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The faces and spaces of
São Paulo's art scene

Though the financial crisis might have hit hard and the public institutions are often in scraping mode for survival, the São Paulo art ecosystem turns out to be almost as lively as this megalopolis itself – the biggest in the southern hemisphere. As São Paulo is one of the most interesting cities from an architectural point of view, many art spaces are housed in impressive modernist buildings, designed by the great Oscar Niemeyer and others. Here, DAMN° reports from a vibrant city, drowned in caipirinhas, and the ever-present sound of the gilded's private helicopters trying to escape the notorious traffic jams.

TEXT

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Felipe Dmab, Pedro Mendes and Matthew Wood
Mendes Wood DM
Photo: Bruna Guerra

'This city is so conservative compared to Rio,' sighs the artist Paulo Nimer Pjota, sipping from his Stella Artois while a bunch of young, beautiful tattooed people with dyed hair parade in front of him during his opening at Gallery Mendes Wood DM. If this is already conservative to him, you have to wonder how things would go down in Rio. 'The only problem in Rio is that it is hard to focus there,' he adds with a smile. The rivalry between both major cities is characteristic for every country. If São Paulo can lay claim to being the financial centre of the country, Rio's reputation rests on its laid-back hedonism. Leaving aside personal preferences, this dynamic means almost

all the important art galleries – and institutions – are based in the former, Brazil's largest city. Like Mendes Wood DM, a gallery that was only founded in 2010 but has risen very quickly to the top of the global pile. Participating in fairs like Art Basel, Art Basel Hong Kong and Frieze, and with branches in New York and Brussels, it reached the 91st position in the respected – yet contested – ArtReview Top 100 of most important people in the art world in 2016. 'When we started in Brazil, there were so many fantastic artists without gallery representation who needed international exposure,' says Felipe Dmab, founding director of the gallery. 'We felt we could do

that for them. At the same moment, we understood that in order to bring Brazil to the world, we had to bring the world to Brazil. In the beginning, we mostly represented Brazilian artists. But we also did projects with established international artists we weren't necessarily representing, like Lawrence Weiner, Jack Pierson or David Salle. We wanted to create a kind of kunsthalle situation in a country that was so hungry for international information. Brazil almost has an insular way of existing in various economic fields – and that is also the case with the art world. In the beginning, Brazilian galleries were selling Brazilian artists to Brazilian collectors and Brazilian institutions. We wanted to break this, as a lot of Brazilian artists end up as a hostage of this system.'

The inward-looking reflex outlined by Dmab should not really come as a surprise. With more than 207 million inhabitants, the country is almost a continent in itself. And that is also reflected in the participants at the 14th edition of SP-Arte, the country's leading art fair that took place in April in the famous Ciccillo Matarazzo Pavilion, originally designed by Oscar Niemeyer to host the São Paulo Biennale, the second oldest biennale in the world after Venice. From the 131 participating art galleries, no less than 97 were Brazilian, or something like 75%, which is a high number of national galleries compared to most fairs. 'The art market in Brazil is young compared to the one in Europe,' says Fernanda Feitosa, the founder and director of SP-Arte. 'The



MASP, São Paulo Museum of Art, designed by Lina Bo Bardi



MASP, covered passage way, overlooking the city
Photo: Markus Lanz



Ciccillo Matarazzo Pavilion, designed by Oscar Niemeyer
Photo: Pedro Ivo Trasferetti
Courtesy of Fundação Bienal de São Paulo

market was shaped in the 1950s and 1960s, with the opening of the new museum MASP [designed by Lina Bo Bardi] and the creation of the Biennale in 1951. Some of the older galleries also opened in the same period. The institutions started following that rhythm.' Though the fair mainly attracts Brazilian galleries and collectors, it also hosts international powerhouses like David Zwirner, White Cube, neugerriemschneider and Gallery Continua. 'Important international galleries have been coming to try out the fair,' Feitosa says. 'The fact they return is a sign of trust. You can also see that international galleries start representing Brazilian artists. Jac Leirner is represented by White Cube, Mira Schendel works together with Hauser & Wirth, and Jonathan de Andrade with Continua. I think this is the result of their presence at the fair and the collaborations they have set up.'

Though both the Biennale and the fair have been instrumental for the art ecosystem, the art scene is mainly driven by private initiatives, by galleries, and collectors. São Paulo boasts many galleries, most of them situated in beautiful modernist – or modernist looking – buildings, with the typical inner courtyard full of exotic vegetation. Like Luciana Brito Gallery, that for the last



Ciccillo Matarazzo Pavilion
Photo: Pedro Ivo Trasferetti
Courtesy of Fundação Bienal de São Paulo



Bosco Sodi
Photo: Romulo Fialdini
Courtesy of Luciana Brito Gallery



Liliana Porter
Photo: José Pellegrini
Courtesy of Luciana Brito Gallery



Pablo Lobato
Photo: Romulo Fialdini
Courtesy of Luciana Brito Gallery

two years has been housed in a marvellous villa from 1958 designed by the Italian architect Rino Levi. During our visit, the gallery brought together a mini-survey of the work of Liliana Porter. Eminence grise Luisa Strina is also settled in an impressive building in the gallery neighbourhood of Cidade Jardins, whereas Galeria Marília Razuk is a bit further away and presented the first – disappointing – exhibition of new work by Scottish artist Douglas Gordon. Razuk opened her gallery in 1992, when there were only eight or nine galleries. ‘Galleries do well,’ she says, ‘which is remarkable as there have been so many crises in this country.’ During our visit when the fair was on, ex-president Lula had just surrendered to the police after contesting the guilty verdict he received on corruption charges last year. Would that impact the art market? ‘It is sad to see a president in jail. But we are used to ups-and-downs in Brazil. I don’t think the collectors will be afraid of the political situation.’



