

Presence of the Primitive at the 9th Bienal de São Paulo
Emerson Dionisio Gomes de Oliveira**Abstract**

The presence of so-called “primitive” or “innocent” artists at the 9th Bienal de São Paulo (1967), within the vocabulary of popular art, was marked by frank and open public debate between the selection jury of the event and the critics of the time. This article seeks to present this debate, which is focused on the distinction between experimental art, new contemporary values, and production with a popular foundation. At stake was the presence and maintenance of certain senses of ancestry and national identity, strongly encouraged during the civil-military dictatorship and perceptible in the following Biennials, especially with the creation of the national Biennials at the end of the decade. The controversy revived the brief polemics, from two years earlier, surrounding the nomination of primitive artists to represent Brazil at the 1966 Venice Biennale and is here aligned with the dispute over contemporaneity in the production of Brazilian visual arts at the end of the 20th century.

Keywords

Bienal de São Paulo, Brazilian Art, Popular Art, Naïve Painting, Venice Biennale.

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The historiography concerned with the 9th Bienal de São Paulo frequently emphasises the proliferation of American Pop Art, alongside its European and Latin American counterparts. It offers a comprehensive understanding of the emergence of new figurations and the exploration of diverse materials and linguistic expressions within the context of this art movement. The influential USA delegation at the Brazilian exhibition, then, was divided into two distinct segments. The first was dedicated to the works of Edward Hopper, who died the same year the biennial took place (May 15, 1967), with around thirty-nine selected paintings. The second was called “USA Environment”, with works produced between 1957 and 1967 by twenty-one young artists identified with Pop Art. The option by art and cultural historians to characterise the exhibition as the “Pop Biennial” found support in the critical debate in Brazil, and even abroad, especially in the USA scene²: “At the Bienal de São Paulo, the United States pavilion qualitatively represents at least half of the large exhibition. It is a formidable condensation of pop art as it presents itself [...]”.³ Nevertheless, this article aims to shed light on another dispute within the confines of the event, discussing the works of “popular artists”.

The work, and its consequences, of artists who can be classified under this label has not yet been given due attention by historiography. This study seeks to redress the balance by examining the possibility that the 9th Bienal produced a change in attitude toward the inclusion of such artists – commonly labelled as “primitive”, innocent, naïve, outsiders, or even virgins⁴ – within spaces dedicated to

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Translated from Portuguese by Marco Alexandre de Oliveira.

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Pop art would share its prominence with the Op Art movement: “The room that represents it and which for that very reason signifies a decisive turning point at Ibirapuera, is that of the Argentinian Le Parc”. Mario Pedrosa, “Pop-arte e norte-americanos na Bienal”, *Correio da Manhã* (October 15, 1967), Supplement 4, 3.

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Pedrosa, “Pop-arte e norte-americanos na Bienal”, 3.

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The terms represent distinct aesthetic, social, and historical positions that were shuffled around by critics and exhibition organisers from the late 1950s to the late 1970s in Brazil. Although different, they received or were associated with the term “primitive”, which “has been used as a semantic umbrella, which encompasses manifestations as distinct as collages made by psychiatric patients, prehistoric paintings, and artifacts produced by Western citizens without artistic instruction”. Ilana Goldstein, “Reflexões sobre a arte “primitiva”: o caso do Musée Branly”, *Horizontes Antropológicos* 14, no. 29 (2008): 279-314, <https://doi.org/10.1590/S0104-71832008000100012>, accessed May 2023.

Brazilian modern-contemporary production. This variation therefore changes the perception of art that characterised the previous three decades.⁵ The underlying idea of this study is that it is possible to contextualise the stories of primitive artists and the Brazilian Biennials within a broader historical and social context. The intention is to present Brazilian artistic production as intricately connected to contemporary urban social issues within an emerging industrial society.

Beginning in September 1967 and ending four months later, the 9th Bienal gave rise to a series of debates on the experimental production of the period. This study will not focus on elaborating definitions of either popular or Pop Art. Nevertheless, according to the literature, it is necessary to consider these two distinct artistic paradigms. Brazilian critics draw distinctions between “Pop Art” and “popular art”, so as to specify how Claes Oldenburg, Andy Warhol, and Roy Lichtenstein were unrelated to “primitive” artists. The necessity for such differentiation may appear unconventional in the international discourse. However, within the Brazilian context, particularly since the 1950s, the creative productions of popular artists have attracted the attention of the elite. This heightened interest has consolidated the criteria through which popular art is evaluated prior to its inclusion within collections, museological institutions, and the presence of this kind of art in the critical debate. Consequently, this evolution in taste influenced the involvement of artists in the Bienal de São Paulo: the artists and their works have frequently been showcased, whether in group or solo exhibitions, under the categorisations “Primitive”, “Innocent”, or “Neo-primitive”.

Convened for more than three weeks, between the end of June and the beginning of July 1967, the selection jury for the Brazilian delegation at the Bienal made a first decision – attenuated in the following weeks – to attend to the ambitions of the many sectors in the Brazilian visual arts: to bar “primitive” production from the 9th iteration of the event. Their resolution had no precedent. Previous exhibitions of the Brazilian Biennial not only accepted but also awarded “primitives”, as exemplified by the case of the Afro-Brazilian painter and composer Heitor dos Prazeres in 1951.⁶ The instance of Prazeres was not isolated. Several other artists, including José Antônio da Silva, Elisa Martins da Silveira, Agnaldo Manuel dos Santos, Rosina Becker do Valle, Grauben Monte Lima, Mirian, Gerson de Souza, and Raimundo Oliveira, along with those involved in therapeutic workshop productions such as Emygdio de Barros, actively participated on multiple occasions across the initial eight iterations of the event. Certainly, even having this point in common, it is necessary to consider that a careful approach to the artistic production of these artists allows us to affirm that their careers did not follow linear paths. The label of the “primitive” artist or painter was associated with a recent tradition that informed a whole field of Brazilian art, in the moving category of popular art. Therefore, “primitivism”, in its breadth and limits, was unstable and uncertain for both critics and the public. The adjective “primitive” was becoming consolidated for some and dissociated for others.⁷

Such artists were included in a process of understanding the broader popular production, in which critical intellectual militancy and the supremacy of scholarly discourse were prominent, in a complex play of representations that subordinated popular culture to categorisations. As a historical notion proper to the Brazilian visual arts, “popular art” – and its derivations such as “primitive”, innocent, naïve, outsider, virgin – as well as the images connected with these labels, emerged during the first half of the 20th century. Their appearance was fuelled by

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The presence of Cardosinho (José Bernardo Cardoso Júnior) in the 1931 Revolutionary Room was neither highlighted nor problematised at that moment of consolidation in the modern art circuit in Brazil's capital.

