

**Between Universalism and Difference: The Singular Movement
of the Bienais de São Paulo****Glauca Villas Bôas****Abstract**

This article examines the extent to which the Bienal de São Paulo's was successful in achieving its main goal of presenting avant-garde art to the public from 1951 to 2002. To do so, it focuses on the conception and materiality of four important exhibitions that occurred in the second half of the 20th century. The notion of the avant-garde was based on a concept of modern linear time, which guaranteed the privilege of future time and was based on a universalist notion of art. Such a conception was part of the concept of modernity that prevailed throughout most of the 20th century, until the advent of postmodern theories.

The idea of exhibiting avant-garde art contributed to banishing the art of the past and the cultural, national, ethnic, and racial differences associated with it. Traditional subjects and cultural differences should, in modernism, give way to new artistic expressions that are more equal in formal constitution and universalist in aspiration. Nevertheless, the argument presented here is that such artistic expressions, despite ostensibly being considered outdated, remained in the discourse of the event's organisers, as well as in the conception and materiality of the exhibitions, thus defining a thread of continuity between them. Ultimately, the desired vanguardist view of art remained deeply entwined with artistic expressions perceived as outdated or surpassed due to national, ethnic, or racial differences, and it was this which shaped the singularity of São Paulo Bienal in the last century.

Keywords

São Paulo Biennials, universality vs difference, past and present, exhibitions, curatorship.

Between Universalism and Difference: The Singular Movement of the Bienais de São Paulo¹

Glaucia Villas Bôas

In the past few decades, periodic international art exhibitions have become increasingly influential events in the art world. In close connection with the art market, museums, curators, collectors, and art historians, biennials or triennials take place in different cities and countries on most continents, with an estimated number of more than two hundred at the time of writing.² The notable development of these exhibitions, which is called biennialisation, has been seen as an unprecedented cultural phenomenon. Some scholars suggest that the biennial's close relation to globalisation, neoliberalism, and the flow of transnational capital has tempered its influence,³ but others maintain that these exhibitions are far from losing their symbolic dimension and continue to attribute meaning and significance to contemporary art.⁴ Whatever the perspective adopted, biennials encourage dialogue and the exchange of experiences from different cultures and regions, by enabling the creation of networks that include local and cosmopolitan artists, without ceasing to be institutions that are bound to the consecration of artists and art movements.

The Bienal de São Paulo is one of the oldest on the list of these exhibitions. Founded in 1951 by the businessman Francisco Matarazzo Sobrinho, the prestigious exhibition was the first in Latin America. Held every two years in the city of São Paulo, it demonstrates its vitality by renewing itself over the years and overcoming all sorts of obstacles, whether internal to the institution, such as lack of resources, or external, such as the adverse conditions created by authoritarian governments. As is well known, the Bienal de São Paulo, by intervening in debates on contemporary artistic expression, has contributed significantly to broadening the horizon of expectations of artists and the Brazilian public. It continues to do so today. The Brazilian international exhibition soon became the object of research and interpretation by art historians and critics. These studies confer legitimacy to the event and inscribe its memory in the imagination of its readership. The literature on

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Translated from Portuguese by Marco Alexandre de Oliveira.

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See the map of global biennials in the Biennial Foundation's website: <https://biennialfoundation.org/network/biennial-map/>, accessed April 2022.

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Anthony Gardner and Charles Green, *Biennials, Triennials, and Documenta: The Exhibitions that Created Contemporary Art* (Chirchester, West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2016).

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Monica Sassatelli, "Symbolic Production in the Art Biennial: Making Worlds", *Theory, Culture & Society* 34, no. 4 (2016): 89-113.

the Bienal de São Paulo examines external factors and the organisation of exhibitions, including historical and political contexts. It analyses the impact of financial crises and funding. However, in spite of the intense relationships among artists and curators from different countries, comparative studies of biennials in other countries and investigations of the intersection of ideas within biennials have received little attention.⁵

This article examines the incorporation of the avant-garde objective of the biennial — that is presenting art considered ahead of its time to the public — into the conception and materiality of the exhibitions that recurred throughout its seventy-year history. The suspicion arises that such an integration did not occur consistently. The avant-garde aim of the Bienal de São Paulo was based on a concept of modern linear time, which guaranteed the privilege of future time and was based on a universalist notion of art. Such a conception was not new; it was part of the concept of modernity that prevailed throughout most of the 20th century, until the advent of postmodern theories. The idea of exhibiting avant-garde art contributed to banishing the art of the past and the cultural, national, ethnic, and racial differences associated with it. Traditional subjects and cultural differences should, therefore, give way to new artistic expressions that are more equal in formal constitution and universalist in aspiration. The argument presented here is that such artistic expressions, despite ostensibly being considered outdated, remained in the discourse of the event organisers, as well as in the conception and materiality of the exhibitions, thus evidencing a thread of continuity between the exhibitions.

To address the aforementioned issue, this article presents examples of exhibitions illustrating the extent to which the desired universalist view of art was entwined with artistic expressions perceived as outdated or surpassed due to national, ethnic, or racial differences. The authors who serve as a reference for this discussion are the historian Reinhart Koselleck and the sociologist Georg Simmel. In his studies on structures of temporality, Koselleck demonstrates how modern societies attributed greater weight to the secular future, considered it superior to the past, and associated it with progress and the perfectibility of social life.⁶ The notions of sameness and difference⁷ inscribed in Georg Simmel's methodological proposals theoretically articulate the permanent movement of duration and change. For the author, in modernity, the terms sameness and difference are constitutive

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Since its 50th anniversary, the Bienal de São Paulo has promoted self-reflection in commemorative publications as Agnaldo Faria (ed.), *Bienal 50 anos* (São Paulo: Fundação Bienal de São Paulo, 2001); Paulo Venâncio (ed.), *30 X Bienal, Transformações na arte brasileira da 1ª a 30ª edição* (São Paulo: Fundação Bienal de São Paulo, 2013); Paulo Myada, *Bienal de São Paulo desde 1951* (São Paulo: Fundação Bienal de São Paulo, 2022). The latter, unlike the previous works, does not deal with each of the seventy years, but presents chapters by artists, critics, curators and other professionals, privileging and combining several points of view. On the history of the Bienal see also Leonor Amarante, *As bienais de São Paulo, 1951 a 1987* (São Paulo: Projeto, 1989); Francisco Alambert and Polyana Canhête, *As Bienais de São Paulo: da era do museu à era dos curadores (1951-2001)* (São Paulo: Editora Boitempo, 2004); Ana Maria P. Hoffmann, *Crítica de Arte e Bienais: as contribuições de Geraldo Ferraz* (PhD Diss.: Universidade de São Paulo, 2007); Vinicius Spricijo, *Modos de representação da Bienal de São Paulo: a passagem do internacionalismo artístico à globalização cultural* (São Paulo: Hedra, 2011); Renata Zago, "As Bienais nacionais de São Paulo: 1970-1976" (PhD Diss.: Universidade de Campinas, 2014); Renata Dias Ferraretto Moura Rocco, *Danilo di Prete em ação: a construção de um artista no sistema expositivo da Bienal de São Paulo* (PhD Diss.: Universidade de São Paulo, 2018); Juliana C. Miraldi, *A Arte disputa a Bienal de São Paulo: as condições de produção do gosto artístico dominante* (PhD Diss.: Universidade de Campinas, 2020); Marina Mazze Cerchiaro, *Escultoras e Bienais: a construção do reconhecimento artístico no pós guerra* (PhD Diss.: Universidade de São Paulo, 2020); Tálisson M. Souza, *Transações e transições da arte contemporânea: mediação e geopolíticas nas bienais de São Paulo (1978-1983)* (PhD Diss.: Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro, 2021).

