



Contemporary Art Biennials – Our Hegemonic Machines in Times of Emergency

Edited by Ronald Kolb, Shwetal Patel and Dorothee Richter

Contributions by Agustina Andreoletti, Rasheed Araeen, Defne Ayas, Marco Baravalle, Alessia Basilicata, Julia Bethwaite, Amy Bruce, Sabeth Buchmann, Vasyl Cherepanyn, Sven Christian, Giulia Colletti, Catherine David, Ekaterina Degot, Diana Dulgheru, Per Gunnar Eeg-Tverbakk, Okwui Enwezor, Brandon Farnsworth, Rime Fetnan, Patrick D. Flores, Natasha Ginwala, Eva González-Sancho Bodero, Resmi Görüş, Martin Guinard, Bregtje van der Haak, Catalina Imizcoz, Răzvan Ion, Andrés Jaque, Melody Du Jingyi, Anni Kangas, Daniel Knorr, Omar Kholeif, Ronald Kolb, Panos Kompatsiaris, Yacouba Konaté, Daniela Labra, Ilse Lafer, Ippolito Pestellini Laparelli, Bruno Latour, Teobaldo Lagos Preller, Eva Lin, Yung Ma, Anna Manubens, Sarat Maharaj, Oliver Marchart, Federica Martini, Vittoria Martini, Lara van Meeteren, Louli Michaelidou, Christian Morgner, Gerardo Mosquera, Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung, Ksenija Orelj, Anita Orzes, Shwetal A. Patel, Delia Popa, Farid Rakun, Raqs Media Collective, Dorothee Richter, Roma Jam Session art Kollektiv, Miriam La Rosa, Mona Schubert, Henk Slager, Robert E. D'Souza, Nora Sternfeld, Fatoş Üstek, Katerina Valdivia Bruch, Mirjam Varadinis, Raluca Voinea, Wilson Yeung Chun Wai, Bart Wissink, Beat Wyss, Xinming Xia, Nathalie Zonnenberg

Processual and Transcultural: the 11th Berlin Biennale and the 34th São Paulo Biennial

Daniela Labra

March 2020. While the art world seems postponed for a few months, this essay analyses the curatorial proposals with a processual profile of the 11th Berlin Biennale and the 34th São Paulo Biennial, scheduled to open in the second half of the year, but traversed and suspended by the process of history itself.

The Biennials of São Paulo and Berlin were conceived in different contexts and times, founded from radically different projects, and yet carried out in cities that projected prominence in the international cultural and economic scenes at the time. The exhibition in Brazil, inaugurated in 1951, was the artistic axis of a modern and civilizing developmental model, naturally elitist and white. The German show opened in 1998 and was born of an innovative, interdisciplinary, and multimedia proposal, which reflected the art of the end of the millennium in the future European-global capital for culture and politics.¹ These two biennials are today paradigmatic for their history, formats, and international relevance, and this year they coincide in curatorial projects focused on the process and the expansion of the leading exhibitions throughout each city in institutional networks, performances, residencies, installations, and exhibitions before and during the final event. Thus, they extend their program and dialogue with communities, organizations, and subjects from many sectors. The dialogic procedure that penetrates the social fabric beyond the art exhibition has become indispensable in many biennials because, in addition to increasing the outreach to the public, it helps to justify the large budgets invested in these events.

The Berlin Biennale, open to experimental standards and concepts from the start, brings a revisionist approach to homogeneous historical narratives in its eleventh edition, and a critical look at the model of biennials themselves. The curatorial proposal has been developed by a temporary collective identified as South American, white, trans-generational, and feminine, formed by Maria Berríos, Renata Cervetto, Lisette Lagnado and Agustín Pérez Rubio, whose different professional experiences go through both the Latin American and European cultural contexts. With a *sureño* conceptual positioning, the collective thinks issues related to dissident bodies, subjectivities in confinement, collectivities, creation and political actions, communication and language in their infinite manifestations, among other topics that continue to add to the project. Its title, though, is not clear yet because it is not only one up to now.

