

29th São Paulo Bienal

CICCILLO MATARAZZO PAVILION,
IBIRAPUERA PARK

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SOME THREE DECADES AGO, writing in the context of Transvanguardia's emergence on the global scene, Jean-François Lyotard famously railed against a "period of slackening" in art typified by what he deemed a kind of *realism*: work that adhered precisely to our expectations for it, neatly aligning with the aesthetic demands set by institutional frameworks and categories that would circulate and distribute it—or, for that matter, render it legible as "work" in the first place. Arguably, we are in a similar period of artistic repose—but we also seem to be witnessing an increasing desire among certain artists and critics to turn the page on techniques and strategies that have become agents of the homogeneity they initially sought to shatter. Art historian Kelly Baum put it succinctly in her response to last year's *October* questionnaire surveying the contemporary field, when—looking at efforts by artists ranging from Fritz Haeg to Andrea Zittel—she wrote that much recent art "seems desperately to want to exceed the parameters . . . and to shed many of the attributes that make it recognizable as art." And yet, it must be said, even those who are content to position such work within the institutional setting now seem, paradoxically enough, to share this iconoclastic impulse. To mention just one oft-cited example, consider last year's Istanbul Biennial, where the Croatian curatorial team of WHW/What, How & for Whom (Ivet Ćurlin,

Ana Dević, Nataša Ilić, and Sabina Sabolović) assembled dozens of works from around the globe and, placing them against the fragmented backdrop of post-cold-war geopolitics—thereby underlining the erosion of the context that afforded many of these pieces their cultural meaning—sought to "de-fram[e] the apparently self-evident."

The Twenty-ninth São Paulo Bienal ought to be seen in the context of such attempts to arrive at a politics—or, in plainer terms, a contemporary relevance—for art by leaving art as such behind. Titled after a line from a 1952 poem by Jorge de Lima, "There Is Always a Cup of Sea to Sail In," the exhibition invokes the grandest of themes (social change) using the most modest of means (cultural production), revolving around the idea of art as an applicable model and catalyst, or as a figure of potentiality, rather than as an object of contemplation. Chief curators Moacir dos Anjos and Agnaldo Farias (who spearheaded a team that also included Fernando Alvim, Rina Carvajal, Yuko Hasegawa, Sarat Maharaj, and Chus Martinez) go so far as to write, in their brief catalogue essay, that this biennial "affirm[s] the value of poetic intuition in the face of a 'tamed thought' that . . . permeates political parties and even formal educational institutions," and that such an affirmation involves a "dismantling of meanings and a generation of knowledge found nowhere else."

Or at least, one might add, found nowhere else *today*. For throughout the exhibition, documentation of works from previous decades establishes a historical counterpoint with contemporary endeavors, prompting audiences to consider at length how the de- or reclassification of art is apt to coincide with and reflect the reorganization of society. Near the beginning of the biennial, for instance, are photographs, videos, and flyers associated with the Colectivo Acciones de Arte, a Chilean group formed in the years following the 1973 military coup, whose endeavors comprised quasi-surreal interventions into the urban infrastructure: say, ten milk trucks touring the roads of Santiago, (to protest the termination of government food assistance to the impoverished); or five Cessnas dropping leaflets over the city, asking citizens to

consider the arrangement of daily life to be a "creative act," just as any art would be. (A significant phrase, indicating their feeling that art does not operate in any elevated sphere: "*No a la ficción en la ficción.*") Farther along in the biennial's massive Oscar Niemeyer building is material pertaining to Grupo de Artistas de Vanguardia's First Biennial of Vanguard Art, a 1968 exhibition of films and photographs (its literally riotous opening captured in an iconic image on view at Documenta 12) made by this collective of Argentinean artists during their infiltration of plantations in the country's Tucumán region, where dictator Juan Carlos Onganía's privatization initiatives had created massive unemployment.

Much of this work from the archives has rarely been seen, even by South American audiences. And in this regard, one should anticipate that the reputations of Paulo Bruscky (who, while employed as a civil servant during the 1970s in Recife, Brazil, walked through the streets wearing a makeshift sign asking "*O que é arte? Para que serve?*" [What is art? What is it for?]) and Alberto Greco (who, during the early '60s, would have himself photographed in streets and plazas around Argentina while carrying a placard bearing his own name, so he would seem to "sign" the scene) to be burnished by this presentation. But other historical work is much more familiar, including, from the Northern Hemisphere, projected images from Palle Nielsen's famous *The Model—A Model for a Qualitative Society* of 1968, for which the artist gave over Stockholm's Moderna Museet to a playground freely used by the city's children. And then there is a large-scale photograph of Oscar Bony's *La familia obrera* (The Working-Class Family), 1968/1999, for which the Buenos Aires factory worker Luis Ricardo Rodríguez lived with his wife and son in a gallery for the duration of an exhibition, all of them going about their daily routines.