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Reinhart Koselleck, *Passado Futuro: contribuição à semântica dos tempos históricos*, trans. Wilma Patrícia Maas and Carlos Almeida Pereira (Rio de Janeiro: Contraponto, Ed PUC/RJ, 2006)

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The idea of sameness in Simmel (2020) is different from the idea of universality. Cf. Georg Simmel "Fashion" in Malcolm Barnard (ed.), *Fashion Theory* (London: Routledge, 2020), in particular chapter 8. The justification for approaching them is the understanding that the concept of universality is defined here as a form or idea shared by all, one that gives people and events what they have in common. I also understand that universality exists in motion, confronting differences and thus forming a unity. See also Simmel's writings collected in David Frisby and Mike Featherstone (eds.), *Simmel on Culture: Selected Writings* (London: Sage Publications, 1997).

of all phenomena. They oppose each other in a game of distancing and approximation, tension, conflict, contradiction, in addition to unification and reconciliation in permanent movement: “every essential form of life in the history of our species represents a unique way of unifying the interest in duration, unity and equality, and similarity with that in change, particularity and uniqueness”.⁸ Drawing from these conceptions, then, this article will contemplate the intricate singularity of the Brazilian Biennial through the lens of ideas surrounding difference and universality. These elements, in a continuous and nuanced movement, sculpt the essence of the São Paulo biennials.

The Beginning

Bold and experimental, as its director Lourival Gomes Machado, who was also director of the Museum of Modern Art of São Paulo (MAM-SP), referred to it, the 1st Biennial led the way for the exhibitions that came after it.⁹ It was important to exhibit contemporary artists, the newest and most experimental artistic languages; it was urgent to recognise them at first hand, to attribute meaning to emerging art, to contemporary art. The award for Max Bill’s *Tripartite Unity* (1951) was a kind of trophy for the universalist and contemporary view of art envisioned by the first exhibition in São Paulo. To this day, the image of the Swiss artist’s work is a required feature of the event, appearing alongside texts about the first exhibition in dozens of publications. Max Bill was soon celebrated as the founding father of the abstract concrete movement, without considering the webs of social relations that engendered the latter here in Brazil even before the exhibition of his work.¹⁰ The repercussions of Max Bill’s work were such that little is said about Danilo di Prete, an Italian artist living in Brazil, whose work *Limões* (Lemons) received the 1st National Painting Prize. The award displeased critics, adherents of Brazilian figurativism,¹¹ causing a stir in the press. One cannot, however, restrict the complexity of the biennials to the omission of the artist’s name and of the work that won the first painting prize, nor to the reiterated evocation of the sculpture prize to the Swiss artist. The effects and consequences of the exhibition are much broader if one recalls at least that the 1st Biennial shattered the provincialism of the Brazilian art world and opened the way to exchanges and reciprocities between national and international artists. The 1st Biennial contradicted, once and for all, the tendency of academic art. Its organising committee, headed by Lourival Gomes Machado chose to exhibit both the figurative modern and the abstract modern. With regard to the abstract, he knew how to bring together the informal and the geometric, which had hardly appeared in the Brazilian art scene. At the exhibition held in Trianon Park there were works by the young Ivan Serpa, who received the Youth National Painter award, Luiz Sacilotto, Waldemar Cordeiro, and Maria Leontina, in addition to the *Kinechromatic Apparatus* by Abraham Palatnik, who won an Honorable Mention from the international jury. It concerned a very young generation, which was breaking into the artistic scene, competing for the emergence of geometric abstractionism in the Brazilian context. They were joined by Fayga Ostrower, who belonged to the same generation but was dedicated to informal abstractionism, and the already well-known and legitimised figurative modernist painters Cândido Portinari and Di Cavalcanti. Besides them, there was the painter Iberê Camargo, who did not belong to either group, having

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David Frisby and Mike Featherstone (eds.), *Simmel on Culture: Selected Writings* (London: Sage Publications, 1997), 188.

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Lourival Gomes Machado, “Apresentação”, in *I Bienal do Museu de Arte Moderna de São Paulo* (October-November 1951), exh. cat. (São Paulo: Museu de Arte Moderna de São Paulo 1951), 14-23.

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Glaucia Villas Bôas, “A estética da conversão O ateliê do Engenho de Dentro e a arte concreta carioca (1946-1951)”, *Tempo Social* 20, no. 2 (2008): 197-219.

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Renata Rocco, “Disputes at the 1st São Paulo Biennial: Lemons by Danilo Di Prete and its Award”, *Oboe Journal* 4, no. 1 (2023): 22-40.

flirted with abstractionism and returned to the figure, in a unique expressionist language that marked Brazilian painting. In addition to the Brazilians, notable figures such as Alexander Calder, René Magritte, Torres García, Lucio Fontana, Giorgio Morandi, and many more were present, notwithstanding the existing categories that classified them into the tendencies of figurativism and abstractionism. No less than twenty-five national delegations attended the event and facilitated the exhibition of 1854 works by 723 artists.¹²

By embodying the idea of ‘modern’, the 1st Bienal de São Paulo was the object of both praise and criticism. In *Bienais de São Paulo*, Francisco Alambert and Polyana Canhête¹³ list the protests that questioned the choice of artistic languages for the exhibition. The *Memorial-protesto* (Protest-Memorial), prepared by 200 academic artists linked to the São Paulo Fine Arts Association, considered that the biennial was a “false artistic creed, which was anti-Christian, anti-Latin, anti-Brazilian”.¹⁴ The opposition corroborated the reaction to modernism, which was evident in Brazilian art circles since the so-called “Revolutionary Salon”¹⁵ or 38th General Exhibition of Fine Arts curated by Lúcio Costa in Rio de Janeiro, in 1934, and showed that the academic wing of Brazilian art remained cohesive when acting to defend its principles. A further demonstration was led by young left-wing artists, who launched the *Manifesto Consequência* (Consequence Manifesto), criticising abstract art. These reactions exposed divisions within the field of art itself, revealing that abstract art was not only opposed to academicism but also provoked resistance from adherents of figurative modernism.

