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## **NEW SOUTHS**

### **Other reflections on biennials**

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Reversing history is easy: it is enough to have the resources to do so, but I suspect that the operation has already been done and that it is repeated every certain time. It is enough to turn the globe upside down to have the southern hemisphere located in the place of the north<sup>1</sup>.

Athens, Chengdu, Dakar, Gothenburg, Kwangju, Istanbul, Johannesburg, Havana, Liverpool, Luanda, Lyon, Montreal, Moscow, Sao Paulo, Shanghai, Tijuana, Venice, Zagreb, among many others, are part of a growing group of cities that organize art biennials. In effect, there are more than one hundred biennials and other recurring exhibitions nowadays. Between thirty and forty of these take place each year in each of the five continents, which brings up the question of why has this format emerged and multiplied in the last two decades across all continents and in an almost viral way.

The extraordinary proliferation of biennials is closely related with its versatility and influence as well as mediation capacity. Biennials are subjective and dynamic initiatives, often renewed radically every two years. They promote the possibility of substantial changes as well as narratives that address new agendas for which new artists and new curatorial teams are convened. They are also experimental spaces for artistic creation and innovative curatorial practices that enable multiple and diverse contextual readings. Biennials can also be understood as extraordinary mediation platforms, involving different agents and facilitating complex dialogues, in particular with the international artistic community. These

practices, which are older than a century, have developed while keeping abreast with the problems of a dynamic and complex system as the one of visual arts, itself not alien to socio-political transformations. In effect, social and political changes that have taken place since the beginning of the twentieth century have had enormous impact particularly in the larger biennials.

The Venice Biennial, for example, has modified numerous rules since May 1968. Great Prizes were suspended and “official sales” were also cancelled, as they were considered to be commercializing the arts. To these operative decisions, adjustments to the theoretical objectives were also made. Priority was given to research and programs considering art and society as a whole. Maybe the most paradigmatic example is the edition of 1974<sup>2</sup> in which a protest against the dictatorial regime of Augusto Pinochet of Chile was promoted. The Sao Paulo Biennial also went through changes and challenges. In 1980, a Brazilian art critic proposed to transform the international biennial into a Latin American<sup>3</sup> biennial. This new biennial, imagined by Aracy Amaral, would not be isolationist. On the contrary, her project considered the inclusion of art works from Europe, the US and Asia, but selected from a Latin American perspective. For Amaral, only a non-isolationist Latin American biennial could stop Brazil from “depending on the methodology of the Universities of North America for the creation and renewal of libraries and for the debate on Latin American art”<sup>4</sup>. The Sao Paulo Biennial did not consider Amaral’s project, but two decades later her proposal would become the premise for the first edition of the Mercosur Biennial.

The Venice and Sao Paulo Biennials became archetypical formats but not all biennials are proposing themselves as mere assimilations of these hegemonic practices. Many of the biennials or “proto-biennials” that take place outside the “centers of power,” can be read as possible variations that build identity based on their own rules and agendas.

The Montevideo Biennial also extends certain practices and dynamics but at the same time rehearses the creation of its own operative identity. A first action is that of relating art with the city of Montevideo through the use of historical buildings and urban regeneration. The different activities organized by the biennial allow the public to relate with spaces of great significance as the former central building of the Banco Republica, the Veltroni annex (specially refurbished for the biennial), the Atarazana building (the first arsenal of Montevideo), or the Church of San Francisco de Asis (the first religious building of Montevideo). On the other hand, several proposals in the program of collateral events extend the biennial to other urban areas of the city. A second action is to increase the link between the various publics and artistic production through intense educational and publishing programs. Facilitating and promoting the participation of society and audiences as a whole, from their particular interests and specificities, is part of the daily agenda and the biennial’s responsibility with the surrounding context.

