29TH BIENAL DE SÃO PAULO

PARQUE IBIRAPUERA, SÃO PAULO, BRAZIL
SEPTEMBER 25 – DECEMBER 12, 2010
BY EMELIE CHHANGUR AND PHILIP MONK

The São Paulo biennale invents itself anew every two years while reinventing its relation to Brazilian art in particular and to the international contemporary art world in general, from which it is perceived to be isolated geographically. The 29th Bienal was no exception. Following Lisette Lagnado's 2006 version, which abolished national representation, and Ivo Mesquita's puritanical 2008 version, which put the very idea of a biennale under suspension, leaving one whole floor of Oscar Niemeyer's iconic 30,000-square-metre pavilion theatrically empty, current curators Agnaldo Farias and Moacir dos Anjos responded with a surfeit; it took us five days to cover its 159 artists.

From the outset, there seemed to be a problem with the curators announcing that the theme was the "inseparability" of art and politics, which contradicted the biennale's poetic title, *There's Always a Cup of Sea to Sail In*. The continual recursion to poetics, rather than articulating what the curators really meant by politics, was an ongoing ambiguity. (And instead of explaining the relationship, the curators simply referred readers through a footnote to Rancière's essay "Politics of Aesthetics"!) In part, this recursion stemmed from the curators' belief that the "Utopian dimension of art is contained within art itself, not outside or beyond it." That they believed it possible—and political—to rethink the world through the senses (art's privileged domain) seemed at odds with their simultaneous belief that the Bienal was an exercise of politics and not merely its contemplation.

Initially, one might be justified in thinking that this sense of the political merely was aligning itself with the art-world trends of relational aesthetics and contemporary participatory art (i.e., European practices). Works of the late Lygia Pape and Hélio Oiticica, of course, appeared here to assert Brazilian priority, but the curators extended this generational legacy to recover other participatory practices of the 60s from Sweden (Palle Nielsen), Venezuela (Jacobo Borges), Argentina (Marta Minujin) and Japan (High Red Center).

Following these leads, the "organizing principle" of the inseparability of art and politics extended into the overall installation itself. Six thematic paths were suggested, punctuated by artist/architect-designed resting points labelled *Terreiros*, "spaces reminiscent of the squares, patios, terraces, temples, yards, and outdoor and indoor spaces in which people the length and breadth of Brazil congregate to dance, fight, sing, muck about, touch, cry, chat, play games, or engage in the rituals of the nation's hybrid religiosity." There was not much mucking about during the opening week, though. But architecture was one of the main elements of the Bienal, with the overall exhibition design obliterating Niemeyer's pavilion that Mesquita had exposed earlier.

At first overwhelming, these eccentrically shaped rooms created oblique "streets" that one eventually navigated following one's own signposts. Of course, the curators mixed metaphors by calling individual rooms "islands [in an] archipelago." Indeed, Niemeyer's pavilion itself became "a gigantic vessel anchored in Ibirapuera Park, a ship that, paradoxically, contains within itself a sea." Hence, the icon (or motif) of a directionless compass also symbolized our passages through this biennale. In the end, we chose our own routes and discovered our own themes, whether or not they had been placed there by the curators with the assistance of their international team (Chus Martinez, Fernando Alvim, Rina Carvajal, Sarat Maharaj, and Yuko Hasegawa). What follows are only a few.

Each São Paulo Bienal grounds itself in a different set of historical precursors, both international and Brazilian, while sometimes recovering obscured groups—such as São Paulo's Grupo Rex this time—and, in the process, highlights not just individuals but also collective vanguard practices. It also extends to include the crucial ongoing recovery of conceptualizing practices from Latin America's period of dictatorship during the 60s and 70s—which involved groups such as Colectivo Acciones de Arte (CADA), from Chile; Grupos de Artistas de Vanguardia, from Argentina; and individuals such as Antonio Manuel, Anna Maria Maiolino, and Hélio Oiticica. In this respect, communal performances, such as Lygia Pape's 1968 *Divisor* (remade for the Bienal), can be seen to be political actions in their time. (However, the curatorial linkage of these artists to Germany during the period of the Red Army Faction was less persuasive.)

Given the Bienal's emphasis on participation, we knew to expect new linkages between past and present, and also found them in the theme of artist-as-participant from the late 70s, a practice that included Miguel Rio Branco, in Rio de Janeiro; Miguel Angel Rojas, in Bogotá; and Nan Goldin, in New York. Today, the artist acts more as facilitator. Here, pedagogy was expressed by Jeremy Deller and Grizedale Arts' updating of John Ruskin's Mechanics Institute, but they reversed its top down hierarchy from originally educating workers to giving urban youth an experience of nature. Seniors were given their own utopian space through Ana Gallardo's *Dance School*, in which an elderly couple, who teach others their age every week in a Mexico City market, charmingly brought their dance lessons to the Bienal. The notion of exchange was enacted in Antonio Vega Macotela's *Time Divisa*, in which prisoners held at Mexico City's Santa Marca Acotila jail made fascinatingly diverse mappings of prison life in exchange for wishes of theirs being

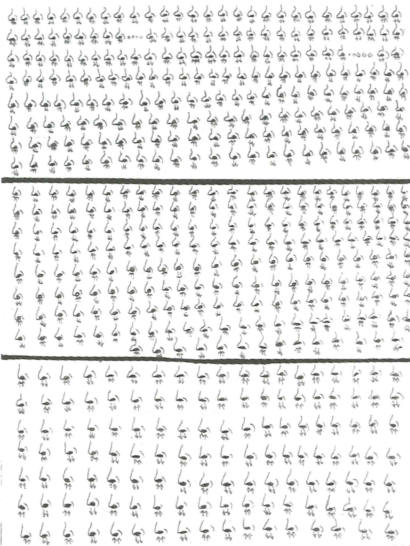
↑ Ana Gallardo, *Dance School*, 2010, collective project with Mario Gómez Casas and Ramiro Gallardo
IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

carried out by the artist in the outside world.

