

São Paulo: Beyond the Bienal *by Oliver Basciano*

We're stuck. The taxi driver doesn't seem perturbed: it's just São Paulo; or to be more precise, it's São Paulo's traffic. The clogged-up roads are a big issue here, and people plaintively predict a moment of total gridlock hitting these concrete arteries in the not-too-distant future. Later, an artist will show me a film he has made that references this worrisome prediction. A few more reals tick over on the meter.

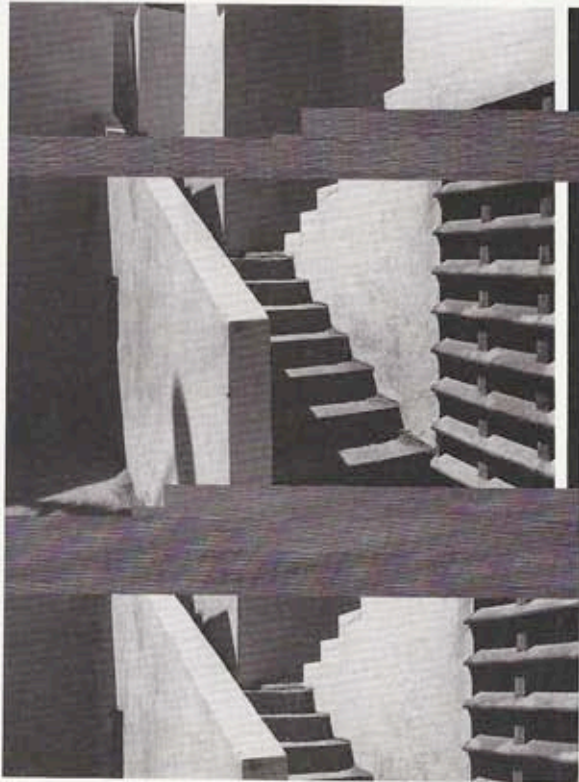
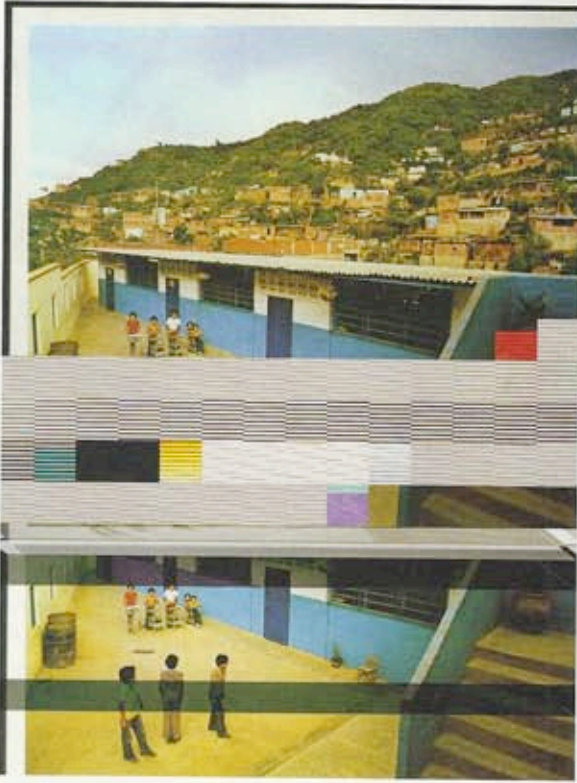
The cab is trying to get me from one of the city's newly booming commercial gallery spaces to another. What started with veteran gallerist Luisa Strina opening a tiny space in 1974, during the height of Brazil's military dictatorship (she would regularly have to make trips to the police station to negotiate the release of one or other of her politically outspoken artists), has now grown to include 35 members of the Associação Brasileira de Arte Contemporânea (ABACT). Alongside that official gallery trade association, there is what one might term a mutually supportive 'scene' in the city, and one that is attracting intense international attention, perhaps not unconnected to the economic boom Brazil is experiencing. (A 300 percent rise in dollar terms to its stock market over the last decade; a tenfold increase, from \$5 billion to \$50b, in the amount of foreign money being poured into stocks and bonds between 2007 and 2011.) The art scene, and its market, have emerged during a similar period, with SP-Arte, Brazil's biggest art fair, staging its eighth edition earlier this year; well-regarded new galleries, including Galeria Vermelho, Galeria Leme and Mendes Wood, being founded; and more established gallerists – among them Strina and Márcio Botner, of Rio de Janeiro-based gallery A Gentil Carioca – taking up positions on art-fair selection committees. This commercial coming-of-age is built upon the firm foundations of Brazil's mid-twentieth-century avant-garde, as represented by the likes of Hélio



