

Article

Brazilian Art and the Dilemma of Globalization: Strategies of Internationalization and Cultural Affirmation in Two 1990s Biennials

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Abstract: This paper will address specifically the 24th edition of the São Paulo Biennial (1998), which took up Oswald de Andrade's concept of anthropophagy as a guiding axis, but it will also bring to light the first edition of the Mercosul Biennial, which was held in 1997 in the city of Porto Alegre, situated in the south of Brazil, with the intention of establishing itself as a space for promotion of Latin American art. Both biennials are private entities, supported by autonomous foundations, but which require public funds to carry out their shows. It is noteworthy that those two shows were held a few years after the third edition of the Havana Biennial, which is widely recognized as a landmark in the history of the biennials based on South–South dialogue. I will point out the connections between the proposals of these exhibitions as well as relate them to the Brazilian economic situation at the time and the dilemma of globalization.

Keywords: São Paulo Biennial; Mercosul Biennial; Latin American art

1. The Biggest Art Exhibition of Latin America: The First Mercosul Biennial, 1997

In the catalogue of the first edition of the Mercosul Biennial, which was presented as “the biggest art exhibition of Latin America”, its curator, the Brazilian art critic Frederico Morais writes:

Since the times of European colonization, the main evidence of our marginalization is the absence of Latin America in the history of universal art. According to a metropolitan perspective, we, Latin Americans, would be fated to eternally be a “culture of repetition”, reproducers of models, it is not up to us to found or create aesthetics or movements that could be incorporated to universal art. (Morais 1997, p. 7)

Adopting a critical stance, which professes regionalism, Morais states that art history should be rewritten on other perspectives and notes that “constructing a history of Latin American art means deconstructing the metropolitan history of art”. It was not about “denying the European or North American influence on world art”, but rather, about discussing “the significant influence that Latin American art has had on both continents [North America and Europe]” and the fact that it should be considered a driving force in the construction of new historiographies (Morais 1997, p. 9). In his opinion, “the problem is that art history has not been written in Latin America, but in the metropolis, in Europe, and in the United States, because that is where the big museums are, and the publishers, art magazines, the curators, the resources” (apud Fioravante 1997).

However, for those who still believed that “nothing of importance could come from the South”, Morais presented an extensive list of artists and intellectuals whose work could serve as a compass to new generations or as tools for understanding the whole process of modern and contemporary art, such as Oswald de Andrade, Pedro Figari, Alejo Carpentier, Ferreira Gullar, Hélio Oiticica, Glauber Rocha, Marta Traba, Enrique Rodó, Joaquín Torres García, Pedro Figari, Xul Solar, José Martí, José

Vasconcelos, José Carlos Mariategui, Simon Bolívar, Vicente Huidobro, Matta, Mário Pedrosa, and Darcy Ribeiro. Years later, during an interview, he would reaffirm that the main aim of the first edition of the Biennial was to show that “we not only have a significant artistic production, but also a set of ideas, theories, and readings that apply both to Latin American art and international art itself” (Morais 2014, p. 19).

The Mercosul Biennial, which had its 11th edition in 2018, was created by a group of leading businessmen from the South of Brazil whose main interest was to bring to the arts field the same integrationist tone of the 1991 MERCOSUL (Southern Common Market) economic deal, establishing a free trade zone among Brazil, Argentina, Paraguay, and Uruguay (and more recently Venezuela). The biennial aimed at establishing itself as an institution capable of creating cultural productive connections between these countries and with other South American countries. Its first edition clearly raised the question of regionalism and asserted the potentials of Latin America as a whole, but this concern did not continue throughout its history. According to [Morais \(2004, p. 188\)](#), “both in art and in the economy, regionalism was a way to face globalization”.

Two hundred and fifty-six artists took part, 880 artworks were distributed among twelve locations throughout the city of Porto Alegre, from big warehouses to hangars, an old department store, and a gasworks (Gasômetro). Some of these locations were completely renovated to host the exhibitions. Besides the Mercosul member countries, Bolivia, Chile, and Venezuela were invited to participate in this edition of the biennial.