Ordinarily, the prominence of such work from the past would leave an exhibition wide-open to charges of nostalgia, especially since so much of the material presented here was made in the historically overdetermined year of 1968. (Among other examples: *Lygia Pape's Divisor*, 1968/2010, for which dozens of people fit their heads

From left: View of "There Is Always a Cup of Sea to Sail In," 2010, Ciccillo Matarazzo pavilion, São Paulo. Paulo Bruscky, *O que é arte? Para que serve?* (What Is Art? What Is It For?), 1978, one of four black-and-white photographs documenting the performance, each 27 1/2 x 19 3/4". Colectivo Acciones de Arte, *¡Ay Sudamérica! (Oh South America!)* (detail), 1981, action documentation comprising color video, photograph, enlarged copy of flyer; video: 4 minutes 41 seconds; photograph: 9 1/2 x 13 3/4"; flyer: 15 1/4 x 20 7/8".



AY SUDAMERICA

CUANDO USTED CAMINA ATRAVESANDO ESTOS LUGARES Y MIRA EL CIELO Y BAJO EL LAS CUMBRES NEVADAS RECONOCE EN ESTE SITIO EL ESPACIO DE NUESTRAS VIDAS: EL COLOR PIEL MORENA. ESTATURA Y LENGUA, PENSAMIENTO.

Y ASI DISTRIBUIMOS NUESTRA ESTADIA Y NUESTROS DIVERSOS OFICIOS. SOMOS LO QUE SOMOS; HOMBRE DE LA CIUDAD Y DEL CAMPO, ANDINO EN LAS ALTURAS PERO SIEMPRE POBLANDO ESTOS PARAJES. Y SIN EMBARGO DECIMOS, PROPONEMOS HOY, PENSARNOS EN OTRA PERSPECTIVA. NO SOLO COMO TECNICOS O CIENTIFICOS. NO SOLO COMO TRABAJADORES MANUALES. NO SOLO COMO ARTISTAS DEL CUADRO O DEL MONTAJE. NO SOLO COMO CINEASTAS. NO SOLAMENTE COMO LABRADORES DE LA TIERRA.

POR ESO HOY PROPONEMOS PARA CADA HOMBRE UN TRABAJO EN LA FELICIDAD. QUE POR OTRA PARTE ES LA UNICA GRAN ASPIRACION COLECTIVA SU UNICO DESGARRO. UN TRABAJO EN LA FELICIDAD. ESO ES. "NUESTROS SOMOS ARTISTAS. PERO CADA HOMBRE QUE TRABAJA POR LA AMPLIACION, AUNQUE SEA MENTAL. DE SUS ESPACIOS DE VIDA ES UN ARTISTA."

LO QUE SIGNIFICA QUE DIGAMOS EL TRABAJO EN LA VIDA COMO UNICA FORMA CREATIVA Y QUE DIGAMOS, COMO ARTISTAS. NO A LA FICCION EN LA FICCION.

DECIMOS POR LO TANTO QUE EL TRABAJO DE AMPLIACION DE LOS NIVELES HABITUALES DE LA VIDA ES EL UNICO MONTAJE DE ARTE VALIDO. LA UNICA EXPOSICION. LA UNICA OBRA DE ARTE QUE VIVE.

NUESTROS SOMOS ARTISTAS Y NOS SENTIMOS PARTICIPANDO DE LAS GRANDES ASPIRACIONES DE TODOS. PRESUMIENDO HOY CON AMOR SUDAMERICANO EL DESLIZARSE DE SUS OJOS SOBRE ESTAS LINEAS.

AY SUDAMERICA.

ASI CONJUNTAMENTE CONSTRUIMOS EL INICIO DE LA OBRA. UN RECONOCIMIENTO EN NUESTRAS MENTES; BORRANDO LOS OFICIOS. LA VIDA COMO UN ACTO CREATIVO.

ESE ES EL ARTE. LA OBRA. ESTE ES EL TRABAJO DE ARTE QUE NOS PROPONEMOS.

COLECTIVO ACCIONES DE ARTE
JULIO 1981
C. A. D. A.

through holes in a massive sheet of white fabric, then must choreograph their movements together, and Amelia Toledo's *Glu-Glu*, 1968/2010, small glass orbs filled with soap and water, intended to facilitate social interaction at domestic gatherings.) By and large, however, the very modesty of the work—the often-fetishized retro-chic “look” of the '60s avant-garde is generally absent—manages to skirt this problem. More important, works such as Bruscky's, Greco's, Neilsen's, and Bony's suggest that audiences should never orient themselves by artistic criteria alone. Bony's in particular demands this reorientation, given that it seems

