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Ministry of Culture, Fundação Bienal and Itaú present 33rd Bienal de São Paulo – *Affective Affinities*

## **Affective Affinities** **Gabriel Pérez-Barreiro**

In his 1809 novel, *Elective Affinities*, Goethe tells a story of an aristocratic couple whose idyllic life is disturbed by the appearance of two new characters into their relationship: the wife's foster-daughter, and the husband's childhood friend. As is often the case in such stories, new relationships are forged beyond the social conventions of the time. So far, so typical. However, when the four protagonists are sitting in their well-equipped library enjoying an evening of music-making and reading, one of them takes a scientific treatise from the shelf and reads aloud about the reaction of certain compounds and molecules, and how some will attract and some will repel, like oil and water. Goethe seems to be inviting us to draw a parallel between the elective affinities of the natural world, and the conflictive emotional and spiritual lives of the characters in the novel. If our tastes and affinities are governed by laws we do not fully understand, we are potentially faced with an organizing system that is not primarily moral, or cultural, or biological, but some strange amalgam of all three, in which our affinity, be it conscious or unconscious, leads the way.

Almost a century and a half later, in a Brazil on the verge of a revolution in the arts (reinforced by the creation of the Bienal de São Paulo in 1951), the art critic and political activist Mário Pedrosa wrote his thesis "On the Affective Nature of Form in the Work of Art".<sup>1</sup> In this text, he uses Gestalt theory to discuss the ways in which a viewer actively constructs an understanding of any artwork, in a dialogue between the formal characteristics of the work, and the viewer's psychological makeup. The dialogical nature of this framework, and its embracing of both formal analysis and subjectivity, was to prove transformative for the development of Brazilian art from the early 1950s to the present. By simultaneously empowering and relativizing the individual viewer, Pedrosa articulated a profoundly humanist perspective through which to understand art and its effects (or affects, to use his term), independently of the prevalent ideological battleground in which x art form was to be considered inherently superior to y art form. For Pedrosa, art was to be judged primarily in terms of its ability to create a productive relationship between the artist's intention and the viewer's sensibility. As one of the most important political activists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Pedrosa was also crystal-clear about art's revolutionary potential within this framework of individual emancipation, resisting calls for a 'political' art at the level of its narrative contents.

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<sup>1</sup> Mário Pedrosa. "Da natureza afetiva da forma na obra de arte" (1949). In: Otilia Arantes (ed.), *Forma e percepção estética: Textos escolhidos 2 / Mário Pedrosa*. São Paulo: EDUSP, 1996, pp.105-177.

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I would argue that Goethe's and Pedrosa's ideas, applied to our current reality, can offer a useful and enriching way to think about the challenges and contributions of a contemporary art biennial. When the Bienal de São Paulo was founded in 1951 as the second international biennial after Venice (1895), its mission was clear: to place the art of Brazil 'in living contact' with international production.<sup>2</sup> This was coherent with the modernizing and progressivist framework of the Brazilian cultural elite of the time, and their ambition was matched with a remarkable *savoir faire* and financial muscle that placed Brazil on the map of international art almost immediately, while also injecting new energy into the local art scene. The early editions of the biennial were organized with an encyclopedic logic. As in Venice, countries were invited to send their 'best' artists, but unlike Venice, the Bienal also organized major exhibitions of the major artists of the day, including Picasso, Calder, Klee and others. Alongside these exhibitions, there were moreover presentations of architecture, graphic design, jewelry, so-called primitive art, and even the art of the Jesuit missions of Paraguay (6<sup>th</sup> Bienal).

In line with broader changes in the art world, the biennial began to question this model in the 1980s, at which point the figure of the curator was emerging as the new organizing agent in events of this type. Biennials were now expected to propose something intentional, and to organize their contents according to this idea. Ironically, just as postmodernism was making itself felt in the arts, ushering in a moment of greater diversity and co-existence of artistic languages, the biennial (and most biennials around the world) was moving in the other direction, attempting to define or articulate the predominant issues and production of the day, to organize exhibitions in which the curatorial concept would be greater than the sum of its (artistic) parts.

Although for most of its history the Bienal de São Paulo was one of a tiny handful of biennials, today, by the most recent count, there are some 320 biennials or similar events around the world.<sup>3</sup> The art biennial has become to some extent the most visible symbol of the contemporary art system: international and event-based, while managing an awkward balance between the social frivolity of the opening events for the art world elite, and the increasingly dense theoretical framework of their curatorial statements. Free of the ongoing programmatic and bureaucratic commitments of the museum or the contemporary art center, biennials operate within their own unique privilege of potentially reinventing themselves every two years. This apparent freedom creates two major challenges: for the institution there is the difficulty of maintaining consistent funding and a relationship with the local audiences in whose names these events are organized, and intellectually, the challenge is how to innovate within a model that, despite its freedom, seems

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<sup>2</sup> For a history of the early editions of the São Paulo Bienal see Francisco Alambert and Polyana Canhête, *Bienais de São Paulo: Da era dos Museus à Era dos Curadores* (São Paulo: Boitempo, 2004); Isobel Whitelegg, "The Bienal Internacional de São Paulo: A Concise History, 1951-2014", *Perspective*, 2, 2013, 380-386; Adele Nelson "Monumental and Ephemeral: The Early São Paulo Bienais." In Mary-Kate O'Hare (ed.) *Constructive Spirit: Abstract Art in South and North America, 1920s-1950s* (Newark: Newark Museum, 2010), 127-142.

<sup>3</sup> [http://www.on-curating.org/files/oc/dateverwaltung/issue-39/PDF\\_to\\_Download/Oncurating\\_Issue39\\_WEB.pdf](http://www.on-curating.org/files/oc/dateverwaltung/issue-39/PDF_to_Download/Oncurating_Issue39_WEB.pdf) [retrieved August 17, 2018]

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often to generate much of the same type of event in which similar concepts are repeated as frameworks for many of the same artists.

