

**Camila Maroja & Dária Jaremtchuk**  
**The Bienal de São Paulo as a Case Study****Abstract**

This special issue of *OBOE* brings together a series of case studies on the Bienal de São Paulo (Brazil) by an international team of scholars that offer new understandings of the complexities of this southern biennial and its position within the larger history of perennial exhibitions. From in-depth analyses of the Biennial's award-winning artists and its acquisition awards that today constitute the bulk of the collection of the Museu de Arte Contemporânea da Universidade de São Paulo (MAC USP) to examinations of specific national representations and important editions, the research presented here is relevant both to the current focus of the field of art history on exhibition histories and the expansion of the canon beyond US-Europe and to scholarship and research in Latin American art and exhibition histories more generally.

**Keywords**

Bienal de São Paulo, Southern Biennials, Exhibition Histories, Latin American Art, Modern and Contemporary Art

# The Bienal de São Paulo as a Case Study\*

Camila Maroja & Dária Jaremtchuk

Even though the Bienal de São Paulo is the longest-lived institution promoting regularly scheduled international exhibitions in the Southern Hemisphere, its role and longevity have only recently begun to be integrated into the critical literary corpus regarding exhibitions. This growing critical attention has been vitally facilitated by a number of institutional publications, beginning with a survey of the exhibition published to celebrate its fiftieth anniversary by the Fundação Bienal de São Paulo (São Paulo Biennial Foundation, FBSP) in 2001.<sup>1</sup> In 2013, some of the most celebrated shows were examined in their historical context in the exhibition and accompanying catalogue titled *30 x Bienal – Transformations in Brazilian Art from the 1<sup>st</sup> to the 30<sup>th</sup> Edition* curated by Paulo Venancio Filho.<sup>2</sup> In 2022, to mark the exhibition's seventieth anniversary, curator Paulo Miyada edited an anthology of academic essays about its history published by the FBSP, *Bienal de São Paulo desde 1951*.<sup>3</sup> Meanwhile, since 2008 the FBSP has made a significant effort to digitise catalogues and archival materials through the Arquivo Histórico Wanda Svevo (Historical Archive Wanda Svevo).<sup>4</sup> In addition to these commemorative editions, a number of peer-reviewed articles in specialised journals and book-length works by such authors as Nancy Dantas, Isobel Whitelegg, Vinicius Spricigo, Roberto Conduru, Pablo Lafuente, and Lisette Lagnado have advanced the scholarship on and interest in the Bienal, offering insightful studies of specific exhibitions or national representations and exploring cases that have had significant internation-

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Aginaldo Farias and Fundação Bienal de São Paulo, *50 Anos. Bienal de São Paulo 1951-2001: Homenagem a Francisco Matarazzo Sobrinho* (São Paulo: Fundação Bienal de São Paulo, 2001).

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Paulo Venancio Filho and Fundação Bienal de São Paulo, *30 X Bienal. Transformações na arte brasileira da 1a a 30a edição* (São Paulo: Bienal São Paulo, 2013).

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Paulo Miyada and Fundação Bienal de São Paulo, *Bienal de São Paulo desde 1951* (São Paulo: Bienal de São Paulo, 2022).

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Catalogues for all the Bienal de São Paulo exhibitions can be accessed online at <https://bienal.org.br/biblioteca/> and archival material is available at <http://arquivo.bienal.org.br/pawtucket/index.php/Gallery/Index>.

al impact within the art world.<sup>5</sup> Such contributions also include the thirty-fourth issue of the Tate Papers, which offered a new examination of the under-recognised history of the Bienal de São Paulo during Brazil's military regime (1964–85), and the research endeavours presented in several theses and dissertations.<sup>6</sup>

