

Art in America



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THE "EMPTY" BIENNIAL

Initial plans for an artwork-free 28th São Paulo Bienal unleashed a storm of controversy. Compromise ensued.

BY EDWARD LEFFINGWELL



View of Joan Jonas's performance *The Shape, the Scent, the Feel of Things*, 2004-07, video projections and mixed mediums. Photo Patricia Stavis.

SOMETHING FAMILIAR has gone missing from São Paulo's sprawling urban landscape. Under a 2006 law mandating a wide-ranging cleanup, billboards have lately been stripped from their scaffolding and corporate logos reduced in scale. Much of the city's iconic, sometimes steamy, outdoor advertising has vanished, leaving an occasional passage of sooty graffiti in its place. If a São Paulo without billboards seems an unlikely sight, equally surprising was the 28th iteration of the São Paulo Bienal—that warhorse of international art exhibitions—which braved derision as the first Bienal without art.

At this critical moment in the Bienal's history, beset by financial problems as well as questions of relevance amid the global proliferation of similar exhibitions, the foundation solicited applications for the post of

2008 curatorial director but received little response. The only viable candidates were Ivo Mesquita and Marcio Doctors, and the latter soon removed himself from consideration, urging a longer gestation period for future biennials. Mesquita was named curatorial director in November 2007, leaving him less than a year to organize the project. A prominent figure on the Brazilian art scene, Mesquita is chief curator of São Paulo's much-admired Pinacoteca do Estado and curator-in-residence at Bard College's Center for Curatorial Studies in upstate New York. In 2000, he briefly served as curator of the ill-fated 25th Bienal, from which, in a very public wrangle over scheduling and allocation of money, he was dismissed by the then-president of the Bienal's governing body, subsequently reinstated, then dismissed again. For this edition, his efforts were supported by

two adjunct curators: Brazilian writer and archivist Ana Paula Cohen and Johannesburg artist, writer and curator Thomas Mulcaire. But citing conceptual differences, Mulcaire resigned from the team in June 2008, just four months before the opening.

THE BIENAL OF SAUDADES

The São Paulo Bienal, based on the Venice model of having national representation, was founded in 1951 by Italian-Brazilian industrialist Ciccillo Matarazzo. Since 1957 it has been housed in Oscar Niemeyer's vast Pavilhão Ciccillo Matarazzo, a three-story glass-clad and louvered structure, situated in the bosky Parque do

DIRECTOR IVO MESQUITA HALTED BUSINESS AS USUAL TO EXAMINE THE BIENNIAL PHENOMENON ITSELF. HIS AIM WAS TO CRITICALLY REPOSITION SÃO PAULO'S FRANCHISE, TO REPLACE AN INCREASINGLY REDUNDANT CURATORIAL IDEA WITH A NEW PARADIGM.

Ibirapuera and offering more than 300,000 square feet of exhibition space. Within this architectural icon, under the title "Em Vivo Contato" (In Living Contact), Mesquita halted business as usual to examine the biennial phenomenon itself. His aim was to locate a new position for São Paulo's franchise, to replace an increasingly redundant idea with a new paradigm.¹

One significant aspect of Mesquita's initial plan was to reconceive the pavilion's ground floor as a public "square," housing ticket offices, reception area, bookshop, an Internet lounge with computer links to a library on the third floor, and more. As for the second floor, in what was envisioned to be a triumph of architecture over art, Mesquita announced that the entire level would be left vacant, asserting in the press materials: "The exhibition of empty space on the second floor of the pavilion [is] a radical gesture affirm-



Top, Mircea Cantor:
Airplanes and Angels,
2008, handwoven wool
carpet, approx. 7 by 11¼ feet.

Above, Matt Mullican:
MIT Project, 1990, mixed
mediums, in collaboration
with the Museu de Zoologia
da Universidade de São Paulo.
Photo Amílcar Packer.