In order to avoid the classic structure based on national representations, and to allow for new critical approaches, [Morais](#) conceived of a show based on three non-exclusive expository axes: (1) a constructive strand (Art and its structures); (2) a political strand (Art and its context); (3) a cartographic strand (Territory and history). According to him, the definition of the three strands came as soon as he started to design the Mercosul Biennial, and it “was important to identify a theory about Latin American art, or at least define certain constants, things that are seen with some frequency, reiterations. I didn’t want to simply show isolated artists” ([Morais 2014, p. 18](#)).

There were also two other segments, the first housing the work of young artists, and the second dedicated to the connection between art and technology. The Biennial also saw artistic interventions of different nature—performances, installations, intervention on a city bus by Carlos Cruz-Diez, and the creation of a permanent sculpture garden in a park¹—as well as two international seminars, with Brazilian and foreign art critics, curators, artists, and historians. An example of a peculiar urban intervention was *Contrato de Trabalho [Employment Contract]*, by Uruguayan artists Eduardo Cardozo and Fernando Peirano, who hired a bricklayer so that he could “freely conceive and create a work of art, using only bricks and mortar”. Bianca Knaack tells the story:

The bricklayer had 3000 bricks and was guaranteed R\$ 0.15 per brick used. And that’s how, in an eight-square-meter area downtown, in front of the Mercado Público [Public Market], (...) the then bricklayer/artist built a stylized *chimarrão* gourd, a bench, and a fence, using only half of the bricks. When asked by artists and organizers about what he had done, he explained: “I wasn’t worried about using a larger number of bricks to get more money. I wanted to make something beautiful”. ([Knaack 2015, p. 231](#))

Not by chance, [Morais](#), who started his career at the end of the 1960s as an art critic and a curator committed to experimental practices, defended, since the 1970s that there should be a Latin American biennale in São Paulo, instead of an international one. Despite his criticism of the 1978 Latin American Biennial, which was held in São Paulo under the title-theme *Mito e Magia [Myth and Magic]*, [Morais](#) proposed, at the time, that this sort of show, anchored in our reality and aimed at our production,

¹ I refer to the Sculpture Garden at the *Parque Marinha do Brasil [Brazilian Marine Park]*, which presents works by ten artists: the Brazilians Amílcar de Castro, Aluisio Carvão, Francisco Stockinger, Franz Weissmann and Carlos Fajardo; the Argentines Ennio Iommi, Julio Pérez Sanz and Hernán Dompé; and the Bolivians Francine Secretán and Ted Carrasco.

substitute the São Paulo Biennial, which had been created based on the model of the Venice Biennale and that contributed nothing new—or strategically useful—to the artists of the region. Morais “was convinced that the [São Paulo] biennial should answer to necessity, that it should not be gratuitous, but address work to be done”, states [Whitelleg \(2012, p. 132\)](#). However, the 1978 Latin American Biennial was not well received by several artists and intellectuals involved in this debate, mainly due to its curatorial and thematic framework, and the project to establish a Latin American biennial in São Paulo (or to transform the São Paulo Biennial into an exclusively Latin American event) did not go any further.² In those years, Morais was part of a group of Latin American intellectuals engaged in constructing a continental consciousness to the region in order to counterbalance the menaces of cultural imperialism after the Cuban Revolution. In his book *Artes plásticas na América Latina: do transe ao transitório* [Visual Arts in Latin America: From Trance to Transitoriness], published in 1979, he reflects upon the role of the São Paulo Biennial in relation to Latin America:

the history of the relationship between the São Paulo International Biennial and Latin America is punctuated by omissions, frustrations, submission (to Euro-North American interests), and, above all, by the absence of any project or program, or, in a wider range, of any policy which aims at defending Latin American art, including Brazilian art”. ([Morais 1979](#), pp. 48–49)

Written during a period in which Brazil and many other South American countries were governed by dictatorial, repressive regimes, the tone of this book was blunt and against the “ideology of international biennials and artistic imperialism”. To Morais, in order to resist the cultural impositions of hegemonic powers it was necessary to discuss “how international languages, forged or intensified at biennials, triennials, quadrennials, etc., operate on national cultures, especially of those peripheral countries or continents, such as Brazil and Latin America” ([Morais 1979](#), p. 41). Under his perspective, the São Paulo Biennial ignored artistic developments in Latin America and not only reproduced the trends imposed by the hegemonic circuit but craved to “extend to the other nations of the continent the same plan of domination”.

