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REVIEW

32nd Bienal de São Paulo: Incerteza Viva (Live Uncertainty)

Ecology, ecosystems and culture – Stefanie Hessler assesses this year's edition of the biennial

By **Stefanie Hessler**



Eduardo Navarro, *Sound Mirror*, 2016, site-specific installation. Photo: Leo Eloy/ Estúdio Garagem. ...



Incerteza Viva (Live Uncertainty), the title of the 32nd São Paulo Biennial, gained a new urgency after Brazil's first female president, Dilma Rousseff, was impeached only days before the exhibition opened. The ousting was the result of a bribery trial amidst economic decline, which some have described as a parliamentary coup. The process was led by conservative Michel Temer, who during his interim presidency (as Rousseff's vice president, he has succeeded to the presidency and will be serving out the remainder of what would have been Rousseff's term) has abolished the ministry of culture (reestablishing it only following massive protests) and appointed an all-male, all-white cabinet. Also among Brazil's woes, just months before, the country had experienced what is being called the worst environmental disaster in its history, when an iron ore tailings dam in the state of Minas Gerais ruptured. In this atmosphere, the biennial's exploration of uncertainty – in the political sphere and due to global ecological irresponsibility; catalysed by international migration and the concentration of wealth in ever fewer hands – has proved topical.

The curators, led by Jochen Volz, proposed the garden as an associative curatorial framework, linking the inside of the pavilion, which thanks to few walls feels open and airy, to the Ibirapuera Park outside. Eduardo Navarro's work *Sound Mirror* (2016) introduces the pro-longed tube of a gramophonelike horn, which is aligned towards the crown of a palm tree, through the pavilion's glass facade, allowing visitors on the inside to listen to the plant. Many of the exhibited works are conceived around natural materials, like the untitled and undated sets of carved and painted tree trunks by eco art pioneer Frans Krajcberg, or Jorge Menna Barreto's functioning vegan restaurant *Restauro (Restoration)*, (2016), based on sustainable food production networks and highlighting agriculture's impact on the environment.

Gardens often reflect the style of an individual, or the values of a culture and its relationship to nature. In Brazil, Portuguese and Dutch colonisers framed their agricultural plantations and monasteries with greens reflecting their taste and claims upon territorial and ecological control, remnants of which stand as present-day reminders of centuries of European colonial presence. Whereas the exhibition did not explicitly address this landscaped historicity, the garden is a curiously affirmative concept for a biennial taking place in a park next to a huge granite monument dedicated to the *Bandeirantes* (seventeenth-century Portuguese colonisers, gold hunters and slave raiders), which was built between 1921 and 1954 by the Italian-Brazilian sculptor Victor Brecheret. Nonetheless, the recent dam disaster's bitter taste of (neo-)colonialism resonates in Carolina Caycedo's work *A Gente Rio – Be Dammed (The People River – Be Dammed)*, (2016) in the form of map-resembling drawings with text, a video and satellite photographs, as well as fishing nets from areas affected by the privatisation of water. Several works in the biennial are dedicated to land rights, like Dineo Seshee Bopape's *:indeed it may very well be the ___ itself* (2016), consisting of compressed soil platforms on which gold leaves and other objects are placed, and the rights of land, like Ursula Biemann and Paulo Tavares's project *Forest Law* (2014), an ongoing series of legal cases arguing for the sovereignty of indigenous land threatened by oil and mining extractions.

