

## Review of the 8<sup>th</sup> Mercosul Biennial: Essays in Geopoetics

### Fernanda Albertoni

The motto of the 8<sup>th</sup> Mercosul Biennial, *Essays in Geopoetics*, refers to the way art defines territories and notions about what constitutes a nation from different perspectives, exploring tensions between local and transnational identities, culture and spaces. Concepts around nation are central to the curatorial project, with its guiding theme an interrogation of this territory, which is somehow between a political construct and a geographical circumstance.

“Nation” was a big word for the 2011 biennials circuit. It was also included in the title of the canonical Venice Biennale (*ILLUMInations*) as, accordingly to its curator Bice Curiger, not just a light on the history of the institution and its national pavilions, but also as a metaphorical reference to “recent developments in the arts all over the world”, where new forms of collectives represent a “variety of more local activities and mentalities”<sup>1</sup>. In Curiger’s Biennial, from the literal reference to the metaphorical one, the word and notion of *nation* were broadly stretched by a project that had the ambiguous task of enclosing both Venice’s anachronic expositive model and a current paradigm for art.

In southern Brazil’s Mercosul Biennial, the discussion around *nation* and *territory* was also a reflection upon the history of the institution, but perhaps in a more coherent manner of connecting theory to history and experience. The project of the Colombian curator José Roca dared to take the previous editions’ models as experiences to be continued, and was innovative precisely by leaving spectacularization and total a revamping out of an edition that, even if not winning on all fronts, was successful in its economy, social conscience and its expansion of how the theoretical framework was applied to a biennial’s curatorial practices.

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<sup>1</sup> From press release: [http://universes-in-universe.org/eng/bien/venice\\_biennale/2011/tour/illuminations](http://universes-in-universe.org/eng/bien/venice_biennale/2011/tour/illuminations) and <http://www.labiennale.org/en/art/exhibition/curiger/>

Despite being a topic already extensively explored in cultural studies and exhibitions worldwide, the subject of transterritoriality is one that is hard to disconnect from the Mercosul Biennial, and José Roca grasped the opportunity to develop it. According to him, the emergence of the theme has an almost “anecdotal origin”. It departs from the curiosity he always had about the title *Mercosul* Biennial, an art exhibition that takes its name from a failed free-trade treaty<sup>2</sup>.

### **A background for the Mercosul Biennial**

Mercosul (standing for Southern Common Market) is the name of the political and economic agreement based on free trade, movement of goods, people and currency, which was signed by some of Cone Sur [*Southern Cone*] countries (Brazil, Argentina, Paraguay and Uruguay) in 1991. The Mercosul Biennial was created later in 1997, in the wave of excitement over the formation of a potentially strong economic block for South America. The official history of the Biennial’s creation is written in terms of a necessity of a consistent cultural articulation between Latin American countries<sup>3</sup>. However, there was also a political, economical and cultural will from Porto Alegre’s cultural agents and politicians to include the city in a Brazilian art circuit that until then revolved around Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo. The “art from the Mercosul countries” also identified a difference to work from the São Paulo Biennial. Since the connection of Rio Grande do Sul with the Cone Sur neighbours is culturally stronger than with the popular Brazilian imaginary<sup>4</sup>, this new mapping of the south of South American art circuit, with Porto Alegre as its host, made political, economical and cultural sense for the region.

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<sup>2</sup> Roca, J. (2011), *8ª Bienal do Mercosul: ensaios de geopoética: catálogo*. Porto Alegre: Fundação Bienal do Mercosul. p.50. The failure that Roca is referring to is the economic and regional integration of the block that has never been fulfilled due to strong divergences between its members.

<sup>3</sup> Fidelis, G. (2005), *Uma História Concisa da Bienal do Mercosul*. Porto Alegre: Fundação Bienal do Mercosul. p.19 and p.29.

<sup>4</sup> The state of Rio Grande do Sul remains closer in geography and traditions to the Spanish-Indigene America of the Argentinean and Uruguayan austere lowlands (Pampas) than to the Brazilian imaginary of Afro-Portuguese culture and exuberant tropical landscape.