Pivô, a non-profit artist organisation, settled in the Copan building designed by Oscar Niemeyer

Though the private market is strong, institutions, let alone artist-run spaces, are less present. ‘The art scene is very unhealthy because of this strong market,’ says Fernanda Brenner who runs Pivô, the independent not-for-profit that is housed in the Copan Building designed by Oscar Niemeyer, with its sinuous shapes the most iconic building of São Paulo, a city that has a remarkable architectural modernist heritage. ‘You have some established institutions here. But there is pretty much nothing in between a kunsthalle model, not-for-profit, or even artist-run spaces. There is just no public support for that kind of thing. We have great artists. But the infrastructure and means to support them are precarious.’ Pivô is an interesting case. Informally occupied in 2011, its first exhibition, *Next Time I would Have Done It All Differently*, turned out to be quite prophetic. ‘It showed we had no idea what was about to happen,’ Brenner laughs. ‘It took me almost five years to use the word institution. We don’t pay rent but lease the venue. After our first exhibition, we agreed with the owner we would take care of the expenses. But I am not a businesswoman. I didn’t realise we had to find funds (laughs). We are almost entirely self-sufficient. We survive through a combination of little incomes, a yearly auction, editions, and renting out the space for photo shoots. But we do not receive money from a ministry.’



Cada Cabeça Uma Sentença part. 2, 2018, Paulo Nimer Pjota, oil, acrylic, pigment on canvas and iron plate plus bronze object with metal pedestal, 243 x 251 x 36 cm
Nimer Pjota at Mendes Wood DM

Besides an exhibition venue, Pivô also hosts studios for 40 artists a year – ten of them reserved for international artists. Nimer Pjota, the artist who was showing at Mendes Wood DM and who combines the formal language of old civilisations with elements from street culture in his paintings, attests to the precarious situation. ‘A lot of things have evolved over the last 10 years. Brazil is now more open to the world. But because of the political situation, it is harder to find public support. There have been a lot of budget cuts for culture. Whereas São Paulo had 50 open calls 11 years ago, now there are only 10.’



Nimer Pjota at Mendes Wood DM

SÃO PAULO



Nimer Pjota at Mendes Wood DM



S video, 2017, Luiz Roque / A sci-fi parable on the underground at Avenue Paulista where the MASP is housed



Untitled, 1970, Flávio de Carvalho
China ink on paper
Photo: Ding Musa
Courtesy of Auroras gallery



Casa de Vidrio where Lina Bo Bardi used to live

His fellow artist Luiz Roque, known for such works as the video *S* (2017), a sci-fi parable on the underground of Avenue Paulista where the MASP is housed, has similar experiences. His studio and that of nine other artists is housed in a mixed-use building by - once again - Niemeyer, called California and located in the República district. 'In the first decade of 2000, the financial situation was healthy,' he says. 'There was sponsorship and you could apply for travel expenses when showing abroad. It was a good moment and there were a lot of interesting artists. But now times have changed. I am not sure it's the best moment. Time will tell. Despite the crisis three years ago, we have some interesting institutions like MASP, Iberê Camargo Foundation in Porte Alegre and MAC in Niterói, the UFO-shaped building by Niemeyer [that frames panoramic views on Rio]. Though these institutions don't have much in the way of funds, they have good ideas and young directors.'



The California building designed by Oscar Niemeyer now houses around 40 artists



Mangrané, 2014, Daniel Steegmann
Kriskal aluminium curtain and powder-coated laser-cut steel frames
Variable dimensions



Untitled, 2015, Tunga
Iron, ceramics, Sansevieria trifasciata, steel, wood, glass, crystal
Variable dimensions
Photo: Filippo Bamberg
Courtesy of the Estate of Tunga

But there are also other formulas, like Auroras, a private initiative set up by collector Ricardo Kugelmas in a beautiful modernist villa from 1957 designed by Gian Carlo Gasperini in the Morumbi district. It's a stone's throw from Casa de Vidrio where Lina Bo Bardi used to live and has been the Kugelmas family home since Ricardo's grandfather. 'I spent 10 years in New York,' Kugelmas says. 'Every time I went back to Brazil, I thought there was something missing. My good friend, the artist Tunga, pushed me to open a space as there were institutions here, but hardly any alternative spaces. Sadly enough, on the 6th of June, 2016, the day I came back to Brazil, he died.' Kugelmas decided to name the venue Auroras, as a tribute to the last body of work of his friend. During our visit, he combined an installation of Tunga with paintings of Cecily Brown – an artist who was simultaneously showing at Instituto Tomie Ohtake Centre, a show Kugelmas also helped realise – and the modernist Flavio de Carvalho. 'We do four projects a year,' he says. 'This is the sixth one. This exhibition is very emblematic for what I want the project to be. I do not want to fill in an institutional gap, but want to create a dialogue.' A nice project indeed.



Auroras gallery, designed by architect Gian Carlo Gasperini



A Traitor is the Bee, 2017, Cecily Brown
Oil on linen
Photo: Genevieve Hanson
Courtesy of Auroras gallery

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