Despite these significant contributions, many stories about and issues affecting the Bienal remain to be unpacked. In particular, as this special issue sets out to show, the Bienal de São Paulo offers a pivotal case study of the history of the biennial format outside Europe. Largely due to its original close association with the Venetian model and history as an offshoot of the Museu de Arte Moderna de São Paulo (MAM-SP), authors Anthony Gardner and Charles Green included this important São Paulo institution in the original wave of internationalizing perennial exhibitions rather than in their much-cited 2013 list of Southern Biennials that, they argued, constituted a second wave of shows that challenged the influence of their original models.<sup>7</sup> Whereas, in line with this understanding, most previous discussion of the Bienal de São Paulo has closely associated it with the process of Brazilian modernisation following the Second World War, new research has nuanced and complicated this history.<sup>8</sup> As such work has shown, the Bienal de São Paulo has served as a geopolitical crossroads as it has endeavoured to adapt the Biennial European model to a new and often unstable context. This special issue of *OBOE* presents a set of case studies that together offer an analytical overview of key exhibition moments in an attempt to provide new pathways for understanding the complexities of this Brazilian biennial and to interrogate its position within the larger history of perennial exhibitions. This introduction is intended to help situate those specific instances within the more than seventy-year institutional history of Bienal de São Paulo exhibitions.

The Bienal de São Paulo, which was initiated in 1951 following the model of the Biennale di Venezia, was a direct development of the MAM-SP, an institution founded by the industrialist Francisco “Ciccillo” Matarazzo Sobrinho and modeled on the Museum of Modern Art, New York (MoMA).<sup>9</sup> The goal of the Bienal, as

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These articles and essays include Nancy Dantas, “An Accented Reading of the Bienal de São Paulo: Leonard Matsoso and the 12<sup>th</sup> (and 15<sup>th</sup>) Bienal”, *Third Text*, no. 13 (2023): 123-135; Isobel Whitelegg, “The Bienal Internacional de São Paulo: A Concise History, 1951-2014”, *Perspective. Actualité em Histoire de l'Art* (2013): 380-386, and “Brazil, Latin America: The World: The Bienal de São Paulo as a Latin American Question”, *Third Text* (2012): 131-140; Vinicius Spricigo, “Más allá del vacío: intercambios teóricos y artísticos. Francia y Brasil en las Bienales de San Pablo (1959-1985)”, *Boletín de Arte*, no. 16 (2016): 20-29; Roberto Conduru, “Janela Baça: A Bienal de São Paulo e seu formato recente”, *Novos Estudos* 3, no. 52 (1998). See also the books by Vinicius Spricigo and Fórum Permanente, *Modos De Representação da Bienal de São Paulo: A Passagem do Internacionalismo Artístico a Globalização Cultural* (São Paulo: Hedra, 2011); and Pablo Lafuente and Lisette Lagnado, *Cultural Anthropology: The 24th Bienal de São Paulo 1998* (London: Afterall, 2015).

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See *Tate Papers*, no. 34, 2021-22, available at <https://www.tate.org.uk/research/tate-papers/34>. These theses and dissertations include Gabriela Cristina Lodo, *A I Bienal Latino-Americana de São Paulo* (MA thesis: Unicamp Campinas SP, 2014); Luciara dos Santos Ribeiro, *Modernismos Africanos nas Bienais de São Paulo (1951-1961)* (MA thesis: Unifesp Guarulhos SP, 2019); and Tálisson Melo de Souza, *Transações e transições na arte contemporânea: mediação e geopolítica nas Bienais de São Paulo (1978-1983)* (PhD diss.: IFCS/UFRJ Rio de Janeiro, 2021).

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Anthony Gardner and Charles Green, “Biennials of the South on the Edges of the Global”, *Third Text* 27, no. 4 (2013): 442-455. In 2016, the authors published a book on the theme, which includes a chapter on the São Paulo Biennial. See Green and Gardner, *Biennials, Triennials, and Documenta: The Exhibitions that Created Contemporary Art* (Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley & Sons, 2016).

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For an excellent publication examining the biennial's early years, see Adele Nelson, *Forming Abstraction: Art and Institutions in Postwar Brazil* (Oakland CA: University of California Press, 2022).

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The founding of a Museum of Modern Art in São Paulo (MAM-SP) had been a project of the local elite from the early 1940s onwards. In 1942, intellectual Sérgio Milliet and USA magnate and Latin American art collector Nelson Rockefeller, who later donated important works to the MAM-SP's collection, began an intense correspondence regarding the opening of a museum following MoMA's regulations. Taking leadership of this project, Ciccillo Matarazzo conceived of the museum's opening exhibition during his encounter with the director of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, Karl Nierendorf, in Zurich in 1946. See Regina Teixeira de Barros, “Revisão de uma história”: *A criação do Museu de Arte Moderna de São Paulo. 1946-1949* (MA thesis: ECA/USP São Paulo, 2002).