In the first editions, the Mercosul Biennial went through a series of different models as it tried to develop and consolidate its identity. From attempts that went from the strict involvement of Mercosul countries only, expanding later to “Latin American” art, and then towards a globalization of its project, the institution managed to create a balance between local and international. In doing so, it inserted itself within the Brazilian art circuit, while at the same time giving visibility to the art scene in Porto Alegre. Slowly, it has also gained recognition within the international art circuit, carrying the image of the biennial of Latin American art, even if it has not strictly been the case in its later editions.

So the issue of transnational identity and territory was already present, both in the name and history of the Mercosul Biennial. José Roca took the appropriate decision of picking up where the previous editions had left off, making this fictional and ambiguous territory the inspiration for the biennial’s central theme. Even if several other exhibitions and biennials had already dealt with ideas relating to globalization and post-colonialism as a generator of new territories and conceptions of frontier, travelling, migration and nomadism, as new paradigms of the contemporary art world, Roca insists that “some things still remain things to be said about issues of country, State and nation at a time when these notions are being questioned or supplanted by new forms of organisation that extend beyond territoriality”<sup>5</sup>. These can be, for instance, virtual social communities or transnational cultural groups regulated by language, religion, political beliefs or ethnicity. Being national territorial concepts regulated by geography, politics and culture, they are all conventions that change according to different interests, and hence, fictional constructs that art can reinvent.

The notion of territory was also redefined by a curatorial project that removed the exclusive expositive focus of the Biennial. Roca was interested in expanding the “event Biennial” in time and space, beyond the three months of exhibition. To do that, he divided the project in “activating” and “expositive” strategies. As part of the activating actions, he gave continuity to the tradition of a strong pedagogical project initiated at previous editions. In addition, he diffused typical Biennial activities (i.e. talks, courses

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<sup>5</sup> Roca, 2011,p.49.

and exhibitions) to other cities of Rio Grande do Sul. In total, the project consisted of five exhibitions (of both activating and expositive character), the creation of a meeting place for the local Porto Alegre audience, and the pedagogical project.

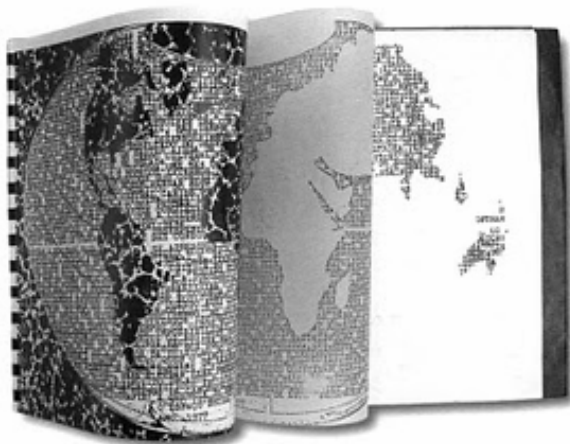
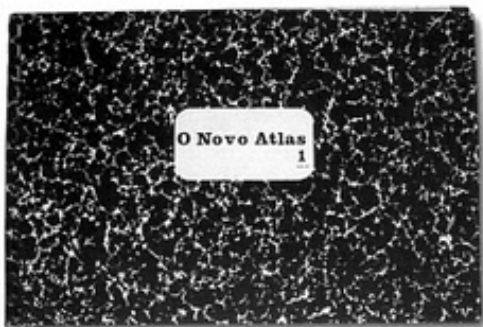
### **Geopoetics**

In the entrance of the only purely expositive session of the Biennial, the exhibition *Geopoetics*, was a carefully chosen group of works that dealt with cartography and politics, which itself created a strong dialogue within the theoretical frame of this Biennial. In the first work to be seen, white flags seemed to have all their colours and symbology melted down through the wall. *Display of Properties*, the work of the American Leslie Shows, created new forms from what ran out from these ideological support – the flags –, interrogating, in a poetic way, the cultural meanings of territorial symbols.



Leslie Shows, *Display of Properties*, (2009/2011), (Image: Fernanda Albertoni).