Two decades later, in 1997, Morais, as we could see, adapted theories and debates developed in the past, taking the notion of Latin America for granted despite trying to articulate it as a political label. He remains critical of the reduced presence of Latin American art internationally and of the idea that our culture should be “discovered, explored, or conquered”. In his opinion, political and economic matters, power relations, corroborated the permanent exclusion of Latin American artists from the hegemonic narratives of Western art.

Several recent researches have tried to show the relevance and originality of art biennials taking place outside of the hegemonic centres and that have adopted a point of view which is neither universalist nor Eurocentric—and therefore more critical and reflective—to defy the established model of the Venice Biennale. Anthony Gardner and Charles Green, in their book *Biennials, Triennials and documenta* (2016) have drawn attention to the second series of biennials that took place after the mid-1950s and have insisted on “critical regionalism as the means for realigning cultural networks across geopolitical divides”, thus engaging with artists, curators and places formerly excluded from the hegemonic circuit ([Gardner and Green 2013](#), p. 4). In reference to Latin America, they point out that a series of biennials were held in different countries of the region between the end of the 1960s and beginning of the 1970s in an attempt to “redirect the axis of cultural and economic influence away from the North (whether that be the United States or Iberia) so as to concentrate on exchange with neighbours in the Caribbean and other parts of South and Central America” ([Gardner and Green 2016](#),

² In 1980, Brazilian scholar Aracy Amaral organized a Consultative Meeting of Art Critics of America, under the auspice of the São Paulo Biennial Foundation, in order to debate the future of the initiative. Like Morais, Amaral was convinced that the São Paulo Biennial had been founded upon geopolitical error and should reinvent itself. She openly defended the proposition that a Latin American axis should replace the international perspective of the São Paulo Biennial but only very few of the critics present at the meeting voted in favour of her proposal, which was abandoned. See [Whitelleg \(2005\)](#) for an in-depth account of this imbroglio.

p. 87). The authors highlight the Medellín and Cali Biennials, in Colombia, the San Juan Biennial (Porto Rico) and the Valparaíso Biennial (Chile). They also highlight the Havana Biennial, which was initiated in 1984, considering its third edition (1989) a successful example of the different strategies used to *reinvent the South*. However, in the last case, Gardner and Green believe that its importance resides not in the fact that it was an exhibition that inaugurated a practice but rather that it represented the pinnacle of almost three decades of transformations in this kind of show.

Gardner and Green mention neither the 1978 Latin American Biennial nor the 1997 Mercosul Biennial, although their curatorial plans and proposals of transnational cultural interchanges within Latin America could easily be included in their study. When referring to the São Paulo Biennial, which initiated in 1951, they point out its submission to the Venetian model.

Despite being the first great international modern art contest held outside Europe, and in a peripheral capital, the São Paulo Biennial was in fact conceived in the same format as the Venice Biennale, based on national representations, for which each country was responsible, and awarding several prizes. It did not dispute the “Venetian formula” or its organizational and media structures; on the contrary, it made use of this formula in order to fight for a prominent position in the international art scene, as asserts Lourival Gomes Machado (1951, p. 15), its first director, in the 1951 catalogue: “by its own definition, the [São Paulo] Biennial should accomplish two main tasks: besides simply comparing Brazilian modern art to art in the rest of the world, it should bring them together, meanwhile, transforming São Paulo into a worldwide centre for the arts”.

Its foundation was part of a broader modernization project of Brazilian society and was implemented with the support of the federal government, which intended to instill an image of Brazil as one of the future world powers, including in the fields of arts and architecture. It is noteworthy that immediately after the war, Brazil, which had timidly taken part in the Second World War, was living a period of economic growth, leveraged by São Paulo, a city that contrasted with the rest of the country due to its intense industrial activities and its high population of foreign immigrants, especially Italians. New museums, devoted to modern art, and the São Paulo Biennial were then established with private funding and the support from the emerging sectors of society—industry and the press.

In its more than 50 years of activities, the São Paulo Biennial has never tried to become a venue that would exclusively promote Latin American art, having insisted, instead, on its internationalist vocation; the only exception, in this case, was the aforementioned Latin American Biennial, which would not see a second edition after the 1978 show. When the São Paulo Biennial was created, in 1951, there was no talk of globalization, but its goal was to introduce cosmopolitan practices that could take Brazil beyond its contradictions and indecisions, in search of a prominent place in the international cultural landscape and of a glorious future, which, in fact, would never fully be. The ambition was for a Brazil constantly updated with established Western canons and keeping pace with the international art scene.