proudly stated in its first catalogue, was to simultaneously put local artists into dynamic contact with the international art scene and integrate the city of São Paulo into a sophisticated network of cultural centres.<sup>10</sup> Although Rio de Janeiro, the federal capital, was widely considered the cultural centre of the country at the time, São Paulo was not only the site of the MAM-SP but also home to a number of enthusiastic art collectors, including Assis Chateaubriand, who in 1947 had founded the Museu de Arte de São Paulo (MASP) under the directorship of the Italian art dealer Pietro Maria Bardi. Unlike the situation in Rio de Janeiro, which remained the capital of the country until the inauguration of the planned city of Brasília in 1960, São Paulo's art scene was heavily dependent on the initiative of private entrepreneurs.

As the very origin of the Bienal itself demonstrates, it was the paulista private sector that initially boosted the city's artistic scene in the 1950s and 1960s. The lack of established public collections of modern art in Brazil at the time meant that the Bienal provided the nation's art audience its first opportunity to see works from European avant-garde movements alongside the productions of Brazilian modern artists exhibited in several iterations. As such, the first biennials can be seen as functioning as temporary museums that contributed to the formation of a public for modern art, locally and regionally. At the same time, the Bienal's acquisition awards enabled the creation of a permanent Brazilian national art collection that was first incorporated into the MAM-SP and today constitutes part of the Museu de Arte Contemporânea da Universidade de São Paulo (MAC USP). As Ana Magalhães' following analysis of the artworks amassed in this way reveals, the dialogue between the organisers and judges of the early Bienal exhibitions and the directors of the MAM-SP shaped the construction of both the museum and the biennial's missions and of understandings of modern art history.

Although the beginning of the Bienal de São Paulo was frequently correlated to Brazilian post-war modernisation and the poetics of geometric abstraction – perhaps most famously evidenced by Concrete artist Max Bill's much-publicised award during the first Bienal de São Paulo – research has revealed the development of a complex artistic modernity that welcomed other styles, including figuration.<sup>11</sup> To this point, Renata Rocco's article in this volume analyzes the political and artistic implications of Italian-born Danilo Di Prete receiving the award for his painting *Limões* (Lemons) at the first Bienal de São Paulo. As Rocco recounts, Di Prete's figurative painting did not comfortably fit into the period's notion of avant-garde production, and he received the national painting award despite his Italian nationality casting suspicion. Many thought that the choice was influenced by his connections to the event's organizer, Cicillo Matarazzo, a rumour which ultimately had a detrimental effect on the artist's career. The impact of the exhibition's awards on artists' careers is also discussed by Marina Cerchiaro, who examines how the Bienal de São Paulo increased the visibility of women artists, especially female sculptors. Her analysis explores how Maria Martins, who was already known in the art world abroad but had faced criticism in her home country, employed the Bienal as a platform to alter her poetics and to have her work valued more highly in Brazil, and how Mary Vieira, despite being based in Europe, used the exhibition accolades to promote herself internationally. These two case studies thus enable us to better understand how the Bienal de São Paulo awards could be operationalised to consolidate professional trajectories, sometimes in positive and sometimes in negative ways.

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As Lourival Gomes Machado, the director of both the MAM-SP and the first biennial, wrote, "By its very definition, the biennial should fulfill two main tasks: to place the modern art of Brazil not in mere confrontation, but in lively contact, with the art of the rest of the world; and, simultaneously, to try to achieve for São Paulo the position of world artistic centre. To have Venice as a reference was unavoidable...." See *I Bienal do Museu de Arte Moderna de São Paulo* (São Paulo: Museu de Arte Moderna de São Paulo, 1951), 15.

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See Nelson, *Forming Abstraction*.

Despite the problematic conflation of the Bienal de São Paulo's stated mission and the political and economic interests of some of its agents examined in the aforementioned articles, by the end of the 1960s the exhibition had become the most important venue for contemporary art in Latin America and had fulfilled its original aims. The trajectory of that success was nevertheless unstable and marked by crises, interruptions, and constant reconfigurations. In an examination of those turbulent years and how external politics helped reconfigure the structure of the Bienal de São Paulo, Bruno Pinheiro and Dária Jaremtchuk analyse the representations of Haiti and the US respectively, to examine how Cold War dynamics permeated the Latin American cultural context. Emerson Dionísio also analyses this period of intense reconfiguration by tracing the different meanings of the term "primitive art" at the 1967 Bienal de São Paulo to understand the tensions and affinities between primitivism and the broader field of modern and contemporary art.