Initially, the curators divided their activities into two spaces: the KW Institute, the administrative spot, and a wing of the Ex-Rotaprint, a 1950s-era industrial, graphic complex in the Wedding district occupied since 2004 by creative and social initiatives. There, the group launched the public programs in a kind of soft opening of the Biennale extended in three sequential moments called experiences (exp.) 1, 2, and 3, developed since September 2019 until the inauguration of the concluding exhibition, the Epilogue, planned for June, when Martin Gropius-Bau and the Akademie der Künste will also be occupied, in addition to KW itself.

The exhibitions evoked the actions of the controversial and restless Brazilian modernist artist and architect Flávio de Carvalho (1899-1973). The exp.1 was called *The Bones of the World*, in reference to the title of Carvalho's travel journal in Europe in the 1930s, read curatorially as a reverse ethnography of Europe.² The exp. 2 brought the relational, performative, shamanistic, social, and queer-oriented work of the Brazilian Virgínia de Medeiros, together with the program of the Feminist Health Care Research Group, by Inga Zimprich and Julia Bonn, focused on feminist and self-care practices based on methodologies of West Berlin in the 1970s and 1980s. In late February, exp. 3 began with Sinthujan Varatharajah from Sri Lanka, and Osías Yanov from Argentina, but soon activities were suspended. All the invited artists developed their proposals directly in Berlin. They dealt, in their way, with the political body, *cuir* activism, historical memory,



Installation view exp. 1: *The Bones of the World*, 7.9. – 9.11.2019, 11th Berlin Biennale c/o ExRotaprint. Photograph by Mathias Völzke © Berlin Biennial



Installation view, exp. 2: *Virginia de Medeiros - Feminist Health Care Research Group*, 30.11.2019 – 8.2.2020, 11th Berlin Biennale c/o ExRotaprint. Photograph by Mathias Völzke © Berlin Biennial

ancestry, power relations, territorial boundaries, rejects of modernism, and other issues, through actions, installations, screenings, conversations, documentaries and educational materials, and more. Their works were presented to a varied audience that included school groups, neighbor associations, activists, children, and the elderly. When the curatorial collective opened its first experience, they declared that, “*The Bones of the World* is an attempt to hold on to the complicated beauty of life when the fire has erupted”³—suggesting that the proposal, until then without well-defined guidelines, was open to chance, error, and precariousness. In March 2020, however, a fire spread throughout the world, forcing a deceleration of all production systems, including the cultural one, and this curatorial and artistic ongoing process was then also temporarily closed.



Installation view, exp. 2: Virginia de Medeiros – *Feminist Health Care Research Group*, 30.11.2019 – 8.2.2020, 11th Berlin Biennale c/o ExRotaprint. Photograph by Mathias Völzke © Berlin Biennial



exp. 3: *Affect Archives*. Sinthujan Varatharajah – *Osías Yanov*, 11th Berlin Biennale c/o ExRotaprint, 22.2. – 2.5.2020. Photograph by Mathias Völzke © Berlin Biennial

In general, in contemporary biennials, the process is often instrumentalized as an alternative to soften limits imposed by institutional, social, political, and financial requirements. The process, as part of the curatorial project, discussed publicly, is then commonly related to experimental platforms, sometimes manneristic and well behaved, developed with little publicity in the attached spaces of educational programs, artistic labs, and parallel discussions.

At the 11th Berlin Biennale, however, the place of experimentation sets the tone for the general proposal—and not the other way around. The promoted meetings of individuals and groups generated transference of knowledge in the Global South-North direction, including the critical approach to clichés such as organicity and spontaneity



Ximena Garrido-Lecca, *Botanical Insurgencies*, 2020: installation at Pavilhão Ciccilo Matarazzo. Photograph by Levi Fanan © Fundação Bienal de São Paulo



Ximena Garrido-Lecca, *Paredes de Progresso*, 2020: installation view at Pavilhão Ciccilo Matarazzo. Photograph by Levi Fanan © Fundação Bienal de São Paulo

of the Southern form, seen as positive as original. This curatorial argument brought more questions than answers, and finds in the modern debris of the colonialist project less failure and more the possibility of rebuilding worlds from referrals emerging from the ruins. While in the history of this Biennale the bet on risk is not new, the *sureño* vision, educated in terrains of uncertainty and scarcity can bring as many new as strange—and therefore productive—operational modes to the German institution rooted in a culture for which an improvisation is only an option as a project deviation.

