

Archaeology of Engagement and Discursive Practices in the São Paulo Biennial

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Abstract This essay explores the evolution of engagement and discursive practices within contemporary art biennials, focusing specifically on the São Paulo Biennial's initial articulations towards the public. As a pioneering platform, the São Paulo Biennial has organically developed educational and discursive strategies between art, curators, educators, and the public until a complex structure is established. This essay investigates how these practices emerged and evolved from the Biennial's inception, emphasizing the role of educational programs and training for monitors. It highlights the contributions of key figures such as Wolfgang Pfeifer, who laid the groundwork for art history classes, and Amália Toledo, who integrated creative exercises into training and reflecting on education art and the public.

Keywords São Paulo Biennial. Educational practices. Discursive engagement. Contemporary art. Institutional memory.

Summary 1 Historical Background. – 2 Key Figures in the Development of Educational Programs. – 3 Conclusion.

The São Paulo Biennial, established in 1951 as the 'second' Biennial after the Venice Biennale, has a crucial role in the history of large-scale art exhibitions.¹ While it initially followed the Venice model, mirroring aspects such as national representations and even the format of its catalogs, the São Paulo Biennial soon developed a distinct identity. It became a platform for rethinking international art production from a South American perspective, challenging the hegemony of Eurocentric art histories and creating a space for dialogue with the continent's diverse artistic practices. Unlike the Italian Biennale, whose audience was mainly international and specialized, the São

1 Other projects called 'biennials' started and faded before the inception and creation of São Paulo Biennial. Therefore, to name it as the 'second' biennial means it is the one that is still active since its creation; see Altshuler 2013; Gardner, Green 2016; Kompatsiaris 2017.

Paulo Biennial engages primarily with the local and regional public, with close to 97% of its visitors coming from the city, country, and continent.² This emphasis on addressing local audiences led to the development of unique educational and discursive programs that emerged organically as a response to the need for deeper interaction with visitors encountering 'modern' art for the first time. These programs, evolving, became a core part of the Biennial's mission, ensuring a continuous commitment to public engagement that set it apart from the more exhibition model of biennials. The São Paulo Biennial thus serves not only as a reference point for other biennials but as a space where art engagement is approached critically and inclusively, offering parameters of what a biennial can be.

This essay deepens into the 'archaeology'³ of these practices, tracing the evolution of the engagement practices and the key figures who contributed to their development. By examining the Biennial's historical trajectory, this essay aims to understand how these engagement frameworks were built, evolved, and sometimes overlooked in subsequent editions. A central focus is placed on the contributions of Wolfgang Pfeifer, the Technical Director of the São Paulo Museum of Modern Art, whose initial efforts in the 1950s laid the foundation for a structured approach to training monitors – a kind of proto-mediation school aimed at introducing modern art, its themes, techniques, and artists to a group of students that would specialize in the structure of the biennial to guide the public. This initial focus on art history and guided tours began a long-term commitment to public interaction, as Minerini Neto notes:

The creation of seminars for the formation of monitors, tasked with the delicate role of elucidation, represents a pioneering approach to engaging the public with contemporary art in São Paulo during the 1950s. (2014, 76)

It's crucial to this essay to acknowledge the significant research undertaken by José Minerini Neto, particularly in his doctoral thesis, *Education in the Biennial Art São Paulo: from MAM courses to the Permanent Educational Programme* (2014). The researcher's work offers a comprehensive analysis of the evolution of the Biennial's educational programs, providing invaluable insights into the depth and breadth of archival materials surrounding these early efforts. His research highlights how the training of monitors evolved into a more systematic practice, even though it lacked an institutional framework at the time. Rather than setting a direct precedent for other biennials, these engagement practices emerged organically, responding to the unique challenges of introducing modern art to the public and encountering it for the first time. From then to now, we ensure a more organized and critical understanding of such programs, staging them into forms of discursive practice, until defining those biennials who have this range of discursive programs (either education or public) as 'self-conscious biennials' (Gardner, Green 2014; 2016).

² See Cohen 2014, as a keynote speaker at the World Biennial Forum no. 2 in São Paulo; see also Spinelli, Pfeiffer 2012 and #30xbienal [Video series]. Available at <https://www.youtube.com/hashtag/30xbienal>.

³ Reflecting on the term offered by Michel Foucault on the accumulation of the knowledge that happens through time, hidden changes and similarities to the past in the traits of history.