Few editions of the São Paulo Biennial have reflected the desire to break away from a Eurocentric view of art. The 24th edition, challenging so-called universal parameters, stands out, however, and is known as the “Anthropophagic Biennial” for using the concept coined by the modernist writer Oswald de Andrade in his 1928 *Anthropophagite Manifesto* to connect the entire show.³ It took place in 1998, 70 years after the launching the modernist manifesto, and one year after the first Mercosul Biennial. Paulo Herkenhoff was the general curator and counted on associate curator Adriano Pedrosa’s direct assistance along with a large team of foreign and Brazilian curators for every segment of the exhibition.

³ In Lisette Lagnado’s opinion, “although the choice of this text [Andrade’s Manifesto] coincided with its 70th anniversary, none of Herkenhoff’s declarations hinted that he was proposing a celebration around the date” (Lagnado 2015, p. 12). However, his using of the concept as a guiding axis for the show made the association unavoidable.

2. Only Anthropophagy Unites Us: The 24th São Paulo Biennial, 1998

The desire to “understand the historical sense of anthropophagy from the perspective of the cultural formation of Brazil” (Herkenhoff 1998b, p. 35) was the main goal of this edition, alongside with the intention to assume a critical stance in relation to the mainstream art history. According to its organizers, the São Paulo Biennial would cease to “illustrate or mirror dated discussions in order to introduce a lens of Brazilian culture as a guide to contemporary art and history” (Herkenhoff 1998b, p. 36). Herkenhoff and Pedrosa recognized Brazilian modernism as “a dense moment” of our art history and detected a conceptual breadth in the Oswaldian concept that allowed for an in-depth discussion of the Brazilian cultural plurality and for the creation of an “other history of art”. “The hypothesis follows that art history no longer has an absolute centre, but creates itself when the artist with historical relevance is to be found”, declares Herkenhoff (1998b, p. 40).

The 24th Biennial grouped 1140 works by 271 artists, 71 of whom were Brazilian, into four big segments: (1) Historical Nucleus: Anthropophagy and Histories of Cannibalisms; (2) Routes. Routes. Routes. Routes. Routes. Routes; (3) National Representations; (4) Brazilian Contemporary Art: One and/among Other/s. The Historical Nucleus was, by all accounts, the core and highpoint of the entire show. In it were exposed, side by side, artworks that ranged from the 16th century—such as Albert Eckhout’s paintings done in Brazil—to the 21st century, going through the 19th century—with works of Pedro Américo, Rodin, Munch, Delacroix, and Géricault—and through artists that stood out in the national and international scenes on the second half of the 20th century like Gerhard Richter, Bruce Nauman, Hélio Oiticica, and Cildo Meireles. There was no regional, national or chronological demarcation since the curators intention was “to undermine established systems of museological display, (. . .) to deconstruct hierarchical relations between genres, dates, techniques and locations and to bring elements from the past into the *here and now*” (Lagnado 2015, pp. 18–19). Thus, by placing together works of Aleijadinho and Goya, Alfredo Volpi and Van Gogh, Lygia Clark and Eva Hesse, by putting a Tunga sculpture next to a painting by Eckhout, pre Cabral Amazonic pottery next to Vicente do Rego Monteiro’s canvases, they sought to “integrate specific issues of Brazilian culture into a discussion with Western art” (Herkenhoff 1998b, p. 37). The 555-page publication referring to this section was the most extensive of the four volumes dedicated to the show and contained numerous texts by curators and scholars of many different nationalities.⁴

The segment Routes, Routes, Routes... attempted to present a panorama of contemporary art that would disrupt the discourses built by the hegemonic artistic centres. In it were artworks of emerging artists of seven regions of the world (Oceania, Latin America, Canada and United States, Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and Europe), which were selected by a team of ten curators, from various countries⁵. The curators were asked to read the *Anthropophagite Manifesto* and to reflect upon anthropophagy as a concept of cultural strategy before assembling their shows. Herkenhoff, however, stated that he and Pedrosa did not aimed at constructing “an expanded version of allegories of the four continents”, but rather integrating “a group of views and articulating criteria” without “reducing the world to a universalist or globalizing vision, nor each region to an all-encompassing gaze” (Herkenhoff 1998c, p. 26). Ana Maria Maiolino and Miguel Rio Branco were the two Brazilian artists selected to be included in the Latin American section.