Mobilizing civil society for the creation of a biennial is also an important and original action, which requires the indispensable complicity of all actors. Generating “a space of encounter” among cultural producers, members of the audience and artists, as Okwui Enwezor<sup>5</sup> said, seems indispensable to put together diverse interests and produce “unpredictable results”. In this, establishing a foundation was significant as it allows not only to create a legal and operative appropriate framework but also guarantees that the experience of the first biennial is built as an operational basis for future activities. The significance of the Montevideo Biennial Foundation can also be understood in terms of its capabilities to obtain the necessary resources to carry out the complex task of organizing a biennial. On one side, the mixed financial resources, sought from private and public sources, and on the other, the management and curatorial structures necessary to operate the biennial format. Another contribution is

that it builds on previous experiences of similar significance, such as ERA and the CCE<sup>6</sup> Laboratories. Both projects, for their characteristics and not for their nomination, can be considered as programs of a biennial culture.

ERA<sup>7</sup> was a regional contemporary art event that took place in Montevideo. The last edition, in 2007, proposed to introduce and deepen the ties between contemporary artists of Latin America and artists established in other continents. The central working premise was to critically approach the concept of region in the context of globalization. As with a biennial, a multidisciplinary and international team was established. The program was put together by Gabriel Pelluffo together with Roberto Amigo and Gerardo Mosquera. Following the conceptual axis, the team developed a transdisciplinary revision based on the geopolitical crises and on aesthetic and historical frictions. The program concluded with a series of debates and conferences ran by a group of European and Latin American theoreticians. In these, the artistic practices were discussed within an inter-disciplinary framework that included art, history, politics and anthropology. The CCE Laboratories, which were created as debate platforms, also drew together a multi-disciplinary<sup>8</sup> curatorial team. In the first editions, issues such as the emergency of art, design, or architecture were profusely debated. In the following, gender issues, violence and dishonor were also discussed. An artists-in-residence program was included, allowing the artists to work in and for the local context.

The Montevideo Biennial considers these and other previous proposals while establishing itself as a reflection space on broader and more complex territories. For this, the biennial invited artists with different geopolitical and social backgrounds, whether renowned or emerging. Many of the site-specific proposals, performances, actions and site investigations were produced specifically for this first edition. In addition to existing and specific works, it is possible to find monumental as well as silent and almost invisible propos-

als. The coexistence of these languages is a curatorial and institutional challenge, but particularly one for the audiences, which are often faced with contrasting stimuli. Diverse perspectives and constructions, such as otherness and belonging, are also employed in advancing the theme of this first edition of the biennial: The Great South. This subject matter suggests a revision of established positions and a renegotiation of the South concept, in part to define it and in part to reinvent it.

In 1935, a year after his return to Uruguay, Joaquin Torres Garcia inverted the map of Latin America as an unequivocal sign of a philosophical position regarding established political conventions. "Our North is the South"<sup>9</sup> raises an endless number of questions for rethinking predefined parameters. For years, Torres Garcia researched and developed his ideas considering Central- and Indian-American cultures. If modernism is the basis from which Torres built his language, it is pertinent to think that without his research of North and South Indian-American cultures, it would have been impossible to develop his Constructivism of the South and its permanent tension between regional tradition and modernity.

Besides Torres, art theory had other references within Latin America. Oswald de Andrade for example is responsible for developing an unprecedented concept within the history of the region. "The Anthropophagous Manifest"<sup>10</sup> revises the "violent hybridization" of the American-Indian and African cultures with the Latin culture of European origin. With its iconic phase, *Tupi or not Tupi*, the manifest promotes a change in post-colonial thinking, but always from a "critical deglutition" that allows revising these facts as positive elements.

In these first conceptualizations, some gaps were closed, which were not simply an evolution of modernism as suggested by Anna Maria Guash<sup>11</sup>, but a series of continuities and discontinuities in which what is important is not so much the matter of "identity" but the politics of "recognition". We can consider Torres and de Andrade as pioneers of a debate

that has become increasingly relevant and is promoting the revision of the artificial premises on which history has been written. In effect, the last twenty years have evidenced numerous omissions and hierarchies, but still have not given parity to decentralized productions. "A hundred per cent of exhibitions ignore the eighty per cent of the planet<sup>12</sup>".

