'THE GREAT WORK OF CONTEMPORARY ART' AND 'THE GREAT CURATOR': AUTHORIAL CURATORSHIP AT THE BIENAL DE SÃO PAULO (1985 AND 1987)

"A GRANDE OBRA DE ARTE CONTEMPORÂNEA" E "O GRANDE CURADOR": CURADORIA AUTORAL NAS BIENAIS DE SÃO PAULO (1985 E 1987)

«LA GRANDE ŒUVRE D'ART CONTEMPORAINE» ET «LE GRAND CONSERVATEUR»: AUTEUR COMMISSARIAT AUX BIENNALES DE SÃO PAULO (1985 ET 1987)

"LA GRAN OBRA DE ARTE CONTEMPORÁNEA" Y "EL GRAN CURADOR": CURATORIO DE AUTOR EN LAS BIENALES DE SÃO PAULO (1985 Y 1987)

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ABSTRACT: This essay focuses on two editions of the Bienal de São Paulo organised by Brazilian art critic Sheila Leiner, in 1985 and 1987, as a key context to analyse the consolidation of exhibition curatorship within the Bienal's structure and Brazil's contemporary art circuit. Built on the analyses of Leirners curatorial projects, I reflect on how and with which implications the conditions and repercussion of these exhibitions may indicate or have affected the direction of the Bienal, structuring its bases to the following globalisation process that circumscribed the shaping of contemporary art biennials.

Keywords: Bienal de São Paulo, biennials, exhibition history, authorial curatorship.

RESUMO: Este ensaio foca duas edições da Bienal de São Paulo organizadas pela crítica de arte Sheila Leirner, em 1985 e 1987, como contextos-chave para analisar a consolidação da curadoria na estrutura da Bienal e no circuito artístico contemporâneo do Brasil. Tomando os projetos curatoriais de Leirner como estudos de caso para abordar esse contexto, reflito sobre a maneira como suas condições e repercussões podem indicar ou têm afetado nos rumos da Bienal, estruturando suas bases para o processo de globalização que se seguiu circunscrevendo a formulação das bienais de arte contemporânea.

Palavras-chave: Bienal de São Paulo, bienais, história das exposições, curadoria autoral.

RÉSUMÉ: Cet essai se concentre sur deux éditions de la Biennale de São Paulo organisées par la critique d'art Sheila Leirner, en 1985 et 1987, comme contextes clés pour analyser la consolidation de la curatelle dans la structure de la Biennale et dans le circuit de l'art contemporain au Brésil. Prenant les projets curatoriaux de Leirner comme des études de cas pour aborder ce contexte, je réfléchis à la manière dont ses conditions et répercussions peuvent indiquer ou avoir affecté la direction de la Biennale, structurant ses bases pour le processus de mondialisation qui a suivi, circonscrivant les formulations biennales de l'art contemporain.

Mots-clés: Biennale de São Paulo, biennales, histoire des expositions, curation d'auteurs.

RESUMEN: Este ensayo se centra en dos ediciones de la Bienal de São Paulo organizadas por la crítica de arte Sheila Leirner, en 1985 y 1987, como contextos clave para analizar la consolidación de la curaduría en la estructura de la Bienal y en el circuito del arte contemporáneo en Brasil. Tomando como casos de estudio los proyectos curatoriales de Leirner para abordar este contexto, reflexiono sobre la forma en que sus condiciones y repercusiones pueden indicar o haber incidido en el rumbo de la Bienal, estructurando sus bases para el proceso de globalización que siguió, circunscribiendo las formulaciones bienales de arte contemporáneo.

Palabras-clave: Bienal de São Paulo, bienales, historia de las exposiciones, curaduría autoral.

Art is... Answer this: art is... Art is what you want it to be This, this is art ... Art is representation This is representation In art the idea can be represented by the idea itself This is an idea Art can be immaterial This is immaterial Art is reflection This is reflection.

1. Introduction and framework

This is an extract from a poem that is part of a visual poetry-video-performance artwork created and presented at the Contemporary Art Museum of the Universidade de São Paulo (MAC/USP), in 1983, by Sheila Leirner (in Souza, 2019: 119) - entitled Trilogia Amorosa (Love Trilogy) and it has been in the Museum's collection as a video art piece since then. This is the only production by Leirner that is categorized as a work of art, her presence in Brazilian art historiography is more important as an art critic and exhibition curator, her central activities since the 1970s, however, this multimedia piece's meaning has a lot to do with how Leirner has understood borders or flows between artists and critics' activities. Since 1975, Leirner has written regularly for O Estado de São Paulo (one of the biggest Brazilian newspapers) and for exhibition catalogues, and she had been in the position of General Curator for two editions of the Bienal de São Paulo, in 1985 and 1987. Then, Leirner was a young art critic with no previous and consistent experience in charge of any institution, taking a central spot in the decision-making structure of the Bienal, right after the first two editions of the exhibition that counted on the formal position of a well-known specialist as a curator, Walter Zanini, an art historian, professor and former founder-director of the MAC/USP (1963-1978).

The first of these two exhibitions that Leirner curated, the XVIII Bienal, became the epicentre of controversies that heated debates among artists, critics and cultural attachés participating in the event or not, even before its opening - and her curatorial project itself was a new element of the biennials expected polemical repercussion. Besides some exhibitors whose presence was highlighted on media coverage around the launching of the show, the way space, architecture, display and concepts were used by Leirner as the curator became a source and target for criticism, cultural journalism and artists' reactions (Souza, 2015: 77-80). Sheila Leirner's poem-videoperformance is strongly verbal, addressing art as idea, representation, and mediation, revealing self-consciousness on her position as an intermediary agent. It is also an example of her reading of the more than ten-years-long debate and intellectual systematisation about arts mediation, conceptualisms, institutional critique, creativity, the asserted crises of criticism, so on. Following the presentation of her

artwork, Leirner gave a lecture about art critics' activity, avowing her intentions to make the video piece:

I would like art criticism to have the right to construct and to express itself through the same dynamic used by art. What has happened is that critics have been able to dissolve the borders separating criticism from creation. Not literarily as it was used to be before. Now, artistically. [...] Because the mediation and the idea have become more important than a completed product. The critic who has always employed concepts to talk about formal elements of the work, the critic has started using ideas to address only ideas. After all, what critics have been doing is the same artists have been doing. Both making art and making criticism (Leirner, [1983] 1991: 55).