Other demonstrations concerned the sumptuous expenses of the exhibition. A concentration of bank workers on strike outside the Biennial, on the day of its inauguration, was a discordant image that had repercussions in the press and on the ‘aura’ of the first event, as well as in articles by Villanova Artigas, who considered the 1st Bienal an expression of bourgeois decadence. According to the architect, the awards were bestowed by São Paulo industry ‘sharks’ who joined the influential Nelson Rockefeller and representatives of the New York MoMA.¹⁶ In times of the Cold War and the fight against American imperialism, such protests were not surprising. The unfavourable criticism of the 1st Bienal, however, was countered by the praise of critics and journalists who were enthusiastic about the initiative. Nobody assessed the situation as well as Murilo Mendes when he said that:

The 1st São Paulo Art Biennial has been causing debates and problems. It is therefore fulfilling its destiny. That was why it was made, the living organism that it is. It provokes admiration, irritation, it clears the air. It is a milestone, and one of the greatest, in the path of Brazilian culture [...] The Biennial is elevated to a position from which new horizons should be unveiled. It is a mighty test, a decisive test of great dimensions. It has flaws, some of them serious. It does not matter.¹⁷

A witness to Brazilian artistic life and a friend to critics and artists alike, the poet and diplomat was acquainted with the challenges accompanying the transformations happening at that moment. He asserted that the 1st Biennial was “the work

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See the Bienal’s webpage: <https://bienal.org.br>, accessed January 2023.

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Alambert and Canhête, *As Bienais de São Paulo*, 37-52.

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Alambert and Canhête, *As Bienais de São Paulo*.

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Lúcia G. Vieira, *Salão de 31: marco da revelação da arte moderna em nível nacional* (Rio de Janeiro: Funarte, 1984).

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Vilanova Artigas, “Verdadeira Farra de Tubarões. A Inauguração da Bienal de Rockefeller”, *Hoje*, October 2, 1951.

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Murilo Mendes, “Perspectivas de uma exposição”, in Venâncio Filho (ed.), *30xBienal: Transformações na Arte Brasileira*, 2013, 76.

of madmen. Very special madmen who should be followed and imitated”.¹⁸ The expression ‘biennial of madmen’ did not remain long in recollections of the event, since later, the term ‘monster biennial’ would become forever associated with the memory of the 6th Biennial. Nonetheless, judging by the size of the event and the historical and political context of the country, which had barely started its process of industrialisation and urbanisation, the expression used by Murilo Mendes seems appropriate. It is possible to insist on the accuracy of the poet’s expression, considering that the 1st Biennial brought together works from the newly arrived abstractionism, which, according to Otilia Arantes arrived too soon,¹⁹ even before figurative modernism was consolidated and, like any and every unexpected event, had caused a strong controversy.²⁰

Whatever the nature of the consequences of the Bienal de São Paulo’s creation, it undoubtedly paved the way for abstractionism in Brazil and, from it, to what is now called “contemporary art”.²¹ It is not enough, however, to reassert what historians and critics have rightly said about the relation between the 1st Bienal and abstractionism. It is important to highlight that the Bienal coined, together with abstractionism, a universalist conception of art, by emphasising points, lines, and colours to the detriment of the theme or subject. This conception was not out of tune with the times but, on the contrary, was consistent with the profound process of intellectualisation characteristic of modernity in all its spheres, including art with its particularities. Such a social process sought to refine differentiated contents in order to be able to define the same and similar characteristics of things, ideas, and relations with the aim of organising the most diverse spheres of life. In art, abstraction was giving way to the creation of a world of forms or, as Kandinsky would have it, ‘the creation of a world’ through the creation of a work of art.²² It is worth recalling, however, that such an egalitarian movement never presented identical characteristics among countries, nor among spheres of the social, artistic, political, or even economic world.

There was, however, another issue in the guidelines of the 1st Bienal de São Paulo, related to abstractionism and the universality of art, which must be explained. It consisted in adopting a modern conception of time, according to which the past should be overcome with each appearance of a new artistic language. In this way, every artistic experience was transformed into a transitional experience, marked by the permanent surprise of something new. In the modern conception of time,²³ the past loses its significance, and the future, no longer predictable based on historical occurrences, becomes unknown. Over time, the intertwining of the notions of abstraction, universalism, and modern time became consolidated as the foundation of the curatorial choices in the Bienal de São Paulo, thus strengthening an avant-garde view of art.

One should not forget, however, that, in parallel with the guidelines aimed at modern Western universalism, the bienal cleared the way for the so-called

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Mendes, “Perspectivas de uma exposição”, 76.

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Otilia Arantes, “Mario Pedrosa, um capítulo da abstração brasileira”, in Otilia Arantes (ed.), *Política das Artes. Textos Escolhidos II* (São Paulo: Editora da Universidade de São Paulo, 1996), 20

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In the post-war period, a movement in favour of abstract art, both geometric and informal, arose in Brazil. This movement caused great controversy with the figurative modernist movement, which was against abstraction. For more information on the particularities of this controversy, see Gláucia Villas Bôas, “Concretismo”, in Fabiana Werneck (ed.), *Sobre a Arte Brasileira. Da Pré-história aos anos de 1960* (São Paulo: Martins Fontes, Edições Sesc, 2016), 265-293.

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With respect to the concept of contemporary art, see Martha Buskirk, *The Contingent Object of Contemporary Art* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2005); on contemporary art in Brazil, see Luiz Camillo Osório, “Genéalogies du contemporain. Le parcours de l’Art Brésilien”, in Alain Queménil, Gláucia Villas Bôas (eds.), *Art et Société. Recherche récents et regards croisés* (Marseille: Open Press Edition, 2006), 87-97.

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Wassily Kandinsky, *Do Espiritual na arte. E na pintura em particular*, trans. Alvaro Cabral and Antonio de Pádua Danesi (São Paulo: Martins Fontes, 1996)

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Koselleck, *Passado Futuro*, 2006.

historical centres, which allowed it to relativise its own guidelines. The latter were the object of long discussions for many years. One never really knew if they were designed to attract the public to the biennials, given the difficulty in the reception of avant-garde art, or if they ensured the presence of the past at the exhibitions to legitimise them. Another important issue, which permeated the universal view of the exhibitions, refers to the concept of nation, configured from the differences, history, and culture of distinct collectivities, which were inscribed in numerous exhibitions. Whether or not due to diplomatic, bureaucratic-political, or organisational obstacles, its presence differentiated art according to a geopolitical criterion.²⁴

2. The Monster Biennial

The first time a spark of criticism was raised against the consecrating trinity of modern, universal, and avant-garde art, which served as the pillar for the exhibitions, occurred at the 6th Bienal de São Paulo. This event was organised by Mário Pedrosa in his capacity as the director of the Museum of Modern Art of São Paulo (MAM-SP). In celebrating the exhibition's 10th anniversary, the 6th Bienal deviated from the pattern adopted by the previous exhibitions, being based on a conception of a modern which aimed at "the depths of the past".²⁵ A few days after the opening, the event was already called historical and museographical, contrary to what its organiser intended. According to Pedrosa, in the 6th Bienal's catalogue:

