

On the Biennial

Vilém Flusser

Originally entitled "Da Bienal", this text –written by Vilém Flusser in 1965– has been specially translated for this edition of ARARA by Vinicius Spricigo with the collaboration of Fernanda Albertoni, and is meant to compliment Spricigo's essay "Oui a la Bienal de São Paulo", also included in the present edition. This translation has been carefully revised by the Vilém Flusser Archive, University of the Arts Berlin and is reproduced here with their permission.

Exhibition of artworks: these terms illuminate every aspect of the situation that surrounds us. Converging in São Paulo, from all corners of the Earth are "artworks" to be "exhibited". The city, the state, and the federation honor the event, whose "cultural" relevance cannot be underestimated (to make use of the appropriate jargon). The governments of Ghana and Albania (or its equivalents) finance the transport of paintings, statues, artists, creators, diplomats, and their respective wives, so they can be admired in Ibirapuera Park¹. A dense network of correspondence was launched over the globe, in order to hold an impressive number of art critics, lecturers, and intellectuals in its meshes and disperse them around São Paulo. What is this that is happening? We have, of course, a whole series of articles in this "Suplemento"², with the purpose of critically explaining various aspects of the spectacle to which we will be exposed. The purpose of this article is another. It is an attempt to appraise the phenomenon of the Biennial within the civilization in which we participate.

Laotian painters, Afghan sculptures and Congolese critics along the banks of the River Tietê are not obviously a reason for surprise, especially considering that all these people apparently descended in exodus³, more or less directly, from the Parisian "rive gauche". These migrants fit into the

¹ Ibirapuera is a major park in São Paulo, which has hosted the Biennial since its second edition in 1953.

² Flusser is referring to the Literary Supplement of the newspaper "O Estado de São Paulo", in which this text was published.

³ The original word 'exotas' does not exist in Portuguese.

grey flow that pulses feverishly in the Transatlantic and in airplanes to transform the former diversity of the cultures into the tedious uniformity that characterizes our civilization today. They are equivalent to the visit of the Shah of Persia to San Salvador, and of the Sultan of Zanzibar to Memphis, Tennessee, with the aim of strengthening the cultural ties that unite these societies. Thanks to this movement of cultural exchange a stage of development has been reached, in which all travels have become perfectly dispensable. We know that if we go to Singapore, we will find exactly the same hotels, the same food, the same movies, the same paintings and sculptures that we find in Pindamonhangaba⁴. We should not therefore expect that the multiplicity of countries represented is reflected in the variety of artworks exhibited in the Ibirapuera Park.

What, then, is the reason for this effort? I believe that an analysis of the terms "artwork" and "exhibition" will reveal the motive. I move to consider the meaning of the term "artwork". It is a strictly modern term and should not be applied, to be precise, to any object before the Renaissance. Let us define as "work" any object of nature transformed by manipulation, and let us define "artwork" as any object of nature transformed by aims at a particular purpose, vaguely known as "beauty". With these definitions accepted, we can say that there were no human manipulations aimed at "beauty" before the European Renaissance, and that, therefore, there were no artworks. It is true that if we define "artwork" as an object of nature manipulated according to aesthetic rules, we cannot maintain the assumed position. But if we apply this definition, all human work before the Renaissance would be an "artwork". Every activity of human manipulation before the Renaissance obeyed aesthetic rules, and resulted in beautiful works. The term "art" (*techné*), meant only "know-how", and it is still in this sense that we employ this term in expressions such as "culinary art", "art of war" or a bridge as an artwork. In the Renaissance there was a shift. It was a change in the attitude of man towards nature. The nature was conceived as an "extending thing", manipulated by the rules of the "thinking thing". When applied, these rules, that resemble

⁴ Remote town in the State of São Paulo.

mathematical rules and tend towards them, result in "ugly" works. The transformation of nature by the thinking thing resulted, for the first time in history, in ugliness. This transformation is called "applied science" or "technology" (which is a correct but curious use of the term *techné*). The consequence is a progressive agglomeration of ugly objects surrounding humanity, of which the most impressive monuments are Nineteenth Century cities. Artworks, as works aiming for beauty, emerged as an attempt to balance this wave of the ugly. In this sense, art is a modern manifestation of human activity, and is the reverse side of applied science.

The bifurcation of manipulative activity into "technique" and "art", and the resulting difference between "instrument" and "artwork", is a symptom of our culture. The Polynesian mask and the Gothic book do not allow this difference to be made. It is therefore inconceivable that "exhibitions" of these works have been made. To imagine that Eskimos organize an exhibition of harpoons, or Moors an exhibition of manuscripts, is to falsify the context in which these works emerged. But we effectively organize such exhibitions, and the last Biennial contained an exhibition of pre-Columbian "art". Only a few steps in the exhibition pavilion separated these objects from concrete paintings and "pop art" sculptures. Whoever took these steps, underwent a shock. The force that was articulated in these Native Indian works was corrosive, if applied to our artworks. Our artworks simply dissolved. This experience may explain why exhibitions are made.

