

Review: 29th BIENAL DE SÃO PAULO: The Politics of Art has gone Global

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The Politics of Art, or the Politics of the Spectacle?

At the dawn of the 21st century can a Biennial of such importance, particularly in relation to the art produced in emerging economic and cultural centres, be innovative if its (claimed) ethos is to dust and polish conceptual memorabilia established at the beginning of last century? The 29th *Bienal de São Paulo* in fact stresses as its main goal the following theme: the recognition of the ambiguous character art assumed the moment it was released from the role of representing what was already there and known.¹ This ambiguity, as the curators Agnaldo Farias and Moacir dos Anjos put it, is the political edge that art expresses when it goes beyond representation, when it comes with a critical function – that is, when it is able to exert critical vigilance over the ethical realm.²

The main proposal of this Biennial is neither singular nor new, as one would expect from an event that supposedly goes hand-in-hand with innovation. In fact, stating that the Biennial's multidisciplinary team wanted to organise an exhibition that radiates out of the restricted circle of artistic production into the ampler domains of culture and politics³ mirrors, for instance, the early 20th century avant-garde intention of committing to a progressive aesthetics. Although the intention is not cutting-edge, it is clearly a valid one; however there is no mention of what shape it would take. Moreover, if the title given to the Biennial, "There is Always a Cup of Sea to Sail in", is an attempt to update

¹ Dos Anjos M. & Farias A. – There is Always a Cup of sea to Sail in. 29th Bienal de São Paulo Catalogue, Fundação Bienal de São Paulo, 2010, p. 19

² De Duve T. – Archaeology of Practical Modernism, in Kant after Duchamp. Cambridge, Mass. Mit Press, 1996, p. 432

³ Dos Anjos M. & Farias A. – There is Always a Cup of sea to Sail in. 29th Bienal de São Paulo Catalogue, Fundação Bienal de São Paulo, 2010, p. 18

a long established paradigm to the current global scenario, it is only able to set up a puzzling paradox.

In relation to the function of art within the complicated world of praxis, is art a small “cup of sea”, or as mentioned above, a “restricted circle”? Are the curators stating that art is a “small universe” from which utopian actions radiate to a dystopian reality? Are these actions to be taken as art’s ambition to influence the practical ambit of life, even if art - as an ocean in a 250 ml container - comes “without ships and bearings / ... without waves and sands”?

⁴ Or is art a realm of endless “small actions” which together effectively press ahead our material world? If so, how is art today enacting this pressure? Judging by its title, the Biennial’s team struggled to articulate a powerful re-proposal of the politics of art. To make matters worse, this re-proposal has relied on works of art which ambivalently gravitate between the political aspect of art and the power of media-hypes – particularly because they are displayed in a high-exposure environment.

In fact, three artists seem to have been selected in accordance with a dangerous shortcut that curators may take in order to emphasise, or at least put under the spotlight, the politics of art as a leading subject matter. This shortcut is called sensationalism, and the curators may have thought of it as part of a strategy that would ensure the achievement of their goal. The drawings of Gil Vicente (fig. 1) depicting the artist shooting to death public authorities such Queen Elizabeth II and Brazil’s former President, Lula; the vultures used by Nuno Ramos (fig. 2) in his work; and the immediate link that Roberto Jacoby’s *The Soul Never Thinks Without Image* (fig. 3) has established with the Presidential campaign which was then taking place in Brazil have all generated controversies. Vicente’s drawings were considered a plea to crime by the OAB, Brazil’s Juridical Organisation,⁵ both Ramos’

⁴ Ibid, p. 20

⁵ For more information on this point, from a legal perspective and in Portuguese, visit the following web pages, <http://www.conjur.com.br/2010-set-25/quem-censura-obras-gil-vicente-seria-capaz-degolar>, and <http://www.conjur.com.br/2010-set-17/obra-mostra-lula-faca-pescoco-faz-apologia-crime-oab-sp>

vultures have been removed⁶ and Jacoby's collaborative work has been suspended following public protest and/or legal action.⁷ Needless to say, media coverage surrounding these events was monumental. It is naïve to think that the Biennial's organisers could not forecast such reactions, particularly during a year where politics is already at the centre of attention due to the presidential elections.

No wonder the Biennial's team surrendered to the charms of the spectacle. By 2010, it is hard to find an original way to say that political blood circulates through art's veins. So why not adopt extreme strategies instead? It is even harder to think that the curators have put this type of argument forward as the Biennial's mission toward its "public", as if, conscious of the fact that specialised audience would not be impressed by it, the "public", at least, would be "enlightened". Forgive me if my counter-argument may sound simplistic in its way of being straight and narrow, but who does not know by 2010 that art is (or at least can be) political? No call for media scandals!