The 6th Bienal has representations from fifty countries, from all continents, including, for the first time, our young and ascending African neighbours. It has therefore and with reason become, at present, the most universal artistic manifestation in the world. This universality is not only translated on the geographical or political plane, that is, in space, but it is also translated in time, that is, it starts from contemporary art to cherish the depths of the past.²⁶

The conception of universalism that included the past and difference, proclaimed by Mário Pedrosa, was manifested in the presentation of religious baroque art from the missions in Paraguay, dated from 1610 to 1667; Japanese calligraphy in works, letters, scrolls, and ideograms from the 8th, 12th, 16th, 17th, and 18th centuries; copies of Byzantine-style frescoes from the 12th to the 15th century painted in museums and convents of what was then Yugoslavia; pieces of Australian aboriginal art from the beginning of the 20th century, and even reproductions of frescoes from the Indian sanctuary of Ajanta dating from the 2nd century BC to the 7th century AD, all of which were exhibited alongside works by Iberê Camargo, Maria Helena Vieira da Silva, Kurt Schwitters, José Clemente Orozco, Lygia Clark, Robert Motherwell, Julius Bissier, Tomioka Tessai, Danilo di Prete, Tomie Ohtake, and Alicia Penalba, among other representatives of modern art.

For the critic, universal art, a central pillar of the 6th Bienal, was not inscribed in a single contemporary geopolitical space, but was composed of different layers of the past, civilisations and cultures, whether primitive or complex, living or dead, from the West or from the East. He had already asserted that art did not belong to one group or another in society or to the artistic experiments of only one era, but instead manifested itself in any person, "regardless of his meridian, whether he is Papuan or mestizo, Brazilian or Russian, black or yellow, literate or illiterate,

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Glaucia Villas Bôas, "Geopolitical Criteria and the Classification of Art", *Third Text* 26, no. 1 (2012): 41-52; <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09528822.2012.647659>.

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Villas Bôas, "Geopolitical Criteria and the Classification of Art".

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Mário Pedrosa, "Introdução", in *VI Bienal de São Paulo* (September-December, 1961), exh. cat. (São Paulo: Museu de Arte Moderna, 1961), 29-30.

balanced or unbalanced”.²⁷ Critics, however, ignored the conception adopted by Mário Pedrosa (who, in his own way, respected the past and differences) and took care to demonstrate their dissatisfaction with the profusion of rooms, activities, and numbers of works, which incidentally led the art critic Aracy Amaral to refer to the 6th iteration as a “monster biennial”.²⁸ As already noted above, the term became ingrained in the event’s legacy. An exaggeration, the criticism alluded to both the excessive number of works and the historical, museographical nature of the exhibition, distorting the avant-garde pretensions of the Bienal de São Paulo.

From the beginning, when formulating a conceptual framework for art criticism, Mário Pedrosa had clarified that modern art was dependent on the “discovery” of primitive art by the modern vanguards, of which he was only interested in its formal nature, privileging what he called its “strong structure”, linked to “rites and rhythms”.²⁹ In the 1950s, he returned to insisting on this issue, motivated by the theme of the International Association of Art Critics (AICA) Congress that was held in Warsaw in 1960, on the issue of internationalism and nationalism. He considered it crucial to investigate the extent to which national or regional art (he preferred the term regional to avoid confusion with nationalism) contributed to both unifying and differentiating the process of internationalising modern art. The universality of art, he argued, rested precisely on the expression of diverse artistic traditions and tendencies from various peoples. Such a foundation of universality did not prevent the construction of unity, but led to the effective achievement of unity in diversity.

The allusion to Mário Pedrosa’s thinking helps elucidate that, in its initial years, the Biennial was establishing a sort of “pattern” wherein the predominant concept of the universality of art intertwined with ideas of historical, cultural, and national difference. This interweaving marked the curatorial projects, which oscillated between concerns for the universal and the future and, at times, towards the celebration of difference and the past. It is never too much to say that this movement is not defined by its *fitting into a format*, but as a constant wave of nuanced movements that frame the exhibitions in a continuous duration of time, one informed by that very pattern.

One of the repercussions of this oscillation between the universal and the different can be examined in the holding of the 1st Latin American Biennial, which was called *Myth and Magic* in 1978. There, the keynote of differences reappears in an accentuated way. The distinctiveness of the Latin American region is emphasised through the exhibition of works that collectively aim to illustrate the shared heritage of its constituent countries, shaped by the integration of indigenous, black, and white communities in their formation. An example of the biennial’s universalist view can be apprehended from the 25th Biennial, in 2002, titled *Metropolitan Iconographies*. In what follows, these two additional examples will be used to further the argument about the inscription of the notions of difference and universality in the exhibition projects of the São Paulo Biennials.

3. In Defense of Latin American Difference

From the holding of the 6th international exhibition, in 1961, to the choice of Walter Zanini as general curator of the 16th exhibition, in 1981, the biennial did not buckle in the face of political and institutional adversity. The authoritarian military government, in force in the country since 1964, imposed censorship on artists, exhibitions, and the press. In addition, the period was known for the effects of the dismemberment of the São Paulo Museum of Modern Art’s biennial. After becoming a founda-

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Mário Pedrosa, “Arte necessidade vital”, in Otilia Arantes (ed.), *Forma e percepção estética: Textos Escolhidos II* (São Paulo: EDUSP, 1996), 46.

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O Estado de São Paulo, December 16, 1961.

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Arantes, “Prefácio: Mário Pedrosa, um capítulo brasileiro da teoria da abstração”, in *Forma e percepção estética*, 15.

tion in 1962, the institution created, in 1977, the Council of Art and Culture/CAC to organise the event, a function previously performed by the museum's director and staff. The CAC was renewed every two years, as was the choice of the foundation's president after the 1975 departure of Ciccillo, as its patron Francisco Matarazzo Sobrinho was called. The choices of the foundation's president and board members, in addition to the decisions that they made, were not always consensual, thus provoking criticism and conflicts both before and after Ciccillo's death in 1977. One of the first difficulties occurred in 1969, during the 10th Biennial, known as the 'Boycott Biennial', an occasion in which Brazilian and foreign artists refused to participate in the event due to art censorship by the military dictatorship.

In contrast to these obstacles, the biennial continued to promote biannual exhibitions, with a greater or lesser amount of financial resources, whether public or private. It continued to bring innovations from abroad, such as Pop Art at the 9th exhibition, in 1967, and video art in its 13th iteration, in 1975. Incidentally, in the latter, which was called the Videomakers Biennial, the exhibition included a room dedicated to the indigenous art of the Xingu,³⁰ an example of how difference interfered in international exhibitions. It was precisely during those years of transformation, instability, and uncertainty that a vigorous debate on Latin America took place at the Bienal de São Paulo Foundation. Interest in the differences of Latin American art led to the organisation of the 1st Latin America Biennial in 1978. The event's impact, not always favoured by critics and historians, led to its exclusion from the exhibition lists in various publications. Analysing it here is warranted, as the exhibition reveals the organisers' intent to embrace differences and move away from a futurist and universalist perspective on art, despite the failure to establish Latin American biennials.

