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## How to be Contemporary? An interview with curator Charles Esche

By CAROLINE MENEZES

The Scotsman Charles Esche, director of the Van Abbemuseum, a modern and contemporary museum in Eindhoven, the Netherlands, has been appointed as curator of the São Paulo Biennial 2014. Besides his experience in museological institutions, he has been part of the curatorial team of shows such as the Istanbul Biennial in Turkey in 2005, the Riwaq Biennial in Palestine in 2007 and again in 2009 and the Gwangju Biennial in South Korea in 2002. As an art writer and editor, in 1999, he co-founded the Afterall art journal, published by the University of the Arts London. More recently, he was the co-editor of a series called Exhibition Histories launched by Afterall Books.

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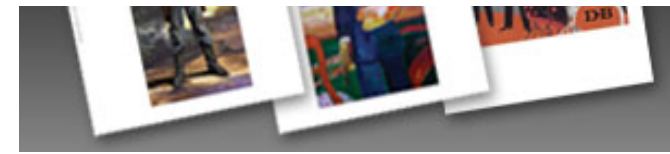
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had many stages, and lasted months, with the names of more than 10 professionals put forward. In April, it was finally announced that Esche had been chosen. His first action on taking charge of one of the oldest biennials of its kind was to invite others to share responsibility with him. The resulting team comprises Spaniards Pablo Lafuente and Nuria Enguita Mayo, Esche's editorial colleagues at Afterall, the Israeli curator Galit Eilat, who worked with Esche at the Van Abbemuseum, and the Israeli architect Oren Sagiv, who will be the designer for the São Paulo Biennial pavilion.

Studio International interviewed Esche in early August during the conference of the International Committee for Museums and Collections of Modern Art, at the Museum of Modern Art in Rio de Janeiro. His first concern was to explain that the curatorial voice behind the exhibition will actually be a tuned choir. Beyond indicating what kind of art will be seen at the biennial, Esche focused on the preoccupation with creating a real contemporary show, not just a show with contemporary art. He spoke about his ideas of how to deliver an experience to the audience that will reverberate in the world outside the biennial and how he and his colleagues will also attempt to let the world come inside the building. More than a set of plans for a large international exhibition, this conversation with Studio International was much more about how to interpret the present times and how art is essential to understand the contemporary facts in our lives.

**Caroline Menezes: Could you tell us what your plans are for the 31st São Paulo Biennial?**



**Charles Esche:** At the moment, I can talk about the background and the process. There are some facts around biennials in general, and around the São Paulo Biennial specifically. The last few biennials around the world have been dominated by the museum as a model. The dominant paradigms in which biennials have been curated recently are the reproduction of the white cube, aesthetically finished artworks, a secure curatorial voice and control.

**CM: Could you give me an example?**

**CE:** The Venice Biennial. It is obviously very controlled and produces a museum of the Arsenale, for instance, with white cubes as walls and everything well finished. However, the artworks are not risk-taking, as aesthetic or relational objects relating to society or to economics. They stayed very much within the paradigm of art made for this white cube. I am not criticising that model as such, but I feel it has run out of energy. I see that this model was a response to a more fluid, chaotic model, which existed in the past. The idea of spontaneity and improvisation being a core element has been eliminated through this more cautious museological approach. They are not bad exhibitions, but I suppose that my question would be, is the best use of the biennial to reproduce the museum model, which we already have in the world?

**CM: And the answer would be?**

**CE:** Historically speaking, biennials in general invented their own form and were slightly out of control, where curatorial voices

seemed to compete. There were biennials where different curators curated different sections; they were agonistic in their relationship to each other. It was not this smooth surface of a singular curatorial narrative; it was different narratives in competition. Of course, I would not want to go back to a 19th-century national model that comes from Venice, but with a national model – for example, where each nation chooses what will be on display – you get more of a sense of a society in conflict. Essentially, the museum model wants to smooth conflict away and it wants to present a singular narrative.

**CM: It seems that, previously, it was a more multifaceted structure, and now we find that biennials present a more museum-like structure. Will you and the rest of the team try to balance that? Are you going to try to find a midpoint?**

**CE:** Exactly, because the museum speaks in one voice. The nation state model is not the agonistic model that I would like, but it produces an agonistic element quite useful to consider. How do we reintroduce that agonistic aspect to it, also in relationship to the potential visitors to the biennial? How do we introduce spontaneity and a little bit more chaos into the experience? In essence, how do we let the world in? The museum's model is very much about keeping the world out – literally, with light, or climate controls and security. Elements of the world that are too rough for art, you keep out of the building. It is about gatekeeping. How might we open that up? You can do that physically by opening doors and imaginatively by thinking about how inclusion might happen. How do we make a

difference? We feel a bit dissatisfied with the museum model, good though it is. It is like using a hammer to saw a piece of wood. It is better to use the hammer to bang in a nail. The São Paulo Biennial is a specific tool and can be repurposed to exploit its particular capacities.