The Bienal de São Paulo's history has, of course, also been marked by internal politics. When in 1962 Matarazzo created the eponymous foundation, FBSP, thereby ending the association of the international exhibition and the MAM-SP, the move enabled the newly founded private institution to receive more public funds from the state and the city of São Paulo. As previous research has shown, the relationship between private and public monies would receive new public scrutiny after the start of the Brazilian dictatorship in 1964, when an increasing dependency on public funds heightened the 'official' character of the exhibition and its association with the military junta.<sup>12</sup> Ultimately, the reaction of artists and intellectuals to the authoritarian government's growing interference and censorship resulted in an international boycott of the X Bienal de São Paulo in 1969, one of the exhibition's most infamous moments.<sup>13</sup> And yet, as Maria de Fatima Morethy Couto demonstrates in her survey of the biennial's impact on the American continent in the 1960s, those exhibitions did succeed in creating an unprecedented influx of artworks, art professionals, and ideas into the region, generating an institutional space for the display and theorisation of avant-garde art and other artistic expressions.

If the 1970s marked a moment of institutional crisis exacerbated by the effects of the Brazilian dictatorship, the lingering effects of a national economic crisis, and the death of founder and organiser Matarazzo in 1977, the articles in this volume reveal that they also intensified a series of existing important debates that culminated in the reformulation of the show in the 1980s and 1990s.<sup>14</sup> Those debates over the biennial's mission and organisation ultimately led to the creation of the 1<sup>st</sup> Latin American Art Biennial in 1978, which Glaucia Barbosa examines alongside the 6<sup>th</sup> Bienal de São Paulo organised by Brazilian art critic Mário Pedrosa, and the 2003 and 2005 shows curated by Alphonse Hugs.

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Regarding the Biennial's growing dependency on public funds, architectural historian Rosa Artigas writes that "the first three exhibitions had half of the expenses covered by the government; the 5<sup>th</sup> Biennial had two-thirds of its costs covered by governmental funds, and from the sixth edition, the biennials had four-fifths of their expenses covered by the three government levels. This 'indicates the growing transfer of the exhibition's economic costs to the State's governmental arm.' If, on one hand, the investment of public funds deemed its organisation and expansion feasible, on the other hand, the Biennial became increasingly identified as an official event." Rosa Artigas, "Ciccillo Matarazzo's São Paulo", in *50 Anos. Bienal de São Paulo 1951-2001*, 66.

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For more on the boycott, see Caroline Saut Schroeder, "The Biennial Under Contestation: Local Perspectives on the Tenth São Paulo Biennial (1969)", *Tate Papers*, no. 34 (2022). See also Amalia Cross, "Boycott Histories: On the Causes and Consequences of Chile's Participation in the Boycott of the 10th Bienal de São Paulo, 1969", *ICAA Working Papers*, no. 7 (2021): 6-25; and German A. Nunez, "Melhor acender uma vela do que maldizer a escuridão: o boicote da representação estadunidense à X Bienal de São Paulo, entre dominantes e dominados", *MODOS: Revista de História da Arte* 5, no. 2 (2021): 272-291.

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For more about the biennial in the 1970s, see Isobel Whitelegg, "The Bienal de São Paulo: Unseen/Undone (1969-1981)", *Afterall*, no. 22 (2009): 106-113. About the national biennials that were implemented during the decade, see Renata de Oliveira Maia Zago, "The Other Biennial: São Paulo's 'National Biennial,' 1970-1976", *Tate Papers*, no. 34 (2021-2022).