There are various explanations for the reasons that prompted the Bienal de São Paulo Foundation to organise the inaugural Latin American Biennial in 1978. The pungent desire of Ciccillo Matarazzo,³¹ the interest of Oscar Landmann, Latin American art collector and member of the Biennial Foundation, the cultural context of the 1970s, the initiatives, symposiums, and movements that sought to give a political framework to the concept of Latin American art³² have all been indicated as possible causes for holding the first and only Latin American Biennial in São Paulo. If, on the one hand, they are all plausible and result from research and astute observations, on the other hand, the initiative has not been sufficiently contextualised in the broader ideological debate of the time, which problematised the notion of a Third World, and of Latin America in particular. Such a current of ideas sought, first of all, a path to the emancipation or recognition of the so-called underdeveloped or developing countries, located in Africa, Asia, and the Americas, by betting on a policy that would free them from being aligned with one of the dominant powers that divided the world at that time, the US and the USSR. One must consider, however, the fact that the circulation of these ideas was not homogeneous, and countries such as the United States took specific political measures in the Latin American region after the Cuban revolution in 1959, thus investing their political, military, and intellectual powers to contain the advance of socialism.³³

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See the Bienal's website: [31](http://www.bienal.org.br/post/557#:~:text=Na%2013%C2%AA%20Bienal%2C%20em%20, accessed November 1, 2022.</p>
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Despite the disagreement among historians, editors of the catalogue on *I Bienal Latino Americana de São Paulo* affirm that Matarazzo was interested in the Latin American Biennial, see *I Bienal Latino Americana de São Paulo*, exh. cat. (São Paulo: Fundação Bienal de São Paulo, 1978), 19.

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See Souza, "Transações e transições", 2021; Camila Maroja, *Framing Latin American Art, Artists, Critics, Institutions and the Configuration of a Regional Identity* (PhD Diss.: Duke University, 2015); Gabriela Lodo, *A I Bienal Latino Americana de São Paulo* (MA Thesis: Universidade de Campinas, 2014); Carla Fatio, *Processos artísticos no continente latino americano: uma perspectiva histórica e crítica da I Bienal Latino Americana de 1978 e seu legado para a América Latina e o Brasil* (PhD Diss.: Universidade de São Paulo, 2012); Isobel Whitelegg, "Brazil, Latin America: The World. The Bienal of São Paulo as a Latin American Question", *Third Text* 26, no 1, (2012): 131-140.

33

See João Feres Jr., *A História do Conceito de Latin America nos Estados Unidos* (Bauru SP: Edusc 2005).

Alongside the set of studies that scrutinise the reasons for holding the 1st Latin American Biennial, there are the writings of Aracy Amaral, which, unlike the aforementioned ones, are critical writings/testimonies of someone who played a prominent role and made her voice heard in events, meetings, and debates that constituted the history of the Biennial. When going through Amaral's articles, dated from 1975 to 1981, and published in *Arte e meio artístico: entre a feijoada e o X-burger* (Art and Art World: Between Feijoadas and Cheeseburgers),³⁴ the reader recognises that she became aware of the need to think of Latin American art after engaging with artists during successive trips to countries in the region. She observed that they severely criticised the Bienal de São Paulo due to its “attachment to a European art criticism – be it from Paris or Venice – and its lack of connection to the continent of which the Bienal de São Paulo is a part”.³⁵ Thanks to her individual experience, she had written, in 1975, a project aimed at transforming the Bienal de São Paulo into an artistic manifestation of a strictly Latin American nature. Nonetheless, one would be mistaken to think that Amaral's interest in Latin American art arose strictly from her sociability. She knew very well the debates waged about Latin America, both in Europe and in the United States, which had begun to place the region on the ‘crest of the wave’. She supported the critics Martha Traba, Juan Acha, and Frederico de Moraes and shared their ideals in the promotion of Latin American art, even if her conceptions were not identical to those of her colleagues; and she did not avoid taking a stand before Argentinians and Mexicans, who tended, respectively, towards internationalism and regionalism. Amaral discussed the relations between modern art and popular art, affirming the proximity between the two. The subject, always controversial in the literature on Brazilian art, was burning at the time, due to the fear that Latin American art would be considered folkloric or exotic. Nevertheless, in the back-and-forth movement of her thinking, one highlights her insistence on the fact that the Latin American wave did not strictly serve the interests of “outsiders”, but of Latin American intellectuals and artists who yearned to be emancipated from the predominant Eurocentric view which attributed to them a secondary place in the hierarchy of the art world. This starting point distinguishes her thinking from that of the critics, who remained incapable of materialising their project.³⁶

However, it is necessary to put aside the question of the reasons for holding the 1st Latin American Biennial and look at its composition. It includes the exhibition titled *Myth and Magic* (1978) displayed at the Biennial Pavilion in Ibirapuera Park, the Symposium on Latin America, which brought together intellectuals from different generations and countries, and the performance event *Mitos Vadios* (Vagabond Myths), which, although outside its programming, became part of its remembrance. Upon entering the exhibition, visitors were surprised by the display of a “set of objects, images, and words fitted into wooden niches [...]: a small pot, a mirror, a cage, figurines of mermaids, an ox, a zebra, and dragons, small statues of Jesus, Yemanjá, the Dove of the Holy Spirit, a composition with several little green devils, a lamp, and a Formula 1 car”.³⁷ It was the “Myth and Magic Package” created by former students of Pietro Bardi,³⁸ which was, significantly, self-nominated as a didactic project. The youth had simply enclosed in

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Aracy Amaral, *Arte e Meio Artístico: entre a feijoada e o x-burger*, (São Paulo: Editora 34 Letras, 2013, 2nd ed.). In the scope of this paper, it is not possible to discuss the set of texts by Aracy Amaral on the subject. Nonetheless, the reader may take note of other discussions, initiatives, and critic on the 1st Latin American Biennial in Souza, *Transações e transições*, 208-225.

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Amaral, *Arte e Meio Artístico: entre a feijoada e o x-burger*, 439

36

With respect to the failure to institute Latin American art biennials, see Fatio, *Processos artísticos no continente latino americano*, 344-405.

37

Pietro Maria Bardi, “Sala Didática”, in *I Bienal Latino Americana de São Paulo, XX*.