The part dedicated to National Representations, “major asset and weakness” of the São Paulo biennials, according to Herkenhoff (1998a, p. 30), was assembled on the first floor of the Biennial pavilion

⁴ The associate curator Adriano Pedrosa was the editor in charge of the 24th São Paulo Biennial publications. In his editor’s note, he states that both he and Herkenhoff wanted to distance themselves from the traditional idea of an exhibition catalogue, thinking of the four publications [that correspond to the four segments of the show] as books that accompany and problematize the show. As Camila Maroja (2015, p. 259) points out, “although the idea of the exhibition catalogue as a place for critical reflection was not new, as 1997 documenta’s catalogue curated by Catherine David demonstrates, it represented a novelty in São Paulo and can be understood as an index of the curator’s effort to associate the show with Kassel”.

⁵ It is worth mentioning that the appointed curator for Canada and United States was the Brazilian Ivo Mesquita. Ten years later, in 2008, Mesquita would organize the 28th São Paulo, together with Ana Paula Cohen.

and comprised of individual exhibitions of artists representing 54 countries, chosen autonomously. Herkenhoff was thus unable to completely abolish the system of National Representations, inherited from the Venice Biennale, but he retained the proposal brought off in the previous edition of the São Paulo Biennial of accepting one artist per country.⁶ Furthermore, he plainly stated his discomfort, writing that “choosing an artist for National Representation is an exercise of power which many institutions are inclined to consider untouchable, (...) but may frustrate not only the general curatorship but, above all, its public” (pp. 33–34).

The fourth segment, dedicated to Brazilian Contemporary Art, had not been initially considered by the organizers of the 24th Biennial and was added with the aim of exposing the more current Brazilian production. It was the only segment of the show to have Herkenhoff and Pedrosa’s exclusive curatorship. Organized in two big parallel axes on the second floor of the Biennial pavilion, it put together artworks of 31 Brazilian artists, of varying techniques and mediums. The curators once again felt the need to explain their method, stating that this segment “does not define totalizing nor ultimate paradigms, does not wish to precise a general panorama nor a list of high selections, but offers instead one organization and conceptual cross-section (among many others) of Brazilian contemporary art” (Pedrosa 1998, p. 99).

An undeniable mark of the 24th São Paulo Biennial was the attention given to the educational sector, which received differentiated status, never seen before, involving a large team of monitors and mediators, and a project that considered elementary, middle, and high-school teachers and students, besides the public in general. According to Herkenhoff, the board of the Fundação Bial [Biennial Foundation] spared no effort in consolidating this sector, which has become one of the pillars of the São Paulo Biennial since then.⁷ Another relevant point, equally innovative at the time, was the development of a Biennial website, which made available exhibition maps, pictures, and short texts about some artworks, as well as a range of didactical material to be used in schools.

An issue that was present throughout the exhibition refers to the opposition between center and periphery in Brazilian and international art, taking us to the discussion developed by Moraes at the first Mercosul Biennial; but here it focuses on the conflictive relationship between Brazil and Europe. “I wanted the Biennial to have a starting line drawn based on the Brazilian culture, understanding that it, our culture, is associated to the Western culture, but with tensions, differences, and singularities”, declared Herkenhoff in an interview given at the time (Fioravante 1998).

In many of the texts published in the four publications that accompanied the show, Herkenhoff claimed to understand anthropophagy as a “crucial strategy in the process of the constitution of an autonomous language in a country with a peripheral economy” (Herkenhoff 1998b, p. 38). In the same spirit, he declared that “in Latin America, modernism—and the *Anthropophagite* Manifesto—is the enlightened moment in the search for an individual language that would surpass the colonial inheritance as well as its syndrome of European art emulation” (Herkenhoff 1998c, p. 27). But he added that he did not intend to reduce anthropophagy to a group of images, or a style, not even to a defined program, and considered it to be a permanent hypothesis for invention concerning the Brazilian social process. With that in mind, he committed himself to make a “fragmented list of possible meanings and approaches to the concept” beforehand, along with the other curators:

Throughout one year the list grew and circulated as a text in progress hundreds of interlocutors who were in some ways involved with the Biennial. For a year the list remained open to suggestions, additions, corrections, changes, explanations, and complications which in turn incorporates the answers in terms of questions, elucidations, reflections, notes, citations and references (...). The list incorporates the interpretation of many authors, critics and

⁶ Brazil did not participate in this segment.

