

Taggers get into 'living contact' with vacant São Paulo Bienal

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In the public 'square' on the ground floor of Oscar Niemeyer's Ciccillo Matarazzo pavilion last week, electroclash band Fischerspooner played a gig to kick off the 28th São Paulo Bienal – the anti-biennial. Curator Ivo Mesquita, together with adjunct-curator Ana Paula Cohen, decided to offer a vantage point on international biennial bloat by leaving the enormous second floor of the pavilion completely empty and artwork-free, and focusing instead on lectures, performances, panel discussions and the presentation of archives – and a few artworks – on the third floor as the core of the exhibition.

But as the artworld crowd waited patiently for Fischerspooner, a more radical gesture towards the Bienal's title *in living contact* unfolded upstairs: around 40 people began tagging the vast empty spaces and white walls of the pavilion in a coordinated guerilla action. 'This is art', read some of the tags.

Onlookers frantically shot future YouTube videos as the taggers were violently evicted by the Bienal security guards, education guides, and apparently even by Cohen herself, who was seen running after them. The next day, the Bienal labeled the taggers 'criminals', and Cohen dismissed them as 'those people from the periphery' during a press conference. Not exactly the kind of 'living contact' promised by her and Mesquita's Bienal. If the 28th Bienal claims to be a 'public inclusive and social space', shouldn't the institution be opening itself precisely to those 'from the periphery'?

On the cover of the exhibition guide, the 28th Bienal's graphic identity is a partly transparent sticker overlaid on top of the logo for the first Bienal, which took place in 1951 as part of the modernisation ideology of the 'the country of the future'. Now that there are around 200 biennials around the world, Mesquita and Cohen aimed at 'offering a platform for observation and reflection upon the culture and system of biennials, taking its own experience as a case study'.

But is their Bienal really able to present 'a new format of exhibition' capable of 'promoting a new relationship with its audiences and the city'? The lead up to the exhibition was dogged by controversy over the non-transparency of the Bienal and allegations of corruption and conflict of interest in the spending of public funds.

Entering the pavilion through the marquee in the Parque do Ibirapuera, and then negotiating airport-level security at the entrance to what one has to assume must be the exhibition proper we see Erick Beltrán's *El mundo explicado (The World Explained)*: an [encyclopedia](#) of non-specialized knowledge set up as an off-set printing press. It is an archive-like collection of maps, diagrams, descriptions of explanations of how the world functions according to nonexperts, incorporating the contributions of the public. Selected posters of drawings, diagrams and maps made on the press are displayed on the third floor.

A video lounge on the first floor presents films and videos by Glauber Rocha, Jean-Luc Godard and Gunter Brus among others. One can watch seminal works not always easily accessible to the public in Brazil, but it seems anachronistic to distinguish these artists' works from the others invited (Rocha, Godard, Brus and others are not listed as artists in the exhibition literature). Another inexplicable decision on the part of the curators relates to the ignorance of the historical format (4:3 and 1:1,3) of much of the video and film material, which has been stretched to 16:9 format to fill the new flatscreen monitors on which they are presented (the monitors have a 4:3 option in their menus).

From the first floor one ascends into a 'void' on the *Open Floor*, which, according to Mesquita and Cohen, is meant to draw attention to the 'economy of art' and allow a reflection on the architecture. However, the most striking feeling as one walks through the 250m long space is not of being able to appreciate Niemeyer's transparent glass and concrete pavilion but instead the feeling of being surveyed by the large security contingent stationed across the room.

One of the most consistent curatorial statements was that this would be an exhibition without walls. However, arriving on the third floor, called the *Plan of Readings*, where most of the artists' works are shown, together with a library with some but not all Bienal catalogues and an auditorium for the conferences, one is confronted with an exhibition packed full of wooden platforms, furniture, temporary wall structures and cupboards that make the space look like a Wood Fair. Whereas artists like Franz West, Heimo Zobernig, Jorge Pardo and others worked extensively with such structures over the last two decades, one wonders if Mesquita and Cohen have misunderstood the irony in aestheticizing exhibition and archive structures. Artists like Mabe Bethonico and Gabriel Serra seem to have been transplanted from Cohen's recent community art centre project Casa del Encuentro in Medellin, Columbia and redeployed to make exhibition structures in the Bienal without much thought for the pavilion's existing architecture or the broader artistic context in which the São Paulo Bienal operates.

Distinct works – by Sophie Calle, Fernando Bryce, Rivane Neuenschwander, Javier Peñafiel or Marina Abramovic – are forced onto structures that make them difficult to find in the first place, let alone experience. There is no clear labeling or indication of the position of works anywhere in the entire building, and less than half of the works ended up in the position marked on the printed floor plans. This gives almost no chance to visitors from outside the inner circles of the artworld to know what or who they are actually looking at.

A few works manage to survive the exhibition design. Peter Friedl's ongoing project *Playgrounds* (1995–2008) is a slide presentation of his photos of public playgrounds around the world. It was presented on one of the few white walls in the pavilion, at the insistence of the artist. Angela Ferreira's third version of the long term project For Mozambique, is a stand-alone Constructivist-style structure devoted to the country's immediate post-independence period, and it included a monitor showing a clip from Bob Dylan's convert film *Mozambique* and a short film by Jean Rouch and Jacques d'Arthuys, made as part of a project for Mozambique's new national TV and film infrastructure in the late 1970s.

Another of the Bienal's several controversies is that there is absolutely no acknowledgement of the concepts developed by Thomas Mulcaire while he was curator of the project – including selecting Angela Ferreira, Sarnath Banerjee, Joe Sheehan, Glauber Rocha and Peter Friedl – before he left in June 2008 due to conceptual differences with Mesquita and Cohen. Among other issues, Mulcaire reportedly objected to Mesquita and Cohen's close relationships with certain galleries in São Paulo and their reluctance to involve all members of the Bienal board in discussions about how the institution could be reformed and how the presidency of the Bienal could become more transparent and accountable.

Apart from the intervention of the taggers, the other remarkable event on the opening day of the Bienal were the long lines for Carsten Höller's slides, *Valerio Sisters*, which connected the three floors of the pavilion, both outside and inside. It was one of the few works that seemed to attract genuine interest and engagement from the audience. The other work that really got into *contact* with the city was the publication 28b, inserted in São Paulo's *Metro* newspaper and distributed free around the city. The first edition had Höller's slides on the cover, and contains another highlight of the Bienal: a serialised graphic novel called *Dispatches from the City of no U-turns* by Delhi-based artist Sarnath Banerjee, which contains a healthy dose of humour as it relates idiosyncratic scenes drawn from everyday life in São Paulo.

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