Leirner also said that her artwork was a "metacritical dialogue", and her lecture about it was "criticism on criticism about criticism". Declaring her understanding of her own activity as simultaneously creative and critical, Leirner has made this set of asseverations a kind of programmatic view that had already guided her work as an art critic for some years, which would also have core implications on the way she curated exhibitions in the following years. When Leirner presented her metacritique at MAC/USP, she was a member of the Fundação Bienal de São Paulo's internal advisory group - the Art and Culture Council (CAC) - during the organising of the XVII Bienal curatorial project's elaboration, when Walter Zanini was the General Curator and presided the CAC. Early in 1984, Leirner was nominated to ascend to the position of General Curator for the next Bienal, finding the means to experiment her understanding of arts mediation in other realms. Leirner's curatorial projects for the Bienal and their reception are useful case study for understanding how the role of "curator" as an "exhibition auteur" became prominent in Brazil's art circuit dynamics and debates, and the implications of this change. This brings the constitution and repercussion of the Bienal's curatorial project into the analytic center of this essay.

Leirner and the XVIII Bienal gave voices, names, venue, and concrete content for discussions that had been burgeoning throughout the 1970s and 1980s – from conceptual tendencies, experimental works in performance, installations, video art, to the emerging movement so-called "return to painting". Some events found conditions to happen and to be spread across a broadening international network of modern and contemporary institutions, contributing to the shaping and consolidating processes of curating and curators as constitutive tasks, positions, and agents in the visual arts. Among many issues discussed around that time, wider debates concerning authorship in regard to curating and biennials have gain new configurations while new cases were following (Martini & Martini, 2010). Leirner's curatorial project for both the 18th and 19th editions of the Bienal Internacional de São Paulo were decisive as the institution, its events and participating actors were connected in a transnational network made of travels, publications, touring exhibitions, international conferences and exhibitions (Souza, 2015: 58-61). Well-known cases like Harald Szeeman's landmark "documenta 5" (1972), and his self-

definition as an "exhibition maker", ascribed as a father-figure of the role of "curator" as we understand it nowadays, have been studied through (geographically) comparative approaches that emphasises a "remarkable simultaneity" of analogous gestures applied in planning, organising, creating and theorising the ways artistic objects and propositions meet their audiences.

Taking Brazil as an example, the professional trajectories of some museum directors or independent curators⁹ have received more and more attention, as has been the case of Walter Zanini (1925-2013), included for instance in Hans Ulrich Obrist's "Brief History of Curating" (2010). Zanini was the first person to fill the formal position of General Curator for two editions of the Bienal – right before Leirner's XVIII Bienal, those which took place in 1981 and 1983 (Souza, 2021: 280). Before that, he had been running the MAC/USP from 1963-78, then building a network of institutions, collections, artists, and intermediary agents, and it helped keeping ideational and practical flows between the national and foreign contemporary art scenes (Freire, 2013).

Other significant cases have been brought into examination, such as art critic and art history professor Aracy Amaral (1930), who worked as Zanini's assistant at MAC/USP in the 1960s, and was the director of the Pinacoteca do Estado de São Paulo (1975-1979), also organising exhibitions more independently, and art critic Frederico Morais (1936), who had programmed exhibitions and events related to the Modern Art Museum of Rio de Janeiro, the *Paço das Artes* in Belo Horizonte, and private galleries, between 1967 and 1972, that all together compose a series of gestures questioning and reshaping definitions of artistic creation, evaluation, interpretation, and presentation (Tejo, 2017; Dalcol, 2018).

Above mentioned episodes of a genealogy of curating practices in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro are only the most visible and systematic examples of experiments and programs in contemporary art exhibitions curating in Brazil that compounded a horizon of possibilities for Leirner when she saw herself in charge of organising an international large-scale exhibition. As she had no previous experience managing such a complex process by then. Analysing her essays and reviews on artworks and exhibitions written before and during the elaboration of her first curatorial project, I aim to address the way she consciously took part in the development of a different mode of visibility that may indicate, also having affected, the future shape of the

⁹ I am aware the term "independent curator" is anachronic in reference to the early 1970 in Brazil, most activities more usually assigned to curators' activities as we understand it nowadays were performed by so-called "artistic directors" and "cultural programmers", what were the case of MAM-SP's director who organized the Bienal between 1951-1961, Walter Zanini running the MAC/USP in the 1960s and 1970s, and Frederico Morais in the late 1960s and early 1970s when working for the MAM-Rio.

Bienal de São Paulo and of the biennials in general (see: Souza, 2015; Dalcol, 2018, 2019).

The XVIII Bienal's vague theme, "Man and life", was the discursive dimension of Leirner's attempt to "capture" a Zeitgeist - or what she has called "The Great Contemporary Work of Art" since 1980 in her texts - and "translate" it into the concrete form of an exhibitionary event. This choice of modus operandi provoked debates and reactions on different directions and with several implications, but also provided an early case for a procedure that became a prevalent convention for the globalisation of contemporary art biennials. As Paulo Herkenhoff, curator of the XXIV Bienal (1998) put it lately: "Sheila Leirner proved the possibility to produce a curatorial focus within the eclecticism that had resulted from the national representations and especial rooms. [...] I think 'The Great Canvas' attested the Bienal's potential to think on issues in an international scope" (Herkenhoff, 2008: 24).