⁷ It was the first time the São Paulo Biennial had a professional exclusively in charge of the educational program.

curators and thus increasingly dissolves the notion of individual authorship to become a collective one. (Herkenhoff 1998b, inside cover)

This list reached 165 different meanings of anthropophagy and cannibalism, amongst which were mentioned: transformation of totem into taboo, construction, deconstruction, amorous fusion and *jouissance*, miscegenation, 'Brazility', defense against canned conscience, war, dictatorships, genocide, culture shock, voracity, catechism, taboo transgression, eschatology, desire, the body in pieces, overcoming the colonial past, transculturation, syncretism, etc.

Evidently, Herkenhoff and his collaborators were aware of the political implications of adopting as a starting point for an exhibition as vast as the São Paulo Biennial, an "essentially" Brazilian topic. This decision rendered praise from some and severe criticism from others. In fact, a great part of the controversy generated by this biennial, especially in Brazil, was due to the use of anthropophagy/cannibalism as a base element for the entire show. While some exalted the fact that it was still a valid current notion, considering, for instance, cannibalism as a metaphor for appropriation and consumption in the contemporary world, others criticized its anachronism and pointed out that this biennial seemed more like a multicultural event than a cannibal or anthropophagic one, making use of these concepts as "a kind of intellectual label".

In Lisette Lagnado (2005) opinion, "never since the *Semana de Arte Moderna* [Week of Modern Art] in 1922 and after the exhibition of [Oiticica's] *Tropicália* have we heard [in Brazil] of such an effort to foment an interpretation of the history of art emancipated from the Eurocentric view". Lagnado was the curator of the 27th São Paulo Biennial, in 2006. She is also the author of a *Third Text* article about the show (Lagnado 1999) and editor of the book *Cultural Anthropophagy. The 24th Bienal de São Paulo*, published in 2015 in the Afterall Exhibition Histories collection, in which she again deals with the subject in a complimentary way. She exalts Herkenhoff and Pedrosa's "attempt to turn a concept into a critical operation" and points out that "until 1998, no reflection on the formation of Brazilian culture had been considered worthy of such explicit engagement by the Fundação Bienal" (Lagnado 2015, p. 11). Furthermore, she considers that "the project overall sought to reverse the flow of interpretations that had previously placed Brazil in a minor position", although she questions "if the scope of anthropophagy prompted the excessive use of metaphors and slipped toward an entropic loss of meaning" (p. 27, vol. 60).

Scholar Annateresa Fabris (1998), on the other hand, in her review about the show for the newspaper *Folha de São Paulo* wonders if it would be possible to think the artistic production of the 1990s based on a perspective which had its *raison d'être* at the beginning of the 20th century:

If the proposal of the *Anthropophagite Manifesto* was to proclaim the originality of the Brazilian culture in a deliberate inversion of the colonial logic, this is not the set of references with which the artists and intellectuals of the last decades of the 20th century come across. Far from being a national construction, culture appears more and more to be a multinational assembly process, an activity managed in many centres, and to which the traditional identity references are losing importance before the transactional character of technologies and consumption of symbolic messages and products.

Teixeira Coelho (1998, p. 143), likewise, reveals his discontent with the objectives of the show:

[There is] a problem with the Biennial that we must revisit: anthropophagy. Van Gogh, Fontana, Reverón: *anthropophagi*? Since Herkenhoff, the curator, says it is a thesis, there is room for debate. The anthropophagy at the Biennial is sometimes content (Bourgeois and the devouring of the father), sometimes language (Malevitch), sometimes colour (Reverón; lovely room, but there is no "devouring of colours", but rather a hint of hues), sometimes just title (Klein and his abstract canvas, only there because it is called *Great Blue Anthropophagy*). In this way, everything is anthropophagy—and, of course, nothing is.