Despite these early advances, the Biennial has faced challenges in preserving its institutional memory, with each new edition often seeking to reinvent itself, sometimes at the expense of past learnings. This renewal cycle has led to a fragmented understanding of the historical contributions of its educational programs. As Minerini Neto highlights:

Much of the memory of the educational activities was not located in this research and may be lost forever, as the focus was on archiving information about the exhibitions and the participating artists, without the same concern for the documents generated by the educational efforts at the Biennial. (2014, 383)

The São Paulo Biennial Foundation Historical Archive Wanda Svevo was conceived in 1955 but lacks systematic educational references and documentation. The archive is primarily dedicated to information from the press. Documents exchanged internally and externally from the organization of the biennial and visual designs and catalogs. The organization of the educational archives came along when more critically defined frameworks, like O'Neill and Wilson's *Educational Turn* (2010),⁴ provided an understanding of the evolving role of discursive and educational programs within contemporary art biennials. The authors highlight how these elements, once considered secondary to the exhibition, have become central to curatorial practice, particularly in biennials. This perspective situates the development of biennial programs within a broader historical and theoretical context, emphasizing the shift towards educational and discursive practices as critical components of contemporary curatorial strategies.

To address any funding gap, this research revisited the foundational years of the São Paulo Biennial by drawing on three key sources: Minerini's thesis, the *Seminar Art in Time* (2013) by the São Paulo Biennial Foundation and SESC São Paulo, and *#30xBienal (Educational Activities)*,⁵ which offers a series of videos documenting the evolution of the Biennial's educational program. Additionally, it incorporates insights from various articles on the history of the São Paulo Biennial.

1 Historical Background

The São Paulo Biennial started in 1951 as an affirmation of Brazil's cultural modernization. The *Modern Week of '22*, which points to the beginning of Brazilian Modernism and settles the necessity of the construction of regional thinking, departed from coloniality and focused on the unique hybrid context of the country. Founded by Italian-Brazilian industrialist Francisco (also known as 'Ciccillo') Matarazzo, it has been a prominent exhibition and contemporary art structure in South America's art scene since. Initially organized by the São Paulo Museum of Modern Art (Museu de

⁴ Notably, O'Neill and Wilson have authored a series of influential works exploring these themes, with this volume standing out as the most significant for this research due to its comprehensive analysis of the intersection between curating and education in the biennial format.

⁵ *#30xbienal* [Video series]. Available at <https://www.youtube.com/hashtag/30xbienal>.

Arte Moderna) – MAM, the São Paulo Biennial Foundation was later founded to take charge of the exhibition, fostering its growth and significance. At the beginning of the 1960s, the exhibition moved to its main house: the iconic Francisco Matarazzo Pavilion within the Parque do Ibirapuera, the three-story architectural building designed by Oscar Niemeyer and Hélio Uchôa spans into 30,000 m².

The São Paulo Biennial emerged as a response to the growing global interest in modern art exhibitions and circulation. The need to create a platform connecting Brazil's burgeoning art scene with international movements and its growing industrialization and urban structure was evident; from its inception, the Biennial aimed to challenge the Eurocentric focus of contemporary art discourse by providing a space for displaying and discussing art from Latin America alongside international works. This initiative positioned the Biennial as a crucial player in reshaping art historical narratives, emphasizing the perspectives and contributions of artists and intellectuals from the Global South, making itself a representative visual arts event in South America that could catapult the region into a post-World War II and pre-globalized world (Gardner, Green 2014).

From the very beginning, one of the distinguishing features of the São Paulo Biennial is its commitment to educational programming, which began as an informal effort but quickly evolved into a structured component of the Biennial's activities. The need for educational initiatives became rapidly evident during the first edition of the Biennial. Despite attracting thousands of visitors, including many students, the artworks' complex and abstract nature left audiences struggling to connect with the exhibition. Diplomats, curators, museum directors and some artists even started to assume the position of guides or monitors of the public organically. Intellectuals and artists, such as those participating in discussions at the School of Sociology and Politics, expressed concern over the public's difficulty engaging with the avant-garde art presented at the Biennial (Groys 2008).