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rooted as much in matters of anthropology—more specifically, in an anthropology of the quotidian—as in art. And in fact, on numerous occasions the exhibition, while ostensibly surmising the status of artmaking today, seems geared toward the consideration of “normalcy” in society at large. Certainly, this is the line pushed by the inclusion of photographs and newspaper accounts of actions from Flávio de Carvalho's “Experiences” series, executed during the 1930s and after, which are less interested in any clichéd themes of blurring art and life than in what Carvalho termed the study of mass psychologies. (In 1931, he entered a Corpus Christi procession while walking in the opposite direction, nearly causing a riot among those who would profess peace.) Such foregrounding of normalcy continues with Dora García's *The Deviant Majority*, 2010, a semidocumentary work taking up the subject of the San Giovanni hospital in Trieste, Italy, which—having been developed during the late '60s in the belief that mental illness is in part a construction steeped in class distinctions and notions of acceptable behavior—eschews conventional

psychiatric method in favor of in-house theatrical productions. Perhaps, the work suggests, it is those outside the asylum who are actually sick; and, per one administrator quoted in the video, through art we might “reform the institution within ourselves . . . our prejudice.”

Whatever the ultimate merits of these individual pieces, their presence places more conventional artwork in a different, more ambiguous register—with the parameters “exceeded” in advance of the work's display, as it were, subtly rooting art within the broader cultural field, and to great effect. Alongside García's video, for instance, Joachim Koester's imagery of actors' spasmodic dances, modeled on Italian field workers' efforts to purge themselves of venom after a spider bite, seems at once lyric and concrete, aesthetic and anthropological, in its representation. And while works by artists such as Antonieta Sosa and Pape deploy formal structures in the gallery context to hypothesize and reconfigure architecture's links to behavior, their postulations assume new weight alongside photographs of the graffiti group Pixação SP, tagging abandoned modern architectures on the outskirts of São Paulo, usually from precipitous heights. (Among the better wall texts I've seen, explaining away the dark and blurry pictures of the latter's work: “The institutional field is not always capable of housing all possible manifestations of art.”) Here Jimmie Durham's *Bureau for Research into Brazilian Normality*, 2010, an installation of street paraphernalia, magazine clippings, and snapshots paired with the artist's commentary on the lingering *bandeirante* legacy that underlies the country's modernization, is a convincing argument for the artistic task, sometimes playful and sometimes not, of debunking myth and renegotiating assumptions about everyday living. Similarly, ground is cleared for one of the very best works in the show, a film installation by Tamar Guimarães, which revolves around a cocktail party at Niemeyer's Casa das Canoas in Rio de Janeiro: One part *La Notte*, one part *Laugh-In*, the piece features conversation among a samba-dancing elite trading one-liners about race and class relations in Brazil, but also discussions among the house service workers, whose labor, while invisible within the modernist regime, makes the very existence of high

culture possible. Institutional and aesthetic critique are sustained in tandem.

So many other juxtapositions create powerful moments in the exhibition, as in one passage where Nan Goldin's melancholic bohemia in *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency*, 1979–2004, meets Miguel Angel Rojas's roughly contemporaneous, surreptitious photographs of cruising in Bogotá cinemas, and Miguel Rio Branco's by turns lyric and horrific, roughly edited portrait of street life in Salvador, Bahia. (While serving as precursor for filmmaker Pedro Costa's work in the slums of Portugal elsewhere in the show, the latter piece also gives an unfamiliar reality and ethical charge to otherwise groovy architectural diagrams and futuristic fantasies of Superstudio.) And throughout the exhibition one finds a loosening of the aesthetic frame, as in James Coleman's *Line of Faith*, 1991–2005, where an attempt to reenact the First Battle of Bull Run continually falls apart; or, more subtly, as in Alessandra Sanguinetti's pictures of mostly domestic settings, awkwardly straddling genre and vernacular photography. But too often these mounting strains are interrupted by works seemingly lifted from the standardized playbook of global exhibition making, pulling the biennial's narrative back into the structure it seeks to destabilize. Further, one fears for the success of *terreiros* created (by UNStudio, Carlos Teixeira, and others) for the biennial: platforms that, taking their name from the multipurpose public spaces in townships throughout Brazil, host discussions, poetry readings, concerts, and other “relational” activities. (Social interaction might well seem merely representational when sited within the Niemeyer building.) But another aspect of the biennial might succeed quite unexpectedly: For the exhibition, the Brazilian government has distributed pedagogical materials to thirty-five thousand teachers throughout the country, who will conduct classes on the biennial and its subject of art and politics—an incredible expansion and realization of the theme itself. Of course, saying as much might sound to you like so many mental gymnastics. But if so, it is after all perhaps best to return to a quote from Nielsen's *Qualitative Society*: “It is an exhibition only for those who do not play.” □

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From left: Tamar Guimarães, *Canoas*, 2010, still from a color film in 16 mm transferred to HD video, 13 minutes 25 seconds. Superstudio, *L'accampamento (Camping)*, 1972/1973, print on acetate, 30 1/2 x 24 3/8". From the series “*Gli atti fondamentali (The Fundamental Acts)*”, 1972–73. Pixação SP, *Noturnas (Night)* (detail), 2006–2008, twenty-two photographs, each 43 1/4 x 28 1/4".