In front of Shows' flags, was the geo-political fictional lesson of the Mexican Eduardo Abaroa. His sculptural work materialized the perimeter of a questionable territory, the Bermeja Island in the Mexico Gulf, articulated using a cheap coated chain. This island is marked in some historical navigation documents from the "Age of Discovery", but in recent investigations is said to have been a cartographic mistake and that the island never existed. Some people suggest that the island could be slightly off the position marked on the maps, and that further investigations should be done because historical documents deserve more credibility. The controversy arose in light of the 2000 Clinton-Zedillo agreement about the sea frontiers between USA and Mexico. If the island existed, it would generate more sea territory for Mexico in an area rich in oil. Abaroa's project of materializing the island coincides with the deadline for any adjustments in the rights of each country in relation to the oil beds in the gulf.



Anna Bella Geiger, *O Novo Atlas* [The New Atlas], (1977), (Courtesy of the artist).

Both works establish a natural dialogue with Brazilian artist Anna Bella Geiger's 1970's maps questioning cultural politics. All these, together with other works in the same pavilion, shape one of the strongest curatorial groups of the Biennial.

In a general way, the *Geopoetics* exhibition outlined an interesting and clear trajectory through works that commented on notions of nation and its symbols, territory and democracy, from a fresh perspective, and without falling into obvious acts of "pamphleteering". Even cartography, a potentially worn out topic within Latin American art, found new life in the poetic work *Geografia de encontros* [Geography of Encounters], by the young artist Mayana Redin, where unlikely meetings inspired by geographic oppositions (e.g. Monaco and Russia, in proportions), or images suggested by the names (e.g. Cape of Good Hope and Cape of Tempests) occur. The current skepticism towards ideologies found a more lighthearted expression through humor with Delacroix's Liberty being murdered by the people she led, and Robespierre being too busy skating to start a new revolution, in video works by Cristina Lucas and Guilherme Peters, respectively. Current political affairs were also wittily reflected with religious, financial and military forces of Egypt trapped in a *scissors, paper, stone* type game, in a video by Khaled Hafez.

The investigation of how new forms of territorial organization are generated, was conceptually and practically exposed in the ZAPs (Zones of Poetic Autonomy). Here containers connected to several points of the expositive space contained documentation about micro-nations and were exhibited in the fashion of a *curiosity cabinet*. Real micro-nations such as Sealand, a former military platform 11km from the West Coast of Great Britain, or fictional and non-territorial ones such as NSK State, a State that "exists in time, not space", created by Slovenian art collective Irwin, are presented as alternative models for thinking about geo-politics. Furthermore, the Z.A.P.s ended up ironically commenting on the national representations figuring at biennials, but here the criteria was not of nations with political and economical sovereignty, but the flexibility of new models of organization created in the gaps between geo-political rules and norms. Some of these non-territorial nations, such as NSK State, even issue passports.



Z.A.P. Irwin, *State in Time* (1991/2011), (Image: Fernanda Albertoni).

The absurdities of geo-political conventions are further outlined in other real situations addressed by works of art, as in Manuela Ribadeneira *Tiwintza mon amour*. The work is a 1:1000 scale sculpture representing one square kilometer of Peruvian forest on top of mobile platform. The depicted territory, literally a square in middle of the Peruvian forest, was given to Ecuador as a compensation for a new frontier agreement between the two countries. The strangeness of this accord is that Ecuadorians can only get there by helicopter, since the square has no land connection with Ecuador's territory.

Other highlights are Coco Fusco's investigation of when nationalism and its symbols come to embody both liberator and oppressor meanings in the video *Els segadors* [*The*

*Reapers*] <sup>6</sup>; and Pablo Bronstein's beautiful watercolors, ironically showing the "harmonic cohabiting" of north African and southern Spanish cultures. Synthesizing the dynamics of the creation of new forms of living together was the archival installation of Uriel Orlow, *The short and the long of it*. The piece documented the life in boats trapped for eight years in the Suez Canal following the Six Days War (1967). The installation was divided into two mirrored spaces: one about practical aspects of living for so long in a motionless boat and what happened in the world meanwhile; the other about the new perceptions generated by this inner life – a time that has another counting, a landscape that one doesn't know if it is external or internal.

### **The activation of new territories**

Beyond the *Geopoetics* exhibition, much energy was spent on the plan of expansion of the Biennial's territories and its "activating" strategies. Within its immediate location of Porto Alegre, attention was given to the local art scene with a project that didn't so much give "visibility" to local artists, but rather attempted to stimulate dialogues between them and develop pre-existing networks. This was the intention of *Casa M*, a meeting place inaugurated three months before the Biennial itself.