Reading the text written by the curators of the European Routes, Routes, Routes ... segment of the show thus becomes enlightening. In it, the Belgian Bart De Baere and the Finnish Maaretta

Jaukkuri reveal their difficulty in apprehending the complete meaning of the concept of anthropophagy, stating that:

Anthropophagy as a cultural approach was put on paper in a manifesto in the twenties, and in Brazil seems to have become a way of identifying with different and conflicting essences, including the possibility of continually swallowing new energies and becoming them, too. When confronting with this concept we experience a sense of lacking something essential that we need to be able to understand it; of being unable to grasp a whole spectrum of nuances entailed in the Portuguese word “antropofagia”. When confronted with it, there is a distinct feeling of being able to go along with it only “so far”, after which there is an immensity that Brazilian culture seems to be intimate with, but which we are alien to, or alienated from. (De Baere and Jaukkuri 1998, p. 294)

3. In Conclusions

There are a good number of studies conducted in Brazil and abroad about the two biennials discussed here but very few that have given a comparative analysis of both exhibitions, which occurred within an interval of one year from each other and that have attempted to answer, in their own way, to the demands of the international art scene of the time and to assist the entry of Brazilian and Latin American art into the global arena. Camilla Maroja’s doctoral dissertation (2013) stands out, discussing at length these two shows, among other exhibitions and events, in order to examine how non-academic agents (i.e., artists, curators, and institutions) helped construct the current canon of Latin American art. The second chapter of her dissertation takes the first Mercosul Biennial as a case study and the third investigates how the concept of anthropophagy gained renewed currency in the art world after the 1998 São Paulo Biennial. However, since the ultimate goal of her research was to discuss how the Latin American art canon has been recently institutionalized in major collections and museums, she does not examine both biennials in relation to the Brazilian and international cultural landscape of the 1990s.⁸

As Mirtes Martins de Oliveira (2015, p. 177) observes, “in the context of the globalization of the 1980s and 90s, some curatorial proposals attempted to promote an internationalist vision of art through terms that could be shaped and understood locally”, like anthropophagy.⁹ At that moment, regional, local, and geo-political oriented new artistic initiatives, such as the biennials of Havana, Dakar, and Istanbul, among others, were welcomed with enthusiasm to counterpoint the general belief in globalization and to create a new map of contemporary exhibitions. In the Latin American context, the importance of the third edition of the Havana Biennial in transforming the concept of major biennial shows by taking them beyond the limits dictated by the mainstream must not be ignored, although neither of the curators involved in both biennials here in analysis mentioned the Cuban event in their texts.

It is also noteworthy that it was in the 1990s that the first solo exhibitions of contemporary Brazilian artists occurred in major museums abroad, leading to an international circulation of Brazilian art that has been expanding over the recent years. As an example, we can cite the itinerant retrospectives about Hélio Oiticica and Lygia Clark at European and North American museums, the first between the years of 1992 and 1994, the latter between 1997 and 1999.

⁸ Regarding the 24th São Paulo Biennial, Maroja believes that it can be inserted into a genealogy of shows that constituted, in retrospect, the so-called “global turn” of art history and defends that “it was the deployment of anthropophagy as a methodological tool that allowed the exhibition to have an impact on global art history and on the institutional history of the São Paulo Biennial” (Maroja 2015, p. 262). She also thinks that the 1997 Mercosul Biennial can be viewed “as a key installment of a Southern genealogy of exhibitions that attempted to formulate a visual and theoretical narrative of regional artistic formations” (p. 123).

⁹ She cites as relevant examples of exhibitions that proposed a revision of the idea of the primitive and its modern appropriation: *Primitivism in the 20th Century Art* (MoMA, New York, 1984–1985), the third Havana Biennial (1989), *Magiciens de la Terre* (Centre Georges Pompidou and La Villette, Paris, 1989); *The Other Story* (Hayward Gallery, London, 1989).

On the other hand, during these same years, the first mega-exhibitions of well-known foreign artists took place in Brazilian museums. During the 1970s and 80s, the country had been absent from the international circuit of exhibitions due to severe economic and political problems. This situation begins to change in the 1990s, and Brazil finally wins a place and acquires more power in the world artistic circuit. Two international shows began this transformation: in 1995, a Rodin retrospective took more than 150,000 visitors to the São Paulo Pinacoteca, and more than 180,000 to the Museu Nacional de Belas Artes (MNBA), in Rio de Janeiro. These were record numbers in the country, although by today's standards they might be considered low if compared to the average daily visitors to great museums like the Louvre and Tate Modern. Two years later, in 1997, the Claude Monet exhibition at the MNBA received around 400,000 visitors and was considered one of the biggest cultural events of that year in South America. Then, it was presented at MASP, in São Paulo, where it also attracted large crowds. In both exhibitions (Rodin and Monet) it was necessary to invest heavily in the museums to allow them to house these two international shows. Therefore, it was essential that public success be guaranteed, and extensive publicity campaigns were one of the means.

