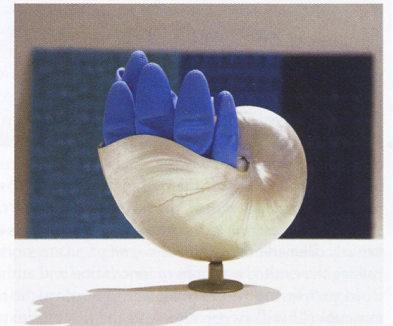




Left: Frans Krajcberg, *Untitled (Bailarinas)*, n.d., burned wood, natural pigments. Installation view. Photo: Leo Eloy. Right: Sonia Andrade, *Hydragrammas (details)*, 1978–93, 110 mixed-media objects, 110 slide reproductions, Portuguese and French text. Installation views. Photos: Pedro Ivo Trasferetti.



32nd São Paulo Bienal

PAVILHÃO CICCILLO MATARAZZO,
PARQUE IBIRAPUERA

Kevin McGarry

INCERTEZA VIVA means “live uncertainty” in Portuguese. As the title for Jochen Volz’s São Paulo Bienal, this phrase positions the show as the latest in a series of recent, loosely like-minded international exhibitions—from Nicolas Bourriaud’s 2014 Taipei Biennial, “The Great Acceleration,” to Okwui Enwezor’s 2015 Venice Biennale, “All The World’s Futures”—that have variously engaged the topics of eschatology and the Anthropocene. Although the most significant art-historical story of the past decade is the market’s supremacy over all aspects of contemporary art, the urge to intellectualize the apocalypse is an important subplot. And it’s quite a problem that, more often than not, this dire topic is made manifest in ways that seamlessly reinforce those networks that are pulling humanity closer to its end.

Fortunately, Volz has spared São Paulo that fate. If judged by a harmony between strong works and incisive riffing on a theme, the show is not only this city’s best biennial in recent memory, it is also one of the best big biennials of the past two years (alongside this summer’s polarizing Berlin Biennale). An ode to the fragility of the natural world, “*Incerteza Viva*” succeeds first and foremost in the biennial-unique challenge of site specificity: The exhibition’s focus on the condition of precarity resonates with an intensifying mood of national doubt caused by an oligarch-engineered presidential impeachment (conferred just a week before the opening), works from different times and places powerfully evoke hallmarks of Brazilian visual art in a way that feels like a genuine celebration of taste, and the setting itself, always Oscar Niemeyer’s Pavilhão Ciccillo Matarazzo—which is encased in glass and surrounded by Parque Ibirapuera, one of the world’s most untamed urban gardens—reverberates with Brazilian modernism’s particular ideal of the coexistence of nature and progress.

Two works on view in the exhibition’s first gallery space set the poles that contain the scope of the exhibition’s curatorial framework: a massive thatched hut by Bené Fonteles and, beyond that, fabric banners by Felipe Mujica, draped from the ceiling. Alluding, respectively, to indigenous craft and modernist political resistance, this pair establishes a spectrum that begins with ancestral purity and ends with poetic protest. These two themes are both apparent in a precursory work at the entrance: a forest of ribbed, wiry totems carved by the ninety-five-year-old Polish-born Brazilian artist Frans Krajcberg from tree trunks burned in man-made forest fires. Just crooked enough to appear anthropomorphic, the sculptures are

backlit by the sunny living plants beyond the gridded glass walls of the pavilion, a contrast that conveys the rank desolation of human industry with striking force. (The trees were burned to make way for clear-cutting.) Crucially, however, Krajcberg achieves this effect not through cheap spectacle but via humble, almost atavistic means: a labored relationship with chosen materials. The generosity of disciplines and cultures on view gives the sense that the show itself is a transposable ecosystem, one in which raw beauty free from polemics stands as a statement that is bracingly prohumanity.

AS IS OFTEN THE CASE in contemporary biennials, the best works in “*Incerteza Viva*” are historical pieces by senior artists, here installed as minipresentations toward the back of the Pavilhão’s third floor. Among them, Sonia Andrade’s *Hydragrammas* is the most impressive. Made between 1978 and 1993, it consists of roughly one hundred simple yet enigmatic objects that juxtapose basic found materials: a kitchen glove stuffed in an iridescent shell, parchment wrapped around upright wooden rods, a scrap of zebra skin set under a piece of Lucite. There is no superficial politics embedded in these constructions; the compositions are entirely dependent on the ways in which the chosen cast-off items interact with one another as formal devices. At one time, the work may have come across as an impressive exploration of cultural hybridity, but today it has a newfound presence as an expression of organic-synthetic balance. Art, here, is shown to be another kind of natural order.