The solution appeared in the event's second edition two years later, with the appointment of trained monitors becoming a solution to bridge this gap, offering explanatory tours to make contemporary art more accessible and understandable. Wolfgang Pfeifer, the Technical Director of the São Paulo Museum of Modern Art, initiated art history classes to train monitors and individuals responsible for guiding visitors through the exhibition space, using the structure already in place by the School of MAM. This early focus on art education began a tradition that sought to democratize access to contemporary art and foster critical engagement among visitors.

By the 1960s, these programs had become more formalized under the direction of figures like Amália Toledo, who introduced creative exercises alongside art history, emphasizing the importance of hands-on learning and fostering an appreciation of creativity. The training of monitors during this period involved a deeper understanding of art movements and direct interaction with artists and curators, providing a holistic educational experience. These efforts helped establish the São Paulo Biennial as a space where educational initiatives complemented the exhibition itself, transforming the experience for visitors from passive observation to active engagement.

As the Biennial grew, its educational programs began to serve as a model for similar initiatives in other biennials. However, the continuity of these efforts faced challenges, particularly as each new edition sought to

bring a fresh perspective and often overlooked the learnings of previous iterations. This tension between innovation and the preservation of past educational strategies remains a central theme in the history of the São Paulo Biennial, shaping its evolving identity as both an exhibition and a site of critical discourse.

The structure of the exhibitions and how they are reflected in the interaction with the public have changed over time and history. The development of technology and immersive practices, the detailing of concepts, and shifts in the cultural (and economic and geopolitical) context surrounding contemporary artmaking also reflect how we conceive and understand the exhibitions. Public engagement and education programs have become essential elements of modern art biennials, fostering a deeper connection between audiences and the art on display. Examining the historical context and motivations behind their initiatives that permeated the public and education demonstrates the evolving role of biennials in shaping artistic discourse and cultural exchange.

2 Key Figures in the Development of Educational Programs

The evolution of educational practices at the São Paulo Biennial cannot be understood without acknowledging key figures' significant contributions, such as Wolfgang Pfeifer and Amália Toledo. These individuals played instrumental roles in shaping the Biennial's approach to public engagement, each introducing innovations that responded to their time's specific needs and challenges.

Wolfgang Pfeifer, the Technical Director of the São Paulo Museum of Modern Art (MAM), pioneered integrating education into the Biennial's framework. Beginning with the first edition in 1951, Pfeifer introduced art history courses to train monitors – individuals tasked with guiding visitors through the Biennial's exhibitions. His approach was grounded in the belief that a deeper understanding of modern and contemporary art could foster a more meaningful interaction between the public and the displayed artworks. These courses emphasized knowledge acquisition and developing critical thinking skills among the monitors, encouraging them to engage visitors in discussions about the art they encountered.

Pfeifer's efforts laid the groundwork for a structured educational program that would continue to evolve throughout the following decades. His focus on continuous learning and interaction with artists and curators created an environment where monitors were seen as guides and active mediators between the art and the audience. This engagement model became a blueprint for subsequent biennial editions, setting a precedent for the importance of training in the context of art exhibitions.

In the 1960s, the educational focus of the São Paulo Biennial expanded under the guidance of Amália Toledo, who introduced a more hands-on and creative approach to the training of monitors. Toledo believed in fostering creativity to enhance appreciation for contemporary art, integrating practical exercises such as drawing and creative thinking into the curriculum. Her philosophy emphasized the importance of understanding art through the process of creation, a shift from the more didactic approach that characterized the earlier training sessions.

Toledo's contributions significantly shaped the Biennial's identity as a learning and creative exploration space. She introduced shorter, more intensive training sessions that included workshops led by artists and curators, offering visitors a direct connection to the creative processes behind the artworks on display. This approach enriched the visitors' understanding and created a more dynamic and interactive experience for visitors, positioning the São Paulo Biennial as a leader in innovative art education practices. Toledo's focus on creativity as a pathway to understanding art influences how contemporary biennials design educational programs.

Considering the thematic evolution of engagement practices, from didacticism to participatory engagement, we can highlight that the educational practices of the São Paulo Biennial have evolved significantly over time, reflecting broader shifts in the philosophy of public engagement within contemporary art. In its early years, the Biennial's educational focus was primarily didactic, addressing the lack of public familiarity with modern art. This was exemplified by the structured art history classes and explanatory tours introduced by Pfeifer, which sought to provide visitors with a foundational understanding of the artworks they encountered.