2. XVIII Bienal de São Paulo - 'Man and life'

The XVIII Bienal ran from 4 October to 15 December 1985, in the giant three-floor Pavilion within Parque Ibirapuera, in Sao Paulo. Right next to the entrance in the ground floor, a set of white walls formed the "historical nucleus" of the show, besides a corner with two sculptures by Yoshishige Saito (Japanese, 1904-2001), and nineteen photographs by Manuel Álvarez Bravo (Mexican, 1902-2002). A total of almost 150 paintings by already celebrated artists from different countries, Fernando Botero (Colombian, 1932), Jo Delahaut (Belgian, 1911-92), Patrick Caulfield (British, 1936-2005), Wifredo Lam (Cuban, 1902-82), and Emilio Vedova (Italian, 1919-2006), were hanging on the white walls of seven aisles there was all converging to a room-like space, distinguished by red vinyl floor, where more paintings, sculptures, printmakings, and drawings by members of CoBrA group were displayed. As I have analysed more carefully (Souza, 2015), the curatorial activity by Leirner also constituted interventions into the negotiating process with the official-diplomatic sectors in charge of national representation for foreign countries in the Bienal, although its reaching was partial, her project of display was more consistent in terms of articulating the content (artworks) sent by those attachés, going further with the previous two editions of the Bienal, when Zanini advocated for the switching the eminent criterion of exhibition design from national divisions to the notion of "language analogies" (Souza, 2021).

Walking up the ramp to the elevated section of the first floor, there was the nucleus "Contemporary 1", a kind of labyrinthic formation of white walls built to display 472 artworks by 89 artists from several countries (mostly Latin American countries, but also from Australia, East and West Europe, Egypt, and Surinam). All these divisions were combined around the Pavilion's architectonic core, a wide and high chamber crossed by a twisting ramp climbing around a tree-like structure. This huge space was

filled by American Jonathan Borofsky's (1948) sculptural interventions: seven "Chattering Men" standing up in cycle, and over them, hanging from the ceiling, "Flying Man", between levitation and fall. More artworks could be seen from the meandering railings of the two upper floors. The third and last level was the area for "special exhibitions" and the educative programme (an open studio for children and teenagers visiting the show). Each room was adapted to host different curatorial projects and touring shows that took the XVIII Bienal as their venue: "Viennese Studio of Lithography", "Expressionism in Brazil", 10 "Bolivian Masks" (120 masks and ritual garments by native peoples from Bolivia), "Cabichui" (a Paraguayan illustrated newspaper active during the years of war and occupation of Argentina, Brazil and Uruguay against Paraguay, 1864-70), "Cordel Contemporâneo".

In a tiny room, the Surinamese collective Waka Tjopu displayed registration of an "aesthetic and ethnographic" work carried out within a community inhabiting the Commewijne riverbanks. In another room, with a singular scenography, black walls and altar-like displays, "O Turista Aprendiz", an installation by English-born naturalized Brazilian photographer Maureen Bisilliat (1931), showing 400 photographs she took during 20 years of expeditions across native communities in Northern and Northeast Brazil, as well as documentation of her research on Brazilian modernist writer Mário de Andrade (1893-45), who travelled to the same region of the country in the late 1920s, poeticising his experience in a book and series of 50 photographs. The United States official representation sent a curatorial project for a special room, it was a large one, entitled "Between Science and Fiction", and showcased photographs, interactive installations, prints, collages, kinetic and mechanical objects. Another section was divided into three rooms for 72 works based on video by artists from Argentina, Great-Britain, France, the United States, and West Germany.

Walking down again, to the second floor, another section of the "Contemporary 1" and the "Contemporary 2" nuclei displayed in many cells built in a zigzagging structure of white walls. According to the guide 'How to visit the Bienal' distributed to visitors in the entrance, with texts by Leirner, there "You can find artists which follow up with what you have seen downstairs" (Leirner, 1985 in Polo, 2006: 228) Closer to the railings around the central span, paintings by 17 artists from various countries, among them some representatives of "neo-expressionism", like Hella Santarossa (Germany, 1949), Jorge Pizzani (Venezuela, 1949), Martin Disler (Switzerland, 1949-1996), and Luís Gordillo (Spain, 1936); within the cells, drawings, printmakings, objects, performances, and installations by other 43 artists. Stepping out of this labyrinth, an installation by French artist Daniel Buren (1938), "A Room in a Room", was placed right in the middle of a gate for three straight and long corridors.

¹⁰ The exhibition Expressionismo no Brasil was co-curated by Stella Teixeira de Barros and Ivo Mesquita.

Leirner's text in the guide makes clear that from the entrance saying that "it meant a transitory period to the 'Great Canvas' right in front of you" (Leirner, 1985 *in* Polo, 2006: 228). The high and white walls of those corridors were brim-full of 204 paintings by 49 artists representing 16 nations -and the gap between each of them varied from 4 inches to 1 foot. Among them, some names already known as part of international movements that had recently flourished across exhibitions in galleries and museums, more representatives of the neo-expressionism from Germany, like Bernd Koberling (1938), Helmut Middendorf (1953), Jiří Dokoupil (1954) and Salomé (1954); and some of those included in the Italian Transavantgarde – Enzo Cucchi (1949), Stefano Di Stasio (1948), and Sabina Mirri (1957); as well as other artists connected to the "return of painting" in other countries: Mechu Lamas (Spain, 1954), Marlene Dumas (South Africa, 1953), Guillermo Kuitca (Argentina, 1961), Paula Rego (Portugal, 1935, representing Great Britain), Gunter Damisch (Austria, 1958-2016), Ádám Zoltám (Hungary, 1959), and Brazilian artists who had never exhibited abroad before, as Leda Catunda (1961), Daniel Senise (1955), and members of *Casa* 7 Group.