New Ways of Making Political Art

Rather than stressing the politics of art as the focus of the 29th *Bienal de São Paulo*, its team should have put forward a valuable account of the ways in which the event is displaying the new characteristics that political art has recently shown as a result of the fast-changing world in which we live today. The team fails to mention how art is political now and how today it actively responds to a praxis that has gone global.

However, the biggest achievement of this Biennial lies beyond its premeditated intention. In fact, it does manage to show us how art is being

⁶ For more information on this point, according to a legal perspective and in Portuguese language, visit the following web page <http://www.conjur.com.br/2010-out-07/juiz-impede-urubus-continuem-29-bienal-sao-paulo>

⁷ For more information on the legal reasons that led the Biennial's curators to cover Jacoby's work, visit the following web page in English language <http://chtodelat.wordpress.com/2010/09/27/sao-paulo-is-burning-the-spectre-of-politics-at-the-biennial/>

political today - although this has not been spelled out by the organisers. This “how”, nowadays, happens when art produces a testimony to the newly established uncertainties that the emergence of a global reality has produced over the last decade or so. It no longer happens, or, at least, not in an original way, when art produces knowledge that destabilizes long-entrenched certainties⁸ - as it has been stated by the team. Yet, the Biennial exemplifies this new political characteristic of art to visitors straightforwardly.

There is no need even to enter the Cicillo Matarazzo Pavilion, as Wilfriedo Prieto's *Apolitico* (fig. 4) stands solemn in front of the façade of Niemeyer's building – merging with the surrounding architecture. The Biennial's catalogue associates the meaning of the work to the questioning of established and hegemonic values; yet, in my opinion the work could be interpreted as a witness to the false equality occurring within countries only in relation to the political climate that characterised the world up to, let's say, the beginning of the 90s. Made in 2001, it instead anticipated our current reality, and by 2010 it is more accurate to say that Prieto's long row of gray-scale flags suggests the levelling of the nation-states to which flags are associated. The work does point to the perplexities that the emergence of competing centres has generated. It addresses the decline of the hegemonic power of the countries that for long time were identified as “the leading economies”; and the crisis of modernist identity-space in the core.⁹ Both phenomena perforate the power membrane of the Western centre and allow this power to flow toward ex-peripheries.

Prieto's work depicts globalisation as a dimension that is progressively demoting nation-states to secondary positions in relation to the political, economic and social life they represent. National institutions have lost centrality across the globe and have equally faded, like the flags of *Apolitico*, in relation to the vigorous manner with which ethnoscaples, mediascaples,

⁸ Dos Anjos M. & Farias A. – There is Always a Cup of sea to Sail in. 29th Bienal de São Paulo Catalogue, Fundação Bienal de São Paulo, 2010, p. 21

⁹ Featherstone M. & Lash S. – Globalisation, Modernity and the Spatialisation of Social Theory, in – Featherstone M., Lash S. & Robertson R. (eds) Global Modernities, London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi, 1995, p. 7

finanscapes and technoscapes are defining global flows.¹⁰ The issue of false neutrality between countries to which this work has been associated¹¹ dates back to times almost immemorial and does not do justice to a work that addresses far more recent matters, envisaging the intensification of trans-societal flows which have established a 'borderless global economy' and undermined the capacity of national states to act.¹²

Even if unintentionally, the 29th *Bienal de São Paulo* manages to carry it off and show to us the new political edge with which artists are responding to the disintegration of any long-entrenched certainty. There are, within the pavilion, works that address the recent inversion of the path of modernity or, from a more extreme stand point, the substitution of the condition of modernity with the one of globality.

As stated in the Biennial's catalogue, the amalgamation of art and politics has indeed granted a unique place to art. However, to state that it is impossible to dissociate art from politics does not assure a singular position to the event.¹³ Far more effective is the way in which the curators have organised the exhibition politically. As clearly stated, they have resisted the temptation to adopt both the traditional museological model of historical narrative and the territorial origin of the artists as absolute criteria of selection.¹⁴ This has resulted in a heterogenic showcasing of works, made at different times and in disparate geographical locations, which reflects the turn of globalisation. The latter represents an important shift in transmuting temporality in a spatial

¹⁰ For more on these concepts see Arjun Appadurai – Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy. In: Featherstone M. (ed) – *Global Cultures*, London, Newbury Park, New Delhi, 1990, pp. 294-310.

