

Frieze

Opinion /

Looking Back 2018: Brazil and the Body-Electric



BY FERNANDA BRENNER

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Latin American artists respond to nationalism, climate change, and other urgent crises



2018 was a year marked by flames. From California's recent wildfires to the extinction of the National Museum in Rio de Janeiro in a devastating fire this past September, this was, to say the least, a gruelling year. I suspect that the Brazilian government's slovenliness with landmark architecture and historical preservation is not far from Trump's biased blind eye towards climate change; their actions are the outcome of neglect and greed.

We are now getting our just desserts for decades of neoliberal policies (and die-hard colonial mentalities) that favour profit over preservation and – in Brazil at least – a systematic disdain towards environmental care and cultural heritage. Looking at these recent disasters, one thing is certain: our way of life needs to change in order for our species to remain.



'Memories of Underdevelopment', 2018, installation view, Museo Jumex, Mexico City. Courtesy: Museo Jumex, Mexico City

Two very different exhibitions held in 2018 brought together generations of artists that have been questioning 'official discourses' and Western standards for decades: 'Memories of Underdevelopment' curated by Julieta González at Museo Jumex, Mexico City, and 'Metamorphoses – Let Everything Happen to You' curated by Chus Martinez at Castello di Rivoli, Turin.

'Memories of Underdevelopment' was a massive curatorial effort that brought together around 400 works from artists from eight different countries in Latin America spanning twenty-five years (between the early 1960s and the mid-1980s) that ditched or deliberately refused Western-imposed aesthetics and the dominant rhetoric of developmentalism in the region. The other exhibition at Castello di Rivoli explored the notion of metamorphosis as a

process shared by the natural and the creative worlds. Through the works of a fascinating few like Eduardo Navarro and Mathilde Rosier, Martinez's exhibition embodied today's most urgent lack: a full-on reconnection with the environment, starting from rethinking language and our own mental structures. These shows were radically different in their curatorial approach and content, but they converged at a crucial point: artists as agents for paradigm shifts.



'Memories of Underdevelopment', 2018, installation view, Museo Jumex, Mexico City. Courtesy: Museo Jumex, Mexico City

I'm certain that many of the artists featured by Gonzalez took Chus Martinez's proposition, 'Let everything happen to you', very seriously when radically engaging – politically and physically – with their own contexts and structural issues. They created new methodologies and forms of social commitment from scratch. At a time when the worst kind of politics are infecting the planet and draining our energy with heavy loads of fear and frustration, it would be nice to consider ourselves more like bees (in the curatorial text, Chus Martinez wonders if we could be flowers) who cross-pollinate ideas and experiences in an attempt to find more sensorial – or less rhetorical – ways of dealing with each other and our surroundings.

It was refreshing to see shows that brilliantly tackled a recent but constant puzzle for the art

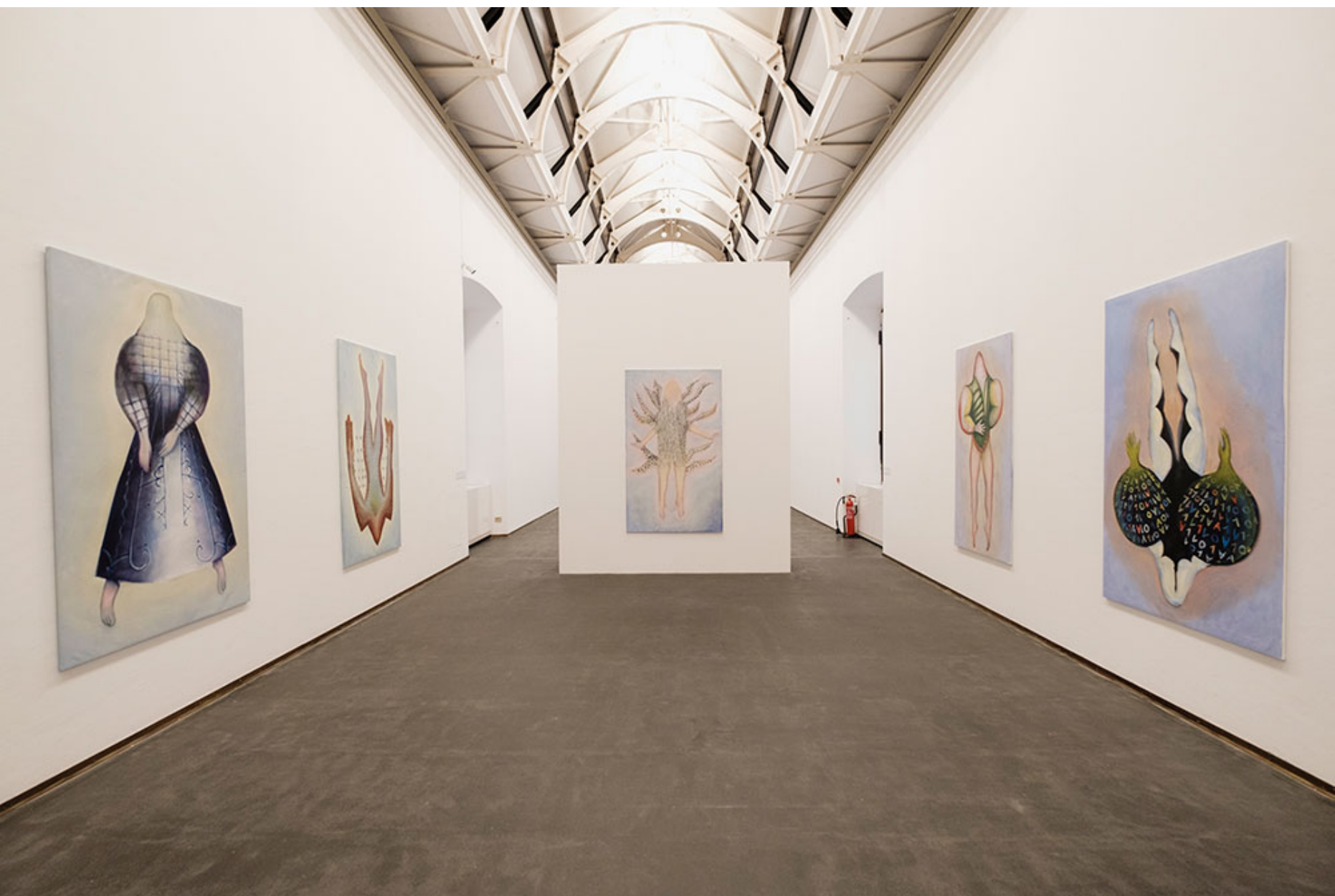
world: how to deal with our global failure when it comes to climate change and endemic social injustice in the art realm. And how this ongoing puzzle can be solved without losing exhibitions' essential *raison d'être* – providing intriguing visual experiences as starting points for broader discussions. I'll keep these two shows and this dilemma in mind into the new year.