Crossing the "Great Canvas" corridors, the sculpture "Four Figures" by British artist John Davis (1946) marked another transition to more cells displaying multimedia artworks made of a diversity of materials and visualities, forming different kinds of installations, environments, records of performance art, and graffiti. This area was named "Zone of Turbulence" both in the guide and in the catalogue of the XVIII Bienal, and it was qualified in Leirner's presentation essay as "where the Bienal is based upon, where the most important questions burst out from".

3. Leirner's 'Great Artwork'

Sheila Leirner is one more descendant of a Polish Jewish couple which immigrated from Warsow to Sao Paulo in 1927, Isaí and Felícia Leirner, setting up a textile enterprise amongst the city industrialisation in the 1930s. As their business was scaling up throughout the next decades, they maintained engagement in the foundation and promotion of cultural and professional associations and institutions. After being the first director of the Centro Cultural Brasil-Israel for some years, and holding a position in the management structure of the MAM-SP and the III Bienal (1955), Isaí Leirner (1903-62) invested more and more in the visual arts, and he created the "Leirner Contemporary Art Prize", in 1956, and the Galeria de Arte das Folhas, 1958. Felícia Leirner (1904-96) became a renowned sculptor after being the first woman to study with the modernist artist Victor Brecheret (1894-1955), and whose artworks were presented in many editions of the Bienal, being awarded and honoured with retrospective exhibitions in the late 1960s. Their children, Giselda (1928), and Nelson Leirner (1932-2020), also became renown artists focused on different media and associated with specific movements in Brazil's art historiography (Oliveira, 2019). Giselda Leirner's daughter, Sheila Leirner (1948) grew up immersed in her family's artistic activities, visiting exhibitions, artists' studios, and hearing the debates of modern art since her childhood, even those stirred up by the first editions of the Bienal, as she recalls in an essay about her relationship to the art world and the Bienal: "there I felt I was itsy-bitsy as a cat in a factory, but fulfilled of an inexplicable civic feeling. I was five years old, and the 'culture', the world and Brazil, to me, were all one and the same thing" (Leirner, 2003: 111-2).

Sheila Leirner's education was partially completed in Paris, where she lived in the late 1960s, studying Sociology of Art, Architecture, and Cinema. Back in Brazil, Leirner began a career as an art critic in 1973, receiving regular space to publish her reviews and essays in *O Estado de São Paulo*, from 1975 onwards. It did not take long for her to be recognised by her peers, having been laureated by the ABCA (Brazilian branch office of the International Association of Art Critics – AICA) in 1976, in the category of "Best art critic of the year". Her membership and association to both institutions were crucial for her finding a chair in the *Fundação Bienal*'s cultural advisory board, in 1982, as she was indicated as a representative of both institutions in the Bienal, being, later, nominated as General Curator (Souza, 2015: 64).

As it can be obvious (but due to its significance for this narrative, I want to be sure it is not dismissed), the reception of Sheia Leirner's ideas and public persona were mutually affected. Besides naturalised sexism among intellectuals and critics that affected some approaches to her work and position¹¹, other elements of Leirner's life style and worldview, social markers and ideological perspective were also pointed out and expressed by other art critics and artists, revealing that the public perception of her was distant from unanimous, as synthesize in the ironic depiction by Telmo Martino: "Sheila Leirner is the art critic who has everything. If she lands in Curitiba bringing all her luxury and beauty, the city is going to be thankful and so overwhelmed it will never feel overlooked anymore for never receiving visits from movie stars coming to Brazil" (1980).

Art historian Stéphane Huchet has proposed a typification of art criticism and critical procedures/postures, defining three categories: "criticism of legitimation, of empathy, and of intervention". Huchet characterises the last category as connected to the implications of the other two that can be associated to a militant critic, engaged and polemic "projecting the analytical thinking into a spectrum of more objective implications". To exemplify this category, Huchet suggests three names of Brazilian art critics, namely Aracy Amaral in the 1960s, Ronaldo Brito, and Leirner in the next decade: "Not so much remembered nowadays, in the 1970s, Sheila Leirner was proposing short but incisive critical reviews, obeying a combative determination" (Huchet, 2009: 78-9).

¹¹ Art historian Cristiana Tejo (2017), studying the trajectories of Walter Zanini, Aracy Amaral, and Frederico Morais, in comparison, also called attention to the fact that the reception of the only woman among them, Aracy Amaral, was usually marked by sexist comments.

While Leirner was getting closer to institutional positions involved in arts management and exhibition, even before being in charge of the Bienal's curating, her writing reflected the way she was getting gradually more aware of exhibitions as a key-context to present art integrated into a discourse, this is, the exhibition as medium, as well as another space for criticism (see: DALCOL, 2018). Her "interventionist criticism", then, finding access to the means of international large-scale exhibitions organisation, could be projected onto other devices than the writing paper of newspapers, magazines, books or catalogues, exploring the specific spatial, temporal, material, multisensorial, and symbolic dimensions of art exhibition.

4. From 'The Great Work of Art' to the 'Great Canvas'

Leirner published texts addressing a large range of issues, from Medieval and Classic art to emerging contemporary artistic languages and artists; reacting to salons jury selections and awards; answering other critics; highlighting some artists' works and trajectories; covering cultural events and art exhibitions, mainly in Sao Paulo, but also as a correspondent for *O Estado de São Paulo* newspaper, traveling to other cities in Brazil and abroad, as Kassel, Paris, and Venice, where other international perennial large-scale exhibitions had settled travelling agendas of contemporary art showcase¹². Taking these last kinds of texts by Leirner as a whole, I was able to retrace how she got in contact to the debated definition of the curator's role in the late 1970s and early 1980s, before and during her time as an advisor and curator for the Bienal¹³.