The thesis of Edward W. Said<sup>13</sup> was substantive in consolidating the need for a new perspective and in the strict domain of the arts, the exhibition "*Magiciens de la Terre*"<sup>14</sup>. The exhibition of Jean-Hubert Martin defined its objectives against the historical omissions imposed by the centers. But "*Magiciens*" was proposed as a response to the *Primitivism*<sup>15</sup> exhibition organized by the MoMA<sup>16</sup>. Martin took strategic curatorial decisions with the aim of considering the differences as consequences and not as adjectives of a society. He elaborated a list of artists from the five continents and divided the groups in a Solomonic way. Half were for the mainstream and half for the forgotten productions. "*Magiciens*" tried to evidence the existence of other artists who could share an exhibition together with better-known artists. Martin proposed in fact a direct confrontation among contemporary artists from all the cultures of the world: here the word international did not only refer to Western Europe and North America, but also the remaining three fourths of humanity.

Almost at the same time of *Magiciens*, two other exhibitions, were presented, one in London and another one in New York. *The Other Story* curated by the artist Rasheed Araeen in 1989, was the first retrospective exhibition to include works of the so-called British-African, Caribbean and modern Asian artists. *The Decade Show*<sup>17</sup> curated by Marcia Tucker, Laura Trippi and Gary Sangster; gathered the work of Hispanic, African-American, Native-American, Asian and European immigrant artists. These emblematic precedents have been revisited many more times since, with more or less density and ethnic significance. Even if these programs have proliferated from the centers and the institutions, they

still are insufficient to eliminate asymmetries. This is possibly the most important role that a biennial can perform and one of the most substantial reasons to support it actively and promote its continuity. This action can be added to revising the relations between critical thinking and multicultural politics incorporated by institutions, and in them I include biennials.

The failure of present narratives is evidence of how certain concepts are progressively in crisis. Jose Roca<sup>18</sup> remembered recently<sup>19</sup> in Trinh T. Minh-ha's<sup>20</sup> words that a Third World exists in each First World and vice versa. We can extend this idea to the concepts or pre-concepts on the South and the North and suggest that each North has a South and vice versa. The South has been associated with the idea of third world and in consequence, with all aspects that overcome the collective imaginary associated with this construct. Maybe in the present and under the experience of global turbulences<sup>21</sup>, it might be more interesting and realistic to think about the mobility of concepts and the necessity of remaining inconclusive. Perhaps we can imagine the South as Lygia Clark's<sup>22</sup> mobiles<sup>23</sup>, entities that reveal their organic nature and display their multiple configurations only with the engagement of audiences. Concepts also need to be engaged with by audiences. This exercise would allow us to consider established parameters as changing, organic and above all precarious.

A lot is debated on the complex role of biennials in the production of contemporary art and their exponential multiplication. The biennial, understood as an exhibition model, needs to be discussed in order to not reproduce established models in a non-critical way and be more effective and consequential.

In *The Glocal and the Singuniversal*<sup>24</sup>, Thierry de Duve assesses "biennialism" and concludes that biennials are, generally, cultural experiments with a high risk of hegemonic deglutition of the local. These appropriations take place primarily in exhausted markets that search to differentiate by new "exoticisms". The escalation in the pursuit of "the new"

is also confirmed in the strategy of many curators. Verifying these premises facilitates critical action as well as operational changes that mitigate risks. It also leads to developing more suitable models for specific cultural and artistic systems.

The biennial can then be thought as a platform where more necessary and urgent changes can be rehearsed. In this sense, biennials can perform a number of functions that allow each member of the arts system to concentrate on its mission and specificities. The biennial can also be understood as an alternative space for artistic and curatorial practices as well as an innovative, flexible and experimental format, liberated from some institutional constraints as the ones of creating and maintaining a collection. At the same time it can motivate public and private collecting as well as inspire young collectors. It can be constituted as part of the national and international arts system, not only as a means of debate, but also as a way to consolidate relationships between the country and its immediate surroundings.