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Bruno Pinheiro. “Moenda de Heitor dos Prazeres, medalha de prata na I Bienal do Museu de Arte Moderna de São Paulo”, *Revista de História da Arte e da Cultura* 2, no. 2 (2021): 119–141, <https://econtents.bc.unicamp.br/inpec/index.php/rhac/article/view/15139>, accessed May 2023.

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In the first case are the artists that will be addressed in this article; in the second, disparate painters such as Djanira da Motta e Silva, Alfredo Volpi, and Roberto Burle Marx.

a keen interest in regional themes, the substantial impact of regional music on the record industry, the initiation of policies directed at national heritage, and the rise of large-scale professional tourism. Brazilian social scientists and art and culture historians observed the solidification of the “popular” within discourses as a means to delineate a segment of material culture, specifically in the artistic realm common to disparate groups situated on both the right and left of the political spectrum. These groups were resolute in constructing a cartography of Brazilian identity and culture, where the presence of such artists was envisioned to occupy a niche distinct from the spaces traditionally designated for the fine arts. The core of these artists was formed mostly by Afro-indigenous descendants who were illiterate and residents of rural areas or the impoverished outskirts of Brazilian cities. For this reason, the desire to constitute a field for the popular arts was guided by social, racial, and cultural segmentations that marked both the history of the Brazilian social constitution throughout the 20th century and the very understanding that Brazilian intellectuals nourished about modernity.⁸ Few intellectuals were crucial in separating and delimiting “popular art”. Figures such as Silvio Romero, Carlos Kozeritz, Manuel Querino, and Nina Rodrigues, along with the contributions of Câmara Cascudo, Gilberto Freyre, Mário de Andrade, Mário Barata, Oneida Alvarenga, Arthur Ramos, and Edison Carneiro, attest to the growing acknowledgment of a material production distinct from that emanating from the traditional art world. This awareness was encapsulated under the heterogeneous label of Popular Culture. For Lélia Coelho Frota, the discovery of popular art “is a consequence of a historical cultural process linked to the philosophy of the modernist movement of 1922 and the regionalist movement of Recife, which began in that city in 1923”.⁹ This process made popular productions clear to both Brazilian and foreign elites enclosed in the primitivist *topos*. It was a visibility which facilitated their preservation, but simultaneously subordinated such production through its folklorisation, thereby perpetuating stereotypes. It was a process that counted on the participation of artists:

Popular artists themselves were absolutely not passive agents of their process of gradual recognition, since for their part they also experienced changes in relation to their cultural milieu, thus making their own formal synthesis, like any other artist, of the transformations that they saw happening before their eyes and that also motivated them [...]. These new works present the construction of a style comparable to that of cultured artists, and are now meant for the clientele with greater purchasing power from art galleries and museums in the great cultural centers of the country.¹⁰

Through this path popular productions became a sort of threshold between their culture of origin and the art world. Nevertheless, the ambiguity generated by the duplicity of meanings attributed to them required continuous adaptations operated by the entire intellectual sphere: including artists, critics, collectors, intellectuals, writers, and art historians. These efforts turned “popular art” into a category assimilated by recent modernist historiography through the interpretation of works as cohesive aesthetic units. This interpretation was grounded in the emancipation of the popular artist as an authentic creator. In most cases, as opposed to institutional artistic production, artworks were univocal and transparent expressions of a given community, racial group, or social class constituted “in hybrid and complex processes, using as signs of identification elements originating from diverse classes and nations”.¹¹

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Barbara Weinstein, *The Color of Modernity: São Paulo and the Making of Race and Nation in Brazil* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 27-68, 221-265; Kaira M. Cabañas, *Learning from Madness: Brazilian Modernism and Global Contemporary Art* (Chicago IL: University of Chicago Press, 2018); Rafael Cardoso, *Modernity in Black and White: Art and Image, Race and Identity in Brazil, 1890-1945* (Cambridge: University Press, 2021).

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Lélia Coelho Frota, *Mestre Vitalino* (Recife: Fundação Joaquim Nabuco; Massangana, 1986), 11.

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Lélia Coelho Frota, *Pequeno dicionário da arte do povo brasileiro: século XX* (Rio de Janeiro: Aeroplano, 2005), 31-32.

At the end of the 1930s, cultural agents and critics started “discovering” popular artists and consequently brought these artists closer to institutions and to the professional art circuit. In the following decade, due to the intermediation of critics, journalists, scholars, and cultural managers, the main names emerged arose from the cultural landscape. Frequently, during the period between the 1940s and 1960s, inclusion in the established visual arts circuit was contingent not only upon artistic merit but also on the quality of interpersonal relations, often to the detriment of inter-institutional relations.¹² It is in this complex context that “primitives” or “innocents” appeared in group and individual exhibitions. In the Brazilian context, two intellectuals would play a prominent role in the formulation of the subgroups that captured the attention of specialists: Mário Barata and Clarival do Prado Valladares.