In Leirner's reviews of exhibitions that she had visited, it is possible to identify her stances and preferences on the way an art exhibition can be conceived, also developing deeper and more elaborated concerns on the mediation of artworks, cultural values and ideas, both as criticism and exhibitions organisation. As Leirner herself put it lately: "Curating was the dream to make concrete in space the critical ideas that we could only put on paper before. It was a kind of tridimensional criticism, a work of art about art, as an opera, a play, a concerto" (Leirner *in* "Para Sheila...", 2014). The image of a maestro is also evoked when, in a conference included in the XXVIII Bienal (2008), Leirner was invited to talk about her experience curating the two editions of the Bienal in 1985-87 and their repercussion, in the occasion she showed a "magic wand" she used during the setting-up process to indicate places and works, as a maestro conducing an orchestra of workers and monitors, or waving it as a fair to have her wills becoming true.¹⁴

¹² Leirner's essays published on O Estado de São Paulo can be consulted on the journals online archive, as well as on two books she organized compiling her essays (Leirner, 1982, 1991).

¹³ For a concise analysis focusing Leirner's essays on exhibitions and curatorship (Souza, 2019).

¹⁴ In 2008, the 28.^a Bienal de São Paulo held a program of conferences, one of them was entitled "The Bienal de São Paulo and the Brazilian Artistic Milieu: Memory and projection", focusing the XVIII Bienal. Artist Rodrigo Andrade and curators Sheila Leirner, and Felipe Chaimovich were compounding the table. The video record of the conference is available to consultation at the Arquivo Histórico Wanda Svevo – Fundação Bienal de São Paulo, in Sao Paulo.

From 1978-87, Leirner's essays were increasingly based on the notion she called "The Great Work of Art". 15 Since 1980, she wrote essays openly defending the idea of a universal analogy among all artistic actions: "The Great Artwork is a synchronic addition of contemporary artistic actions, that is neither hierarchical nor eligible, uniting the polarities and embedding the diversities, making evidence of the simultaneity of these actions" (Leirner, 1982: 125). Each text from this period is directly connected to the former, unfolding topics and clarifying positions, as if Leirner was interviewing herself, thus, making bolder assertions around her vision of contemporary art or the current constitution of art as a symphonious phenomenon. In one of Leirner's essays from 1981, entitled "The balloon and the Great Artwork", she emphasises the metaphorical base of her interpretation, indicating the universal scope and contingency of the "Great Artwork" - I reproduce an excerpt in which the main aspects of Leirner's conceptualisation are distilled:

> Now our vision is able to reach a panorama, our senses became globalising, our aesthetic borders are inclined to open enough to avoid labelling non formalist tendencies as anti-art or literary Dadaism, it becomes harder to imagine or to look for fresh conceptions, natural-like and popular ones, alluding our own experience, vocabulary, and language. The homological character of all art has been confirmed - the overcoming from one structure to another via analogy, what artists have always made (Leirner, 1982: 115).

Some of Leirner's bolder assertions in her texts from the early 1980s are examples of a cosmopolitanism that could easily be related to the 'global village' theorised by Mashall McLuhan (1962) in the 1960s. As when she writes:

> The individual artist, in any part of the world - New York, Berlin, Tokyo, Sao Paulo, Paris - brings face to face not with external impositions, but with the ubiquitous activity of art, also with a constant revelation of the totality of thinking, faith, and humans' achievements via archaeological and anthropological research. [...] These findings enable a wider vision, antihistoricist, in relation to the identity of man. Man, and his artwork [...] Facing all the fragments and actions collectively representing the condition of art in its original state of unity: The Western contemporary Great Artwork (Leirner, 1982: 22-3).

Despite Leirner's attempts to depict her notion of the "Great Artwork", her writing only started presenting more concrete indications of this through reviews and comments expressing her position on exhibitions of controversial receptions. A significant case was the event "Como vai você, Geração 80?" ("How have you been, 80s Generation?"), that took place in the Visual Art School of Parque Lage, in Rio, 1984. It was an occasion of spontaneous presentation of artworks within a palace,

¹⁵ The development of *The Great Work of Art* throughout Leirner's activity as an art critic is presented in a concise way in both books compiling her essays published between 1975 and 1981 (Leirner, 1982), and from 1982 to 1990 (Leirner, 1991). In both cases, the selection of texts was carried out by Leirner herself, framing a coherent linearity of her thinking and approach to the arts.

around its water pool, and outdoors, in the gardens, on the street, and in close points of the neighbourhood. Mostly engaged by "young" art critics and more than 60 artists, displaying paintings and sculptures, intervening on street walls, assembling objects, performing, and dancing, the event was narrated under a general assertion they were celebrating a new path in painting, in making art, far from the rationale of the former "generation", the 1970s. Besides its relation to a democratisation process of Brazil's political regime, the main issue this exhibition arose was the fact that a "new generation" of artists was making evident the "homogenisation" and "commodification" of current artistic trends, namely the "return to painting". As a reaction to this, Leirner gave concrete existence to the "Great Artwork", adding fuel to the fire: "There were no twenty years of military dictatorship in Belgium, Germany, England, France, Italy, and so on, although, the new generations have hatched out there with the same energy as ours" (Leirner, 1991: 108).

