponsorship also supported an ambitious education program, involving an intensive series of courses and seminars, reaching more than a thousand teachers and nearly 120,000 students nationally – thus visibly reviving the pedagogical ambitions of the event as established by Milliet in the early 1950s.¹⁸

The altered funding structures established in the 1980s have, however, also had negative effects on the Bienal in its more recent history. Entrenched financial irregularities had a particular impact on the 2006 and 2008 editions, when chief curator Ivo Mesquita transformed the FBSP's budgetary crisis into an opportunity to strip the event down into a largely discursively-focused occasion, one that invited reflection on both the Bienal's history and its future, and that inaugurated a decisive focus on the FBSP's extensive archival holdings and a retrieval of its critical history.¹⁹ Under new administration, the Bienal went on to demonstrate its stubborn resilience for the subsequent two (less risky and more conventional) editions of 2010 and 2012, and the FBSP has continued to pursue the public dissemination of its archives, for example by making a digital version of each of its catalogues freely available online (fig. 5)²⁰.

Zanini's editions of 1981 and 1983 had inaugurated a new phase of the Bienal: one in which the role of curator was paramount (and which recalled the decisive contributions made by artistic directors such as Gomes Machado, Milliet, and Pedrosa over the first decade of the event). As was the case with Zanini, the Brazilian curators Sheila Leirner and Nelson Aguilar, and the German curator Alfons Hug each oversaw two consecutive editions (1985/1987, 1994/1996, and 2002/2004 respectively). Among those who took on the role of chief curator for single editions – from the late 1990s until the present decade – Paulo Herkenhoff (1998), Lisette Lagnado (2006), and Ivo Mesquita (2008) stand out for making significant contributions to both the structure of the event and its changed local and international role within a densely populated contemporary biennial landscape.

The appointment of a non-Brazilian curator and specialist in Latin American Art (Luis Pérez-Oramas, Curator of Latin American Art at the MoMA in New York) as chief curator for the most recent edition signaled a certain repositioning of this event, as central not only to a generalized global art world, but also to Latin America as a region of burgeoning economic power and increased art world influence. Its next edition, in 2014, will again (but for only the fourth time in its history) be conceived by

a non-Brazilian curator: Scottish-born Charles Esche, who is presently director of the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven and has previously acted as curator for five other biennials internationally. Esche is widely respected for the integrity of his work, whether acting locally or internationally, and has established a reputation for re-thinking the rules and structures of museums, institutions, and temporary exhibitions in relationship to both their histories and their present social contexts.

The sixty-two year history of the Bienal Internacional de São Paulo, the world's second biennial, has been one of invention and re-invention, from solid Modernist museological roots to phases of experimentation and risk, moving through different configurations in terms of governance, funding, artistic direction, and reach, and taking place in a public park within a densely populated city whose economic and political divides are never entirely invisible to the event itself. The changing fortunes of both Brazil and the Bienal invite a critical reflection on both the past and the present – one that the forthcoming edition is now in a good position to fulfill.

1. “[...] um festival nos moldes do festival de Veneza” (Ibiapaba Martins, one of MAM-SP’s founding directors, quoted in Aracy Amaral, *Arte para quê? A preocupação social na arte brasileira*, São Paulo, 1987, p. 236).

2. “[...] colocar a arte moderna do Brasil, não em simples confronto, mas em vivo contato com a arte do resto do mundo, ao mesmo tempo que para São Paulo se buscava conquistar a posição de centro artístico mundial” (Lourival Gomes Machado, “Introdução,” in *I Bienal do Museu de Arte Moderna de São Paulo: Catálogo*, [exh. cat., São Paulo, Museu de Arte Moderna de São Paulo, 1951], São Paulo, 1951, p. 14).

3. See Rita Alves Oliveira, “Bienal de São Paulo: impacto na cultura brasileira,” in *São Paulo em Perspectiva*, 15/3, July/September, 2001, published online: www.scielo.br/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S0102-88392001000300004 (last accessed September 18, 2013).

4. See Adele Nelson, “Monumental and Ephemeral: the early São Paulo Bienais,” in *Constructive Spirit: Abstract Art in South and North America, 1920s-50s*, Mary Kate O’Hare ed., (exh. cat., Newark, Newark Museum/Fort Worth, Amon Carter Museum, 2010), Newark/San Francisco, 2010, p. 129-131.

5. The construction of a park on the Ibirapuera site to mark the quadricentennial was proposed to the mayor of São Paulo by Matarazzo himself, who was also responsible for the assembly

of a planning team headed by Rino Levi and for the eventual appointment of Niemeyer as the architect of Ibirapuera.

6. See Nelson, 2010, cited n. 4, p. 133-134. Nelson argues that this architectural division, together with the selection of works, allowed Milliet to present those artists that represented the Americas as the embodiment of forward-thinking tendencies in contemporary artistic practice (as distinguished from the historical tradition represented by European artists displayed within the Palace of Nations).

7. See Nelson, 2010, cited n. 4, p. 133.

8. See Ana Maria Pimenta Hoffmann, “A Bienal de 1961: A Atuação De Mário Pedrosa,” (conference, Campinas, 2011), published online: www.unicamp.br/chaa/eha/atas/2011/Ana%20Maria%20Pimenta%20Hoffmann.pdf (last accessed September 18, 2013).