The brusque totality and depersonalized idiosyncrasy of Andrade’s project stand in sharp contrast to the small,



Left: Erika Verzutti, *Italo*, 2016, papier-mâché, expanded polystyrene, 118 1/4 x 118 1/4 x 7 1/4". Photo: Leo Eloy.
Below: Gabriel Abrantes, *Os humores artificiais* (Artificial Humors), 2016, 16 mm transferred to HD video, color, sound, 30 minutes.



soft drawings by the American artist, experimental filmmaker, and “visual music” pioneer Jordan Belson. Made in the 1950s and most never before exhibited Belson’s works are synesthetic experiments linking sight to sound, yielding imagery ranging from coiling, almost intestinal mandalas to stark, spattered rings that recall celestial phenomena, such as eclipses, solar flares, and weather. Circles are also the punctum of the Portuguese artist Lourdes

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Castro’s drawings from the ’80s, which trace the shadows of flowers and herbs but look like so much more: cosmos, lightning, coral, lichen. Placed in a vase and lit from above, each enchanting composition shares an annular dead zone from which one might imagine the whole image sprang.

Andrade, Belson, and Castro make the kind of work that grows expansive through restraint. The standout works by younger artists, meanwhile, seem to come from another planet—and, given profound shifts in generational outlook, they effectively do. Whether huge sculptures or straight-up movies, they are productions rather than practices, in the classical sense; in spite of these differences, the work still echoes, indeed reinforces, the biennial’s overarching interest in positing art as its own ecosystem—one that mirrors and models the natural one, and can therefore

offer a way in which to better understand it and its disasters.

BRAZILIAN-BORN Erika Verzutti’s colossal sculptures are made of Styrofoam but disguised as engraved granite or some other kind of course heavy, stone. The size of small houses, these wall-mounted or freestanding pieces confront their audience with an unmistakable force, yet this raw power is all but evaporated by the artist’s claim that they are a “commentary on the large-scale paintings” normally exhibited at biennials. Symptomatic of the impulse to declare work that has been made for a biennial critically engaged, the artist’s statement is apparently intended to differentiate the work from that which is made for market. But any work that adheres to the fantasy of some dichotomy between commodity and commentary only reifies their symbiosis. Art does not need to comment! Certainly not on something as small as the inside baseball of market trends; the visceral heft of Verzutti’s pieces says plenty on its own. In contrast with her work, South African artist Dineo Seshee Bopape’s low plinths of compressed soil are displayed on the ground, reorienting the mock heaviness of Verzutti’s work to express real physical weight. Viewers look down on mounds, rings, holes, and ritualistically placed objects around and within them, which together assert—with honesty and rigor—that history is best understood as a record of impermanence.

The most enthralling commission in the show is a new film by Gabriel Abrantes, *Os humores artificiais* (Artificial Humors), 2016. Its hero is a levitating, blinking robot orb named Coughman, an allusion to the avant-garde and all-too-real comic Andy Kaufman. In an effort to teach him to recognize humor and emotion, Coughman’s programmer

takes him to an indigenous community in the Amazon, where he falls in love with a young girl. Later, back in São Paulo, a malevolent “comedy curator” encourages the programmer to wipe Coughman’s memory so he can be put to the test as a stand-up comic. In a cinematic balladry of transformations, the film taps into the essence of feeling through mediated affect, a mounting problem for robots and people alike. The piece (made by an American of Portuguese descent living in Lisbon, shot throughout Brazil, and shown in São Paulo) is also a multifaceted and distinctly enjoyable treatise on colonization. Not only is Coughman familiar from films such as *Star Wars*—a computer cut from the same silicon as R2-D2, as it were—but every note of the production mimics the schmaltzy hegemonic aesthetics of George Lucas or Steven Spielberg, down to a score redolent of John Williams.

By simultaneously invoking the near-future other of artificial intelligence and the colonial other of indigenous culture, Abrantes’s work shows that nothing is ever natural, including nature itself, and that ecology is always intertwined with the aesthetic. As Brazil enters a period of epic crisis—a scorched-earth endgame of industrial mining and deforestation at the site of the world’s most incredible biodiversity, along with the collapse of the welfare state—there could be no better time to bring these issues to the fore, for the violent ravaging of the local ecology is also the destruction of the global one. Indeed, the best works in “*Incerteza Viva*” make clear at least one certainty about life: World-making is as much about individuals as it is the systems of control that bring them together. □

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The 32nd São Paulo Bienal is on view through December 11.