In Brazil, a nation where improvisation is a basic rule of sub-existence, this year the 34th edition of the São Paulo Biennial is being held. It is the second oldest in the world and the first in Latin America, founded by Italian-Brazilian industrialists inspired by



Neo Muyanga, *A maze in grace*, 2020: Performance with Legítima Defesa theater group and Bianca Turner at Pavilhão Ciccilo Matarazzo. Photograph by Levi Fanan © Fundação Bienal de São Paulo



Neo Muyanga, *A maze in grace*, 2020: Performance with Legítima Defesa theater group and Bianca Turner at Pavilhão Ciccilo Matarazzo. Photograph by Levi Fanan © Fundação Bienal de São Paulo

the nineteenth-century model of Venice. Its first artistic director was Lourival Gomes Machado (1917-1967), an illustrious man committed to modern values. Throughout its existence, the Brazilian show has become contemporary and gaining in international relevance. However, its traditional structure, with rooms designated for national representation lasted until 2006, extinguished precisely by the curator Lisette Lagnado—today in the curatorial collective of the 11th Berlin Biennale.

The long history of the São Paulo Biennial has accompanied not only the transition from modern to contemporary art but also the maturing of a market, oriented by the critical trends of Europe and the United States after World War II. Today, it is the cultural event with the largest budget in Brazil, and its mission is not only to attract international attention but also to receive as many visitors as possible,⁴ as it deals with internal and state political expectations that demand once and for all excellent media return inside and outside the country, prestige in the art system, and wide reception. Its spectacular scale is in line with the numbers of the nation, the ninth-largest country in the world, with more than 200 million inhabitants, 44 million of them in the State of São Paulo alone.

Unlike the Berlin Biennale, which is defined by experimentation, novelty, and a modest budget for such an event, the São Paulo Biennial carries the weight of the developmental tradition and, in the face of the Brazilian social inequality, needs to justify its existence, legacy, and public importance at each edition.

In its sixty years, however, many editions, including recent ones, have remained more committed to the international art system than to the local community, succumbing to the institutional protocol in tedious proposals. Others, however, sought to problematize the traditionalist and developmentalist model, managing to oxygenate the exhibition with works and expographies that challenged standardization and stimulated urgent discussions and the engagement of visitors, students, and artists in general.

In turn, the 34th edition bets on innovation, although it does not claim to question the bases of biennials as a whole. It has a curatorial body with a conventional structure divided into a chief curator, co-curator, and three invited curators: Jacopo Crivelli Visconti, Paulo Miyada, Carla Zaccagnini, Ruth Estévez, and Francesco Stocchi. The title, *Though It's Dark, I Still Sing*, was taken from a 1962 poem by the Brazilian writer Thiago de Mello, *Madrugada Camponesa (Peasant Dawn)*, written in “a time of some promises of transformation, nurtured by progressive policies and some desire for the expansion of basic rights, such as education,” according to Paulo Miyada. “But then the horizon changed, ‘Brazil had been torn asunder by a military coup supported by part of the citizenry, a dictatorship was being consolidated’, and the poem was published ‘more as a call to resilience.’”⁵