Left, Paul Ramírez Jonas:
Talisman, 2008, booth
and 2,500 keys.
Photo Amílcar Packer.



ing the act of suspension, elaborating analysis of the Biennale model, and its role in the contemporary world." He encouraged appreciation of Niemeyer's building as a site for *saudades*—a Portuguese expression of nostalgia, of longing for someone or something loved and lost—by decreeing that the biennial would include no artists. In the widespread shock that followed the announcement, the Brazilian press called the exhibition the "Bienal do Vazio," the "empty" Bienal. Brazilian critic Fabio Cypriano described his dismay in an article published in *Frieze* online, and he quoted internationally known Brazilian artist Jac Leirner saying that the proposal was the equivalent of "a punch in the stomach."²

FACING THE VOID

Perhaps responding to the uproar in the art community, Mesquita altered his plan and decided to invite a number of artists to participate. But when the Bienal opened, the pavilion's second floor exhibition space was, indeed, untenanted. The third floor featured (as planned) an auditorium, reading room and computer center with Internet access, along with a well-chosen library presenting documents, books and a collection of catalogues said to have been gathered from some 200 biennials worldwide. In this computer-literate culture, hard-copy archival materials

from biennials past seemed fetishized by their very display.

The third floor thus functioned, in part, as a center for the newly minted discipline of biennial studies. It was inspired by the Wanda Svevo Historical Archive, which is housed within the administrative quarters on the pavilion's second floor. Destined for inclusion in that archive, the tabloid *Jornal 28b*—a series of nine newspaper publications—was distributed gratis at the pavilion as well as on city street corners. Serving as a catalogue, the *Jornal* contained the Bienal's complete

program, reviews and articles, plus novella-style graphics by participating artist Sarnath Banerjee of New Delhi.

The first and third floors accommodated a roster of artists that eventually numbered 40, with negotiations for some of the participants continuing to the eleventh hour. Several existing works were adapted to the Bienal site. A stage and seating were provided for performance, theater and cinema. A first-floor video lounge presented films by pioneers such as Glauber Rocha, Jean-Luc Godard and Anne-Marie Miéville, Jonas Mekas and



Above, view of Los Super Elegantes' performance *Flip Flop*, 2008. Photo Autumn Sonnichen.

Left, Marina Abramović: *Video Portrait Gallery*, 1975-2002, 16 performances shown on 16 video monitors.



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Agnès Varda. Performances were scheduled throughout the run of the exhibition, along with a program of talks by international art-world luminaries.

In an interview with Alexandre Werneck for *Studio International* (January 2008), Mesquita sought to link the original concept with the eventual realization by saying that the curators were looking for "artists whose works dialogue with such concepts as memory, history, narration, literature and writing. We want artists aimed at the spectacular, to performances that activate various senses at the same time, to the idea of the total art work."

The roster included high-profile New York-based artists such as Marina Abramović, and the performance duo Fischerspooner, and Eli Sudbrack of assume vivid astro focus. Abramović's *Video Portrait Gallery* (1975-2002) consists of a simultaneous presentation of works via 16 monitors on a long row of pedestals. For this mini-retrospective for an artist much admired in Brazil, the works had been edited to focus on Abramović's expressive face. In November, New York-based Joan Jonas presented the haunting operatic video-performance *The Shape, the Scent, the Feel of Things* (2004-07; originally presented at Dia:Beacon). Inspired by the writings of cultural theorist and art historian Aby Warburg on the indigenous peoples of the American Southwest at the turn of the 19th century and by Jonas's own visit to Hopi reservations in the 1960s, the piece included live performances by Jonas and an actor in the role of Warburg, along with video projections.

A GALLERY OF ARTISTS

Among the archive-oriented projects was New Yorker Allan McCollum's *Eighteen Hundred Drawings* (1988-91), an expansive sequence of framed black graphite drawings leaning back-to-back on 60 draped tables that formed long, ecclesiastical-looking aisles. Each 30-by-96-by-30-inch table supported dozens of drawings. Matt Mullican's *MIT Project*, first exhibited in 1991, includes an architectural surround containing an array of objects, old and new—specimen boxes, food wrappers, stuffed birds, yellowing newspaper clippings from World War II—ordered by shape and content in a long, waist-high structure, the whole resembling a systems-based game. Mullican refers to the work as a way of cataloguing, or presenting a map of, organized information.