¹¹ For more details on the opinion that the 29th *Bienal de São Paulo* has regarding Apolitico see the Biennial catalogue, page 32

¹² Featherstone M. & Lash S. – Globalisation, Modernity and the Spatialisation of Social Theory, in – Featherstone M., Lash S. & Robertson R. (eds) *Global Modernities*, London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi, 1995, p.2

¹³ Dos Anjos M. & Farias A. – There is Always a Cup of sea to Sail in. 29th *Bienal de São Paulo Catalogue*, Fundação Bienal de São Paulo, 2010, p. 19

¹⁴ *Ibid*, p. 22

framework where transcultural exchange takes place incessantly.¹⁵ The Biennial demonstrates its affinity with our contemporary condition by creating nonlinear associations between the art produced within the core and emerging centres.¹⁶

Through nonlinear association, the curatorial project seems to imply a type of correlation that explores the transformation of the place-culture relationship, which today occurs regardless of temporal and spatial transitions. A good example of how culture has detached itself from geographical and even physical areas, has been given by the proximity between the works of US artist Jimmie Durham, who lives in Rome and Berlin, and Chinese artist Cao Fei, who is based in Beijing.¹⁷ Durham's work (fig. 5) mirrors the level of curiosity that Brazil's socio-cultural context is generating within core institutions and cultures and depicts, in anthropologic fashion, the traits of cultural interpenetration between the global and the local that are taking place in São Paulo. His installation *Bureau for Research into Brazilian Normality* (2010) is on the one hand a collection of codes and symbols that refer to Western culture across long stretches of space-time. On the other hand, it is a specifically Brazilian pastiche between inner issues of coloniality (e.g. differences among individuals linked to class and race) and hybridisms generated by the multiculturalism peculiar to global capitalism.

This notion of cultural displacement has been dramatised by Durham's work in proximity to that of Cao Fei (fig. 6). *RMB City* (2010)¹⁸ was produced by Fei in Beijing and is about the contradictions of contemporary Chinese cities.

¹⁵ Here I am referring to the fact that - if today's Biennials tend to display artworks disregarding their origins in terms of geographical location and historical context – it is because they perceive that our globalising moment has put to an end its previous stages, which were based on a master logic of historical development. Nowadays, Biennials are reflecting the problematic of globalisation – which within social sciences are identified under the spatialisation of social theory.

¹⁶ Ibid, p. 24

¹⁷ These works are displayed one beside the other in the 2nd Floor of the Cicillo Matarazzo Pavillion.

¹⁸ To know more about this work and about Second Life visit www.rmbcity.com

Beyond the use of Oriental symbols and aesthetics, overlapped to the westernising impulses of the world of entertainment and media, the work also underscores virtuality as one of the most powerful spatial frameworks of today's culture. The parallel online universe is the only place in which RMB City exists, yet the city connects to the "real world" and to "material culture" as people are transformed into Second Life avatars and invited to invest in virtual buildings, to buy the "places" in which the activities and events available to users take place.

Reflections on the urban scenery of megalopolises belonging to the emerging world connect, according to the curatorial choice, the industriousness of two artists producing within distinct geographical realities. The pavilion becomes a sort of container for metaphorical encounters between equally important yet temporally and/or physically distanced artistic expressions. Furthermore, the approximation of art produced everywhere, freed from geographical categorisation, creates a crisscrossing of significance and value that allows the hybridisation of their individual meaning. In other words it detaches each work from its canonical interpretation (the one associated with the so called "international language" of art¹⁹ and with hegemonic art criticism) and recombines it with new ways of conceiving art and its content. These new ways are progressively prone to blur both the core-periphery and the hegemonic-subaltern distinctions.

Global? Yes, but from a Brazilian Perspective

The Biennial contributes to the blurring of this distinction adopting also another strategy. Apart from displaying artworks regardless from where and when they were produced, it underlines that global expressions of art are, nevertheless, exhibited from a Brazilian perspective. The country has gained in recent years a crucial position within the rapid global reorganisation that positions the emerging countries of the BRIC block at the centre of politico-economic debates. Brazil is subverting given hierarchies within the context of

¹⁹ Dos Anjos M. & Farias A. – There is Always a Cup of sea to Sail in. 29th Bienal de São Paulo Catalogue, Fundação Bienal de São Paulo, 2010, p. 25

international politics and the global economy - and the Biennial's curators have paid due attention to this matter. The idea of bringing to the fore the typically Brazilian concept of *terreiro* within the exhibition space symbolises the importance that the subversion of given ideas and values is a constitutive part of being Brazilian – it has always defined the country culturally and is now repositioning it also in terms other than cultural.