The initial curatorial project of *Though It's Dark, I Still Sing* was proposed by Jacopo Crivelli, Italian living in Brazil with a PhD in Architecture and Urbanism from the University of São Paulo, producer of the Fundação Bienal de São Paulo for several years and an independent curator in the last decade. He started from the concept of “relationship,” freely inspired by the thought of Édouard Glissant (1928–2011), author of *Poetics of Relations* (1990), and the Brazilian anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (b. 1951), whose Anthropocene theories and Amerindian worldviews are widely discussed today. The project “emphasizes the potential of art as resilience, reinvention, repetition, translation,” and claims “the right to the complexity and ambivalence of the expressions of art and culture, as well as the identities of social subjects and groups,

offering alternatives to the exacerbated antagonism that has characterized the political and social arena in recent years,” according to Crivelli.⁶

Like the 11th Berlin Biennale, this São Paulo Biennial is not tied to a single theme, thesis, or discourse, and its project is articulated in three main axes: time, surface, and depth. The process, then, is in the order of time, like an essay in continuous construction that affirms the vitality of artistic creation despite the anti-democratic moment Brazil is going through, whose government despises the arts, especially contemporary production.⁷ Although this edition evokes resilience and resistance, the political element has so far appeared in works by artists who deal less with a confrontational approach, and more with the sensitive, conceptual, poetic, and historical element. They reflect on the political darkness of the recent past and present, including the Brazilian military dictatorship period (1964-1984), which has lately been reborn as a heroic phase that must be restored, in popular discourse and that of Brazilian leaders.

Like Berlin, three exhibitions and performances would also be scheduled before the official opening, but in this case, only the first ones took place. Activities began in February with an individual exhibition of Peruvian Ximena Garrido-Lecca, who works between Lima and Mexico City and researches Peru's history and the contemporary effects of colonial processes; and the musical and collective performance by South African Neo Muyanga on the floors of the Biennial Pavilion, a 1957 modernist building designed by Oscar Niemeyer.

However, with COVID-19 the “time” vector tore apart the curatorial process itself, suspending the following exhibitions by Clara Ianni and Deana Lawson, and performances by León Ferrari and Hélio Oiticica, which were absorbed into the collective exhibition *Though It's Dark, I Still Sing*, rescheduled for October.

The space-time dimension of the 34th Biennial remains ambitious, as can be seen in the articulation of the curators based in São Paulo, Crivelli and Miyada, who wove, in cooperation with 25 museums, cultural centers, and independent spaces, a network of individual exhibitions throughout the city connected to the halls and installations of artists who are also in the group exhibition. Thus, the curators believe the public can learn more about the thinking behind the works of these authors presented at the Pavilion. This program, assembled following already defined calendars of the institutions, led to the completion of the list of names of artists in the Biennial. In terms of mobility, however, the tour of exhibitions can be challenging to accomplish in its entirety, considering that the traffic in São Paulo can be chaotic. In any case, visitors should draw their own map and thus construct unique aesthetic and urban experiences, further dilating the vectors of time and space proposed by the curators. The contemporary city, with its scale, transits, meetings, communities, and multiple visualities in constant transformation, is still an element that inspires the expography in the Pavilion, which would be built in the process of the architectural demands that have arisen since the first exhibition in February. Developed by the Andrade Morettin Arquitetos office, the expography takes the interior of the Pavilion as a neighborhood of São Paulo, and the exhibition volumes are meant to establish a natural-scale relationship between the visitor's body and supposed projected “buildings.” They have also used translucent and permeable materials to aerate the environment and create access routes between rooms and art installations. Once the architectural project is done, perhaps more clues about the “surface” curatorial vector will be found, because at this point it still seems to be just a poetic and generic erratic concept.

The processual element in the curatorship of a large-scale periodic exhibition runs the risk of being just a manneristic strategy to achieve visibility and will always deal with the paradox of promoting flexibility, improvisation, and spontaneity at the level of creation while responding to pre-defined institutional, political, and budgetary pressures. The process depends on negotiation with various entities, in turn, anchored to structures that are of interest to spheres of power far away from the gentleness of art. However, the Berlin Biennale, for its still cutting-edge profile and less grandiose dimension, allowed approaches between artists, curators, and the public on a more human scale in the initial events of the 11th edition, almost domestic in terms of spontaneity and warmth; São Paulo, with its historical weight, public ambition, and responsibility toward high-ranking social counterparts is at the same time accessible, eloquent, and sophisticated, attracting many visitors at the very first activations of the Pavilion. Because of its show structure and expanded proposal in the city, it needs to be more formatted even if the process is on the agenda of the curators' discussions.