Subsequent to a decade of intense activity and debate, when Walter Zanini, director of the MAC USP since its inception, was invited to curate the editions of 1981 and 1983, he chose to centre the exhibition around the notion of language relations and analogies, giving the displays a strong thematic curatorial imprint and circumventing the Venetian model of national representation for the first time. This stronger curatorial imprint was later echoed in the success of the 1994 and 1996 Bienais de São Paulo, whose strong emphasis on the museological aspect of the earlier exhibitions through their heavily curated special rooms, created new expectations for the exhibition.<sup>15</sup> The new goal of these exhibitions was to invite the largest number of countries as possible while also bringing in artists of renown and displaying works important to the history of art.<sup>16</sup> The larger intention behind these changes, as stated by the President Edemar Cid Ferreira in the catalogue for the 24<sup>th</sup> Bienal (1994), was to attract a massive audience by constructing a permanent museum space within the biennial that would demonstrate that contemporary art was not simply a ‘fashion’ but could be inserted into a lineage of famous precursors. Blockbuster exhibitions were enabled by neoliberal tax incentive policies, specifically the Lei Roaunet (1991), that allowed companies to take a tax deduction for contributions to art and cultural institutions. The success of the early 1990s biennials restored the Bienal de São Paulo’s credibility, both internationally and monetarily, and paved the way for the success and international publicity of the 24<sup>th</sup> Bienal, known as the anthropophagic biennial. That 1998 exhibition, analysed in this special edition by Camila Maroja, created new curatorial expectations for the exhibition that were acknowledged in the international press as shifting the focus of the Bienal de São Paulo away from its earlier international model toward a more geopolitical, Southern one.

Despite the successes of the 1990s, in 2006 Cildo Meireles’ refusal to participate in the 27<sup>th</sup> Bienal gave visibility to a new ethical and economic crisis in the history of the Bienal de São Paulo, as did curator Ivo Mesquita’s decision two years later to leave the pavilion’s middle floor completely empty as an invitation to re-examine the biennial model.<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, the fact that even as this introduction is being written the foundation is opening its 35<sup>th</sup> iteration attests to the exhibition’s resilience. Beyond its impressive longevity and historical importance to the region, the Bienal de São Paulo has successfully asserted itself as a prestigious contemporary platform that showcases both art and significant socio-political and contemporary issues. Whether the various contexts and constant adaptations examined in this special edition have shaped and differentiated this platform enough to both illuminate and interrogate the Venice model on which it was founded remains to be seen.

By offering the Bienal de São Paulo as a case study for examining not only this particular set of international exhibitions, but also the constrains and malleability of biennial exhibitions more generally that this exploration reveals, our hope is that this special edition will contribute to and encourage future scholarly examination of the important role this biennale has played in the art world, the history of the region, and art more broadly.

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For an excellent critique of these two exhibitions and an insightful history of the Bienal de São Paulo, see Conduru, “Janela Baça”.

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Farias and FBSP, *50 Anos*, 240.

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This crisis included the decision by Manoel Pires da Costa, who was elected president of the Bienal in 2002, to reinstate Edemar Cid Ferreira to the board despite the latter having been charged with fraudulent activity and a lack of administrative transparency that hid the foundation’s debts; for example, in 2012 the press reported a shortfall of R\$75 million. For more on this complicated history, see Pablo and Lagnado, *Cultural Anthropophagy*.



## Authors' Biographies

### Camila Maroja

Camila Maroja (Ph.D., Duke University) works with modern and contemporary art and visual culture, with an emphasis on Latin America and transnational exchanges. She is an Assistant Professor at Brandeis University. Before, she has held positions at California State University, Fullerton, McGill University, and at Colgate University, where she was the Kindler Distinguished Historian of Global Contemporary Art. She has held Postdoctoral Fellowships at the Getty Research Center (2019-2020) and in International Humanities at Brown University (2015-2017). She has recently received an award from the National Endowment for the Humanities (2022) to finish her book manuscript, *Framing Latin American Art*.

### Dária Jaremtchuk

Dária Jaremtchuk is an Associate Professor of Art History at the University of São Paulo. In 2019, she received the Fulbright Brazil Distinguished Chair at Emory University. Her current research primarily focuses on the artistic exchange between Brazil and the United States during the 1960s and 70s. In 2023, she published *Políticas de atração: relações artístico-culturais entre Estados Unidos e Brasil nas décadas de 1960/1970* (UNESP/FAPESP). Additionally, she served as the editor of *Arte e política: aproximações* (Alameda Press) in 2010 and launched “Anna Bella Geiger: Passagens Conceituais” (EDUSP) in 2007. She is a Research Productivity Fellow at the National Council for Scientific and Technological Development (CNPq).