Oiticica, Lygia Clark, Lygia Pape and Cildo Meireles (on more than one occasion in conversation someone compares the Brazilian art industry's growth to that of China's – however, while there are commercial similarities, China does not have the strong history of Modernism underpinning its art practice), and a few key nonartists pushing it into place.

And when it comes to individuals, Strina is the place to start. Regarded as the grande dame of gallerists, she now occupies a

vast U-shaped space in Jardim Paulista, a block away from that district's central avenue of skyscrapers. When I visit the gallery, it's not Strina but Bernardo Paz, the billionaire mining magnate and philanthropic backer of the Inhotim sculpture park and botanic garden, who is languidly sat at *her* desk, smoking. In the galleries, meanwhile, there is an exhibition of Venezuelan artist Alessandro Balteo Yazbeck's large-scale manipulated photographic prints, which display what one might see as various recurring (if contentious) facets of Latin American art – a bright, vivid aesthetic and an interest in politics and urbanism. In this case the politics comes to the fore in the artist's collaging of old photographs portraying favela scenes from his home country, the results of which are then scanned with a faulty scanner. The consequent images are both a comparison of the old and the new – the archival graininess of the original photographs interrupted by digital distortions caused by whatever problem the scanner was suffering – and the juxtaposition of a twenty-first-century technology with a social problem that has its roots a hundred years prior. Coupled with this show is an exhibition of British artist Brian Griffiths's 'invisible' sculptures (large steel cubes covered with dirty-cream canvas, Griffiths's tents suggest, in the context of Balteo Yazbeck's work, a commentary on the supposedly temporary structures of the favela).



clockwise from lower left: two images from Alessandro Balteo Yasbeck, *The Corrupted Files*, 2012, © the artist, courtesy Galeria Luitza Strina, São Paulo; Adriano Costa, *A Place Built to Be Destroyed*, 2012, embroidery, 85 x 75 cm, photo: Ricardo Bassetti, courtesy Mendes Wood, São Paulo; Adriano Costa, *Plantation*, 2012 (installation view), photo: Ricardo Bassetti, courtesy Mendes Wood, São Paulo; Marlene Huginmair, *Art for Modern Architecture Dilma's Election* (detail), 2011, silkscreen on paper, 56 x 32 cm each, courtesy Luciana Brito Galeria, São Paulo

The presence of a European artist in the space is in marked contrast to the isolation in which Brazil operated when its contemporary art ecosystem was developing. "We were separate from the world," Strina tells me. It was through the São Paulo Bienal, which was first staged in 1951, and which opens its 30th edition this month, that the city was able to make contact with the international art scene; however, this avenue of communication was as frequently jammed as any of modern-day São Paulo's streets. In 1969 the French participants in the tenth edition voted to stay away in protest over the censorship that had prevailed in Brazilian art and media since the introduction of the infamous, hated Institutional Act #5 (passed in 1968, it gave the dictatorship a veto over all public forms of expression) and the presumed effects of this decree on the biennial. Several other countries followed the French boycott. It was a stance taken out of solidarity with Brazilian artists living under the shadow of censorship, but it had the effect of further isolating Brazil from the global art community. After Brazil's return to democracy in 1984, Strina and a couple of the galleries that had been established at a similar time – Nara Roesler in 1975, for example, and Gabinete de Arte Raquel Arnaud in 1980 – began to participate in art fairs, and the country's art scene was able to build upon the attention focused on it through the efforts of its de facto ambassadors, artists Lygia Clark (who left for Paris in 1968) and Hélio Oiticica (who had lived in New York since the early 1970s).