Brazilian modernism has always had a privileged relation to anthropology, but anthropology by artists is usually non-traditional in documenting some form of marginalized or overlooked *urban* life (such as Carlos Vergara's documentation of aspects of Rio's carnival) and by using its methods to create fictions. Beginning in the 30s, the work of the artist, architect and flamboyant provocateur Flávio de Carvallo was the precursor to anthropology as fictional performance, as well as a substitution of Brazilian experience for European modernity. And Jimmie Durham's *Bureau for Research into Brazilian Normality* put on ethnographic display a collection scavenged from the commercial detritus of the city—in the process adducing an underlying racism to São Paulo life. Maria Thereza Alves had a 19th-century German–Krenak dictionary translated into Portuguese, which after its use in the Bienal was to be given to Brazil's indigenous Krenak people, now reduced to just a few hundred members (smaller than the book's print run).

Still other themes could be derived from the names of the individual *Terreiros*: "Far Away, Right Here"; "I am the Street"; "Remembrance and Oblivion"; "Said, Unsaid, Not to be Said"; "The Other, The Same"; and "The Skin of the Invisible."

So, in spite of itself, we could make this Bienal into a political exhibition in the weak sense; however, we recognize that the political effects of this biennale are registered in other ways, which are mainly invisible to international visitors. Perhaps a demand for the restitution of the Bienal's financial security following problems with corruption and budget cutbacks, a very large percentage of this year's budget was devoted to education—this in a country, with its legacy of Paulo Freire, where education is a political matter. In any case, a staggering 35,000 educators were trained to bring the Bienal to the rest of the country, and 400,000 students were expected to tour the pavilion, led by student interns trained as tour guides.



Finally, what lessons can we, as Canadians, take when there were no Canadian artists exhibited? The curators placed less emphasis on Europe and the United States (and many of the latter are of South American origin), instead looking more to Latin America and Africa—in effect, making Brazil less geographically isolated by paying attention to its own context. Overlooked here by our too intimate association with the United States, Canadians hoping to create their own biennale in Toronto may want to follow the example of Brazil articulating its relation to the world by paying attention to itself first.

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MANIFESTA 8: THE EUROPEAN BIENNIAL OF CONTEMPORARY ART

REGION OF MURCIA (SPAIN)
IN DIALOGUE WITH NORTHERN AFRICA
OCTOBER 9, 2010 – JANUARY 9, 2011
BY MIKHEL PROULX

The eighth edition of Manifesta, the European biennale of contemporary art, opened this past October in the ancient Spanish province of Murcia. Fifteen exhibition venues throughout the region were filled with the work of over 100 artists, as selected by three curatorial teams: Alexandria Contemporary Arts Forum (ACAF), Chamber of Public Secrets (CPS) and tranzit.org. Several hundred arts professionals and cultural tourists gathered for its opening weekend in the municipal plaza between Moorish mosaics, fountains and former military barracks now serving as kunsthalles. Most of the time the plaza is an everyday social centre where schoolchildren play and *viejos* convene with their *cigarros*. The gentrifying potential of the biennale greeted a post-crisis Murcia, where emptied storefronts abound.

Previously, Manifesta has put a critical focus on the East–West axis within Europe; this year's incarnation professed to observe Europe's special relationship with the north African region of Maghreb, which refers collectively to Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, Mauritania and the Western Sahara areas. Southern Spain proffers a loaded history of geopolitical, intercultural and transnational influence legible through its assemblage of ancient Roman architecture, Visigoth chapels, Baroque churches and Arab medinas. Regrettably, in favour of focusing on Africa, M8 largely curtained the rich locale where it is sojourning for the latest iteration of its site-responsive format.

At best, the itinerant biennale model can be a catalyst for cultural dialogue within its espoused region, sometimes acting as a bridge between local and global discourses. More often, though, it merely plots trends for the roving arty insiders of the international biennale circuit. And there is also the risk of infringing culturally rich regions and subsuming artworks into a tourist activity—a consumptive mash-up of history, geography, art and travel coagulating over free sparkling wine. At M8, art tourists became fodder for at least one of the festival's participants: Thierry Geoffroy took on the role of "Colonialist" for the duration of the press week. Alongside his assistant, "Biennialist," he played the part of a safari-esque

↑ José Antonio Vega Macotela, *Time Currency Exchange 07*, 2006, ink on paper, 28 cm × 21.5 cm
IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

↑ Thierry Geoffroy, still from *Artist Colonist for TV: "is there a dialogue with Northern Africa or is this construction a diversion?"* 2010
IMAGE © THIERRY GEOFFROY