From 1981-86, many exhibitions in Rio de Janeiro, Sao Paulo, and Belo Horizonte focused on painting by contemporary artists, Leirner wrote an essay for the catalogue of one of these, "3 x 4 Grandes Formatos" (1983) in which she made a direct reference to the source of her metaphoric concept of "Great Canvas" – another essay, by Germano Celant, published on Artforum in the year before (Celant, 1982):

This term was employed before, in a different way, by an Italian art critic who has intended to demonstrate the rhythm between the canvas and the environment through painting. But in my vision, the 'Great Canvas' is a real and symbolic unity, of wide effect, that gathers the current production of a new painting and that is folded within itself. [...] In the 'great canvas' all works are articulated among themselves, a narrative, noisy, and uninterrupted unrolling. However, do not wait for any lineal and fluent discourse coming from it. On the opposite, the 'great canvas' reveals mainly friction, shock, and antagonism, what is typical of all deep and lovely relationship. [...] what is actually intended is to create a disturbing space, a turbulent zone, analogous to that we can see in contemporary art (Leirner, 1983).

In an interview about the latest Bienal, in 2006, Leirner narrated the moment the "Great Canvas" design was idealised: 'The feelings caused by that invasion of painting were consuming me [...] I looked at the Avenue I was driving on and I imagined a giant canvas, from a point of view moving in high-speed, its figures were animated throughout its lengthiness. This imaginary installation virtually named itself as the 'Great Canvas" ("Para Sheila...", 2014). Transfiguring this idea into a plan for displaying artworks in the XVIII Bienal took the form of three long corridors crowded of huge canvases by artists from many countries.

The reasons for a centralisation on the "Great Canvas" are multiple: even being a transition to "Turbulent Zone", the corridors of paintings captivated audiences, gathering a kind of artworks that were appealing at the moment, a magnet for critical attention and media controversy. Proposing a revision of curatorial studies, curator

Lisette Lagnado (of the XXVII Bienal, 2006), brings a question regarding to Leirner's project for the XVIII Bienal and its repercussion in Brazil's art historiography: "As time goes on, where is the recognition of the emphasis Leirner gave to music (with John Cage coming), to video art (curated by Jorge Glusberg), and to performances by Ulay and Marina Abramovic, to mention only a few stars in the Bienal of 1985?" (Lagnado, 2015: 84).

5. From the 'Great Canvas' to 'the Great Curator'

Reviewing other exhibitions between 1982 and 1984, Leirner explicitly defended and expressed a programmatic view on curators' activity, referring to concepts, cases, theories and theorists of mediation, and focusing on curatorial experiments she considered exemplar ones. The exhibition *Design no Brasil: História e Realidade*, curated by architect Lina Bo Bardi (1914-92) at the *SESC Pompéia* (São Paulo, 1982), was defined by Leirner as "An embodiment of perfect mediation between the critical view of its organizer and the focused object (sine qua non condition for an actually didactic approach), the exhibition is an ideal simulacrum, a convincing narrative of the multifaceted and unorganised process experienced by handcrafted and industrial utilitarian product in our country" (Leirner, 1982: 20).

Leirner wrote to O Estado de São Paulo as a correspondent from documenta 7, 1982, curated by Rudi Fuchs (1942). Her review on the exhibition focused the curator's "personal angle that shines through the exhibition", considering this aspect a positive one. Leirner evaluated its curator's method to bring into the exhibition the same contingent and "globalising" features of that fin de siècle, a context she qualified as "the most polemic, effervescent and ambiguous of all them". In her passionate writing-style, Leirner celebrated that her notion of a creative criticism, subjective and interventionist at the same time, was being incarnating in one of the most influent art institutions, taking the form of an exhibition. Fuchs curatorial project fitted in the perspective she had been elaborating regarding the relationship between artistic criticism and creation: "In summary, this documenta is a point of view, as it could not avoid being after a hard-fought conquest for critical freedom. [...] An extremely creative work that is fused within other works of art" (Leirner, 1982: 20). Leirner's positive reception of current curating methods carried out in large-scale exhibitions gained triumphant notes when she observed similar posture being consolidated at the Bienal under Walter Zanini curatorship (1981-83). His basic criterium of "analogy of languages" to conceive the display for the XVI and XVII Bienais was connected to methods employed elsewhere, particularly at the Kassel's event:

The XVII Bienal is already a landmark one, due to its critical correlations. They are very clear through the new terminology, and critical criticism professor Walter Zanini created with the International Committee in charge of the exhibition display. [...] Nuclei, vectors, and satellite exhibitions are essential terms that, in practice, allow an articulation between languages,

a less limiting relationship between art and its techniques – as Zanini wants to promote. This also distinguishes the Bienal de São Paulo from other international large-scale exhibitions, as Kassel, Venice, and so on (Leirner, 1982: 20).

The global simultaneity/ubiquity Leirner found and indicated in contemporary artistic production that was crucial to her theorisation of "The Great Western Contemporary Artwork", thus, was also understood in terms of mediation. Cases of curating methods that she had seen as models, as a natural configuration of contemporary art, came to have herself as a gear in the mechanism that made it so prominent, or "naturalised". In 1984, when Leirner was already holding the position of General Curator of the Bienal, she found large and effective complicity in the Fundação Bienal's new director, Roberto Muylaert. He had entered in the scene with a managing and advertising project that played an important role in the overturn of proportions from private and State investment, making the 18th edition the first to be funded by a majority of non-public sources, 85% of the total budget (Souza, 2015; Pereira, 2016).

Muylaert's project also encompassed proposing the Bienal "as a party", with continuous activities to bring audiences to be in contact with art, and in 1984, a typically off black year for the institution, the FBSP organised a large-scale exhibition of Brazilian art, composed by a team of co-curators specialised in diverse themes from pre-colonial art too contemporary, passing by the contributions of the Bienal itself to modern art in Brazil. The show, entitled "Tradition and Rupture: Synthesis of Brazilian Art and Culture", occupied the entire pavilion of the Bienal, divided into seven exhibitions with its own curators and display method. In Leirner's review of the exhibition, when she was already the General Curator for the next Bienal, it is depicted as a kind of "Brazilian Great Artwork", although she did not coin this exact expression: Tradição e Ruptura is indeed a construction of a dream. And all dreams become metaphors when they come into reality. In spite of the multiplicity of visions of its curators, the exhibition represents the epopee of heroic traditions and ruptures, the almost romantic capture of dialectic time, space and visuality. In an analogical way, it is the country's history, a surprising spectacle of suspense, emotion, and pleasure" (Leirner, 1991: 189).