Another trip through the city: this time via the efficient, if geographically limited metro to Fortes Vilaça in the Santa Cecilia district. The previous evening I'd attended a private view at their downtown space. That was big – housing an addictively humorous series of sculptural assemblages by Barrão (an artist belonging to the same generation as Clark and Oiticica), constructed out of kitschy broken ceramic and porcelain ornaments, and placed throughout the space – but nothing compared to this warehouse venue. Here I meet Alexandre Gabriel, the gallery's director. He picks up the story of the art scene's postdictatorship emergence, which was gathering steam with the establishment of galleries such as Casa Triângulo in 1998. Marcantonio Vilaça founded Galeria Camargo Vilaça in 1992 with his girlfriend, Karla Meneghel Ferraz de Camargo. After Vilaça suffered a fatal heart attack, age thirty-eight, in 2000, the gallery took on its present form under the partnership of Alessandra d'Aloia and Márcia Fortes, with Gabriel as director. While tragic on a personal level, Gabriel tells me, Vilaça's death came as an additional blow to an art scene that had already seen many of its second wave of gallerists die young, as a consequence of the AIDS epidemic of the previous decade: "A sizeable sector of this emerging generation succumbed to the virus," he notes.

In its present incarnation the gallery works with Brazilian artists "and those with a certain Brazilian sensibility in their interests", Gabriel says. The idea of 'a Brazilian sensibility' is one that comes up repeatedly in conversations with Brazilian artists and curators I meet along the way. It's

a contentious and markedly generational debate, and one that has spread internationally to influence the view of how foreign artists contextualise working in Brazil. For example, Luciana Brito Galeria (a gallery founded during the late 1990s, is displaying a well-constructed group show curated by former Miami Art Museum curator Rina Carvajal and titled *Performing Abstraction*, which includes contributions by, among others, Tobias Putrih, Falke Pisano and David Maljkovic. In one corner of the gallery are works by Marine Hugonnier. They belong to an ongoing series titled *Art for Modern Architecture* (2004–), in which the French artist blocks out the images of various newspaper front pages – in this case *Folha de S. Paulo*, *O Estado de S. Paulo* and *O Globo*, each carrying a headline concerning the election of Dilma Vana Rousseff (succeeding the popular Lula da Silva) as the country's first female president – with brightly coloured rectangles. The overall effect seems to be an embodiment of two major influences on Brazil's contemporary art production: its history of Constructivism, and a strong political rhetoric (while additionally offering a neat, specific inversion of Nara Roesler artist Antonio Manuel's five-panel work *Repressão outra vez: eis o saldo*, 1968, in which the artist silkscreened red and black two-tone newspaper images of protests and repression onto each panel). These historic touchstones are noticeable in much of the art being made in Brazil (and, evidently, work that is made in relation to it by outsiders) and have become a recognisable aesthetic and, to a degree, conceptual shorthand for references to the Brazilian avant-garde of the twentieth century.

Such nods are apparent in the exhibitions of work by Adriano Costa and Paulo Nazareth at Mendes Wood – one of the younger galleries to have broken onto the international circuit through, among other activities, their participation in the Frieze Art Fair. There is an evocative recurring sense of materiality in Costa's sculptures that harks back to concrete art – the mid-twentieth-century movement that, aesthetically, was seen to have promoted a sensual tactility while retaining a certain strict geometric abstraction. This reference point can be detected in the bold primary palette and gridlike use of rectangles in Costa's crocheted fabric floor work *A Place Built to Be Destroyed* (2012), for example; or in another floor work – much larger – *Os Bananas da Terra* (2012), which features empty rubbish bags spread across the gallery floor and weighed down by sheets of glass, the cheap plastic material rippled and creased to beguiling affect. Yet the title of Costa's exhibiton, *Plantation*, is telling. With this invocation of colonialism, Costa seems to introduce a wry irony to his art-historical nods. He implicitly asks whether, like the old colonial plundering, this preoccupation with Brazil's avant-garde modernist past benefits Brazil and its artists, or whether it is something driven by today's European and American market view of Brazilian art. •