**CM: I understand this background regarding biennials in general, but what can you say about the specificities of the history of the São Paulo Biennial?**

CE: This is the first São Paulo Biennial since Oscar Niemeyer's death<sup>1</sup>. We have been looking at the different ways in which the pavilion has been used for exhibitions in the past. Going back to 1957 all the way through, there are just a few typologies of how the space has been used: open, with the glass closed, with lots of architecture. We want to research that to try to push a little against the architecture probably. From being a living monument to Niemeyer, the building has become a historical monument with his death: it has become a site with a specific possibility, like a public square. Rather than a container for art, the building itself has its own character, which I think we can tease out of it.

**CM: What would you say also about the context in which the Biennial will take place? Do the political uprisings that have been happening in Brazil since you were appointed curator<sup>2</sup> provoke changes in the plans for an exhibition of this magnitude?**

**CE:** A fascinating and urgent responsibility that we have is to think about the protests and the social uprising, not only in Brazil, but also, of course, in the Middle East, Istanbul or the Occupy Movement in Europe or in the United States. How can this demand for a turn in our social, political and economic environment be reflected by the artistic gesture and the art world as a whole? Our analysis is not that there is an ideological solution that is waiting to be adopted, but that people are, in different ways, asking for a turn in the circumstances in which they live. Instead of just continuing on this path, people are asking for us to turn: the direction is not clear, but clearly this turn is required.

**CM:** It all seems to be very confusing, in the sense that we do not understand exactly what people are asking for. It started with the price of bus fares and right now, in Rio for example, public school teachers are on strike and there are people on the streets asking for better work conditions, better education. Something is happening – you see a movement, people are trying to change the situation, but which path to follow is not clear, it is hard to foresee the future.

**CE:** The answer is not to have a new popular leader who can stand up and say: “Let’s go and march in this direction.” Clearly the answer, or the question that is being asked, is the question of the notion of representative democracy. Brazil has now had democracy for nearly 30 years. Western Europe has been democratic for a longer time, since 1945. The United States, say post-civil war, the

civil rights movement, there was a real move towards a more equitable representative democracy. Since some of the modifications in the 1960s there has not been much of an address to these systems, and it is the systems themselves, and the notion of representation, that are under threat. It means: “Let’s have a different way of being governed.” The answer is a question: how do we keep this plurality, how do we keep these demands, actually always in flux, how not to organise them into a single party or a single movement? It is not to go back to those revolutionary contexts of taking over the state power, but what does it mean to be governed? It may not necessarily be articulated in this way, but it is a question, rather than an answer or demand, that is present in these protests.

**CM: Being responsible for an exhibition of this size in Brazil, how do you think that the curatorial team can tackle that? The events are very recent and very new.**

**CE:** Our responsibility is to respond to the moment, the São Paulo Biennial is a contemporary activity, it is not a historical survey. It is not about picking up some obscure fact from the past and then making a coherent narrative to the present through a whole series of interesting artworks. This is the job of a museum. A biennial has to reflect the urgency of the moment. The solutions have to be spontaneous and temporary, have to be thought out on the spot rather than be planned by the curatorial genius. To get rid of artistic genius as we have been struggling for and have it replaced with curatorial genius is a little bit sad.

**CM: So, how can we shift it?**

**CE:** It is to clearly work as a team, to not have a singular voice controlling it. One way is to think about how we can include some of those social questionings in a manner that is not representative. It would be absurd and abusive to what is going on there on the streets, just taking photographs of the protest and putting them in the pavilion. We have to take risks. But I don't think it is about representing what is going on out in the world in the Biennial. There has to be a transposition, a turn between what is happening there and what happens in the Biennial. What is the reason to bring it into the Biennial? There needs to be a transformation that would hopefully lead to some surplus value and not simply this quite dumb early-20th century move of the found object, taken from its context and put in an art context, and then it becomes art. In artistic terms, at a time when representative form, and therefore its legitimacy at its political level but also at its symbolic level, is under question, it would seem to be wrong to stick a photo of the protest on the wall. We have in a sense to get away from simple representation. The Biennial is a contemporary condition. There is a sort of body knowing in politics. There is a politics that happens on the street that is different from the politics that happens at the exhibition, because the body knowing at the Biennial is of a different nature. The intellectual knowing is of a different nature to the nature of the protest.

**CM: When you talk about bringing the contemporary into the situation, do you have an idea how you are going to**



## **enable this to happen?**

**CE:** This simple idea of opening the doors and allowing the contemporary in is inadequate to the task. The contemporary is transformed in that process of bringing it into the institution. It does not remain the same, because you are talking about the body; the forms change, the encounters change.

One important aspect is what the Biennial looks like, and how the spaces are used.

## **CM: Do you mean what it looks like physically?**

**CE:** Physically, what is the body experience like as you move through the spaces? Is spectatorship privileged or not? Are there other forms of encounter that are permitted with artworks? What kinds of tools are given for people to approach what we produce in the Biennial? You could make an argument that it does not really matter what art we show, what is important is how you can think about it. We can take almost anything, our framing, our concern with how the encounter is managed is of paramount importance, rather than a list of names of artists. To some extent, I am not so interested in who is in it, but how the material that we gather comes over to the users.