In 1949, Barata published a short essay called “Conceito e metodologia das artes populares” (Concept and Methodology of Popular Art), whose central thesis reverberated throughout the following decades. Cognisant of the need to distinguish artistic production from artisanship, Barata argues that popular painters are linked to their environment and social relations. This connection motivated the existence of their work; in fact, in his words “the object is not a product of snobbery or gratuitous activity. It has a purpose and is immediately used”.¹³ This does not mean that its artistic value is less, only that such value expresses the “spirit” of the collective. Unlike “popular” artists, innocent artists imprint an individuality, narratives by interactions with erudite circles, especially ateliers and schools, at some point in their careers. Even belonging to and coming from popular circles, innocent artists, for Barata, are marked by the gratuitousness of their production, which meets their individual professional longings: “Soon their signed paintings will be in urban collections and soon they will be able to transplant themselves to an erudite circle”.¹⁴

From Barata’s text, it becomes clear that in the following years painting was treated distinctly from three-dimensional ‘objects’, which were understood as part of ‘useful’ material culture. In 1966, Clarival do Prado Valladares took a step forward in this direction, by occupying himself with the plural notion of primitivist, innocent, naïve artist. In Valladares’s words, an artist is one “who absorbs the style and characters of primitive-cultural art consciously and even manneristically, seeking to obtain acceptance and applause from a public that seems inspired by a romantic feeling”.¹⁵ For these artists, the critic denies the term “primitive”, since their motivations are no longer genuine and are aimed at a specific consumer. In this view, “primitivists” create artworks that can easily communicate with and adapt to bourgeois homes. By steering clear of overt displays of erudition, they crafted works that weren’t obscure but rather, descriptive and repetitive. Such “primitivist” artists make available “to the market a product of specific poetic, lyrical, and banal quality, generally involving a literary significance that is unnecessary for pictorial composi-

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Néstor García Canclini, *Hybrid Cultures: Strategies for Entering and Leaving Modernity*, trans. by Christopher L. Chiappari and Silvia L. López (Minneapolis MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 425.

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Two cases stand out emblematically in this context. One is the connection between the sculptor Vitalino Pereira dos Santos and the critic and artist Augusto Rodrigues, who orchestrated his initial exhibitions in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo. The other notable case is the association between Heitor dos Prazeres and the critic and journalist Carlos Cavalcanti. In the former case, see Paulino Cabral de Mello, *Vitalino: sem barro, o homem* (Brasília: Fundação Assis Chateaubriand; Ministério da Cultura, 1995). In the latter: Pinheiro, “Moenda de Heitor dos Prazeres”: 119–141.

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Mário Barata, *Conceito e metodologia das artes populares* (Rio de Janeiro: MEC, 1950), 31. In essay format, “Conceito e Metodologia das Artes Populares” was published in the *Revista Cultura* I, no. 3 (May-August 1949), 27-46.

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Barata, “Conceito e metodologia das artes populares”, 32.

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Clarival do Prado Valladares, “Primitivos, Genuínos e Arcaicos”, *Cadernos Brasileiros* 8, no. 2 (March-April, 1966): 40. Implied in the discourse produced by Valladares is the thinking of Gilberto Freyre, who defended the return to traditions and the appreciation of popular art, especially in his texts from 1945 onwards. There are certainly differences in the folklorist approach of Freyre and the texts of Valladares from the 1960s, but both defended the appreciation of authenticity as a criterion for distinguishing “genuine” popular art. See Eduardo Dimitrov, *Regional como opção, regional como prisão: trajetória artísticas no modernismo pernambucano* (PhD Diss.: Graduate Program in Social Anthropology; University of São Paulo, 2013), 149-161.

tion”.¹⁶ Valladares believed that the market was capable of transforming an authentic primitive into a primitivist artist, such that “there are few truly primitive artists recognisable as authors of a work of merit”.¹⁷ Elements such as authenticity, archaism, functionality, and self-education, which were present in the vocabulary of Barata and other scholars, become, in Valladares, instrumental concepts, manipulated by certain artists to achieve particular effects in a specific art market.

Valladares is an important character for understanding the changes concerning the Bienal de São Paulo’s behaviour towards the work of “primitive” artists (without adopting the critic’s concept of “primitivist”). In the 9th Bienal, he was chosen by four other members of the jury for the selection of the Brazilian delegation: José Geraldo Vieira and Mario Schenberg, elected by the artists, and Geraldo Ferraz and Jayme Maurício, nominated by the Bienal’s Foundation. With the exception of Schenberg, Valladares, like the others, was part of an elite of Brazilian art critics who were active in print media, often responsible for steady reviews-columns or linked to editorial and political projects in the field of culture in the cities of Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo.¹⁸ On that occasion, the event’s selection process was a novelty only for Jayme Maurício. The others were already experienced in dealing with the Bienal’s bureaucracy, especially Vieira, who had been involved with the institution since at least 1954.

Throughout 1967, debates in the media prioritised other topics: changes made by the Biennial Foundation regarding the funding and distribution of the awards, the composition of the international jury, and the selection of the main participating countries, particularly highlighting the USA, British, Argentine, French, and Italian delegations. Nonetheless, during the selection process, the topic of “primitives” gained noteworthy prominence. The jurors selected 366 Brazilian artists from among the 1,104 entries.¹⁹ Initially, they opted to remove “primitive” artists from the event in 1967, but the decision was not unanimous. The scientist and critic Mario Schenberg voted against the exclusion. A conciliatory measure was attempted: the creation of a specific room for the genre, a solution that was rejected by the directors of the Bienal Foundation – the entity responsible for the event.²⁰ The absence of primitive artists, at first, was justified by the choice of experimental artists, concerned with new languages and aesthetic renovations. In other words, the aim of the exclusion was to promote new research, innovations, and the presentation of novel formats, both from a material and conceptual perspective.

In that same year, in April, the exhibition *New Brazilian Objectivity* occurred at the Museum of Modern Art in Rio de Janeiro. Organised by artists and critics (Hélio Oiticica, Hans Haudenschild, Pedro Escosteguy, Maurício Nogueira Lima, Rubens Gerchman, and Frederico Moraes, who left the organisation of the exhibition shortly before its opening), this exhibition, among others in the same period, reinforced the need for an experimental contemporary production capable of instituting a project for a new Brazilian avant-garde. Far from producing a consensual direction, the exhibition and the resulting manifesto, on the contrary, pointed to the recent past (constructive models) and emphasised the dispersion and multiplicity of languages. The *Declaration of Avant-Garde Principles*, which worked as a manifesto, was published in the press during the exhibition. This document advocates for

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Valladares, “Primitivos, Genuínos e Arcaicos”, 41.