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Pietro Bardi was an Italian curator and collector living in Brazil in the city of São Paulo. He was the founder of the Museum of Modern Art of São Paulo (MAM-SP).

boxes (not from the myths of politics) objects symbols or almost of popular and executivesque sorcery; they resorted to a bit of history which, despite being a marginalised subject, at least serves to amuse; they arranged spiritualities, doubts, aberrations and everything else that serves to take a task seriously knowing, a priori, that a communication must, after all, be spontaneous and provoke discussions.³⁹

If visitors had read the catalogue, they would know that the words were those of Bardi who, in advance, apologised to critics and specialists for the irrelevant or hardly appropriate conduct of his young disciples, even though he supported them completely. That was how, at the moment that Institutional Act No. 5 was repealed in 1978, and on the eve of the twilight of the boasted economic miracle,⁴⁰ the art of myths and magic in Latin America was exhibited to public appreciation.

The novelties of the 1st Latin American Biennial contradicted the programmatic nature of the Foundation, whose objective was to present the artistic vanguards, thus scrutinising the future of art. *myth and magic* sought to ‘correct’ past mistakes, presenting itself as a timid libel against evolutionary trends, above all economic development, which sought to erase the memory of a past deemed inferior on a scale of Eurocentric values.

The fundamental proposal “MYTH AND MAGIC” was born, therefore, from the need to rediscover our origins, (and) discuss the possible deformations introduced into our cultures by other dominating and dominant ones, either by force or by economic processes. Latin America is still very young, but it is taking long steps towards its maturity, hence this need to reconsider old forgotten paths, proposals lost in time and historical space that, unfortunately, we were not allowed to tread in remote times.⁴¹

The central idea of the exhibition was not limited, however, to the memory of the origins of Latin American art; it was also intertwined with the category of race. The Arts and Culture Council determined that works submitted on the theme of myth and magic should be classified in categories that represented cultural manifestations evoking the specific ‘races’ of Latin American countries: black, indigenous, mestizo, and Eurasian.⁴² The objective was to display works within the confines of each category, intending to acquire insights into the similarities and differences in Latin American production. This approach aimed to define its identity without interference from the category of nation. Nonetheless, the attempt to eliminate national differences failed. According to the Council of Arts and Culture, in the catalogue presentation, the reason for this failure was the incorrect completion of the registration forms by the countries participating in the event. The council’s bewilderment at the response of the fourteen invited countries is expressed in the following passage:

We lost the concept of dividing by proposals, but we received a response on which we should reflect at length. Why does this happen?

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Bardi, “Sala Didática”, 51

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The expression “economic miracle” is defined by the accelerated growth rate of the GDP (Gross Domestic Product) that occurred in Brazil, above all from 1968 to 1973, during the military dictatorship, which did not, however, solve the problem of social inequalities in the country.

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I Bienal Latino Americana de São Paulo, XX.

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The definition and use of these categories are included in the exhibition’s regulations, published in the catalogue *I Bienal Latino Americana de São Paulo*, 24-29. With respect to the debate on Latin American art, see Maria de Fátima Morethy Couto, “Para além das representações convencionais: A ideia de arte latino-americana em debate” *POs: Revista do Programa de Pós-graduação em Artes da EBA/UFMG* 7, no. 13 (2017): 124-145. <https://eba.ufmg.br/revistapos>, accessed October 2023.

Does Latin America really intend to be a whole, or does it still prefer to be separated by nations, culturally speaking?⁴³

The overlapping of the categories of race and nation permeated the spaces of the biennial, undermining the purpose of exhibiting Latin American art from the perspective of artistic manifestations inspired by their racial origins. It should be added that, by accepting any artistic language of an iconographic (themes, characters, signs, and symbols) or compositional (colours, shapes, spaces, materials, textures, gestures, and rituals) nature, since *Myths and Magic* should not be considered as a “preconceived theme to produce works or promote folklorisms”,⁴⁴ but as having an experimental character, the 1st Biennial arranged, side by side, works by nationality and by race, juxtaposing the two notions in a plurality of artistic languages.

In the group of Brazilian artists, there were Israel Pedrosa, Glauco Rodrigues, Lia Robatto, Ziraldo, and Aluysio Zaluar with works considered manifestations of mestizo culture; the work of the Etsedron collective was an expression of African culture; Niobe Xandó doubly classified her work as a manifestation inspired by African and indigenous cultures; the work by Ubirajara Ribeiro was marked as Eurasian in expression while that of Claudia Demange was indigenous. Out of a total of forty-six artists, a majority of twenty-six framed their works in the mestizo category. Only three indicated the African category.⁴⁵ Despite the difficulties in bringing together a set of works in tune with the initial proposal of the organisers, and the unwelcoming reception of the public and the critics, the exhibition is differentiated from all other Bienais de São Paulo.

The disarray of the 1st Latin American Biennial, however, was also on display in the lectures, talks, and interventions on Latin America which took place in the symposium. The interventions, published by the Bienal de São Paulo Foundation,⁴⁶ were delivered by a group of forty intellectuals, thirty-two men and eight women, and featured both famous scholars and emerging ones just entering the intellectual circuits. Darcy Ribeiro, Ernesto Sábato, Nestor Canclini, Eduardo de Oliveira e Oliveira, Mário Pedrosa, Juan Acha, Romero Brest, Fernando Albuquerque Mourão, Lélia Coelho Frota, Alba Zaluar, Marta Traba, and Silvia Ambrosini, among others, took part in the meeting. Despite addressing a wide range of topics, including the specificity of art, the underrepresentation of certain Latin American countries in the Bienais de São Paulo, philosophical and sociological discussions on myths, artistic vanguards, and Latin American art in general, as well as presentations on popular art, African art, and indigenous art, these discussions did not seem to significantly contribute to the understanding of the exhibition or the discourse on the concept of art in Latin America. The symposium did not even manage to recommend the contours of the unfolding of the Latin American Biennial, as its organisers had wished.

As if the dissonance caused by the mismatch of those two parts – exhibition and symposium – within themselves and in relation to each other were not enough, the 1st Bienal de São Paulo was surprised by the apparition of *Mitos Vadios* in a property on Rua Augusta, announcing, in a playful and ironic way, tensions of another nature: the happenings and performances organised by the artist Ivald Granato contested the biennial ‘of origins’, provoking it with work representative of the avant-garde and contemporary modes of art. It included Ana Maria Maiolino,

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I Bienal Latino Americana de São Paulo, 20.

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I Bienal Latino Americana de São Paulo, 20.

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The exhibition regulations considered both artistic manifestations and documentation, such that, in the set of documentation, there were photographs of indigenous people from the Yanomami group by Claudia Andujar; indigenous pieces collected by Claudio and Orlando Villas Bôas, and pieces of black art donated by the National Folklore Institute, among other items.

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Simpósio da I Bienal Latino Americana de São Paulo, 1978, volumes I e II, <http://www.bienal.org.br/publicações/7094>, accessed May 2023.

