

Momus

While the World Burns: The 32nd São Paulo Biennial's Political Disregard

2016-10-13 00:10:42 Juan José Santos

For the first time in the history of the [São Paulo Biennial](#), the turnstiles disappeared. Attendees carried no tickets and sported no bracelets. The decorated tree trunks of an artificial forest made by Frans Krajcberg, and a hut with clay walls designed by "artist" Bené Fonteles, welcomed visitors: the outside was beckoned in.

Upon entering Fonteles's mud house, I found myself surrounded by leather musical instruments, rudimentary fishing tools, and aboriginal wooden crafts alongside photographs of contemporary European artists like Duchamp and Beuys; the attempted analogy was clear enough. An altar gave the place a spiritual and esoteric sensation, and in the middle of this temple laid a circle of flowers, patchouli, and earth.

Emerging from the hut I fought anxious visions. The return of some embarrassing photographs from 1989: Navajo Indians making sand offerings in Paris; a contemporary artist trying haplessly to chat with an Australian native; tribal instruments among John Baldessari or Jeff Wall pieces. Was I reliving *Magiciens de la Terre* (1989), the regrettable, colonial French blockbuster in São Paulo? The aesthetic of the works; the legacy of the World's Fairs, and their link to the Indigenous peoples; the exaltation of the primitive; the comparison between the "other" (exotic ceremonies and crafts) and the contemporary; the Eurocentric ethnographies of African or Amazonian cultures: from the entrance, all appeared queasily reminiscent of a dark chapter of cultural appropriation. Thankfully, the spell was quickly broken. Things improved step-by-step upon crossing over into Felipe Mujica's metaphorical territory, *The Unknown Universities* (2016). The colorful geometric shapes and flags delimited a numinous land, not an exotic one.



Felipe Mujica, "Untitled (El Quisco)," 2013. Photo: the artist.

Ultimately, there was no reprise of *Magiciens*. By and large, the exchanges between the Indigenous world and the contemporary realm felt more balanced and egalitarian. Like [Carlos Motta's erotic and tribalist museum](#), or the emotive Indigenous fictions of Jonathas de Andrade, the highlights of São Paulo's biennial are examples of how contemporary artists can work with the autochthon, referencing ecology and uncertainty. However, this edition of the Biennial will, instead, be remembered as the one that privileged an esoteric and metaphorical trip to Indigenous and cosmological worlds in the middle of a state of political crisis.

The 32nd edition of the most important art show in Latin America, entitled "Live Uncertainty," gathered ecology, ancestral rituals, and non-artistic forms, while a barely-covered *coup d'état* shook Brazil. The press conference for the Biennial and the show's inauguration were interrupted by manifestations of artists chanting and condemning the new president, Michel Temer. The exhibition's only work that made direct reference to the conflict was Amílcar Packer's *Oficina de Imaginação Política* (2016), a space with couches and blackboards covered in slogans supporting Dilma Rousseff, the dismissed president. The lone piece faded into the décor, a barely-acknowledged backdrop. There are plenty of precedents in the history of the São Paulo Biennial that could have inspired local artists to create something more striking or provocative, from the 1971 creative call to boycott that edition (*The Contrabiennial*), to the previous iteration's [rejection of Israeli funding](#). Despite the curators' attempts to blend the esoteric, the magical, and the phenomenological with real-life situations, the show's "uncertainty" hardly engaged with the real conflict destabilizing the country that housed it.

The curators, Jochen Volz, Gabi Ngcobo, Júlia Rebouças, Lars Bang Larsen, and Sofia Olascoaga, attempted to display artworks by following a garden design, reminding us that head curator, Volz, was director at *inhólim*, a space that combines nature and contemporary installations in an immense open field. Even as the political wilds outside the garden fence loomed largely untended and unaddressed, a confused and confusing curatorial approach spoke to the need for some serious weeding within.