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Valladares, “Primitivos, Genuínos e Arcaicos”, 41-46.

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During this moment, Mário Schenberg stood out as the sole member of the jury lacking a regular column in the press. Artists elected him as the second-place member to form the national selection jury. Schenberg became a subject of speculation regarding both his identity as an art critic and his political stance, which notably opposed the prevailing dictatorial regime. These rumors necessitated an official response from Luiz Rodrigues Alves, the director of the Bienal de São Paulo. “The Bienal is apolitical – he declared – and has never had political statements or attitudes”; see Jayme Maurício, “Bienal: Eleitos dos artistas”, *Correio da Manhã* (June 6, 1967), Supplement 2.

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“Brasileiros na Bienal”, *Jornal do Brasil* (July 25, 1967), Supplement B, 4.

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“Juri da Bienal finaliza seus trabalhos”, *O Estado de S. Paulo* (July 5, 1967), 7.

a constructive drive in Brazilian art emphasising the viewer's participation in the constitution of the work. The manifesto also took a political stance, particularly significant during the period of the civil-military dictatorship following the 1964 *coup d'état*. It embraced the conceptual premises of anti-art and the tendency towards the object, in a denial of traditional artistic supports. With these premises in mind, it is worth highlighting the object-like nature of experimental contemporary production as a way of overcoming "easel painting", a value that was important in the discussions of that year and that was recognisable in the selection for the 9th Bienal, given that in previous Biennials sculptures and objects were few and far between, whereas in this one the situation was reversed, with many objects and sculptures of high quality.

The critics who composed the selection jury both knew of the uneasiness felt by experimental artists towards the primitive genre and were involved in the themes presented in *New Brazilian Objectivity*. Maurício was the most frank and openly declared in his column that most jurors were unwilling to forcibly confront the "vanguard" artists, "artists of high *métier* and inventive capacity",²¹ by including "primitive" or innocent painters in the Brazilian delegation at that biennial. Furthermore, he argued that:

The non-acceptance of primitives does not imply an analysis of values or merit, but a criterion favorable, even, to the primitives themselves. [...] Everyone knows the importance of the sincere, authentic, and gratuitous forces of the art of the so-called naïve artists, of the painting of children, and of the so-called exceptional, especially by the surrealist movement. The so-called masters of popular reality are not being overlooked in the plastic transfiguration and instinctive interpretation that they have been creating without pretensions, for themselves, possibly on higher planes in a certain sense. In the midst of the immense number of quasi-scientific experiments in today's art, which is laden with the most refined motivations or alien to the pure state of mind created by the naïve artists, the proximity and comparison become meaningless, and almost shocking, in addition to establishing an enormous confusion in the mind of the layman, who is almost always inclined towards a legible, sincere, and poetic reading of the innocent artists, in an understandable reaction against the daring and necessarily too advanced (for the layman) proposals of artists who wish to renew, revolutionise, or bear witness to the dramatic and chaotic time in which they live.²²

Maurício clarified to his readers that the 9th edition of the biennial sought to overcome the aspects that made it similar to salons or to anthological and retrospective exhibitions, consequently avoiding excessive eclecticism. Vieira, another juror, expressed a similar opinion, and his perspective was aligned with that of Valladares (1966) when he accused the art of primitives – considered here as a genre – of repetition and emulation of truly popular values; and, thus, they could not participate in "an ever-changing group exhibition of processes and research".²³

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Jayme Maurício, "Os primitivos e a 9th Bienal", *Correio da Manhã* (June 25, 1967), Supplement 5, 2.

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Maurício, "Os primitivos e a 9th Bienal", 2.

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"Juri da Bienal finaliza seus trabalhos", 7. Ana Gonçalves Magalhães explains the support of Matarazzo Sobrinho (Ciccillo) for so-called primitive artists, especially for the career of the painter José Antônio da Silva. Magalhães shows how the creation of the Nativity Museum, incentivised by Matarazzo Sobrinho, is related to a notion of popular art "as a constituent part of an idea of national culture formulated by our modernists [...] Ciccillo, in addition to effecting the purchase of a Neapolitan nativity scene for São Paulo, promotes the foundation of the Domus Gallery here and becomes the biggest collector of paintings by José Antônio da Silva", Ana Gonçalves Magalhães, "Arte Moderna, arte popular, cinema, teatro e um presépio napolitano - São Paulo, 1940-50", *Anais do Colóquio Labex Brasil – França: Uma história da arte alternativa: outros objetos, outras histórias* 21 (2015), http://www.mac.usp.br/mac/conteudo/academico/publicacoes/anais/labex_br_fr/pdfs/2_Labex_anamagalhaes.pdf, accessed May 2023.

Despite these efforts to keep the genre of primitives out of the event, some artists managed to break through the fence of exclusion. Contemporaneous literature and criticism does not provide evidence on this topic, but Schenberg clarified, years later, that Francisco Matarazzo Sobrinho did not agree with the jury, because if the event accepted primitives from other countries there was no reason not to accept Brazilian primitives, according to the president of the Biennial Foundation.²⁴ The pressure resulted in a new list of Brazilian artists, which was approved in early July, this time with names whose poetic production was associated with “primitives”, such as Francisco Domingos da Silva, Grauben de Monte Lima, and José Antônio da Silva. Jurors could indirectly have invoked Valladares’s distinction, since the exclusion of “primitivists” and the inclusion of works by “primitives” appear to be strategic choices. In accordance with Vieira’s standpoint, the latter group exemplified “the authenticity and sincerity of the artist”.²⁵