9. Written under a pseudonym, Pedrosa’s text entitled “Os deveres do crítico de arte na sociedade” was published in the *Correio da Manhã*, Rio de Janeiro, on July 10, 1969. It made reference to the removal by the military police of works from the II Bienal da Bahia in 1968 and the closure of a 1969 exhibition at the Museu de Arte Moderna do Rio de Janeiro (MAM-RJ), including works selected to represent Brazil at the forthcoming Biennale des Jeunes in Paris. The exhibition was shut down, works were confiscated, and the director of the museum, Muniz Sodre, was arrested and detained. Pedrosa’s text repudiated the government’s assumed right to impose limitations upon “the creation of art works or the free exercise of art criticism.” It impelled the members of the ABCA to refuse to judge any exhibition supported by a government that was actively imposing censorship. The fact that the Rio exhibition was linked to Paris, together with the fact that the ABCA was a branch of the International Association of Art Critics, meant that the boycott held potential to become international in scope. Pedrosa’s text is republished in a volume of his collected writings edited by Otilia Arantes (*Política das Artes*, São Paulo, 1995). See Caroline Saut Schroeder, “X Bienal de São Paulo: sob os efeitos da contestação,” MA thesis, Escola de Comunicações e Artes, Universidade de São Paulo, 2011, available at www.teses.usp.br/teses/disponiveis/27/27160/tde-26112011-133939/pt-br.php (last accessed September 18, 2013). Schroeder’s thesis offers a detailed study, addressing both the artists who participated in the Bienal and the context – and contestation – of the boycott, both nationally and internationally.

10. Jacques Lessaigne, president of the Biennale de Paris, signed a letter protesting the arrest and imprisonment of Muniz Sodre, director of the Museu de Arte Moderna do Rio de Janeiro. Lessaigne was to have been the curator for the French delegation at the 1969 Bienal, a role subsequently vetoed by the Brazilian Ministry of External Relations. This further act of censorship added momentum. A meeting took place in June 1969 at the Musée d’art moderne, Paris, and 321 artists and intellectuals signed a manifesto, “Non à la Biennale.” A document entitled “Brazil 1969; partial dossier of the cultural repression” was circulated anonymously from artist to artist within Europe and beyond, its existence eventually being cited by an article in *The New York Times* (see Schroeder, 2011, cited n. 9).

11. The Director of the Stedelijk Museum, as well as the artists chosen to represent the Netherlands, withdrew, as

did the Swedish contingent. Pol Bury and Pierre Restany withdrew a thematic cross-national exhibition for the Bienal's new "Art & Technology" section. The Center for Advanced Studies at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) had been chosen to represent North America, and the proposed show, organized by Georgy Kepes, was also cancelled after several of the artists withdrew. The Mexican muralist David Alfaro Siqueiros had been awarded a dedicated exhibition within the Bienal, which he refused, and two Japanese artists requested that their works, already en route to the Bienal, be removed. The Netherlands, Sweden, Chile, Venezuela, the Soviet Union, and Mexico were among the countries to withdraw national participation entirely, with both the Netherlands and Sweden remaining absent until 1979. Other nations maintained a nominal presence. A pro-forma exhibition was swiftly prepared and dispatched to represent France, in place of the dissenting artists, and the United States was represented by only one artwork, by the sculptor Chryssa Vardea (see Schroeder, 2011, cited n. 9).

12. Including Sergio Camargo, Lygia Clark, Hélio Oiticica, Rubem Gerchman, Antonio Dias, and Frans Krafjberg.

13. In 1968, Tozzi's painting *Guevara Dead or Alive* was attacked and partially destroyed by a far right group at the IV Salão Nacional de Arte Contemporânea in Brasília; the source materials for the series, on display at the X Bienal Internacional de São Paulo ("Multitudes"), were photographs (both those taken by the artist and those he appropriated from press images) depicting scenes from the political protests of 1968. One work for the X Bienal – entitled *The Arrest* – was temporarily removed on the day of the official opening, when representatives of the regime were present (see Schroeder, 2011, cited n. 9).

14. For an examination of Schenberg's position in relation to the X Bienal, see Schroeder, 2011, cited n. 9.

15. For a study of the persistence of the Bienal Internacional de São Paulo as a site for experimentation and resistance in the post-boycott decade see Isobel Whitelegg, "The Bienal de São Paulo: Unseen/Undone (1969-81)," in *Afterall*, 22, autumn 2009, p. 106-113.

16. See Isobel Whitelegg, "Brazil, Latin America, the World: The Bienal de São Paulo as a Latin American Question," in *Third Text*, 26/1, January 2012, p. 131-140.

17. See Oliveira, 2001, cited n. 3.

18. See Oliveira, 2001, cited n. 3.

19. The approach taken by the 2008 edition provoked considerable controversy, which was the subject of a "post-mortem" discussion organized by the Research Centre for Transnational Art Identity & Nation (University of the Arts London) in January 2009. An audio recording is available at www.transnational.org.uk/events/62-the-28th-bienal-de-so-paulo-a-post-mortem-discussion (last accessed September 18, 2013).

20. The catalogues have been made available at www.bienal.org.br/publicacoes.php (last consulted November 15, 2013).

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