*Casa M* was inspired by artist-ran spaces, with a local group advising on the creation of a program that included workshops, artists meetings and also small exhibitions by local artists. It also has an inter-disciplinary experimental character, but with the difference of a generous institutional budget for its creation. By the amount of local people meeting there, and the intimacy they seem to have with the place and each other, the community-creating proposal appears to have been fulfilled. But despite the longer life of the project in relation to the Biennial, it will come to an end in December, when the

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<sup>6</sup> *Els Segadors* is the name of a seventh-century song celebrating the Revolt of Catalans against the Castilian Rule, and later became the "national" anthem for Catalonia. Before turning into an official song, *Els Segadors* was often sung at Catalan demonstrations and, during Franco dictatorship, was banned from being played. In 2001, in light of the rising tension over immigration in Barcelona and the changes that were occurring in the city's culture and language, the local press started debating whether *Els Segadors* should be taught in public-run schools. In that year Coco Fusco advertised in the Barcelona press for actors that could sing traditional Catalan songs to represent the Catalan identity in an American movie. During the recording process, many of the actors realised that they also had a "broken" command of the Catalan language, causing a reflection on what determines a cultural identity.



generous budget also finishes. That evidences that, even with this aim towards continuity, in time, there is a limit to how much the compromise of a biennial institution can be stretched beyond the visibility of an exhibition as an international event. The local community seems to hope that another sponsor decides to keep the project going.

Another activating project, not based upon the art scene, but rather on the relation between the exhibition and its urban surroundings, is *Unseen City*. Nine artists were invited to elaborate works for certain locations in the centre of Porto Alegre generated by “urban archaeology” research. These places were selected for their invisibility in the daily life of the city, such as an inaccessible balcony-garden in the government palace, an underused stairwell connecting the low and high town, and a high-level tram platform that became an urban ruin even before its inauguration. The sights that the project guided one to were beautifully awkward and unusual, even for the local inhabitants, revealing the incongruent exquisiteness in the decadent modernization project of Porto Alegre’s old art-deco centre. The curatorial proposition was that the works should be almost invisible, appealing to other senses and perceptions other than the visual.



Marlon de Azambuja, *Sculptural Potential* montage, (2011), (Image: Cristiano Sant'Anna/[indicefoto.com](http://indicefoto.com)).

While this invisibility did in fact happen, the problem was that the artists invited didn't follow the unpredictable path of the city, and their projects seemed to paradoxically disappear for being too obvious in the eccentric surroundings – such as national songs of the Cone Sur countries being played simultaneously in the government garden, or an interphone connecting both ends of the long stairs. One of the exceptions was the work of Marlon de Azambuja, an artist native to Rio Grande do Sul but expatriated in Madrid, who with his experience of subtle urban interventions, gave a fresh glance to the old grey viaduct of the city through his *Sculptural Potential* series, in which he wraps street objects in colour duct tape.

### **Somewhere between the local and the international**

Regarding the larger scenario, that of the *region* where the Biennial is inserted, the relation with the exhibition was vaguer. People from the interior of the state of Rio Grande do Sul didn't necessarily feel part of the project that, as tax payers, they helped to finance. Thinking about the several levels of otherness inside any territory, Roca and his curatorial team decided to look at the diversity of the state and its ambiguous relationship with the cosmopolitan Mercosul Biennial, both as a way of inclusion and of exploring theoretical ideas about transterritoriality.

Rio Grande do Sul, the southernmost state in Brazil, actively relates to the paradigmatic fiction of “the frontier” of a nation. Historically, colonization on the coast – where Porto Alegre is –, was dominated by an Azorean Portuguese fishing culture, whereas the northeast mountains and valleys underwent colonization by Italians and Germans; meanwhile the central and west plateau territory is populated by the gaucho (ethnically a mix of Spanish, Portuguese and Amerindian) culture of cattle raising, a Pampas tradition spanning into neighbouring Argentina and Uruguay. As such, the culture and habits are coordinated by a landscape that doesn't respect the triple border of Brazil-Argentina-Uruguay.