I would argue that the crisis of the model has less to do with the conditions of most biennials, which generally are freer than those of almost any other contemporary art institution, and more to do with issues within the curatorial world itself. When, in the 1980s, the curator began to emerge as the center of the contemporary art system, it led to the rise of ‘curatorialism’, the idea that the curatorial thesis is the primary motive and attribute of an exhibition. At that time, the idea that becoming a curator (especially an independent curator) was even a viable profession began to gain traction, and numerous graduate programs in curatorial studies were founded to serve this burgeoning professional and intellectual field. With an almost exclusive emphasis on the contemporary thematic group exhibition as a model, these programs further cemented the idea that an exhibition was above all else an opportunity to propose a thesis, in which the artworks should line up to ‘illustrate’ or ‘prove’ a proposition.<sup>4</sup> In the years since, the biennial has become the privileged stage on which these theses can be demonstrated and compared.

Returning to Goethe and Pedrosa, could the concepts of affinity and affect provide a different framework, or operating system, within which to organize a Bienal? For the 33rd edition of the Bienal de São Paulo, I am proposing that the centralized, discursive, and top-down Bienal – that today is the standard protocol for international biennials – can evolve into a more diversified experience, in which the hierarchy between art and curatorial practice can be re-thought. For this edition, I invited seven artists to comprise the curatorial team, each with the invitation to curate a stand-alone exhibition within the pavilion, in which their own work would be included, alongside artists of their choice. With this model, I hope to show how artists construct their own lineages and systems to understand their own practice in relation to others, while also allowing the themes and relationships to emerge organically from the process of exhibition-making, rather than starting with a set of predetermined issues. This choice also reflects a desire to re-evaluate the tradition of artists as curators, which is a central part of modern and contemporary art history, and also of particular relevance in Brazil, where artists have long organized their own discursive platforms.<sup>5</sup> Each artist-curator works with complete freedom in determining the list of artists, the exhibition design, and the internal curatorial logic of their exhibitions, and the resulting diversity of curatorial methodologies is entirely intentional. In addition to these seven group exhibitions, I have selected

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<sup>4</sup> For a mordant critique of curatorial programs, see Maria Lind, “Hothouse Tomatoes and Outdoor Tomatoes”, *The Exhibitionist* 3, (May 2011).

<sup>5</sup> On the artist as curator, see Jens Hoffmann (ed.) *The Next Documenta Should be Curated by an Artist*. Frankfurt: Revolver, 2004; Elena Filipovic (ed.) *The Artist as Curator*. London: Koenig Books, 2017. In the Brazilian context I am thinking of projects like the magazine *Malasartes*, and the experiences of artists teaching in the early years of the Museu de Arte Moderna in Rio de Janeiro, along with contemporary examples like Projeto Fidalga and Pivô in São Paulo, or the Escola de Arte Parque Lage in Rio, all of which propose more horizontal relationships between artists and curators.

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twelve individual projects by artists I consider to be remarkable for different reasons, and who do not necessarily have a thematic connection between them.

Of these twelve projects, three are posthumous exhibitions of key artists of the 1990s who have not received the attention they deserve in recent art history: Lucia Nogueira, Aníbal López, and Feliciano Centurión. In addition, the artist Siron Franco will participate with a selection from his iconic *Rua 57* series (1987), a transformative moment in the artist's production, and also in the history of Brazilian art, in response to an environmentally and socially catastrophic event.

If one of the critiques of the current biennial model is that there is a disconnect between the stated discursive principles and the actual physical experience of being in the space, this issue should be at the center of any proposal for renovation. For the 33rd edition, this concern informs both the physical distribution of art in the pavilion (low-density, and clearly demarcated exhibition spaces), and also the education program. Both of the major Brazilian biennials (São Paulo and Mercosur) have given great priority to mediation and education, and this tradition to my mind separates them from the plethora of biennials where, if this concern exists, it is usually at the level of good intentions, and not in terms of real resources. For this edition, the conceptual focus of the education program is attention: how we administer our capacity to focus or not on what surrounds us.

While this is an age-old concern, in our times the issue of attention has become especially pronounced. We are just starting to understand the catastrophic impact of social media in our interpersonal and political lives. Our attention has become the prime product that 'free' platforms resell, while continuing to seduce our attention during our waking hours.<sup>6</sup> Visitors to the 33rd Bienal will be offered a number of exercises or protocols through which they can experience the exhibition differently, hopefully counteracting the natural dispersion that occurs in large-scale exhibitions of this type. The emphasis on attention also connects to Pedrosa's idea of affective form, as it empowers the viewer to create his or her own relationship to the object, and then share that experience with others.

The concept of *Affective Affinities* works at two levels within this edition. The projects of the artist-curators demonstrate how artists can provide a model for thinking about the relationship between artworks that is born of their life-long and productive relationships within the field in which they work. At another level, by presenting a diversified and fragmented Bienal, free of an overarching thematic framework, the viewer is free to construct his or her own experience of the different proposals, without feeling that the experience will succeed or fail only in the degree to

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<sup>6</sup> On attention and its contemporary political effects, see Jonathan Crary. *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep*. London: Verso, 2014, and John Lanchester, "You Are the Product". *London Review of Books*. Vol, 39, No. 16, August 2017, pp. 3-10.

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which it corresponds to a central-declared set of principles. At the heart of this edition is a desire to reaffirm the power of art as a unique place to focus attention in, to, and for the world. If we can think of art and its exhibitions primarily as experiences and not as declarations, we may be able to imagine a biennial in which artists, curators and viewers are treated as equals, all able to build their own affective affinities with art and with the world beyond.