If ecology is the relation of organisms and their interactions with the environment, the garden is a site of inscription of the modernist opposition between culture and nature, of human thought imposed on nature. Architectural theorist Sanford Kwinter describes this dyad as the imaginary axis upon which modernisation and progress are conceived. The entangled ecological and economic crises are the results of the transformations of territory, which are often colonial projects, and deeply rooted in this false opposition. The manmade topology of the megalopolis of São Paulo is the subject of Rosa Barba's to-the-point work *Disseminate and Hold* (2016). The 16mm

film focuses on the 3.5km concrete overpass nicknamed the Minhocão that meanders through the city like a giant earthworm. At night and on Sundays the flyover is closed to traffic and reclaimed by pedestrians, whom Barba's film follows in a rhythmical sequence that is interwoven with archival material. The images are overlaid with text fragments by the artist Cildo Meireles, a key figure in the cultural opposition against the 1964–85 military dictatorship. A shot of a graffiti reading *Temer Jamais* (*Never Temer/Fear*) links historical events to the current political situation, while the Minhocão per se becomes a symbol for architectural impositions on nature and the domestication of soil for economic and other human purposes.



Jonathas de Andrade, *O peixe*, 2016, 30 min, 16mm film transferred to digital HD. © the artist. Courtesy Fundação Bienal de São Paulo

Emphasising diverse forms of knowledge, the biennial includes numerous references to native cultures, from projections coming out of the indigenist audiovisual project *Vídeo nas Aldeias* (*Video in the Villages*) to Maria Thereza Alves's *Uma possível reversão de oportunidades perdidas* (*A Possible Reversal of Missed Opportunities*, 2016), a series of fictional conferences the artist organised with Amerindian students around topics usually ignored by Brazilian institutions. Öyvind Fahlström's concrete poetry piece *Den svåra resan* (*The Difficult Journey*, 1954) proposes an alternative to the linear structure of language, and in Rachel Rose's immersive video *Everything and More* (2015), projected on a semitransparent screen installed against a window with a view of the park, the astronaut David Wolf describes the cognitive shift in awareness known as 'the overview effect' that makes so many space travellers return to earth as ecologists.

The biennial grapples with the failed promises of modernity, evinced in works like Maryam Jafri's *Product Recall: An Index of Innovation* (2014–15), an array of objects and photographs of products accompanied by captions describing the failure of, say, Kleenex's antivirus tissues or Pepsi's nursing bottle, products by companies that were an epitome of the capitalist myth of progress that went awry. However, in the conceptual assertion of Don Quixote's idealist marvelling (in maybe the first modern novel) at the discrepancy between his expectations and the real world, the exhibition feels delayed. The realisation that uncertainty permeates all arenas of life and the fact that progress is a myth have long been understood by those structurally

excluded from it – Amerindian peoples, for example. Yet the biennial provides a timely reminder that uncertainties in the form of climate change and political instability are entering previously spared areas, collapsing the borders that global capital is attempting to uphold. Carla Filipe's installation *Migração, exclusão e resistência* (*Migration, Exclusion and Resistance*, 2016) occupies the pavilion's terrace with endangered food crops planted in plots of car tires, proposing the reclamation of urbanised spaces and the revitalisation of knowledge crucial for survival, concerns with increasing geographic and social scope.

Denise Ferreira da Silva's catalogue text is a key to the most thought-provoking ideas and works in the exhibition, suggesting that the pillars of modernist thinking – separability, determinacy and sequentiality – are collapsing. In nonlocality, she argues, resonating with Donna Haraway and Karen Barad, the differences between human groups, and between human and nonhuman entities, have little ethical significance, and can instead be understood as singular expressions of everything else in the universe, as countless entanglements. Such links can be found in Jonathas de Andrade's *O peixe* (*The Fish*, 2016), a highlight of the show. The film shows fisher-men on the northeast coast of Brazil holding and caressing their catch until it dies. The artist's forged myth is a comment on the impossibility of reconciling humans with the product of their labour, in this case due to increasing estrangement from traditional fishing, and nature 'itself'. The work calls for the creation of new myths and models that don't resort to ostensible certainties and idealisms of the past, but instead create new, nonlocalised entanglements of fact and fiction, human and non-human. Whether these can be found in existing, anthropogenic concepts of gardens, which this biennial frames as attempts of ecology itself, is uncertain.

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Stefanie Hessler

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