This year, which will enter the history of exhibitions as the one of postponed biennials, will later require the revision and definition of new bases of coexistence and existence, less extractivist and personalist, including in the arts. The projects that will come after the lockdown period will probably be infused with the feeling of blockage, isolation, suspension, and redefinition of goals that all individuals in countries affected by the pandemic experienced in the critical months, and this experience should remind us for a long time that every process in art is, in the end, part of the processes of life.

Notes

1 The curatorial team of the 1st Berlin Biennale was composed by Klaus Biesenbach, Hans Ulrich Obrist and Nancy Spector, and it recognized in the future capital a place to deconstruct conventionalities, in its multiple layers. "The exhibition was conceived as a forum for artists, architects, designers, writers, musicians, choreographers and fashion designers, theatre directors and cinematographers." The first edition was divided by four spaces around the city, besides KW, organizer of the event.

2 "*The Bones of the World* is an initial point of departure aware of the rawness of time and its broken promises. At the same time, it is a joyful recognition of the life that occurs in the midst, against and despite the general states of fracture around us. From here we move." Curatorial text from the 11th Berlin Biennale, *exp. 1 The Bones of the World*, accessed March 17, 2020, <https://www.berlinbiennale.de/en/biennalen/5/berlin-berlin>.

3 <http://11.berlinbiennale.de/>, Accessed in March 19, 2020.

4 The Biennial Foundation estimates between 800 thousand and 1 million visitors in recent editions, <http://www.bienal.org.br/transparencia>, accessed March 19, 2020.

5 Gabriela Angeleti, "The 34th edition of the Bienal de São Paulo explores 'calls to resilience,'" accessed on March 24, 2020, <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/news/the-34th-bienal-de-sao-paulo>.

6 <http://imgs.fbsp.org.br/files/aec39aaf910e96693401afd397237fec.pdf>

7 One of the first measures taken by the Jair Bolsonaro government, which began in January 2019, was to eliminate the Ministry of Culture and practically end its budget. Public cultural and educational institutions have been systematically persecuted with budget cuts, dismissal of qualified employees, and closure. At the same time, industrialists members of the board of Fundação Bienal de São Paulo expressed support for the unbelievable president at the beginning of his term, confirming the conservatism of the base that maintains the event and indicating that the choice of the chief curator of the 34th edition also responds to internal political and diplomatic interests.

Daniela Labra is an independent curator, researcher and art critic. PhD in Art History and Criticism from the Graduate School of Fine Arts, at the University of Rio de Janeiro UFRJ, with the thesis: *International legitimation of Brazilian art, analysis of a course: 1940-2010*. Winner of the Gilberto Velho Thesis Prize at UFRJ, 2015. Post-doctoral fellow at the School of Communication at the same institution for the project *After the future: Ruins and reinventions of modernity in contemporary arts*. She develops projects of exhibitions, festivals, critical writing, teaching and research, working mainly on the issues: Latin American historical and artistic processes, Brazilian art, performance art, performativity, art and politics. Lecturer on Curating Performance Art, and Art & Politics at NODE Center. Professor of Art History and Theory at EAV Parque Lage, Rio de Janeiro (2010-2016). Art Critic at O Globo Newspaper (2014-2016). Curator of *Frestas Triennial 2017: Between Post Truths and Events*, SESC Sorocaba, São Paulo and *Festival Performance Arte Brasil*, Museum of Modern Art, Rio de Janeiro, 2011, among several shows. She currently collaborates with Revista Select, SESC São Paulo, Conccinitas Arts Journal, Plataforma Insurgencias Berlin, among other networks. She lives and works between Rio de Janeiro and Berlin.