Lygia Pape, Hélio Oiticica, Gabriel Borba, Regina Vater, and Rubens Gerchman, among other young artists, who sought freedom of expression outside institutional chains.⁴⁷

Considering the conceptual pattern of the Bienal de São Paulo, it becomes evident that the 1st Latin American Biennial, by revisiting the past and emphasising differences, deviated from the event's original orientation. The expectations associated with establishing a biennial in Latin America did not materialise. However, the project to appreciate Latin American art, embedded in the event, persisted. There were several initiatives and achievements that emerged after the 1st Latin American Biennial. In the context of postmodern criticism, the Latin American art category has reappeared⁴⁸ with full force, which makes evident the complexity of the processes in which permanence coexists subtly with change.

4. Picassos of the Present and the Future

The period that separates the 1st Latin American Biennial (1978) from the 25th Biennial, *Metropolitan Iconographies* (2002), witnessed the end of the military dictatorship and the beginning of the re-democratisation of the country. At the Bienal de São Paulo, a change in direction was felt when Walter Zanini was assigned the position of general curator. Betting on the idea of an analogy of languages, Zanini abolished the division of the exhibition space by country and gave priority to a universalist view of art.⁴⁹ With him, new curatorial practices were established, which were defined by the curator's direct involvement with the conception and production of the exhibitions. From then on, biennials followed with a greater or lesser emphasis on a cosmopolitan, internationalist, or universalist orientation that was nonetheless always concerned with the place of Brazilian art and the continuity or suppression of national representations and historical centres. In the set of these exhibitions, one may ask why the choice of the 25th exhibition, curated by a foreigner, the German Alfons Hug, did not deserve as much attention as the one that preceded it, curated by Paulo Herkenhof, under the aegis of the notion of anthropophagy?⁵⁰ Or even, why the choice was not allowed to fall on the biennial that followed it, curated by Lisette Lagnado in 2006, which after all managed to put an end to national exhibitions? The emphasis on the 25th exhibition is justified for two primary reasons. Firstly, it serves as a paradigm illustrating the challenges encountered by the curatorship of the biannual exhibitions in realising an exhibition aligned with the avant-garde principles of the biennial. Secondly, it highlights the curatorship's ability to articulate a discourse justifying the presence of national differences in an event conceptualised as cosmopolitan.

Two decades after the 1st Latin American Biennial in São Paulo was held, social and political transformations incited predictions for the newly arrived 21st century. The world's aggression towards nature was questioned, which had become greater than the capacity of the biosphere to recompose itself, thus threatening life on the planet. Experts and politicians were calling for the development and institutionalisation of ecological policies. Globalisation, encouraged by the economy and new technologies, had created a world market and accentuated the imbalances between the northern and southern hemispheres. Migratory movements of populations suffering from political and economic problems were increasingly feared. The changes that directly affected daily life and politics consolidated discourses of disenchantment and criticism of modernity.

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With respect to *Mitos Vadios*, see Arethusa Almeida de Paula, "*Mitos Vadios. Uma experiência da arte de ação no Brasil*" (MA Thesis: Universidade de São Paulo, 2008).

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With respect to the repercussion of the 1st Latin American Biennial see Souza, *Transações e transições*, 202, 221-225; and Maroja, *Framing Latin American Art*, 131-157.

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The division of the space by national representations was reintroduced at the 20th Biennial. With respect to Zanini's conceptions and work, consult Souza, *Transações e transições*, 280-324.

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See a detailed analysis of Paulo Herkenhoff's curatorship in Maroja, *Framing Latin American Art*, 174-266.

At first glance, the internationalist curatorial project of the 25th Bienal de São Paulo (2002) appears to be cognisant of current transformations and, furthermore, consistent with the consolidation and strengthening of the figure of the curator and of contemporary art in the art world. It would not be surprising, then, that the curatorial conception of the 25th Bienal de São Paulo reaffirmed universalism, cosmopolitanism, and internationalism, contrasting with the project of the 1st Latin American Biennial (1978). Nonetheless, the exercise of comparing the two events invites us to assess the path, which is more complex than linear, that the Bienal de São Paulo has taken and to observe affinities between the two exhibitions.

Evoking “The Aleph” by Jorge Luis Borges to define the concept of the exhibition, Alfons Hug, its curator, declared that “just as in the Aleph, where a tiny point in space contains all the points of an inconceivable cosmos, the images in our exhibition show the diversity, the contradictory, and the multifaceted of the Earth”.⁵¹ *Metropolitan Iconographies* was characterised by Hug as an international art exhibition, in which emphasis would be given to cities from different countries and continents. The important thing was to give visibility to the condition of art in the metropolises in order to know whether the artists let themselves succumb to urban problems or whether they still had the capacity to show a way ahead. Based on this problematic, Alfons Hug updated the concept of avant-garde: those who would be ahead of their time are now presented at the forefront of the problems of the metropolises.

Alfons Hug’s avant-garde conception was made manifest, among other measures, in the elimination of the historical centres. He admitted that there could be a decrease in attendance due to the decision but believed that the insistently evoked relation between higher attendance and historical centre was a myth.

We may lose a little audience, but the board does not think so. I am not sure. But I think there is a false myth. A lot of people always came to see the contemporary production. Biennials should not run after art history, that is what museums do. Instead of presenting Picasso, it should present the Picassos of the present and future. The art world is experiencing a period of great creativity, especially in peripheral countries. Why deny the great geniuses of today?⁵²

In the same newspaper *Folha de São Paulo*,⁵³ Helouise Costa made an assessment of the historical centres, foregrounding their ambiguous character:

The exacerbation of the historical bias ended up revealing itself to be a paradoxical strategy. Although it provided the public with exceptional opportunities to have contact with works by artists who had never been presented before in the country, it created an unusual competition within the Biennial. The historical rooms established a dispute with the contemporary art segment, both in relation to fundraising and public affluence. This extreme situation was partly responsible for an institutional crisis of major proportions, which led to splits between divergent groups and to the reordering of political forces within the complex gearing of the Foundation.⁵⁴

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Alfons Hug, “O Atlas do Aleph”, em *Meta-Arte na 25ª Bienal Internacional de São Paulo. Uma exploração conceitual*, n.d. http://hrenatoh.net/curso/textos/instalacoes_Bienal.pdf, accessed May 2023.

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Fábio Cypriano, “Alemão Alfons Hug fala sobre dificuldades para fazer a 25ª Bienal”, *Folha de São Paulo* (March 21, 2002), <https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/foha/ilustrada/ult90u22338.shtml>, accessed August 8, 2023.

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Helouise Costa, “Análise da polêmica opção pelo tempo presente na 25ª Bienal”, *Folha de São Paulo*, (March 21, 2002): n.p. <https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/foha/ilustrada/ult90u22344.shtml>, accessed August 2023.

54

Costa, “Análise da polêmica opção pelo tempo presente na 25ª Bienal”.

Despite the financial causes for the elimination of the historical centres, their suppression favoured presentification, a kind of 'here and now' of art, always with an eye on the future that it would be anticipating. Successful in this endeavour, Hug was unable, however, to eliminate national representations from an event that was supposed to be international. In this sense, it is essential to know his arguments for and against the representation of works by nationality in order to get the gist of his project.