1966 Venice Biennale

The controversy in the selection of the 9th Bienal de São Paulo revived the brief polemics surrounding the nomination of primitive artists to represent Brazil at the 1966 Venice Biennale. Once again, Valladares was part of the selection jury for the artists sent to the Italian event. At his side, Vasco Mariz and Pietro Maria Bardi were responsible for choosing Arthur Luiz Piza, Sergio Camargo, Wesley Duke Lee, Agnaldo Manuel dos Santos,²⁶ Agostinho Batista de Freitas,²⁷ Francisco Domingos da Silva, and José Antônio da Silva, the latter three being recognised as “primitive” painters. The connection between the 1967 censorship and the 1966 choice was offered by Maurício, who on the eve of the Pop Biennial’s opening wrote: “At the last Venice Biennale, one noted the embarrassing situation experienced by the primitive Brazilians in the face of kinetic, space-dynamic speculations, applications of new materials, appeals to cybernetics, geometric and mathematical speculations, art of an erotic, political nature, etc”.²⁸ The embarrassment indicated by Maurício was already perceived in the announcement of the selection which took place at the end of 1965:

[...] that same commission [Bardi, Valladares, and Mariz], astonishing some, including ourselves, has included in the delegation three painters called innocent or naïve or whatever name you want – the vein is immense and elastic – and an Afro-Bahian sculptor, who is already dead: José Antônio da Silva, Agostinho de Freitas, Francisco Domingos da Silva, and Agnaldo Manoel dos Santos (the already dead sculptor).

It is the first time that we have sent primitives and Afro-Brazilians to an exhibition such as the Venice Biennale, which is meant for large retrospectives of significant artists and for avant-garde research. Initially, they explained to us that these paintings would not com-

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Mário Schenberg, “Entrevista: Mário Schenberg”, *Trans/Form/Ação* 3 (1980): 155-156.

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“Juri da Bienal finaliza seus trabalhos”, 7.

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The works by Santos were not presented at the Italian Biennale, since he had died in 1962 and only living artists could participate in the awards ceremony. He was replaced by Maria Martins; see Jayme Maurício, “O Brasil na XXXIII Bienal de Veneza”, *Correio da Manhã* (December 11, 1965), Supplement 2, 3. The work of Santos was the theme of a book by Valladares (*Agnaldo Manuel dos Santos – Origin, Revelation and Death of a Primitive Sculptor*, 1963). The critic would be an advocate of the posthumous presentation of the sculptor both in Venice and at the I FESMAN. Valladares was a member of the Brazilian delegation at the I World Festival of Black Arts, in Dakar, Senegal, which was held between April 1 and 23, 1966.

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An electrician who began to paint in the late 1940s, Freitas was ‘discovered’ by Pietro Maria Bardi in art fairs at Praça do Correio, in São Paulo. Bardi was responsible for the artist’s first solo exhibition at the São Paulo Museum of Art. While alive, Freitas had no works exhibited at the Bienal de São Paulo.

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Maurício, “Os primitivos e a 9th Bienal”, 2.

pete for the awards, which was already a relief regarding the possible judgment that Venice would make of Brazilian intelligence. It was to show something new, national, authentic, different, in the end, from European creation.²⁹

A worried, astonished tone and disregard for “primitive” artists were evidenced in Maurício’s text. The critic is highlighting a potential discrepancy in the treatment of experimental and primitive artists. He implies that there was a European preference for innocent production, a notion contradictory to the censorship of the 1967 Biennial. The argument behind the censorship was that the presence of naïve production might confuse the broader Brazilian. Unfortunately, also the critic of the newspaper *Correio da Manhã* anchored his argument on an error, when he suggested that this was the first time that the Brazilian delegation in Venice would feature primitive artists, including some of African descent. Historical records, in fact, indicate that at the 26th exhibition of the Italian Biennial, the Brazilian delegation was composed of Cassio M’Boy, José Antônio da Silva, Emygdio de Barros, and Heitor dos Prazeres, all belonging to the broad continent of “primitive” art,³⁰ the last two being well-known painters of African descent.

Also in December 1965, it was up to another important Brazilian critic to debate the topic of the selection of primitive artists. Harry Laus, in his column for the *Jornal do Brasil*, published the opinions of artists and critics about the inclusions, who were divided between acceptance and tacit refusal. On the former team was the critic Antônio Bento, who agreed with the inclusion of the primitives since “Europeans like them a lot”. Bento recalled their presence at the Italian Biennale in 1952 and the audience’s appreciation of the “beauty of the colors and the fantasies”. As for Laus, José Roberto Teixeira Leite also believed that the artists would be appreciated at 1966 Biennial, “because it is a curious thing”. Similarly, the critic Carlos Cavalcanti considered the contribution innocent artists made to Brazilian art in terms of authenticity and originality, “because erudite artists copy Europeans [...] they [the innocent artists] can better transmit the message of the Brazilian land and people”.³¹ Flávio de Aquino, a critic who later advocated for naïve art in the 1970s, deemed participation positive as long as it occurred in “small doses”. In the words of Laus, the only favourable artists were Augusto Rodrigues, a recognised promoter and collector of Brazilian popular art, and Djanira da Mota e Silva, considered by some of the critics of the period as a neo-primitivist.

It is important to emphasise that, even partially, Laus revealed that a significant portion of the opposition stemmed from the artists themselves. Indeed, the majority took a contrasting stance, advocating for the Biennial to operate as a contemporary art competition (Ivan Serpa, Lygia Clark, and Carlos Scliar). For the international environment, it was considered better to present new talents and values, rather than accentuate the view of an underdeveloped country (Ana Letícia, Iole Saldanha). Fayga Ostrower, an award-winner in Venice in 1958, declared: “Innocent art is entirely disconnected from historical development. An innocent view that has no significance for our time. Besides, it works for this century as much as for any century. It does not represent the Brazil of today”.³²

Not representing a sense of contemporaneity was an explicit defect in the selection for the 1966 Italian Biennale, as can be seen in the artists’ positions. There was no strong opposition expressed towards the artists or the jury members,

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Jayme Maurício, “O Brasil na XXXIII Bienal de Veneza”, *Correio da Manhã* (December 11, 1965), 3.