In his curatorial essay, Volz lays a conceptual ground for the Biennial that is as unstable as José Bento's *Do pó ao pó* (2016), a parquet topography hiding trampolines underneath. He writes: "Describing the unknown always implies interrogating what we take for granted as known, and valuing scientific and symbolic codes as complementary rather than exclusionary." Rather than complementing, however, various codes about one another haphazardly in the exhibition, without much context: cosmological thinking alongside established religion, ecological disasters against emotive rituals, and studies on extinction next to anti-colonial manifestos. To see it feels like watching Jon Snow do battle with Vladimir Putin: an absurd antagonism between characters inhabiting wholly different dimensions.



José Bento, "Do pó ao pó." 2015-16. Photo: Daniel Mansur.

This overarching lack of coherence troubles immersion in a unitary experience, and instead has visitors trying to understand odd-couple pairings. Inscrutable collisions of worlds abound. New Zealander Luke Willis Thompson transported and installed nine anonymous slave tombstones from a Fiji cemetery inside the Biennial. Thompson obtained custodial rights to these graves, which had been located in an area under high risk of flooding due to climate change. His powerful work linked religion, ecology, and a history of international labor oppression. In front of this were displayed the film and mixed-media images of Priscila Fernandes. In her video, characters dance, do yoga, and talk smilingly about an imaginary Cuckoo-land. Mixed-media images of abstract and colorful forms hang in front of three beach chairs, inviting the public to sit and contemplate. If the curator intended a dialogue between these works, he succeeded in staging my uncertainty as to where it might be.



Priscila Fernandes, "Gozolândia" (still), 2016.

Elsewhere, Dineo Seshee Bopape's soil structures with casts of uteruses, healing herbs, and candles (*: indeed it may very well be _____ itself*, 2016), clash against *A Gente Rio-Be Dammed* (2016), a multi-disciplinary political research project by Carolina Caycedo about three Brazilian conflicts related to the building of dams and the privatization of natural watersheds. The first piece takes us to an inner and intimate land, while the latter places us in a real and ongoing tragedy. Further undue violence would be required to force a connection between Grada Kilomba's moving visual poem referencing the colonial past and its painful legacy (*The Desire Project*, 2015-2016); and the artistic ecosystem proposed by Pierre Huyghe (*De-Extinction*, 2016; a work in circuit, as it's also on view in Tokyo's Mori Museum), illuminated by a spectacular video of an insect trapped in amber and a colony of living flies.

Despite these missteps, some brilliant connections can be found, particularly among the commissioned works. You just have to sharpen your senses, especially your hearing. Periodically, vibrations from deep sound waves, the echoes of an African rebellion (the Malé Revolt, which occurred in 1835 in Salvador de Bahia, where a group of black slaves rose up against the government) reverberate off the walls and the floor of the pavilion. The otherworldly sounds guide viewers towards familiar street-party speakers, in front of which candles dance to the beat of bass lines composed by artists from Ghana, a country that welcomed slaves escaping from a Brazilian revolt in 1835. The installation's author, Vivian Caccuri, conducted research in Ghana, translating these ultramarine relations into

danceable rhythm. Titled *Tabom Bass* (2016), it was sited next to Eduardo Navarro's own playful sonic invitation. In *Sound mirror* (2016), Navarro presents an oversized, deformed trumpet that traverses the glass building and hides its bell inside a palm tree. Any visitor overcome with artificial incertitude could sit and hear the whisper of nature, of the living. Both Caccuri and Navarro introduce a faint but powerful sound, for which spectators had to close their eyes and strain. On the borders between the humorous and the spiritual, sensed and felt, both are suggestive voices.

Turnstiles or no, what arose in the 32nd Sao Paulo Biennial were serious questions about how to admit the outside. How can a curator incorporate specialized, disciplinary languages in a multifold narrative without simply generating tumult and noise? How can a large exhibition with an ambitious curatorial concept remain agile enough to respond to political dramas and from the worries of viewers? While celebrating attempts to make events like this more accessible to the public, we should also press on the fresh uncertainties beneath the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion.