

The 18th Sao Paulo Biennial as an example for a new space-time.

(For Sheila Leirner).

Exhibitions of paintings, (and of "art objects" in general), may be observed from at least two different angles. As walls carrying surfaces which are covered with paints, or as cut-outs from space-time where various intentions to publish informations overlap. From the first angle, (the classical one), attention will concentrate on the paintings, from the second angle, (the new one), it will concentrate on the relations which link the paintings. From the first angle, it will be necessary to analyse critically the various producers of the paintings. From the second angle, it is the "author" of the exhibition itself which is to criticize, because it is he who has produced this space-time for inter-linking. Now of course, the two angles overlap: he who analyses the paintings must cross the space-time of the exhibition, and he will notice its structure while crossing it; and he who analyses the exhibition will finally come up against the paintings while observing the exhibition structure. Still, though the two angles do overlap, they are incompatible the one with the other. For the first point of view it is the paintings which are the concrete data of the exhibition, and the invisible threads which link them are mere abstractions. For the second point of view, the concrete data of the exhibition are the fields of relations which it establishes, and the paintings are nothing but abstractions from this concreteness, they are "horizons". Because the first point of view, (the classical one) conceives the world to be a context of objects, and the second one, (the new one), conceives the world to be a context of fields, of relations. For the first point of view it is the magnet, for the second one it is the magnetic field which is the concrete datum. Now, since the second point of view is new, it is difficult to assume and to maintain. The 18th S.Paulo Biennial helps us to maintain it. The purpose of this paper is to consider the Biennial as a model for this new angle.

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He who enters the building which houses the 18th Biennial from 4/10 to 15/12/8 does so coming from the city of S.Paulo, and by doing so he penetrates into a different space-time. It is not unlike the experience of the Athenian citizen who climbs the Acropolis, leaving the Polis with its private houses and public places behind him, in order to penetrate into the temenos, the space-time of temples. The Ancients believed that the sacred space, cut out from the profane space of the city, confers a meaning to the life led within the private and political space of profanity, and the organizers of the Biennial share this belief. Still: the parallel between 4th century BC Athens and 20th century S.Paulo should not be exaggerated. S.Paulo, that monster which is like a Detroit sitting on a Lagos, despises the human individual by its violence and its dimensions. And the 20th century in its last stages is a cynical and disappointed "fin de siecle": it gives up, without regret, the second Christian millenium, and it enters, without illusions, the third millenium of man's ambiguous dominion over nature. And it is that city of S.Paulo, and that "fin de siecle", which the Biennial is trying to surmount, to give it a meaning, and thus to become an Acropolis of the future.

The building which houses the Biennial is part of an architectural complex

which was held to be of avant-garde style in the fifties, (boxes of concrete and glass), and it is located in a park which used to stand at the city outskirts, and which is called "Ibirapuera". Since then, both style and name, (which evokes the exterminated aboriginal population), have been banalized by the malign growth of the city which advances over its hills and plains, and which has overflowed the park, transforming it into one of its centers. Thus the Biennial is of easy access to the crowd of its thousands of visitors, (mostly young ones), which enter it daily, either individually or in groups led by "monitors". They do so in a festive spirit: they emerge from the visual, acoustic and atmospheric pollution of the city to take a cathartic bath of brilliant colors, musical sound and cleanness amidst the white walls, the winding stair-cases, the neat columns, and the well illuminated corridors of the exhibition, (which, in spite of its size, (miles of corridors), is not labyrinthical, but offers its visitors a friendly wellcome).

While walking along the corridors, the visitor follows well-marked paths, though those paths permit him to deviate ever so often. Those paths are "connotating" ones: the visitor's steps interpret them. There are three slightly thematic "nuclei", and various "special exhibitions" which may be visited separately. And there are "parallel events", (of music, of dance, of lectures), which deviate the visitor's attention from the paths markings. The size of the exhibition is such that the visitor cannot hope to exhaust the repertoire which is offered, even if he should visit it several times. But this wealth of repertoire does not result in chaos, because it is the visitor himself who organizes, by his steps, the experience he is having into meaningful information. The Biennial is a game whose rules are a synthesis of the organizers' and the visitor's intentions.