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The intellectual Sérgio Buarque de Hollanda and the critics Mário Pedrosa, Antônio Bento, Geraldo Ferraz, and Eugênia Franco were responsible for the selection in that year; see Dunia Roquetti Saroute, “La partecipazione brasiliana all’Esposizione internazionale d’arte di Venezia (1950-1964)” (Doctoral Dissertation. Ca’ Foscari University of Venice; University of São Paulo, 2021).

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Harry Laus: “Veneza – Prós e Contras”, *Jornal do Brasil* (December 7, 1965), 3.

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Our positions are a synthesis of two newspaper articles by Harry Laus: “Veneza – Prós e Contras”, *Jornal do Brasil* (December 7, 1965), 3; and “Veneza – Prós e Contras II”, *Jornal do Brasil* (December 8, 1965), 2.

who occupied influential positions in the art scene and played a role in decisions related to Brazilian cultural policies. However, the prevailing perspective was that “primitives” belonged to a distinct category of production lying outside the “modern-contemporary” space sought by Brazil and its intellectual and artistic elites. Critic Marc Berkowitz even labelled them as “curiosities” in his arguments against the selection.³³

During the 33rd Venice Biennale, reporting on the reception of primitive artists was rare and a formality. Nevertheless, it’s worth noting two significant contributions that help clarify the context of the event. The first contribution was particularly focused on the honourable mention awarded to the painter Francisco da Silva. According to Laus, this recognition might have occurred because “The bizarreness of his creations must have enchanted European critics”.³⁴ The second instead involved Maurício who recalls the reception of the “primitive” artists at the exhibition’s opening: “The primitives – unfortunately – were discreetly placed in a corner of the room entirely disconcerted, eager to leave and take the first ship back”.³⁵ Valladares, in a letter to the collector Haroldo Juaçaba dated September 23, 1966, elucidates a different dimension of the disputes over the participation of “primitives”, singling out Francisco da Silva:

In Venice I was terribly opposed, I suffered incidents and almost aggression on the part of jealous Brazilians against the presence of Chico da Silva. Without support from the other members of the commission, the space for the primitives was reduced to a minimum. I fought a lot for Chico [Francisco]. The award, Honorable Mention, was an unprecedented fact in the history of Venice, created in 1895, in relation to a primitive. After seeing the four paintings (panels) on display, Jacques Lanaipre secretly sought me out and took me to show five members of the jury Chico’s unexhibited works: precisely those 12 gouaches from the Ceará Museum of Art. It was a revelation. They said that if Brazil had made a room for the Indian, the result would have been different.

On the same day, at night, the biennial’s secretariat went looking, as was the custom, for the head of the Brazilian commission, surrounded by what was most unusual, ignorant, pretentious, and false in the Brazilian elites that sponsor the arts, in order to obtain approval for the jury’s nomination regarding an award. They said that the reaction of the Brazilian elites was an affair [...] and they were terrified that the award was granted to an illiterate and drunk Indian, who was regrettably a participant, due to the presence of “Professor Valadares, a provocative man, a leftist, who was interested in showing the underdevelopment of the country, etc.”³⁶

In this private and intimate missive, Valladares underscores that the exclusion of various forms of popular art was influenced by considerations of class, race, and political stance. In this regard, the repercussions of the Venice selection anticipated the restriction at the Brazilian biennial in 1967. Despite the desire to distance themselves from “primitive” works, the jurors of the 9th Bienal de São Paulo selected five artists who were classified by the media and critics as “primitive” at that moment: Maria Graubem Monte Lima, Clodomiro Lucas, Waldomiro de Deus, Francisco Domingos da Silva, and José Antônio da Silva. Such artists occupied distinct positions in the Brazilian art scene, especially concerning the history of the Brazilian biennial.

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Laus, “Veneza – Prós e Contras II”, 2.

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Harry Laus, “Piza confirma JB em Veneza”, *Jornal do Brasil* (June 21, 1966), Supplement B, 8.

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Jayme Maurício, “O Brasil na 33ª Bienal de Veneza”, *Correio da Manhã* (July 3, 1966), 4.

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Excerpt transcribed by Roberto Galvão in the exhibition catalogue for “Chico da Silva: do delírio ao dilúvio”, which occurred in November 1989, at the Abolition Palace Cultural Center, in Fortaleza, Brazil, 20-22.

The 1967 Inclusions

The 1966 and 1967 Biennials both featured the participation of Francisco Domingos da Silva and José Antônio da Silva. The former was a wall painter of indigenous descent. He began his career at the III April Painting Salon in the city of Fortaleza in 1944, being ‘discovered’ by the Swiss painter Jean-Pierre Chabloz, who sponsored his first exhibition in Rio de Janeiro the following year at the Askanasy Gallery. Before arriving at the Venice Biennale, da Silva’s work had already been shown at six international exhibitions in France, Switzerland, and Spain, in addition to an exhibition in Moscow in the same year as the Italian biennial. His works circulated regularly both in Brazil and internationally. As noted above, his presence at the aforementioned biennials, according to Roberto Galvão, was due to his closeness to Valladares, who organised a solo exhibition at the Querino Gallery, in the city of Salvador, in 1965. The increasing visibility of his work can also be attributed to the efforts of two influential gallery owners and foreign collectors based in Brazil: the Romanian Jean Boghici and the Italian Franco Terranova. In the second half of the 1960s, he became recognised as a painter of animals and other fantastic beings.

