

[são paulo]
The things that do exist
by Misal Adnan Yıldız

How to talk about the 31st São Paulo Biennial



Hanging around with Nilbar Güreş during the installation of her works as part of the biennial

Charles Esche is a great strategist. As curator of the most recent São Paulo Biennial, entitled *How to talk about things that don't exist*, he has managed not only to bring together a great team and, through these curatorial channels, an excellent line-up of artists, but also to pave the way for discussions and artists' gatherings, which have created a perception of the exhibition as a 'political' one. We live in times where no biennial opening occurs without out a petition or protest, and in the opening days of the São Paulo Biennial, hot on the heels of the Sydney Biennial, where artists had protested the institutional framework, a petition signed by most of the participating artists in Brazil asked the organisers not to use the financial support from Israel, which made up a little of the biennial budget. As the artists were producing and installing their work in São Paulo, Israel's army was bombing civilian areas in Gaza. And this summer, Israel lost the psychological war in many cities, from New York to Berlin, where there were protests, many of them attended by the Jewish community and Israeli citizens. So yes, the world has been changing, socially and politically, and with it, our perspectives are shifting too.

During the final days of the installation, most artists declined private dinners organised by collectors in favour of participating in public discussions, in which Esche and his team actively took part, shaping the potential of the debates. Perhaps for the first time in biennial history, a protest against the biennial institution and its structure happened in collaboration with the curators themselves.

I have no idea whether the 31st São Paulo Biennial as a whole is political or not. It certainly achieves a work-

ing dialogue with the exhibition space, Oscar Niemeyer's Cicillo Matarazzo Pavilion. It is the first time a biennial has taken place at the pavilion since its legendary architect died, and his simultaneous absence and omnipresence pervades. It is also without doubt one of the most queer exhibitions since the 12th Istanbul Biennial, which was curated by Adriano Pedrosa and Jens Hoffman. Although there is no special section like their *Untitled, Ross*, there are strong installations in this one especially related with gender issues and queer identities throughout the exhibition. One of these installations, which could be also contextualized within the changing Latin World, is the presentation of multi-layered biographical research entitled *Life's Timeline / Transvestite Museum of Peru*, organised by one of the most interesting young curators of our time, Miguel Lopez. A collection of texts, objects, notes, documents, documentations, ephemera and more from the Peruvian drag queen, Giuseppe Campuzano (Lima, 1969-2013) becomes a complex form as a walk in a conceptual spiral reformulating the questions around a certain history of gender construction. This is a good example of the show's decision-making process in general: the curatorial team of the biennial stated that they were interested in inviting projects – rather than artists or individual works – that aim to contextualise a social and panoramic view of the mystical, the unknown and the spiritual.

Another re-discovery – in the context of queer art in Brazil – was Brazilian artist Hudinilson Jr., whose work includes sculptural forms, autobiographical drawings and collages. In the last three decades, especially since the seventies, his art has investigated the transformation of



Reading Clarice Lispector in São Paulo

All photos by Misal Adnan Yıldız

gender and identity within a militaristic and post-militaristic context, with certain references to masculinity. Nilbar Güreş's work, from her sculpture to her photography, reflects on the cultural and political climate of the city. A combination of new pieces produced during her residency in São Paulo and existing works sets up comparisons between the São Paulo and the Anatolian landscapes and the social transformations that have taken place in each. These positions develop a new scale of content development popping up between data based, large scale installations reminiscent of the late nineties, as a typical example; *The Modern School*, a collaboration between Archivo F.X., an institution working with an archive of images from Spanish Modernity and the artist, Pedro G. Romero.

Film has a strong presence at the biennial, and it is a privilege to see José Val Del Omar's film works supported by a sound system of such excellent quality. The Spanish director has such a unique language in relation to the history of filmmaking: most of the works shown in the exhibition date from the early fifties and include striking moments of abstraction and subversion. The 16-mm film projection and sculptural objects produced as seating proposals for the film by Kasper Akhøj and Tamar Guimarães operate as a site-specific work along with Mark Lewis's, which had more physical references to the architecture of the building and the city's panorama, big scale video projections that reflect the architectural movements of the space and the urban life. I personally enjoyed the new chapters of *The Incidental Insurgents* by Basel Abbas and Ruane Abou-Rahme since last year's Istanbul Biennial. And Yael Bartana's *Inferno* 2013 has been attracting huge audiences – is her next stop Hollywood?

There are striking pieces from Otobong Nkanga, Dan Perjovschi, Anna Boghiguan, Wilhelm Sasnal, Tony Chakar and Walid Raad, though one might expect more abstraction in an exhibition dealing with things that don't exist – the dominant styles of the exhibition could be deemed figurative and expressive. Although many works are political, a collaborative film project by Armando Queiroz with Almiros Martins and Marcelo Rodrigues, a huge wall painting by Éder Oliveira and a film installation by Halil Altundere all portray males as the resisting political subject: this perhaps makes São Paulo yet another 'boyish' exhibition by Esche, likely to provoke a critique similar to that regarding his collaboration with Vasif Kortun during the Posit 9B programme at the 9th Istanbul Biennial.

One might wonder how the São Paulo Biennial might have looked had it been curated by someone – such as Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev or Anselm Franke – who has been developing research and exhibitions with similar themes for a little longer. But what makes *How to talk about things that don't exist* interesting is the ambition Esche shows in drawing on everything, from social inequality to the war in Palestine to the Messiah, as starting points for looking at the art. And as the Brazilian Clarice Lispector wrote, "Everything I do not know forms the greater part of me: this is my largesse. And with this I understand everything. The things I do not know constitute my truth."



Nilbar Güreş, *Open Phone Booth*, 2011

3 channel synchronization video, 16:9, 33 min. 46 sec

Courtesy of Nilbar Güreş, Rampa (Istanbul) and Galerie Martin Janda (Vienna)