This synthesis of intentions is feasible because there is a theme to the Biennial: "Man and Life". Now of course: such a theme is so vast as to become insignificant, if taken to be a subject. But if taken as a catalyst for a synthesis of intentions it works: the visitor will leave the Biennial with the vague impression to have learned something about Man and his Life in this inhuman city, and in this disappointed "fin de siecle". And each visitor will have learned a different aspect of it, according to his own making, his own choice of walking. Thus the theme should not be taken as a label, but as an arrow to follow while walking.

Most of the objects exhibited are paintings, some of them are three-dimensional still or moving objects, and some of them are immaterial images, especially in the sections called "Viedoart" and "Between Science and Fiction". The paintings are either "contemporary art", or they are retrospectives into recent art. Now there is a paradox with surfaces covered with paint, be they contemporary or recent: they are products of antiquated techniques, (of handicraft), just like the Bolivian masks also exhibited here, but they intend to be avant-garde. This paradox is a problem for the usual art exhibitions all over the world, but not for the Biennale. It is not interested in the paintings themselves, but in their interrelation, and the very obsolescence of the painting technique becomes an information within the context of the theme "Man and Life".

The new images included in the exhibition, (synthetic ones, computerized ones, video, holograms), are poor if compared to what is shown in the United States

and Europe. But this is not a defect, but rather an advantage. The purpose of those images is not to offer the visitor a vision of the emerging esthetic scene, but a vision of the difficult relation between the new images and the old ones. The shock between the esthetic refinement of the obsolete images and the esthetic primitivism of the new ones, and between both of them and the esthetic power of ancient images like the Bolivian masks, shows the visitor what is involved in the present esthetic crisis. The Biennial has established a violent dialectical tension between pre-historic, historical and "post-historical" esthetics.

The visitor, after having left the exhibition, may analyze his experience intellectually: he was exposed to overlapping, incongruous esthetic messages, coming in from various horizons, (mostly from Latin America and from the First world), in various codes, (pictorial, musical, verbal), and in various techniques, and it is difficult for him to find a common denominator to be called "20th century art in its last phases". He may thus feel to have been exposed to the desperate decomposition of our historical civilisation, and to the menace of technical barbarism which is irrupting. But such a feeling would contradict his concrete experience, which was one of festivity: he had been invited to participate in a festival during which not objects, but relations between objects had been feasted on, and during which it was he himself who had established those relations.

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The Biennial was organized by a team led by two people: Roberto Muylaert and Sheila Leirner. The first one is a business man, the second one an art critic. Now this is an important fact for anybody who wants to criticize the exhibition. The phenomenon to be analyzed is the exhibition itself, not the objects exposed there, and the team mentioned above is the author of the work, (the space-time), under analysis. It is the intention of that team which is to be synthesized with the visitor's intention to result in the information "Man and Life". Now this team intention is itself a synthesis between an administrative, (formal, structural, functional), intention, and a critical, (evaluating, thematic, humanist), intention. And this characterizes the new emerging form of creativity in general. To be sure: the famous dichotomy "technocratic-humanist" is a brutal simplification, and there is no necessary contradiction between the two, still: Leirner and Muylaert having here collaborated, they have surpassed each other, and thus have supplied us with a model for future creativity.

Individual creativity, (the genius who produces in splendid isolation thanks to his mysterious intuition), is over. The superhuman mass of information at our disposal, and the complexity of that mass, no longer allows to be processed by an individual, but only by teams equipped with artificial intelligences, if new information is to be produced. Every future creation will be the result of team work, as exemplified by scientific laboratories or artistic work shops. But if we consider the Biennial to be a work of art, it stands on a new level. It is a work composed of works, and its authors have had recourse to authors. It is a meta-work composed by meta-authors. An example taken from biology may illustrate such an emergence: an organism composed of organs requires different

criteria from those required by the analysis of the various organs. Because it is no longer the organ function, but the inter-relation between the organs, which is the problem.