In a site-specific intervention occupying the primary pathways of the third floor, São Paulo artist Dora Longo Bahia silkscreened the kaleidoscopically patterned *Scalp 5063* ▶

INHOTIM: CULTURE IN THE COUNTRYSIDE

IN THE TOWN OF BRUMADINHO, an hour's drive from Belo Horizonte, the capital of the state of Minas Gerais (itself 364 miles from São Paulo), is Cultural Institute Inhotim, named for a neighborhood in a mining region in the mountains of the Atlantic Forest. Inhotim, which includes exhibition pavilions, sited works and an open-air restaurant and bookstore, recalls the experience of being at Marfa or Storm King Art Center. Its pavilions house contemporary art amid tropical parklands inspired by the work of the late Brazilian landscape architect Roberto Burle Marx.

Established in 2005, Inhotim is set in a 5,000-acre park that features, in addition to the country home of its founder, Brazilian entrepreneur and collector Bernardo Paz, roughly 1,500 acres of preserved native forest, 110 acres of gardens and four ornamental lakes. Paz is advised by curators Allan Schwartzman (U.S.), Jochen Volz (Germany) and Rodrigo Moura (Brazil), with support from Júlia Rebouças. The collection includes 450 works by 60

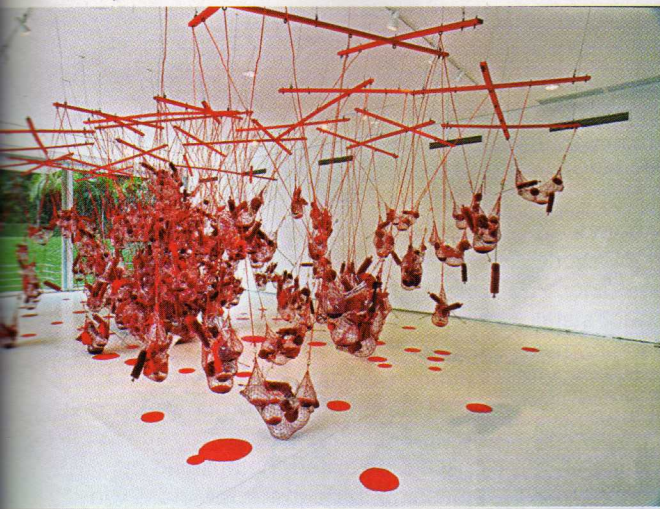


View of the gardens at Cultural Institute Inhotim, Brumadinho. Photo Bruno Magalhães. Photos this spread courtesy Inhotim.

artists, with special galleries dedicated to the work of Tunga, Cildo Meireles, Adriana Varejão and Doris Salcedo.

Lago Gallery contains Chris Burden's *Samson* (1985), an instrument of self-destruction. Visitors move through a turnstile connected to a gearbox and a 100-ton jack designed to press two large timbers against steel plates fixed to load-bearing walls. Each click of the turnstile increases the apparent threat that the building will be destroyed. Elsewhere, on a mesa above Inhotim, Burden has completed the first stages of *Beam Drop*, a version of his massive 1984 work that entails dropping vertical steel I-beams, up to 40 feet long, into a bed of cement. Also in the gallery is a re-creation of Hélio Oiticica and Neville D'Almeida's project *Cosmococo 5 Hendrix War* (1973), a well-known installation of projectors, slides, audio equipment and a Jimi Hendrix soundtrack.

Coinciding with the 2008 São Paulo Bienal, Inhotim celebrated



Top, Tunga: *True Rouge*, 1997, wood, nests, blown glass and mixed mediums, approx. 14¾ by 43 by 24½ feet. Photo Eduardo Eckenfels.

Above, Cildo Meireles: *Through*, 1983-89, mixed mediums, approx. 19¾ by 49 by 49 feet. Photo Pedro Motta.

Right, John Ahearn and Rigoberto Torres: *Open the Door*, 2006, fiberglass and automotive paint, approx. 50 feet long.

Right bottom, Adriana Varejão: *Coelacanth Causes Tsunami*, 2004-08, oil and plaster on canvas, 184 panels, each 43¼ inches square. Photo Eduardo Eckenfels.

the installation of Oiticica's posthumously realized *Magic Square no. 5—De Luxe* (1978), an imposing Stonehenge-like cubic structure made of upright acrylic-on-wood slabs. A focal point of the surrounding landscape, the open-ended construction features monochrome surfaces of vibrant yellow, intense purple and other hues. Another recent acquisition, Matthew Barney's *De Lama Lamina* (From Mud, a Blade), 2004, is a hallucinatory video of celebrants aboard a Bahia carnival float. The float takes the form of a mud-caked tractor bearing an uprooted tree on its hood. Argentine conceptualist Victor Grippo is newly represented by *The Privacy of the Light of St. Ives* (1997), a strategically illuminated selection of sculptor's tools arranged on tables in a darkened room. Among other striking additions, Iran do Espírito Santo's *Corrections A* (2001) is a series of cut and polished geometric blocks of granite. Nearby, the artist's anthropomorphic *Desdobrado* (2004) consists of large planes of glass, leaning and supine.