Although the term originates within the customs of the coloniser, and in Portugal conveys the piece of land that lies on front of a house, particularly rural ones, In Brazil, it is mainly used to describe the loci of the country's hybrid spiritual practices such as *Candomblé*'. These practices are a syncretisation of beliefs that came to Brazil through slave's ships and the Christian religion of the Europeans. *Terreiros* can initially be seen as part of a strategy with which the curators have established six themes²⁰ that would both connect the works presented and demarcate areas for didactic, convivial and performative experiences. Under deeper analysis, they also manage to draw attention to Brazil's ability to successfully metabolise, re-elaborate and merge core and periphery notions, values and traditions.

The concept surrounding the term *terreiro*, at the 29th *Bienal de São Paulo* addresses new forms of cultural hybridity that occur across the planet, drawing inspiration from a traditionally Brazilian way of generating hybridity. Once more, a way of thinking globally - yet understanding the global as a condition that can be exemplified equally from different geographical locations. This new hybridity is still a response to the long globalising process, yet it does not react to globalisation as a process of homogenisation, rather it assumes that nowadays globalisation means diversification. To expand this

²⁰ The six themes are the following: "The Skin of the Invisible", which is dedicated to images. "Said, Unsaid, not to be Said": for all that can be said or sung. "I am the Street": it is open to debates. "The Other, the Same" is dedicated to performance. "Remembrance and Oblivion" is dedicated to things and events that societies tend to remember or forget. "Far Away, right here": it is dedicated to both utopias and dystopias, to reality and its representations.

point the following list of vocabulary and connotations given to globalisation, created by Dutch sociologist Jan Nederveen Pieterse's, is vital:²¹

Globalisation/homogenisation

Cultural imperialism

Cultural dependence

Cultural hegemony

Autonomy

Westernisation

Cultural synchronisation

Globalisation/diversification

Cultural planetarisation

Cultural interdependence

Cultural interpenetration

Synthesis

Global melange

Creolization/crossover

Today's hybridity has shifted its radius of action. It no longer behaves against religious, imperial and civilisational chauvinism.²² Now it functions, for instance, within the framework of social networks operating within computer user's zones rather than within the jurisdiction of the 'nation' and its 'society'. It reacts less to cultural imperialism and dependence and more towards cultural planetarisation and interdependence. It is less afraid of cultural hegemony and increasingly perplexed in relation to the acceleration of cultural interpenetration. By displaying a selection of contemporary political art from the world in a way that highlights the importance of doing so from a specifically Brazilian perspective, the Biennial manages to focus on the politics of cultural hybridity and its changes. By adopting a range of Brazil's political art, which is not only political because it reacts to problems that mainly belong to the subaltern condition - such as dictatorship, cultural imperialism or economic dependence - the curatorial team is proving that Brazilian art is now also capable to be a valuable example of how the politics of art has gone global.

²¹ Nederveen Pieterse J. – Globalization as Hybridization, in – Featherstone M., Lash S. & Robertson R. (eds) Global Modernities, London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi, 1995, p.62

²² Ibid, p. 64



Figure 1. Gil Vicente: Self portrait killing Elizabeth II, from the series *Inimigos* (Enemies), 2005

Source:

<http://www.arteref.com.br/artref/index.php/noticias/view/1282/artesPlasticas>



Figure 2. Nuno Ramos – *Bandeira Branca* (White Flag) (2008/2010).

Source: <http://planetasustentavel.abril.com.br/noticia/atitude/protestos-jornalistas-militantes-direitos-animais-ibama-nuno-ramos-605763.shtml>



Figure 3. Roberto Jacoby – *El Alma Nunca Piensa Sin Imagen* (The Soul Never Think Without Image) 2010.

Source: <http://veja.abril.com.br/noticia/celebridades/bienal-cobre-obra-que-faz-apologia-do-pt>



Figure 4. Wilfredo Prieto – *Apolitico* (Apolitical) 2010.

Picture taken by the author, São Paulo, October 2010.



Figure 5. Jimmie Durham – Bureau for Research into Brazilian Normality, 2010.
 Picture taken by the author. São Paulo, October 2010



Figure 6. Cao Fei – RMB City , 2010. Detail of video shown within a multimedia installation.
 Picture taken by the author. São Paulo, October 2010