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'Metamorphoses – Let Everything Happen to You.', 2018. Installation view. Courtesy: Castello di Rivoli Museo d'Arte Contemporanea, Turin; photograph: Renato Ghiazza

Retrospective thinking is often a melancholic activity, especially after a year like this in Brazil. The victory of the far-right conservative candidate Jair Bolsonaro, concluding a batch of surrealistic events – such as the museum burning and the brutal murder of congresswoman Marielle Franco – made artists and most people working in the arts deeply anxious about current affairs (including myself). The question of whether art is capable of doing something about it has caused some artists to retreat inward, and others to go on the offensive. In São Paulo, Casa do Povo's programme welcomed artists and activists that opted for the latter.

This included a theatrical performance conceived and staged by former secondary-school students who participated in the school occupations against budget cuts by the state in 2015-2016 and the exhibition 'Rejuvenate!', conceived by the artist Renata Lucas as an acute response to the aforementioned 'surrealistic' political scenery of the country. Lucas worked with Mauro Restiffe, Carla Zaccagnini, Carlos Fajardo and others in a self-organized attempt to raise awareness for the current political situation.

In the student performance 'Quando Quebra Queima' (roughly: when it breaks it burns), young performers took over the community centre's open rooms in what they called a 'dance-uproar'. By re-enacting the moments of occupation at their former schools, the youngsters' bodies disrupted the structure that first brought them together by transforming their discontent into an artistic language. We attend the theatre to watch human bodies perform, but this was nothing like that. These bodies were power lines for social change, they weren't enacting anything and we weren't watching. I felt that by simply being there, I was subscribing to something I didn't fully realize yet, something that is becoming clearer as things get rougher.



'Metamorphoses – Let Everything Happen to You.', 2018. Installation view. Courtesy: Castello di Rivoli Museo d'Arte Contemporanea, Turin; photograph: Renato Ghiazza

A power line can start a fire if it breaks in the wind. The cause of the Californian firestorms was human, as with the incineration of the museum. To build and to burn is the *modus-operandi* of what we learned to call ‘civilization’, but everything that deeply caught my attention this year seemed to disavow this premise. Sometimes after tragedies happen it’s easy to slip back into daily life as we know it, to forget what a new era may ask of us, even when the stakes are high. These shows encompass both analytic reporting and affective experience, and hasten us to find our own ways to engage with our time’s most pressing issues.

Renata Lucas ‘stabbed’ the three-story building of Casa do Povo with a massive Brazilian flag (*Top-floor*, 2018), its pole piercing all the building’s slabs. Without the official ‘art institution’ framework, the installation’s structure mingles – or interferes – with all the activities taking place in the space (from boxing lessons to neighbourhood forums). Flags have always been symbols of domination, conceptual disparity and territorial dispute. When reaching the top floor, the Brazilian national symbol dramatically touches the ground, looking exhausted and crestfallen with its own weight. Unfortunately, Lucas’s piece didn’t coexist with the student performance in Casa do Povo, but it might have. Maybe a good way to deal with 2018’s ashes is to ‘sing the body-electric’ along with Brazilian students and follow the lead of Martinez’s group show, to start by decolonizing our own minds.

Main image: A massive fire engulfs the National Museum in Rio de Janeiro, 2018. Courtesy: AFP/Getty Images; photograph:

Carl De Souza

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MUSEO JUMEX

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