

SÃO PAULO AND VENICE BIENNALES

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Facing a crisis that lasts for years, nearly two weeks ago the Board of Curators of the São Paulo Biennale chose a young and dynamic consultant and art collector to preside over the institution. Soon afterwards, in Italy, this year's Venice Biennale opened with parties celebrating its success. Why are their destinies so different? Why is the São Paulo Biennale, that I have unfailingly visited since its opening in 1951 up to 2006, losing artistic relevance and social support in São Paulo year after year, whereas the Venice Biennale continues to achieve success and respect? For lack of money, someone would say. For lack of enough State support, would add someone else. And maybe both would be right. I propose, however, another explanation that doesn't intend to be exclusive, because it also helps to explain the lack of resources, but which, if taken into consideration, may take the São Paulo Biennale back to its heyday.

There is a fundamental difference between the two Biennales. Whereas the Venice Biennale is divided into three sectors, the São Paulo Biennale is limited to just one. Whereas Venice keeps a large sector for national exhibitions at the Giardino and the Arsenale, a small but relevant sector for renowned artists at the Giardino, and a large sector at the Arsenale in which the curator develops a theme and makes room for new artists, the São Paulo Biennale decided, a few years ago, arrogantly and misguidedly, to confine itself to the theme chosen by the curator and to new artists. It thus reflected an actual and even propitious fact: the growing importance of creative curators for major museums as well as for Biennales. But it did it in a radical, and, therefore, misguided way.

It is important to create a space for renowned artists because it is educational and helps to legitimate the exhibit with the other renowned artists, regardless of their presence. On the other hand, national exhibitions are important because they make it possible to present great artists at no cost for the Biennale, since it is the government of the

represented country that pays for the expenses. Therefore, if we decide to divide up the space of the Biennale so that 45% are destined to national exhibitions, 10% are left for the curator to show renowned artists, and 45% are destined to the theme of that year's Biennale, we will have a cheaper exhibit, that will also be more attractive to the public.

But, on the other hand, won't this limitation of the curator's power imply a decrease in the artistic quality or in the cultural significance of the Biennale? Not at all. First, because he will have power over the three segments of the exhibit. Even in the case of national exhibitions, negotiations may and shall take place. Second, because there will be more resources left for the large thematic segment – so that the curator will be able to invite the best up-and-coming artists.

The São Paulo Biennale has always had a significant role in the diffusion of Brazilian and world avant-garde art, and in the acclaim of new artists. The City of São Paulo and Brazil thereby become part of the contemporary trends, participate in cultural avant-garde experiences and in the basic critique that emerges in conceptual art. More than ever before, today we see artists mastering the most advanced technologies in order to innovate and create. We cannot let an institution such as this die of administrative incompetence and intellectual arrogance. The Biennale board and its new president are in the presence of a major challenge.