Exhibitions are places in which artists exhibit works to the public, and in which the public is exposed to these works. In the small-scale exhibitions that swarm through the city, the public consists of friends of the artists, and the occasional visitors who inadvertently penetrate there. The artists and their friends form hermetic circles, use esoteric language and despise the common people. The occasional visitors suffer the impact of the mystery, seek in vain to decipher the esoteric language, and return to enjoy the true art of today, that is, television, illustrated magazines and cinema. These exhibitions are existential proof of the vanguardism of self-

conscious art, that is, of its isolation. But the Biennial is a different case. Buses and public transport bring the masses hungry for sensations, guards regulate the transit, and queues are formed. The crowd rushes. It is obvious that the official propaganda, the peanuts and Coca-Cola, the meetings of lovers and the boredom of Sundays explain, in part, the phenomenon described. But the paintings and the sculptures also have their function, although perhaps restricted. After all, since the public rushed, it does not hurt to take a look. The combination of ignorance and "blasé" superiority characterizes the encounter of the public with the works.

The exhibition is made to reduce the ignorance and increase the "blasé" superiority, and indeed, the number of Biennials is directly proportional to the rate of this superiority. The ignorance and sophistication of the public merits a moment of meditation. Ignorance can thus be formulated, "All these works do not concern me, as they do not refer to my ordinary circumstances. Furthermore, they intend to cause the impression that I do not understand them. But I do not let them make me a fool." The sophistication can thus be formulated, "I already know all these attempts to reach originality. All that is just entertainment. But it is a sign of education to follow with interest the evolution of these attempts." These two reactions are consequences of the role that art occupies today: a marginal role to balance the ugliness of the instruments. The Biennials (and similar exhibitions) are organized to suppress the first reaction and emphasize the second. The behavior of the public attests the success achieved.

I said that the exhibition of Native Indian art at the last Biennial could perhaps explain the motive of all art exhibitions. Now I claim that the motive for this is the transformation of the ignorance of the public into boredom. There seems to be a contradiction in these two statements. But the contemplation of the Native Indian works reveals, by contrast, the bifurcation of the modern manipulative activity and the resulting inauthenticity of both our instruments and our artworks. The Biennials,

when educating the public to this "blasé" attitude, contribute powerfully to the understanding of this inauthenticity, and by doing so, perhaps overcome the bifurcation that is its cause. I thus reformulate the motive of Biennials; they exhibit artworks in the modern meaning of the term, to demonstrate that these works are the reverse side of technique, and that [artworks] will be meaningful only when they are again re-unified with the manipulative activity of man. The Biennials exhibit "primitive" artworks to demonstrate how this manipulative activity formerly worked.

Probably, this motive of the exhibitions is not entirely conscious to the organizers. But it is, indeed, this overcoming of the bifurcation that justifies the Biennials and forms one of the symptoms of the overcoming of the Modern Age. The ties with abstract patterns, the sardine cans with lines à la Moore, the Biennial-esque toothpaste advertisements, these are the tangible results. Thanks to this invasion of art in the area of technology, we are a generation that begins to acquire a style; the first true style after the Gothic, indeed. The instruments that surround us start to acquire again this elusive quality called "beauty".

Art in the modern meaning of the term can be overcome by the "blasé" boredom that the exhibitions provoke. But this overcoming is only possible because the artworks exhibited articulate an aesthetic sense that concerns us. The thousands of square meters in the Biennial walls do not allow, obviously, that we go deep in the "messages" of an individual artist (if indeed these messages exist). But the global impression that these walls cause, is of an impact of the new sense of beauty. This is the attraction that the Biennial exerts on our minds. We are being immersed in a world of forms and colors that expresses an aspect of our reality. Indeed, the pavilion in Ibirapuera somehow much more immediately represents our world than factories and cars. This is why factories and cars adapt themselves progressively to the pavilion in the Ibirapuera, and that is why the pavilion was built. To summarize, the exhibition of paintings and sculptures, if taken as such, is a marginal agglomerate of works. But if it is

taken as a set of models for the future manipulative activity, it could be the birthplace of a new civilization articulating a new sense of reality.

I said that the true art of our age is in the illustrated magazines, the Hollywood movies, the television shows and radio novellas. The aesthetic quality of these artworks is repulsive, because these works aim to overcome the ugliness and profanity of the technical world by numbing our sense of beauty. The Biennials are places in which this sense is again provoked. They are places in which we are reminded of the fundamental fact that human manipulative activity results in beauty, unless such activity is distorted by a preconceived attitude. It is true, that the walls of the Biennial still bear "modern" objects, in the sense of "manipulated objects with preconceived attitude". But it is not less true, that from these objects an influence spreads over our situation, that tends to overcome the ugliness of the instruments and liquidate with the art of illustrated magazines. In this sense, the painters and sculptures that exhibit in the Biennial are the shapers of the future.

Works like the pre-Columbian ones are the result of a fixed way of man to assert himself. They were performed according to "projects" provided by a culture. The works exhibited in the Biennial were not projected in such a traditional and fixed way. On the contrary, they reveal fluid tendencies and rapidly overcome trends. The fluidity of artistic tendencies is related to the "blasé" sophistication of the public that appreciates, and in the final analysis, finances the artists. This mass, hungry for novelties, requires that new things should always be provided, and the artists, although vanguardists, cannot follow the "progress" of this mass quickly enough. But hanging over all these fugacious tendencies, we can smell the aroma of a new "project". From this overabundance of forms, some are crystallizing to serve to the articulation of a new civilization *in statu nascendi*. It is this inebriating aroma that despite everything makes the Biennial to be experienced as one of our openings to the future.