If we simplify that problem from the point of view of the team which organized the Biennial, we might state it as follows: individual works are to be chosen, they are to be inserted into a context such that the visitor may elaborate an information about "Man and Life" from it. It is the relational context which is the problem. It is a cybernetical problem. The choice of the individual works becomes the input of a complex system, and the information the visitor elaborates becomes its output. Now, this cybernetical attitude is precisely what I had in mind when speaking of a "new angle" in the introduction to this paper. The classical criteria applied to the choice of works to be exhibited no longer apply here. It is no longer the merit of the work in its own, but its place within the context, which is the criterium. And as for the information which the exhibit proposes, it no longer emanates from the individual works, but from the links between them. The attention is no longer focussed upon the "sender" of the message, but on its "receiver", and thus, in a dialectical way, it is the medium which becomes the message. It is no longer the case, as in traditional exhibitions, to supply the artist with a space within which he is to publish his message. It is now the case to create a space-time within which the message of the artist is absorbed, in order to enable the visitor to elaborate his own message. The tradition discursive structure of exhibitions, (the artist speaks, the visitor listens), is substituted by a dialogical structure, (the artists speak to each other, to the organizers, and to the visitor, who has the final word concerning the message). To create such dialogical space-times is the task of every creativity of the future.

No doubt: such a new attitude goes against established values. The artist chosen now becomes a part of a meta-individual, (inter-subjective), context, he becomes an "information bit", which is a violation to the classical attitude, for which the artist is the creator of the message. As for the receiver, he, too, is violated in his classical attitude which is one of information consumption, because he is being challenged to elaborate his own message. Yet, the festive climate which surrounds the Biennial softens this shock: both artist and visitor are here invited to actively participate in a festivity which is creative of a message on a new level of significance, a co-operative creation.

Now, it is almost impossible to create such a festive space-time as a place for the creation of esthetic messages in the First world. In those societies, artists are too severely inserted in their individual shells, and receivers are too satiated with informations to open themselves up. The ideal place to do it is S.Paulo of the eighties. It is sufficiently integrated within history to serve as a focus for dialogues, and it is sufficiently distant from the geographical centers of production to serve as a meta-platform. This is why S.Paulo of the eighties may serve as a point of departure into the level of artistic creation through intersubjective dialogue, to become an Acropolis of the future.

But having taken advantage of this in no way diminishes the merits

of the team which has organized the exhibition. On the contrary: Leirner and Muhlhaert, and their collaborators, have in fact transformed that opportunity into a model for future events elsewhere. They did so in two respects. They have creatively transformed the gigantism which characterizes S. Paulo, (and Brazil in general), from quantity into quality. And they have creatively transformed the festivity inherent in Brazilian culture from alienation into participation.

More than 700 artists and practically innumerable works participate in the exhibition. Now such an enormous quantity seems irresponsible from the point of view of classical criteria: it is out of the question that the two years which measure between Biennials should have produced so many works worthy of attention. But from the cybernetical point of view, the quantity is fully justified: the large number of works in the repertoire does not enlarge the structure of the exhibition, it densifies it. This jump from quantity into quality, this strengthening of structure thanks to repertoire increase, is characteristic of the emerging mentality, which I shall call "informatic" for the lack of a more adequate term.

The festive climate which surrounds the Biennial is a "ludic" one, in the sense that it is a game proposed by the organizing team to the visitor, who is invited to play with the works exhibited as if they were chess-men. In fact: by walking through the exhibition, the visitor "moves" those chess-men. Now such a festive play is complex, just like chess, but it is close to such Brazilian cultureemes like the carnival or foot-ball. With that difference that the visitor no longer watches the games, but participates actively in them. And such an active festivity comes close to what the Ancients called "sacred feasts", to take the parallel with the Athenian Acropolis up one more.