A pharaonic gallery designed by Paulistano architect Cerviño Rodrigo Lopez is devoted to the work of Varejão. Outside this impressive space, a pool of water reflects the unadorned facade, while ambient light penetrating the gallery bounces off an interior pond. In an upper gallery Varejão installed the chaos theory-themed *Coelacanth Causes Tsunami* (2004-08), a signature work in the Portuguese tradition of ornamental tiles, here showing a freely painted repeated pattern of swirling waves. Another gallery is dedicated to Janet Cardiff's 40-voice audio work *40-Part Motet* (2001). Each voice in the Salisbury Cathedral Choir is represented by a speaker and stand arranged in an intermittently interrupted ellipse.

In works that engaged nearby residents and Inhotim workers, New York-based collaborators John Ahearn and Rigoberto Torres produced two painted-fiberglass reliefs on opposite walls of adjacent buildings on site, each mural about 20 by 50 feet. On one wall, the narrative *Natchitoches Road* (2005) features a bus station, railway to the mines and portraits of townspeople. Opposite, *Open the Door* (2006) depicts a religious celebration near the village church and includes a uniformed security guard with an Alsatian guard dog. Such works expand the scope and reach of Paz's collection. An elegantly organized campus of handsome modernist pavilions with engaging works, Inhotim yields an exhilarating and unforgettable experience in the mountains of Minas Gerais. —E.L.

Inhotim is open to visitors Thursdays and Fridays from 9 A.M. to 4:30 P.M. and on Saturdays, Sundays and holidays from 9 to 5:30, www.inhotim.org.br.



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▷ (2008), more than 16,000 square feet of near-grisaille acrylic paint punctuated with tattered skins of red, over much of the floor, where it was subjected to abrasions and scuffs by the shoes of passersby. Bahia intended to broadcast jam sessions from the site by radio but was unable to secure the support of a station.

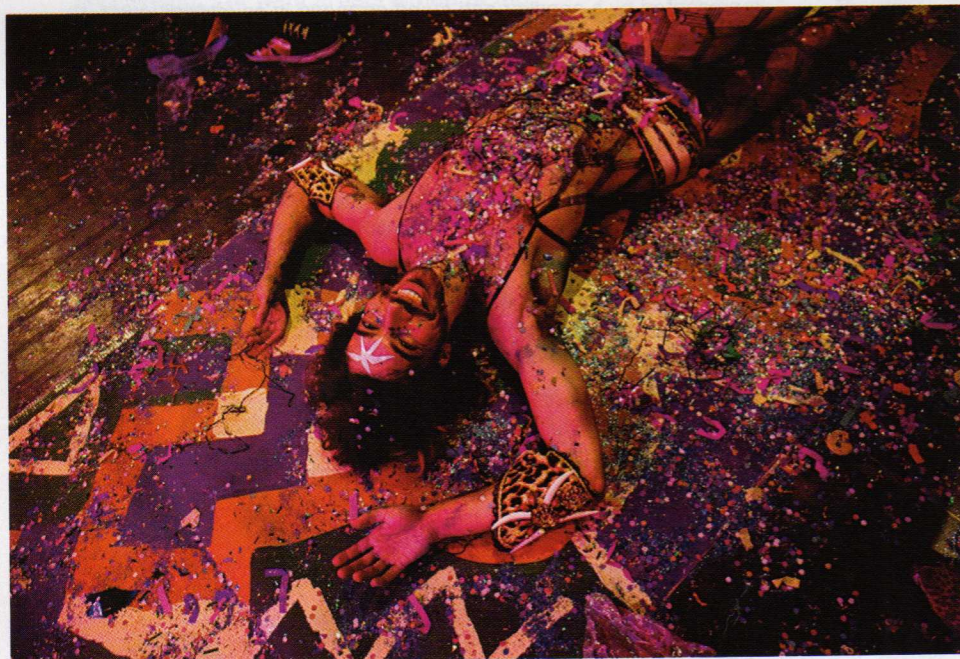
Romanian artist Mircea Cantor

Espírito Santo installed an untitled stainless-steel relief in the shape of a gleaming keyhole 3 inches high (1999). The work corresponded with *Talisman* (2008), by New Yorker Paul Ramírez Jonas, located on the ground floor near the Bienal entrance. In this work, the artist festooned the rear interior wall of a brightly painted vendor's stall with a grid of 2,500 keys, each permit-