Another relevant piece of information that cannot be neglected is the fact that, in these same years, the Brazilian government had been able to finally control the hyperinflation that had been ravaging the country for decades. Therefore, massive investments in culture could begin (with government incentive through a law called *Lei Rouanet*, which made it possible for companies and citizens to invest part of their income taxes in cultural actions). The more stable economy made it easier to consolidate the art market in the country, the advance of major art exhibitions, and the interest of national and multinational corporations in sponsoring cultural events.

Brazil was getting professional in the field of culture, and the irradiating power of the biennials could not be ignored. Huge amounts of money (for Brazilian standards) were invested in the 1994, 1996, and 1998 São Paulo Biennials, not only in setting it up, but also in publicizing and in the production of increasingly ambitious catalogues, as we have seen. Mirtes Martins [de Oliveira](#) (2015, p. 179) highlight that “the 24th Biennial adopted new forms of cultural marketing and popularization, as the Fundação Bienal engaged in gigantism and spectacularization in the 1980s and 90s”. This also applies to the first Mercosul Biennial, although in this case, as aforementioned, local businessmen made most of the investment.

In an interview years later, [Herkenhoff](#) (2005) remembers that in 1998 there were not many Brazilian curators with international experience, in particular in the Latin American circuit and in the United States. However, in the case of the two biennials discussed here, both curators were very experienced, recognized nationally, and who could mingle easily in international circles¹⁰. Herkenhoff himself, in the same interview, acknowledges that for more than a decade he had “patiently dialogued with the international art system, working with museums, cultural centers, biennials, congresses and universities, and advising curators in South America”, which conferred him legitimacy to negotiate loans of artworks or the participation of certain artists. Frederico Moraes, thirteen years older than Herkenhoff, has had an important place in the national scene since the 1970s for organizing outstanding Brazilian avant-garde and contemporary art exhibitions.

The curatorial strategies in both biennials were, in fact, innovative and can be considered as political statements in their own right, which helped to build new collaborative networks. However, their curators had not exactly constructed an anti-hegemonic aesthetic program since, in general, they bet on already established artists, in the national or international market. In both cases, the desire to play a part in the global art world and to bring significant visibility to the shows themselves was undeniable. In the case of first Mercosul Biennial, to the critics made with an excessive presence of artworks produced many decades before the show, Moraes explained:

¹⁰ It is worth pointing out that only in 2002 was the first foreign curator hired for the São Paulo Biennial. Until then, only Brazilians had taken that job.

If one of the programmatic objectives of the Mercosul Biennial was to make it possible for us to rewrite Latin American art history, if not from our own perspective, at least not from an entirely metropolitan one, then it is necessary to revisit or revive some historical moments of our art. After all, if Europeans and North Americans do not know our art, which is understandable, if not justifiable, we, Latin Americans, do not know ourselves, in such a way I would call irresponsible. (Morais 2004, p. 187)

For Moraes and Herkenhoff, inscribing Brazilian artists into the international circuit was not enough and they both took up position in relation to the discipline of art history and its selective narratives. Their shows, however, were not able to throw new lights over the history of Brazilian art, nor did they alter the current historiography of art in Brazil or Latin America. Hitherto, they did not produce an “other history of art”, as proclaimed. Furthermore, it should be stressed that the antagonistic discourse towards an Eurocentric view of art adopted by Moraes and Herkenhoff, aimed at decolonizing the history of Brazilian or Latin American art, was consistent with the general desire of the hegemonic circuit at the time to give (relative) centrality to periphery.

All in all, both biennials resist not only time but also economic problems in Brazil and are constantly reinventing themselves. In recent years, they succeeded in overflowing the sphere of high culture and transforming into (or becoming again) a cultural product for the masses, with strong media appeal and spectacular characteristics.

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