Nominated to the position of General Curator with the slogan 'The Bienal is a party' already settled up by the *Fundação*'s director, Leirner's main goal was to project a "critical spectacle" over it. The idea of promoting a show based on the "universal plurality" of Leirner's "Great Western contemporary artwork", like that she saw as audience and advisor for the CAC during the XVII Bienal, right before seeing herself in the central position to design the exhibition: "the historical part of the exhibition, the satellite exhibitions like 'Arte Plumária do Brasil', aborigine painting from Australia's central desert, artists and groups in the 'Nucleus II', like Torsten Anderson, Flavio de Carvalho, Fluxus, Manzoni, Panamarenko, Bram van Velde [...] with a

undeniable potential to dialogue with and confront artworks by younger artists" (Leirner, 1991: 210).

But Leirner also manifested being cognizant of inherited aspects of the Bienal's structure that affected the 1983 edition, potentially constraining the means to make concrete her ideal curating. However, her understanding of art was based upon an ontological perspective:

> Despite economic dependency obstructing the curating to choose most of the foreign artists, at the Bienal, after all, art is dictating the norms. The curating was strongly persuasive, the fact it could invite names and tendencies of great significance according to what has been produced currently in the world, and the fact it could also frame the examples of official, anachronical, and folkloric art within it is specific organisation, via a powerful analogy of language, have led the show itself independent (Leirner, 1991: 210.).

After one year of preparation for the show, in March 1985, Leirner and Muylaert first public comments with definitions on the XVIII were very optimistic, "the Bienal is a polemic thing itself" (Soller, 1985: 33). The General Curator highlighted that her basic criteria were elaborated in order to provide a critical presentation of the decade's Zeitgeist, and her vision of it was branded as "the current desire to avoid the languages of the 1970s, which were art for art's sake" (Leirner, 1991: 210). In the XVIII Bienal catalogue, Leirner's presentation text says the organisation of the exhibition was based on taking the next step with prerogatives earned with Zanini's curating, those she considered "were responsible to the recovering of the Bienal's international prestige, practically lost", as Leirner itemised: "the display based on 'language analogies' instead of the traditional geopolitical representation, the attempt to influence foreign representatives (mostly successful), hiring meaningful international name to add to the Brazilian curatorial project, and primarily the asseveration of the exhibition as the consequence of a firm critical point of view" (Leirner, 1985: 13).16

The Fundação Bienal also promoted short insertions on TV and spread hoardings to attract more audiences to the Bienal. Months before its launching, the curatorial project was being detailed and explained on the news, Leirner and Muylart were interviewed many times as the participations were being confirmed, announcing the focus on contemporary art with installations, photographs, different special rooms, and an interdisciplinary program of seminars, films, videos, performances, and music¹⁷. But in the last week of preparation, the first protests involving the "Great

¹⁶ I researched the way geopolitical categories of nation and region were employed in the Bienal's organization and curating processes in my Ph.D. dissertation (Souza, 2021), and I offer a detailed analysis of the previous period from the 14th to the 17th Bienal, including the Bienal Latinamericana, in 1978.

¹⁷ The musical program "Música e Vida" was curated by singer and researcher Anna Maria Kieffer and its concerts took place during October, with participants from many countries of Europe and the Americas.

Canvas" popped up, and swept. Director of the Kunsthalle Dusseldorf, Jüngen Harten, invited to collaborate with the display settle-up, decided to step out of the process due to the fact "the exhibition was already defined when he arrived" ("Bienal, A Performance...", 1985: 52). Following this episode, German artist Koberling took off the wall two on nine painting he had brought. But, as Alan Riding wrote in a review of the Bienal for *The New York Times* that highlighted the "Great Canvas" and reactions to it, "Miss Leirner defended her decision, arguing that 'a disturbing space, an area of turbulence' harmonized with the biennial's new critical spirit" (Riding, 1985: 1.101). In the case, that "critical spirit" gained the outlines of the curator's "Great Artwork". Among the most active art critics in Brazil, Leirner's project was interpreted and debated on the news, earning more layers of meanings to the experiment. Some of them recognised the diverse constitution of its core section following the curator's intension, both the "Great Canvas" and the "Turbulent Zone". For instance, Frederico Morais wrote:

On one hand, 'The Great Canvas' radicalized the concept of languages analogy, on the other, it rationalized the way to assemble an exhibition, thus it enabled an intelligent distribution of works throughout the building, in such a way that nothing could escape visitors' sight. *De facto*, if 'The Great Canvas' worked as a central nave accompanied by two lateral aisles – to keep the metaphor of a religious buildings –, the installations were the altars distributed around a chancel, representing diverse sodalities, that gave, at the same time, unity and diversity to that temple of art (Morais, 1985: 3).

But another "interventionist" art critic, Aracy Amaral, then director of the MAC/USP, dedicated a three-pages-long essay to express her opinion on the XVIII Bienal and Leirner's curating, emphasising that the way works were presented was more controversial than neo-Expressionist paintings on display:

The 'Great Canvas' is an installation by Sheila Leirner, and she confirms this space was indeed an installation from her perspective. Although Leirner is reluctant to acknowledge it was a co-authorship with the architect and chief designer, Haron Cohen in this case, it actually means that her curatorial project for the XVIII Bienal was appropriating the paintings by participating artists in order to conceive an interpretative space on the current art created by the most recent generations and legitimated by the international market' (Amaral, 1986: 206).