José Antônio da Silva’s career, meanwhile, followed a similar path. A former waiter and doorman, he won an award at an exhibition in the state of São Paulo in 1944 with two oil paintings on flannel of his famous “boizinhos”, or little oxen. Two prominent art critics, Paulo Mendes de Almeida and Lourival Gomes Machado, were on the awarding jury, which marked the artist’s “discovery” and “meteoric” rise through the art circuit of São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro in the following years. Also worth mentioning are the acquisitions by Pietro Maria Bardi of paintings by the artist for the collection of the newly created São Paulo Museum of Art (MASP), in the late 1940s, and for the Museum of Modern Art in New York on the occasion of the 1st Bienal de São Paulo. Thus, by the time the artists were chosen for the 1967 Bienal, José Antônio da Silva had already been featured in numerous solo and group exhibitions in Brazil. His exhibition history included participation in six biennials in São Paulo, as well as notable exhibitions in the United States, France, Cuba, Venezuela, Italy, Switzerland, and the renowned traveling exhibition *Arte Moderno en Brasil* (Argentina, Chile, and Peru). Crucially, he exhibited alongside some of the most significant Brazilian modernist artists, including the “primitives” Heitor dos Prazeres and Elisa Martins da Silveira in 1957. Being included in the professional circuit of Brazilian visual arts made him impossible to overlook for critics, galleries, and collectors interested in furthering the visibility of his work. Throughout the first three decades of his career, he devoted himself to capturing rural landscapes, with a particular emphasis on scenes of labour and portraits of workers in the land.³⁷

Among the “primitives” who overcame the limitations imposed by the jurors, two were young beginners: Clodomiro Lucas and Waldomiro de Deus. Their inclusion in the art circuit happened in the two years prior to the Pop Biennial and functioned as wagers for gallerists and critics dedicated to naïve production. Lucas began his career in the state of São Paulo, and in 1965, he drew the attention of São Paulo critics, being selected for the Bienal of that year. In those first years, his small paintings and engravings represented the daily life of small towns, especially religious themes. Also in 1965, Waldomiro de Deus stopped exhibiting in the streets of downtown São Paulo to present his works alongside modern and contemporary artists at the *Proposta 65* (65 Proposal) exhibition. His paintings depicting “rockets”, along with religious themes and local customs were relatively successful in the second half of the 1960s.³⁸ The careers of Lucas and Deus were, at the time, closely followed by the critic and collector Mário Schenberg, who was likely responsible for influencing the jury to select these self-taught beginners.

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Frota, *Pequeno Dicionário da Arte*, 251.

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Marisa Alves de Lima, “Pintando foguetes, Waldomiro de Deus envia brasileiros à lua”, *A Cigarra* (June 1966): 34-37.

Among the selected artists, the only woman was Maria Graubem Monte Lima, also known as “Grauben”.³⁹ Although the eldest of the artists, Grauben started her career only at the age of seventy-one, passing through the studio of contemporary artist Ivan Serpa and quickly gaining visibility as a naïve talent, which earned her a presence at the two previous biennials (1963 and 1965). A year before the Pop Biennial, the artist composed the cast selected for the exhibition *Artistas Brasileños Contemporáneos* (1966) at the Museum of Modern Art in Buenos Aires. Despite such participation, three months before the opening of the 9th Bienal, Geraldo Ferraz did not refrain from offering an ironic and harsh perspective when commenting on Grauben’s work. This occurred in the context of the latter’s inclusion in the inaugural collection of an art gallery in São Paulo:

Nor does it concern pointillism, as Louise Frost Turney, from Boston, would have it. Pointillism is a technique woven from erudition right after impressionism, derived from it, etc. [...] The case of Grauben, however, is there, and if the exhibition adds nothing to the production, so far, of the painter, it is because this thematic and technical repetition is all that she could give us, and the people who do not yet have “a Grauben” must feel happy about the opportunity that the Cosme Velho Gallery has given them.⁴⁰

Ferraz’s recurring criticism of the “primitives” in the years leading up to the opening of the 9th Biennial often evoked repetition. This aspect served to contrast the qualities associated with contemporary production, namely research and experimentation. Ferraz’s evaluations were influential during those years, and when commenting on a group exhibition of “primitive” artists, his inquiry served to isolate such work: “Does a group of innocent artists fit? Innocent painting, situating itself between the popular and rudimentary in painting, at the insistence of some artists, has been valuable for our artistic pauperism”.⁴¹

Before delving into the concluding remarks, it is essential to remember that among the artists chosen to represent Brazil at the Pop Biennial, there were those who occupied a borderline position between “primitive” production and modern art. Gilson Barbosa, Paulo Menten, Eunibaldo Tinoco de Souza, Antonio Maia, José Demétrio da Silva, and Samico are artists who navigated both realms but were not necessarily categorised as either “innocent” or “primitive”. Similarly, it is significant to recall that artists perceived as close to the style interpreted as naïve were present in other national delegations. Examples include South African Sydney Kumalo, Bulgarian Violeta Grivichka, Lebanese Sophie Yéramian, Nicaraguan Adela Vargas, Paraguayan José Laterza, Haitian Jean Raynald Exumé, and Trinidadian-Tobagonian Hally Gayadeen, among others.⁴²

A Few Considerations

The facts and critical assessments presented here indicate that the restrictions placed upon the participation of so-called “primitive” artists at the 9th Bienal de São Paulo generated some controversy but did not cause significant repercussions in the media. These debates, which had already begun quite discreetly during the selection of the

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It is worth clarifying that the painter used different signatures for her works: Grauben Monte Lima, Grauben, Grauben Monte-Lima, Maria Grauben Bomilcar de Monte Lima, Monte Lima, Monte-Lima.

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Geraldo Ferraz, “Ingênuia tardia destoa de acervo”, *O Estado de São Paulo* (June 6, 1967), 13.

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Geraldo Ferraz, “Coletiva de oito ingênuos”, *O Estado de São Paulo* (July 13, 1966), 7.

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The Brazilian Biennial, in 1967, was remembered for opening up to countries in the Americas and other continents. Of the 61 participating countries, approximately a quarter were from Asia, Africa, and Oceania, with the rise of the so-called “Third World;” see Líliliana Helita Torres Mendes de Oliveira, “A bienal pop: a pop art analisada através das representações dos Estados Unidos e do Brasil na IX Bienal Internacional de São Paulo” (MA Thesis: State University of Campinas, 1993), 9.