In *Travel Notebooks*, a project curated by the Chilean Alexia Tala, nine artists whose practices related to travelling or landscape were sent to document their traversing of

nine different routes through Rio Grande do Sul's territory. The model evokes the idea of the traveller artist, that was so present in scientific and other expeditions throughout South America in the 17<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup> and particularly 19<sup>th</sup> century, and that returns (in a modified form) in the contemporary paradigm of the nomad artist attending residential projects. The trajectories proposed by the curatorial team were historical routes of territorial conquest, passing by the Pampas, the canyons, and the regions explored by Jesuit missions. After two or three weeks travelling, the artists were invited to make an exhibition in their final destination consisting of their travel notes or execution of projects elaborated during their journey. The exhibitions were accompanied by talks and courses organized by the pedagogical program. After this first experience and contact with the local audiences, the artists elaborated new projects to be exhibited at the Biennial warehouses in Porto Alegre, alongside the *Geopoetics* exhibition, as multiple views of Rio Grande do Sul territory.

The result of the final exhibition is an incongruous group of works, with some artists trapped in their previous practice and others seeming to be lost somewhere on the journey. One highlight is the work of the Puerto Rican Beatriz Santiago Muñoz, *Folc-Industrial*, a video made in the industrial city of Caxias do Sul. The artist recorded the moment the workers leave the factories in one mass movement, capturing the everyday choreography of the workers turning into individuals again, or sometimes crossing to another group-oriented identity, such as the mass divisions by the colours of football shirts, another strong form of identification within local culture. Muñoz showed her mute-choreography video in an exhibition in Caxias do Sul and asked local musicians to react to the images and improvise a live sound-track for the video. The experimental composition now accompanies the work.

Another highlight of *Travel Notebook* was the work presented by Mexican Sebastian Romo, with the suggestive name of *Accelerating Machine of Fictions*. This was composed by a scenographic recreation of the landscape of the cities of Santana do Livramento and Rivera, both on the frontier region between Brazil and Uruguay, a territory incised by concrete border marks, but with a bilingual community that will not assume any national identity.



Beatriz Santiago Muñoz, still images from *Folc-Industrial*, (2011), (Courtesy of the artist).





In the carefully curated survey on Eugenio Dittborn, the Chilean artist honoured by this Biennial's edition, the activating strategy was also an element of the curatorial practice. Part of his *Aero-postal Paintings*, a series he has developed since 1983, and which has traveled separately to be remounted at the Santander Museum, Porto Alegre, was due to travel again after the opening week. This time various parts of the series went to different interior museums of Rio Grande do Sul. This act had a double meaning; it was a way of activating the work, which carries on the trajectory borne by the painting written on each envelope, i.e. testing the transit of a work of art using the mail as part of its distribution system; and also a way of including different regional territories within the event of the exhibition itself. With an iconography that is related to travel accidents and the interruption of trajectories, Dittborn's work can be regarded as early examples of art dealing with transterritoriality.



Eugenio Dittborn, *Absent Feet*, (2004), (Image: José Roca).

Finally, apart from the inspiring moments of main section *Geopoetics*, a further example of good curatorial practice was *Beyond Frontiers*, an exhibition consistent both in its theoretical proposal and in its practical results. Through the leadership of Aracy do Amaral, nine artists developed works by visiting specific landscapes of Rio Grande do Sul, and, in a Warburgian way, the works were intercalated inside the exhibition space with historical objects, maps and traditional landscape paintings from several of the state's historical museums, forming an new archaeology for the Rio-Grandense culture. Highlights are Cao Guimarães' haunting video of an extended and anachronic time in the Pampas, and the surreality of Lucia Koch's video of "dancing waters" in the public fountain of a small town.



Cao Guimarães, still image from *Limbo* [Limb], (2011), (Courtesy of the artist).

By expanding his curatorial project through different territories – physical and theoretical –, José Roca managed to extend the notion of the Biennial model and make it, to a certain extent, more inclusive for the regional audience. Whereas that seems to have provisionally worked for the Porto Alegre circuit, the connection between the

cosmopolitan exhibition and the Rio Grande do Sul territory still felt like a disconnected dialogue when it happened according to exhibition models that prioritized *activating* strategies. However, it was within the traditional expositive space, where exhibitions were curated by affinities between art, that his theme found its greatest depth through the presence of high-quality works themselves.



Lucia Koch, still image from *Cachoeira* [Waterfall], (2011), (Courtesy of the artist).