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Giving Artists Total Freedom

The Upcoming São Paulo Biennial



Poster for 33rd Bienal de São Paulo, incorporating Jean Arp, *Formas expresivas* (1932) © Jean Arp/AUTVIS, Brasil, 2017. Collection MAC USP. Design: Raul Loureiro. Photo credit: Eduardo Ortega/Fundação Bienal de São Paulo

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For the 33rd edition of the [Bienal de São Paulo](#)—which opens to VIPs on 5 September and to the public two days later—I wanted to explore an alternative to the centralized, thematic curatorial model that is now unquestioningly applied across the world’s biennials. I suspect that this model, which was a terrific innovation two decades ago, tends to produce events that compete primarily on their discursive skills rather than on the experience of the visitors or participants—including the artists.

I suspect that many people share a sense of unease about the sheer predictability of many contemporary art projects. It seems that exhibition after exhibition is posited on the idea that a thematic group show about a loosely defined state of crisis in the world is somehow going to radically change us, or art, or the world.

Part of this is to do with the professionalization of the art world. This is the first generation to have graduated from the various MA programs in curatorial studies and, from what I can see, very few of these require either a background in art history or contact with living artists.



São Paulo Biennial pavilion (2017) © Pedro Ivo Trasferetti/Fundação Bienal de São Paulo

I recently received an email blast from a leading curatorial program that spoke a lot about activism and critical thinking but only used the word “art” once, and “artist” not at all. I wonder whom these programs are targeting, and how activism and curating came to be synonymous. It strikes me as either naïve or sinister to sell one thing as the other, especially given the reality of careers in the art world.

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The curators I have long admired are those who are deeply committed to artists and to a certain vision of art: I’m thinking of Guy Brett, Paulo Herkenhoff, Catherine de Zegher, Gerardo Mosquera and many others. The risk today is that the curatorial field becomes less and less about art and artists, and more about other curators or critical theory. That’s potentially a

problem.

Projects more concerned with demonstrating the inventiveness and cleverness of a curatorial construct are always likely to be less meaningful than those engaging with the actual art and artists.

When I was asked to curate the 33rd Bienal de São Paulo I wanted to look for an alternative to the thematic model. I wanted to examine the tradition of artists working as curators as a way to talk about art and its relationships in a less linear and instrumental way. So, I have invited seven artists to each curate an exhibition, including their own work, with total freedom to bring whatever references they choose into dialogue with their own work.

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Some of the artists are well known, others less so but they are, to my mind, some of the most interesting practitioners working today: [Antonio Ballester Moreno](#), [Sofia Borges](#), [Waltércio Caldas](#), [Alejandro Cesarco](#), [Claudia Fontes](#) and [Wura-Natasha Ogunji](#).

The result will be seven separate exhibitions, each with a different curatorial logic and set of interests. In addition to these, I will be selecting 12 individual projects that will be placed between the exhibitions. The Bienal de São Paulo has had an ambitious educational project from its early editions, and this year we will be focusing on “attention” as the core element that connects art to its viewers.

I like the idea of a biennial that emerges from the interests of the artists who take part in it, and who can create different curatorial frameworks to express their affinities and interests. I think it’s also time to create less vertical structures in which the authority stems from a single figure who is the “meta author” of an exhibition.