

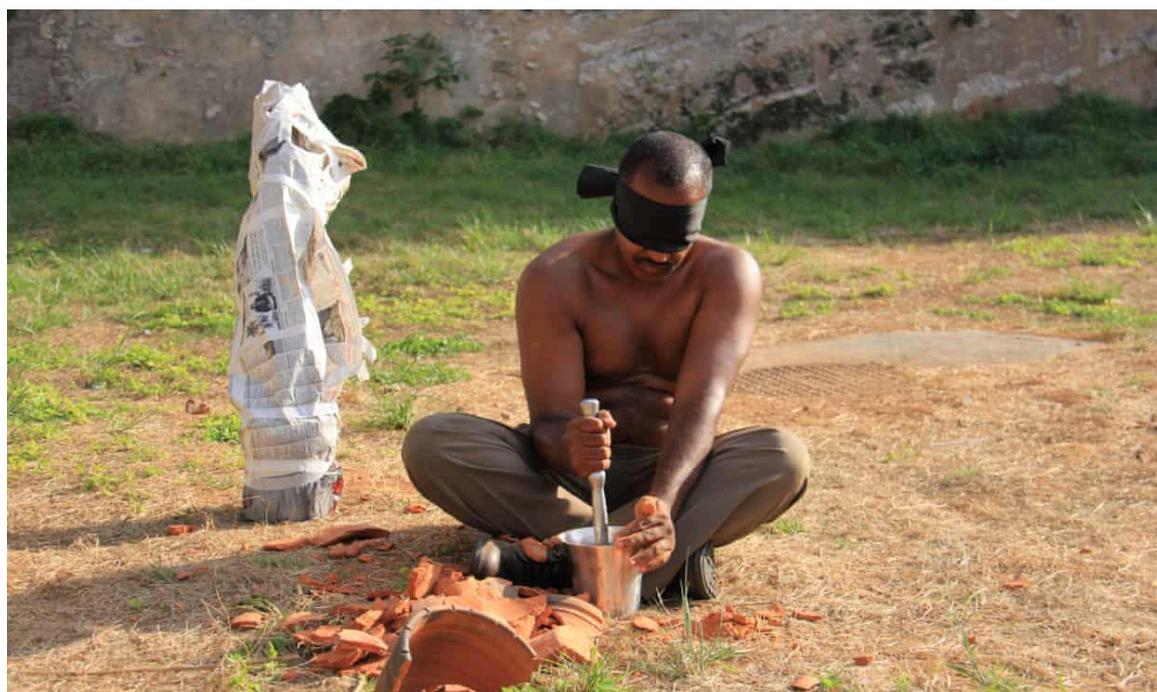
# The Guardian

## São Paulo Biennial - artists react to Brazil's political turmoil

Some artists return to the land and one suggests interspecies communication could be a solution as exhibition expresses tension and uncertainty

**Jason Farago** in  
*Sao Paulo*

Mon 12 Sep 2016  
18.51 BST



Dalton Paula, one of Brazil's most promising young painters, has festooned dozens of ceramic vessels with imagery drawn from Latin America's colonial history. Photograph: Gabriela Sacchetto

**W**earing black at an exhibition opening usually goes unnoticed – but here in Brazil, the black-clad artists at Latin America's most important contemporary art exhibition knew how to make a stir. On the preview days of the São Paulo Biennial, more than a dozen artists milled through the galleries in custom black T-shirts, whose blunt slogans brought the country's filthy politics into Oscar Niemeyer's airy white pavilion. EU QUERO VOTAR PARA PRESIDENTE, read one: "I want to vote for president." Another said DIRETAS JÁ, "Elections now," a reboot of a chant from the last days of the dictatorship. The most popular was the frankest: FORA TEMER, a call for Brazil's newly installed president to jump into Brasília's manmade lake.

The 32nd Bienal de São Paulo, which opened to the public this weekend in this glorious mess of a megacity, is the oldest such art exhibition in the world after the Venice Biennale. It's a halting, tentative, exploratory show – and its hesitancy may be a natural response to

the wild gyrations of this country, upended by a one-two-three punch of political, economic, and medical crises. Days before the exhibition opened, the twice-elected president, Dilma Rousseff, was bounced out of office by a political class far more corrupt than she. The continuing mega-scandal uncovered by Operação Lava Jato (“Operation Car Wash”) – the largest graft probe in Brazilian history, which has revealed dumbfounding corruption across the country’s political and business elites – has been pushed off the front pages by Rousseff’s ouster, and the new Temer government is accused of attempting to smother Lava Jato for good. Whether or not you agree with the artists here who speak of Rousseff’s impeachment as a coup, the replacement of Brazil’s first female president with a despised politician of another party has dealt a grievous blow to this still young democracy, and given a new cast to the biennial’s title, *Incerteza Viva* (Live Uncertainty).