access to the second floor and sprayed black graffiti on the columns and walls, including the inscription *ABAIXA A DITADURA* (Down with Dictators). The action was the group's second in a month—the first was at a São Paulo gallery exhibiting graffiti—and was characterized by the press as a protest against the commercialization and institutionalization of graffiti culture. Bleeding from the nose, a young woman in the group was arrested during an ensuing melee as her colleagues exited the building by smashing through a large glass window on the lower floor. Bienal curator Ana Paula Cohen joined security personnel in hot pursuit. The vandalism delayed the performance of Fischerspooner, a boisterous concert of music, dance and projections. Thanks to the efforts of amateur video-makers, footage of both the scheduled and unscheduled events was available online in a matter of hours.

Mesquita believes that in its considerable history the Bienal has fulfilled its original mission: to support the participation of Brazil's modern art in the global cultural conversation and to establish São Paulo as an artistic center. He acknowledges the salutary influence of the Bienal on generations of artists, museum professionals, intellectuals and educators (not to mention schoolchildren and the general public) who visit and come away renewed, if not enlightened. Yet while he may have succeeded in clearing the decks, and certainly was handicapped by time constraints, Mesquita lost credibility in treating the performances as a sort of illustration. Due to his text-driven theme, "In Living Contact" may join a

host of exhibitions that "live" most vividly in the documents they leave behind. The 28th Bienal featured a concentration on entries to key-in and link, and on newsprint journals to be gathered for archives, while the art, though engaging, remained peripheral. The next custodians of the institution should aim to reach beyond the concept of the Bienal as merely a forum of many voices in a large and empty room. ○



hung a roughly 7-by-12-foot hand-woven kilim-style wool carpet from the high ceiling. Titled *Airplanes and Angels* (2008), it was made in Romania and ornamented with airplanes in the manner of Afghani war rugs. Near the library, the New York-based Brazilian artist Valeska Soares installed a large mat patterned with the motifs and colors of the cover of the first Bienal catalogue (1951). A nearby mound of die-cut paper pulp in the form of thick letters implied the reduction of the catalogue text to blocks of illegible glyphs.

Appealing to a public accustomed to festival high jinks, Stockholm-based Carsten Höller introduced *Valerio Sisters* (2008), two 45-foot-long tubular slides of stainless steel and polycarbonate. Visitors could ride down the slides that snaked out of an aperture cut into a glass panel on the third floor, returning through a similar opening in the glass wall on the first. At the center of an enormous stretch of drywall, São Paulo-based Iran do

ting access to one of the building's locks. Visitors could trade one of their own keys for one of these. Ramírez Jonas's gesture of exchange conceptually returned the building—or free access to it—to the people. An exterior wall of the booth was inscribed with the Portuguese for "my key," "your key," "our key."

In late November, Los Angeles-based Los Super Elegantes (Martiniano Lopez-Crozet and Milena Muzquiz) presented the musical performance *Flipi Flopi*, a reference to the popular sandals associated with Brazil's beach culture. But not all the performances were anticipated. On Oct. 26, the evening of the public opening, a posse of graffiti taggers known as *pichadores* gained

Above, view of assume vivid astro focus's performance *axé vatapá alegria feijão*, 2008. Photo Autumn Sonnichsen. All photos, unless otherwise noted, courtesy São Paulo Bienal.

1 For Mesquita's statement and more information on his aims see www.universes-in-universe.de/car/sao-paulo/eng/2008/index.htm.
2 See www.frieze.com/comment/article/a_void_in_sao_paulo/-29k. Cypriano is a São Paulo professor who writes regularly for the newspaper *Folha de S. Paulo*.

The 28th São Paulo Bienal was on view Oct. 26-Dec. 6, 2008.

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