Besides many "accusations" suggesting the "Great Canvas" was celebrating the "return of painting" or was "the funeral of gestural neo-Expressionism" (Abramo, 1985: 70), long discussions among critics and intellectuals analyzing the project, speculating its future consequences on the Bienal, on Brazilian art, or on contemporary art in general, inserted the exhibition as a case to retrace the examination of "post-modern society" n. And artists reaction also drew attention to the curator's authorship overlapping and outshining artists' individual expressions; as Luiz Paulo Baravelli, who had exhibited his work at the XVII Bienal and represented

Brazil at the XLI Biennale di Venezia, 1984, used his permanent space on *Ilustrada* to publicize his repudiation of a curating also considered authoritative: "Why must an artist agree to show a piece in the *Great Canvas*, modifying its original intentions completely? In name of which 'god' would one commit such a suicide? The 'Great Curator'?" (Baravelli, 1985: 48).

6. The 'Great Collection' and the structural incrustation of an opaque role

Art historians Francisco Alambert and Polyanna Canhête claimed that "The ideology of curatorial authorship had been drafted at the Bienal in the early 1980s, under Walter Zanini curating, then, with its new curator, Sheila Leirner, it reached a very theoretical status" (Alambert & Canhête, 2004: 173). I consider the XVIII Bienal's reception was centralised on the effects and reaction related to the authorial and subjective configuration of its curator, being the "Great Canvas" alleged to be her most "daring" gesture among them, on one hand it was interpreted as sign of a progressist moment of Brazil's artistic milieu, but on the other, authorial curating brought to the surface a set of criteria related to subjective perspectives and choices, and the understanding of exhibitions as a medium gained an irreversible opacity in debates concerning contemporary art (Souza, 2015; Dalcol, 2018). Meanwhile, Brazil was experiencing a process of re-democratisation after a 20-years-long military dictatorship that installed oppressing mechanisms on media and cultural expressions, the XVIII Bienal was the first edition launched under a civilian-president, and an authorship to its organisation based on a universal perspective was also perceived as authoritarian and antidemocratic, since artists' voice were manipulated to fit in Leirner's authorial narrative.

I brought some details above regarding Leirner's familial origin, social class, and education, as well as her life-long connection with the Bienal Internacional de São Paulo as a main channel to access art from "around the world", her material and symbolic means to "get around" and feel herself as a "natural" part of a globalising network of artists and art intermediaries, institutions and exhibitions, in permanent flows and interchanging. There is no simple determination or direct causality between those facts and the conditions of Leirner's insertion in the Bienal or to hold the role of its Curator for two times, however, I consider they play many roles in it, and are intertwined in her discursive practices both as an art critic and curator, allowing to retrace Sheila Leirner's position in a constellation of actors, objects, visualities, institutions, and aesthetic, political, and ethical ideas, ideals, and practices. Leirner's conception of "the Great contemporary Artwork" (sometimes written also as "Western" even being defined as "universal" and "natural"), considered the works of art as a kind of incarnated thinking, and the artistic activity as a synchrony between mental components and its plastic forms, resulting in "fragments" and "plurality" the "Great Arwork" was able to absorb and harmonise. Her "universalizing" perception/approach to contemporary art shares many historical and interpretative aspects with other critics/curators working as key mediators in other geographic contexts – the perspective promoted by Italian art critic Achille Bonito Oliva around the same years, for instance, that coined a national (Italian) section within the *Biennale di Venezia* in 1980 (the Aperto'80), then being generalized as the as "International Transavangardia", as a global phenomenon (Souza, 2015: 20-21).

Keeping the position of General Curator for the XIX Bienal, 1987, Leirner gave a further step into the authorial curating strategy, "Utopia versus Reality" was its title, and "Great Collection" was the core of her "curatorial installation", evoking a Wunderkammer of contemporary artworks. The repercussion on the news did not avoid the issue, but it did not find the same resistance, revealing the accommodation or broader acceptance of the new authorial status curators had performed all around the (art) world – as biennials were showing it, so ubiquitous and simultaneously as the "Great Western contemporary Artwork" Sheila Leirner had theorised, making it seemingly natural.

If, according to art historian Caroline Jones, the configuration of a "biennial culture" has its development rooted back in the 1970s, with "the individuation that had depoliticized the work in Attitudes and de-democratized documenta" (Jones, 2016: 188) around Szeemann's activity in Europe. I bring the structural reformulation of the *Fundação Bienal de São Paulo*, that had been in process throughout the late 1970s and the 1980s, with its curatorial projects by Zanini and Leirner, not only as adapting the institution to the consolidating position of exhibition curators, but also as contributing to re-establishing the Bienal's position as a gear or channels in a wider transnational network, making it able to represent and to intervein in the shaping of contemporary art in the world, even been attached to its geographical location, in Latin America, Brazil, Sao Paulo. Taking place one year after the launching of the Bienal de La Habana, in Cuba, with its explicit Latin Americanist and Third-Worldist scopes, the XVIII Bienal, with Leirner's curating, functioned as sticking a flag into the globalist terrain.

The XX Bienal, 1989, brough back to its organisational structure the national representations, dissolving curatorial authorship into a team of three curators (Carlos von Schmidt, Stella Teixeira de Barros, and João Cândido Galvão), responding to the questioned centrality and authoritarianism of a General Curator, but the following exhibitions of the 1990s found a way to re-establish the position, giving it more autonomy as the Bienal become less dependent on diplomatic mediations. The opaque figure of curators, operators of exhibitions as media, became a constant issue, and the XVIII Bienal was the shocking context of this realisation.

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