The show features a substantial number of African artists, including the young Zimbabwean painter Misheck Masamvu, whose splotchy, color-soaked abstractions display a roiling anxiety. Afro-Brazilian artists are well represented too. Dalton Paula, one of Brazil’s most promising young painters, has festooned dozens of ceramic vessels with imagery drawn from Latin America’s colonial history: missionary classrooms, celebrations, funerals, all depicted in a naive style that offsets black skin with white clothing.

Paula’s unadorned, unpretentious ceramics are among this show’s many humble gestures. Jewels you can find at the after-parties; prepare here for acres of dirt. The Australian artist Susan Jacobs interrupts a pile of raked earth with a spill of molten gallium. Dineo Seshee Bopape, from South Africa, displays tightly packed cubes of soil decorated with hieratic symbols and embedded with herbs and clay. More packed earth courtesy of Erika Verzutti, one of Brazil’s best sculptors, whose wall-mounted blocks of brown are scored with slices, divots and pockmarks. Lais Myrrha, also from Brazil, has erected a three-story tower of dirt, timber and straw next to another of metal and concrete: an occupation of Niemeyer’s high-modern pavilion with cheaper, rougher architecture.

Myrrha’s giant twin towers are only the largest of many projects here to look at indigenous Latin America and at alternatives to the big bad city. Sometimes it’s done sympathetically, as in the ethnographic films of *Vídeo nas Aldeias*, a collective from Pernambuco that encourages indigenous Brazilians to document their lives. Too often, though, the show dips into heal-the-world pieties, back-to-nature hippiedom and spiritualist bunkum. The young Scottish artist Ruth Ewan has gathered hundreds of plants, rocks, bones, and tools associated with the French Republican calendar, pitched here as a critique of modern timekeeping. Jorge Menna Barreto has occupied the pavilion’s restaurant and made it vegan-only; I tried to order a coffee with milk and was duly humiliated. Eduardo Navarro of Argentina has pierced a window of Niemeyer’s pavilion with a giant ear trumpet, so you can have a conversation with the palm tree outside. I didn’t hear anything, but perhaps I am dead to interspecies communication.

Nearly half a floor of the biennial is dedicated to such paranormal visions as Gilvan Samico’s occult engravings of stars, snakes, and mermaids carrying the sun; the intricately abstract “energy diagrams” of Kathy Barry, from New Zealand; or else a yoga-inspired video of nebulating clouds of blue and pink from the San Francisco visionary Jordan Belson. Those of

us who are stuck on the international biennial treadmill will note that this crystals-and-mediums stuff has been going around for a while. Both the 2013 Venice Biennale and the 2015 Istanbul Biennial pulled the same trick, employing the last century's world spirituality as a balm for this one's miseries. (The interspecies schmoozing has trended lately too: if you missed the episode in 2012 that saw curators musing over voting rights for strawberries, consider yourself lucky.) At this very fraught São Paulo biennial, though, the New Age sympathy has a local cast. If the utopian designs of an earlier age of Brazilians has soured – and, indeed, Niemeyer's own presidential palace in Brasília is now occupied by a corrupt usurper – then maybe a different, less European kind of utopia deserves a look.



The Italian film-maker Rosa Barba has produced a quicksilver portrait of São Paulo's indelible Minhocão. Photograph: Rosa Barba

I get the impulse. I sympathize with its political basis. But at the risk of getting all anthropocentric on you, this anti-modern palaver is getting tiresome, and today especially it seems unhelpful at best. There is something immature, bordering on primitivist, in this show's celebration of talking trees and magic dirt, and it is dangerous to commensurate the very real concerns of climate change and indigenous rights with spiritualist hokum. In a moment of real crisis, when political language has no room for fantasies, wouldn't thinking hard and looking clearly seem more proper? It's all right not to have a concrete response, but you won't find the answers you seek from Madame Blavatsky.

This biennial is at its best when it puts magic to one side and looks life in the face, to see how people really handle unstable places and uncertain times. The Italian film-maker Rosa Barba has produced a quicksilver portrait of São Paulo's indelible Minhocão, the elevated highway that slices through this concrete jungle and that paulistanos have reclaimed as public space. And the young Brazilian artist Bárbara Wagner – one of the many wearing a "FORA TEMER" T-shirt at the opening – befriended the young singers and rappers of the country's north for a knockout video backed by the acid sounds of brega, a pop genre out of Recife. Teens with face tattoos and twerking dancers get busy in the slums of Pernambuco – but then Wagner invites them into a vacant, ghostly nightclub, where Brazil's reliable decadence turns almost heartbreaking. They sing about love, money, and shaking their asses, but in the empty club the entreaties sound more plaintive, troubled, desperate even. "É tudo ilusão," one backup singer intones over and over: it's all an illusion. Today it is a more fitting motto for this roiled, beautiful, uncertain nation than Order and Progress.

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