Arguing that national representations were "outdated"⁵⁵ and, at the time, already absent from all biennials except the Venice Biennale and the Bienal de São Paulo, Hug observed that the affirmation of nationalities had once again been a success at the former. Based on this fact, the curator affirmed that the "national pavilion" made it possible to follow the changes that occurred in the art of a country, thus offering a chance, above all, for peripheral countries excluded from the travel itineraries of critics. Hug admits that national representations could, as a whole, present 'uneven qualities' that should not, however, be eliminated or mitigated, since they made evident the existence of cultural differences between nations in a globalised world. The openness to a pluralistic art (based on nationality), he considered, was a way to struggle against ethnocentrism, which was a constant in the biennials. With this argument, Hug touched the nerve of several São Paulo biennials, European ethnocentrism, which, as we have seen, was also the target of the 1st Latin American Biennial, even though the fight against it took place by emphasising the region's origins. And if we go back in time, it was also an issue for the critic Mário Pedrosa, director of the 6th Bienal, who defended "unity in diversity".⁵⁶ Hug's proposition was possibly closer to Pedrosa's perspective, since he abandoned neither a transformative role for art nor a universalist view of the world.

No one will expect, from art, recipes for everyday politics. But one thing it will be able to do: at a time when political, economic, and social disparities between the different regions of the world are on the verge of growing, to artists is reserved the mission to once again unite the two hemispheres and defend the banner of the indivisible human community.⁵⁷

Alfons Hug chose cities across five continents – São Paulo, Caracas, New York, Johannesburg, Istanbul, Beijing, Tokyo, Sydney, London, Berlin, and Moscow. Despite his acknowledgment of this subjective selection, he believed these cities possessed a consolidated critical mass and a vibrant artistic scene, aiming to include a balanced representation of non-European continents. Each city was represented by five artists, irrespective of their nationality, and selected by a local curator. Additionally, Hug extended invitations to twelve artists to participate in a 12th imaginary city, nominated as "utopian". The exhibition also featured special rooms, including the works of Brazilian artists Nelson Leirner, Carlos Fajardo, and Karim Lambrecht, and an exhibition centre called *Na Rede* (On the Net) that showed art on digital networks. Convinced of the importance of cities in artistic creation, Hug bet on the complexity of metropolises to test the vanguardism of artists:

How does the work of art compete with metropolitan dimensions? Faced with the speed and complexity of urban processes, is there a risk of art "trailing" the city instead of running ahead of it and showing it the way? Would art be tamed by the city?⁵⁸

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Hug, *Iconografias Metropolitanas, 25ª Bienal de São Paulo*, 19-22.

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Mário Pedrosa, "Arte, linguagem internacional", *Jornal do Brasil* (February 17, 1960).

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Hug, *Iconografias Metropolitanas*, 23

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Hug, *Iconografias Metropolitanas*, 16.

The universalist and vanguardist view that permeated the 25th Biennial did not suppress differences in artistic production, which were visible in the art presented by seventy countries, stretching the limits of cosmopolitanism. But that is not all. The differences also recalled the obstacles faced by the 1st Latin American Art Biennial to remove the classification of art by nationality from the São Paulo exhibition. Furthermore, both exhibitions confronted European ethnocentrism, which was always threatening the emphasis on differences, dismissing them as exotic or folkloric. From *Metropolitan Iconographies* onward, the debate on the geopolitical criteria of art was resumed. In 2006, the 27th Biennial abandoned the system where works were selected according to nationality. The curator Lisette Lagnado justified her initiative, asserting that she was freeing culture from the geopolitical mechanisms that marked cultural bureaucracy, but like her predecessors, she was not spared from criticism.⁵⁹

Final Considerations

In 2021, the 34th Bienal de São Paulo, called *Though It's Dark, Still I Sing*,⁶⁰ alluded to the calamities experienced in Brazil, where the health crisis caused by Covid-19 added to serious political problems domestically. The title suggested that, despite the dark times, the exhibition had gone public. However, by highlighting the adverse historical circumstances, *Though It's Dark, Still I Sing* also announced the drama of the indigenous peoples of Brazil, who were under constant threat of destruction. The 34th Biennial raised the banner of differences and identities, represented by indigenous art, and without isolating them in a reserved space, it placed them both in confrontation and dialogue. Such is the example of works by an indigenous and a non-indigenous artist displayed at the exhibition, *Espelho da vida* (Mirror of Life, 2020) by Daiara Tukano and *Memória Tupinambá* (Tupinambá Memory, 2020) by Lygia Pape, both of which evoked the original sacred mantle of the Tupinambá.⁶¹ The 34th Biennial is a recent case of the singular movement of the Bienal de São Paulo, highlighted in this article, one molded and updated over time, combining the ideas of universalism and difference.

By reconsidering the examples of the 1st, 6th, and 25th Bienal de São Paulo and the 1st Latin American Biennial, the suspicion arises that the Bienal de São Paulo, when examined through the lens of difference/universality, reveals the coexistence of these notions in the exhibitions held. In the São Paulo exhibitions, past and future times are continually reconciled and separated. The emphasis on one of these notions/times or the other does nothing more than problematise the limits of each, reaffirming that there is no single principle to which judgment must be submitted when one places the conception and materiality of the exhibitions under the magnifying glass. It has also been demonstrated that this movement, despite the nature of the conflicts and challenges it has traversed—whether institutional, political, or economic—can be discerned in the curation of the exhibitions. It is not a strictly progressive or linear movement, shifting at times towards one side and at other times towards the other. Instead, it creatively intertwines them, even if it privileges either universalism or difference in a particular exhibition.

No matter what the content of the institutional conflict, the effects of the lack of resources, or the political adversities, the biannual and international exhibitions held in the city of São Paulo are therefore propelled by a continuous movement guided by the ideas and ideals of universalism and difference. It is possible that such a movement is one of the most significant legacies of the São Paulo biennials, since, by preventing them from following a single direction, it granted them a multi-plicitous and complex manifestation.

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Jorge Coli, "A Vanguarda do tédio", in *Folha de São Paulo* (November 19, 2006).

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A verse from the poem "Madrugada camponesa" (Peasant Dawn, 1965) by Thiago de Mello.

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With respect to Tupinambá mantles, see Elisângela Roxo, "Longe de casa", *Piauí* 182 (November 2021): 40-44.

Author's Biography

Glaucia Villas Bôas is Professor of Sociology at the Universidade do Rio de Janeiro and senior researcher of the Brazilian National Council for Scientific and Technological Development. She studies modern and contemporary art. Her current research project focuses on the political dimension of contemporary art. Recent-

ly she published *Forma Privilegiada. A Arte concreta no Rio de Janeiro de 1946 a 1959* (2022) about the rise of concrete art in Brazil and *Mário Pedrosa, crítico de arte e da modernidade* (2023), that bring together five essays about the Brazilian art critic's ideas on modern and abstract art.