Brazilian delegation for the 1966 Venice Biennale, functioned as a symptom of a broader process seeking to consolidate an emerging artistic circuit during the civil-military dictatorship. Simultaneously, there was a desire to reposition the Brazilian biennial on the international stage with its frank debate on op art, pop art, and other “isms”. These movements were characterised by the exploration of new materials, artistic languages, and forms of circulation and exhibition. Strategic repositioning served as the principal rationale behind the unprecedented censorship of the “primitives”. Three points ought to be emphasised here.

The first is aligned with the changes sought by the Bienal de São Paulo in 1967. The exhibition sought to reaffirm its international importance, which was increasingly fragile in the face of the censorship and repressive policies instigated by the dictatorial regime, and therefore, the Brazilian delegation sought equivalences between local production and that which was awarded and debated in international exhibitions. The art historian and critic Mario Barata accurately intuited this wish when he stated that, “for the first time the Brazilian language at the biennials is practically coeval with that of the world avant-garde, although it does not always have the financial resources to facilitate the development of larger and more complete works”.⁴³ Agreeing with Barata may be easy, but embracing a contemporary model has its costs. The jury members, who were critics in constant communication with artists and cultural managers, recognised the importance of aligning with the principles and values of the new artistic order. Thus, the Brazilian delegation was committed to presenting itself as a “profound renewal of Brazilian art”,⁴⁴ and the biennial was compelled to “highlight immediate contemporaneity, even if the affirmation of the most recent aesthetic language is still hotly contested”.⁴⁵

The second point specifically concerns the debate about the special room titled “USA Environment”, and the presence of artists linked to the Pop Art movement. Part of the resonance of Pop Art was its link to a contemporary industrial society that was familiar with mass communication and commercial visuals. This association served a specific segment of Brazilian society which was striving to align itself with international capitalism. Yet this desire for “modernity” the critic Mário Pedrosa⁴⁶ who pointed out the impracticality of transplanting Pop into the Brazilian context, characterised as it was by poverty, oppression and the challenges of underdevelopment. According to Pedrosa, in Brazil, Pop Art would intertwine with a political and denunciatory power that opposed the trends of capitalism. For the aim of this study it is worth underscoring that one of the critic’s focal points was the abandonment of “artisan traditions of painting and sculpture” in favour of embracing the realm of comics, posters, and other forms of mass communication imported from the United States.⁴⁷ It is not difficult to understand how the abandonment of artisanship, for a white elite that wished to modernise itself, contrasted with the practices of a popular artistic production self-conscious of its rusticity and archaism.

The distancing from the “artisan” coincided with the perception that the circuit of the so-called “primitive” artists had been organised by its own logic, thereby establishing its own national and international environment. This perception was corroborated by international exhibitions held in France, Italy, the Soviet Union, and Spain, among other countries, of “primitive” painters and sculptures. At that time, the impact of the commercial success of exhibitions such as *Eight Naïve Brazilian Painters* (1965) and *Brazilian Primitive Artists* (1966) in France was felt, in addition to the Brazilian presence at the 1st Naïve Art Triennial in Bratislava, in

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Mario Barata, “A nova imagem”, *Jornal do Brasil* (September 23, 1967), Supplement B, 4.

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Schenberg, “9th Bienal de São Paulo”, 4.

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Clarival do Prado Valladares, “A Bienal em Quatro Tempos”, *Jornal do Brasil* (September 23, 1967), Supplement B, 1.

46

“Do pop americano ao sertanejo Dias”, *Correio da Manhã* (October 29, 1967), Supplement 4, 1.

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“Do pop americano ao sertanejo Dias”, 1.

Czechoslovakia, in 1966. Thus, the 1967 Bienal crystallised the idea that primitives occupied a parallel space in the Brazilian art system. The presence of such artists was increasingly frequent in galleries in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro (Relevo, Petite Galerie, Vernon, Gemini, Cosme Velho, Astréia, Dearte, Selearte, Ars Artis, 4 Planetas, etc.), in institutional spaces, and in exhibitions and events dedicated to “primitive” art, which ensured segmentation through the “specialisation” label. The discussion about the contemporaneity of the new avant-gardes and their experimentation not only excluded primitives, as seen in both critics’ perspectives and discussions of “contemporary” meanings in major events like the Brazilian biennial, but also began to segment the foundational aspects of this production rooted in modernism. Any consideration of a potential genealogy between modern and contemporary art production in Brazil reveals there was never any intention to include the participation of “primitive” artists. This becomes evident when observing the absence of such artists in the selection for the subsequent biennial in 1969, particularly in the “Magical, Fantastic, and Surrealist Art” Room.⁴⁸

In the following two decades, such a segmentation was strengthened with the consolidation of a circuit dedicated to popular production, with special emphasis on naive painting. It was an emerging circuit divided between the exaltation of the authenticity of popular as part of the patrimonialist and nationalist discourse shared by the right and the opponents of the dictatorial regime; the suspicion of a “primitivist” simulacrum, as we saw in Valladares; and the emergence of new artistic genealogies dedicated to highlighting ethnic, racial, regional, and religious aspects. It is particularly symptomatic that, as the discourse about pop art unfolded in Brazil, there was a notable rejection of popular production as a guiding force for capturing the zeitgeist. In this context, inclusivity was never the intention, and the underlying motives were not concealed. Equally significant is the observation that, in subsequent years, many experimental artists chose to explore the “archaic” realm of popular art and its manifestations in a culture undergoing massification. More recently, it has been in the field of curatorship and historiography that we have witnessed experimental artists being linked to popular cultural and artistic production, such as samba, *cordel*, and popular religious images (ex-votos), in a regime of approximations that are increasingly common.

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Certainly, the artist who occupied the limit between modern-contemporary production and innocent production was Paulo Menten, who was then selected for the aforementioned room, even though the intention was to present artists with “more recent research, or using materials introduced by modern technology, along with sculptures coming from the hands of the people denoting the contrasts that characterise all of our culture”; see Edila Mangabeira Unger, “Sala de Artes Mágica, Fantástica e Surrealista”, in *X São Paulo Biennial*, exh. cat. (São Paulo: Fundação Bienal de São Paulo, 1969), 41.

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