## **CM: From what you are saying, can I expect perhaps, that it will have more performances or artists who create art projects engaged with communities and with the public?**

**CE:** If you talk about body knowing, you are clearly talking about

the presence of the body in space, which is one way of talking about performance. But it is your body that is in the space, not necessarily somebody else's. It is not about representing the body. You have a body, it is this body that we are talking about, not that body.

Performance is not necessarily the only way, but I am sure that it is part of it. Your body would be reformulated in a certain way. You can expect that the rhythm of the spaces will not be regular. Recent biennials have often been designed in a very regular museological approach. You have a circuit of rooms, these rooms all relate to one another, and you can go from experience to experience. I think you can expect that not to happen.

**CM: OK. So can I imagine that the spaces will be differently organised?**

**CE:** Exactly. How? I do not know yet, but we are beginning to know what we do not want. The aspect of the body is very important, the aspect of the mind and how the experience of the show is mediated as well. Can we provide the tools in which the use value of the art can be enhanced? Those tools can be classic education tools, the guided tour, the audio guide, listening to music while you are walking around the exhibition, playing a role as a visitor, not being yourself but being somebody else, by looking at the art from somebody else's point of view. However, they can also be very simple, little devices in which you would have to go through certain preparations. One artwork is a preparation for another artwork in which you are asked to spend time in certain way. For example, the expectation you have of spending time watching a video. We need to

be realistic that people have two or three hours to see a huge exhibition. In essence, what is most interesting is what they take away with them out into the world. There is a relationship between bringing the world into the Biennial, and you also want to take the Biennial out into the world. What happens at that moment when you walk out the door? This final moment is as interesting as the moment when you walk in the door. The encounter then is very important.

**CM: Again, from what you are saying about being contemporary, can we also expect that the next São Paulo Biennial will present more recent artworks, artists who are creating art right now?**

**CE:** Yes, they will be as contemporary as they can be, because they will be fresh. All biennials commission new work: it is not very original, but we will do that as well. I am sure there will also be moments of historical retrospect, but it has to be written from the points of view that we have been talking about – the urgency for the Biennial to be contemporary. For example, we did a project in which we took a Picasso's artwork that was painted in 1943 during the German occupation in Paris and we took it to the Israeli occupation in Palestine. We made that work contemporary by taking it away from its origins and giving it another life. We can do this with historical work, but what is the motivation for it? It was not to celebrate Picasso, it was to give Picasso another image, which seemed relevant for that place at that time, for Palestine in 2011. I worked with a museum, I know what the urgencies are of that

historical work to be shown today, and it is certainly not being true to its origin, or even necessarily true to the intentions of the artist. The historical works that exist would have to be there because of their present relevance and not their proof that the past was better, or for their interest value. It is only interesting if it addresses the condition now, and this condition is the turn that is being demanded by many people.

**CM: Which is not just a political turn, but also a social turn.**

**CE:** It is an emotional and a psychological turn too. It is a sense of participation in the society in a different way. It is not as a coherent political project but on emotional terms it says: “We do not want to be represented.” I know what politicians are like. I come from Scotland and I have no respect for 99% of the politicians there. We don’t want that system any more. It is an emotional response and it is a bodily response to say no. In the art world, there are also artists who are saying no to that, and are giving form to that demand. Just as artists gave form to the demands of 1968 or gave form to the emotions of punks in the 70s, or gave form to the notions of globalisation in the 90s. Artists do this, they give form to these emotionally felt bodily demands of society and that is the forms that they are doing now.

**CM: The final question: you worked in South Korea, you know about Asian art and you mentioned a project in Palestine. Are you going to bring artists from these**

## regions to São Paulo?

**CE:** We are going to bring artists from around the world. North America will be underrepresented. Certainly the Middle East will be represented, and I also work a lot in South East Asia. Those artists will be here, but our research is in Latin American and, above all, in Brazil. It is a reversal of the work of other São Paulo Biennial curators: they went out to look for works and brought them to Brazil. We know the outside, but we want our research to be based here, and that here is São Paulo, Brazil, Latin America. So, those artists that we bring from Asia, from the Middle East, are artists we have already worked with, whom we have confidence in. We will really focus on São Paulo. It is firstly a São Paulo Biennial, then a Brazil Biennial, then a world Biennial, but the São Paulo element has to be significant. It is there that it takes place.

## References

1. Oscar Niemeyer, who designed the Biennial Pavilion, is well-known for being one of the most important modern architects. Incredibly, he kept working until his death last year aged 104. The first edition of the São Paulo Biennial was in 1951 at the Museum of Modern Art in São Paulo. It was in its fourth edition in 1957 that it moved to the modern pavilion in the Ibirapuera Park, where it still takes place today.
2. In June 2013, demonstrations began in São Paulo city against a rise in bus fares, culminating in a march by millions on 20 June. On that Thursday, in almost every capital in the country, people were

on the streets showing discontent with the government, complaining against huge spending on sporting events, demanding better infrastructure and better public services, including schools. Since then, there has been a wave of mass protests making various demands all over the country. Some have ended in acts of vandalism and there has been violence between protesters and the police.



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**Grupo Etcetera**

great article... ;)

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