As the Biennial matured, the focus shifted towards a more participatory engagement model. Influenced by global pedagogical trends, such as Paulo Freire's ideas and the increasing emphasis on audience agency, the Biennial's programs prioritized dialogue and interaction over instruction. The transition from 'explaining art' to 'experiencing art' marked a significant change in how the Biennial approached its public, creating an environment where visitors were encouraged to form their interpretations and engage in critical discussions about the exhibitions.

If we examine the challenges of institutional memory/continuity versus reinvention of it, a recurring challenge in the history of the São Paulo Biennial's educational practices has been the tension between continuity and reinvention. Each new edition of the Biennial often brings a fresh curatorial vision, which, while fostering innovation, can sometimes lead to overlooking previous educational strategies. This renewal cycle has created gaps in the institutional memory of the Biennial's engagement practices, making it difficult to build upon the successes of past editions. Unfortunately, this is an issue faced by all the institutions that promote biennials.

This problem is particularly evident in transitioning between different approaches to training mediators and designing public programs. For example, the structured, continuous training model championed by Pfeifer was later replaced by shorter, more flexible formats under Toledo. While these changes reflected evolving educational philosophies, they also resulted in a lack of continuity that made it challenging to assess the long-term impact of these programs. The absence of a comprehensive archival strategy has further complicated efforts to preserve and learn from the Biennial's educational history, highlighting the need for more systematic documentation of these initiatives.

The innovative educational practices developed at the São Paulo Biennial have impacted other biennial organizations, influencing how other large-scale exhibitions approach public engagement. There is an emphasis on structured training for mediators, the integration of creative exercises, and the shift towards participatory engagement. The São Paulo Biennial's experience serves as a valuable case study for understanding how educational

initiatives can enhance biennials' cultural and social relevance, positioning them as both exhibitions and platforms for learning and dialogue.

This analysis demonstrates that a dynamic interplay between tradition and innovation has characterized the São Paulo Biennial's approach to education. While the challenges of maintaining continuity remain, the Biennial's commitment to public engagement has left an indelible mark on the field, offering insights into the potential of biennials to act as spaces of critical reflection and cultural exchange.

3 Conclusion

The history of the São Paulo Biennial's educational and discursive practices reveals a complex interplay between tradition and innovation, offering valuable lessons for contemporary art exhibitions. From its early years, the Biennial has embraced the challenge of engaging diverse audiences with modern and contemporary art, evolving from a didactic approach to a more participatory and dialogic model. Key figures such as Wolfgang Pfeifer and Amália Toledo played critical roles in this evolution, each contributing unique perspectives that helped shape the Biennial's approach to art education.

Pfeifer's emphasis on structured training and art history provided the foundation for a more informed and engaged audience. At the same time, Toledo's creative approach brought new vitality to the educational programs, emphasizing the importance of experience and creativity in learning. These efforts have had a lasting impact, influencing how biennials worldwide consider their role as educational platforms. By prioritizing public engagement, the São Paulo Biennial has helped to redefine the relationship between contemporary art and its audiences, making art more accessible while fostering a deeper understanding of its cultural and historical contexts.

However, the São Paulo Biennial's history also underscores the challenges of maintaining continuity in constant reinvention. The cyclical nature of biennial exhibitions, with each edition bringing new curatorial perspectives, has often led to a loss of institutional memory, making it challenging to build on past successes. The absence of a systematic archival strategy has further complicated this issue, highlighting the need for better documentation and preservation of the Biennial's educational initiatives. Addressing this gap is essential for ensuring that future editions can draw on the rich history of the Biennial's engagement practices while embracing the spirit of innovation that defines contemporary art biennials.

Looking forward, the São Paulo Biennial's experience offers important insights for other biennials and large-scale exhibitions seeking to balance educational continuity with creative renewal. As biennials continue to increase globally, they must struggle to maintain their unique identity and adapt to changing cultural landscapes. The São Paulo Biennial demonstrates that a thoughtful integration of educational programs can play a crucial role in this process, helping to create spaces where art and audiences can meet in meaningful ways.

In revisiting the São Paulo Biennial's history, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of the potential of biennials to act as platforms for cultural dialogue and critical reflection. It highlights the importance of looking back to move forward, acknowledging the contributions of past

editions while envisioning new possibilities for public engagement. As the biennial model continues to evolve, the lessons learned from the São Paulo Biennial's educational programs remind us that the true impact of art lies not only in the works on display but in the conversations, connections, and learning experiences that these exhibitions inspire.

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