To sum up, the critical value of a biennial is to build itself as a space for questioning and revising concepts and formats. Also, that it constitutes a sphere for negotiating and re-negotiating definitions beyond a visual-Cartesian interpretation of space. This is also the contemporary value of Torres' map. In its simplicity, his image is more elaborate than the surrealist<sup>25</sup> proposal. A simple graphic gesture becomes a powerful tool. The image is proposed to redefine, re-think y and why not, invent and re-invent any concept, each time it is necessary.

This biennial and the collateral programs will provide an opportunity to explore the distances between territorial and cultural identity, recognize the diversity, the otherness, and the multiplicity of processes. Recently, noticing the remarkable growth of the art system, Marcio Botner<sup>26</sup> emphasized the necessity of art and culture to have social support and understanding. Part of the success of a biennial is given by its support and continuity. Remaining and deepening the at-

tention given by the public is what allows it to revise and reformulate each time, and in the end, to move forward with more developed ideas of art and courses of action.

1. "La biblioteca de los libros inexistentes," Servando Rocha, 08/04/2012, El Confidencial. (<http://www.elconfidencial.com/alma-corazon-vida/2012/04/08/la-biblioteca-de-los-libros-inexistentes-95515/>).

2. The President of the Biennial of Venice, 1974, Carlo Ripa di Meana.

3. "La biblioteca de los libros inexistentes," Servando Rocha, 08/04/2012, El Confidencial. (<http://www.elconfidencial.com/alma-corazon-vida/2012/04/08/la-biblioteca-de-los-libros-inexistentes-95515/>).

4. Aracy Amaral, original declaration, October, 1980.

5. "The Artist as Producer in Times of Crisis", Scott McQuire and Nikos Papastergiadis (eds) "Empires, Ruins + Networks: The Transcultural Agenda in Art", Melbourne, Melbourne University Press.

6. Cultural Centre of Spain in Montevideo.

7. Regional Encounters of Contemporary Art.

8. Enric Ruiz Geli, Wilfred Wang, Anton Capitel, Laura Gioscia, Luis Camnitzer, Berta Sichel, Ana Tiscornia, among others.

9. Joaquin Torres Garcia, "Universalismo Constructivo", Poseidon, 1944.

10. Presented by Andrade in 1928 and published in the first number of the Anthropology Magazine.

11. "El arte contemporaneo africano en un contexto global", Anna Maria Guasch in "El juego africano de lo contemporaneo" (exhibit catalogue), MACUF

(Museo de Arte Contemporaneo Union Fenosa), Corunna, 2008, pp. 130-136.

12. Jean-Hubert Martin. Nowadays Martin is collaborating with the *Theatre of the*

*World* exhibition, which will take place in the Museum of Old and New Art, Hobart, between June and April, 2013.

13. "Orientalism", Vintage, 1979.

14. National Museum of Modern Art Centre Georges Pompidou and Grande Halle of La Villette, Paris, 1989.

15. "Primitivism in 20th Century Art: Affinities of the Tribal and the Modern".

16. Museum of Modern Art of New York.

17. The Decade Show: Frameworks of Identity in the 1980's.

18. Curator of the 8th Biennial of Mercosur, 2011.

19. Catalogue of the 8th Biennial of Mercosur, 2011.

20. "She, the Inappropriate/d Other", Discourse 8, 1987.

21. Arab spring, occupationist movement, nuclear disaster in Japan, Mexican border, etc.

22. Brazilian painter and sculptor, self-called "no artist".

23. Lygia Clark, "Bichos" 1960.

24. "The Global and the Singuniversal: Reflections on Art and Culture in the Global World", Third Text, 21(6), 2007.

25. "Le monde au temps des surrealistes", published in Varietes magazine on June, 1929.

26. Marcio Botner is one of three founder artists of A Gentil Carioca gallery, in Rio de Janeiro, together with Ernesto Neto and Laura Lima.