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If the 18th Biennial is looked at from the critical point of view of an observer in the First world, it becomes a fascinating spectacle. Something new is happening over there in the South American peninsula, and it is new not as a technique, but as an attitude. That festive, almost sacred event shows us, not new art techniques, but a new a new way to experience art. We should study that event with close critical attention, because we are in need of models to experience art, if we are to overcome our crisis. The 18th Biennial is one of those rare examples for the inversion of information flux which flows from the North toward the South: a piece of information is coming in from the South, and we should pay close attention to it.

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On discovery

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The art of living.

Whatever the term "art" may mean at present, it had a different meaning for the Ancients. Then, there were two art forms which were held to be supreme: the art of living, ("ars vivendi"), and the art of dying, ("ars moriendi"). We have unlearned the second form, but as for the first supreme art form, it has, very recently, re-emerged in a shape, that is, to say the least, surprising. It is now called "Biotechnics", a term which seems to be the Greek equivalent of "ars vivendi", but it has a quite different climate from the one the Ancients meant by that term. In fact, it is a discipline out of which a whole world of living art works, (artificial living beings), will arise, and that adventurous world will no doubt radically change our grandchildren's existence. When we consider this revolution, we usually look at it as if it were a sort of industrial revolution: instead of inorganic machines we shall have animated organisms, and instead of artificial intelligences made of silicon we shall have artificial brains made of nerve fibres. This paper will look at the biotechnical revolution from an aesthetic viewpoint.

Whatever the term "art" may mean, it always means the production and preservation of an information. A work of art is an information stored within some material, (stone, bronze, paper,), and the purpose of the material is to preserve the information from being forgotten. Now this is a forlorn purpose. The Second Principle of Thermodynamics states that in a closed system, (for instance in the universe which surrounds us), every information will, with time, dissolve, it will be forgotten. And, in fact, not only individual works of art of the past have fallen into ashes and ruin, but entire civilisations have disappeared from memory, or they have left only dubious traces. He who aims at becoming immortal through producing art, or he who is committed to the creation of eternal values through art, is on a wrong track.

There is, however, a very curious material within our universe which seems to defy this universal tendency toward "entropy", toward dissolution of information. It is called "living matter". So far, it has been found only on the planet Earth, and there is little hope to find it elsewhere, (for reasons which will be considered later). It forms a sort of slime which covers the Globe, (the "biomass"), and it is possible to calculate its weight with some precision. This slime consists of individual microscopic drops which contain an information. Those drops tend to divide, and to transmit their information to their successors. During this transmission mistakes may occur, and the information thus changes. Those mistakes are called "mutations". Thus living matter as a whole is a slime which carries a stream of ever more diversified information, in apparent defiance of the law of nature just mentioned. Of course: this is not really true, because life on Earth is not eternal. It will disappear one day, for instance when the planet Earth approaches the Sun a little more closely. Still: the duration of the information carried by living matter is very considerable. It is to be measured in hundreds of millions of years, not in millenia like artistic information. It is practically eternal.

However a very sad thing must be said concerning the production and transmission of information by living matter: it applies an extraordinarily stupid method. New information, (creativity), comes about by mistake, or, if you prefer, by pure chance. Even such marvellous informations, (such complex works), like the nervous system of an octopus or the human brain are the result of blind, haphazard variations. And there is more to this stupidity of biological "evolution": The single drops of which the biomass consists have, in the course of hundreds of millions of years, brought about very complicated structures, called "organisms". Our body is one such organism. But those organisms do not contribute to the diversification of living information. The drops, (the germinal cells), flow through the organisms as if they were mere channels, and the information which the drops contain is not affected by anything the organisms might do or suffer. In our case: the sperm and the ovula which flow through our bodies as if we were channels do not take notice of anything we do, (of our culture, of our art), and they will mutate, (change the information they contain), only by some mistake, by pure chance, and not by anything we do about it. This may be put the following way: there is no possibility to biologically inherit acquired information. Nothing can be more stupid.

The drops which carry biological information are microscopic, which is why they have been discovered only lately. And the information they carry, (molecules of complex acids), are even smaller. But once they were discovered, it became possible to manipulate them. Now what I have just said is a shattering statement. It shatters to bits almost everything we have learned about life, about art, about our position in the world. Because it says that it has now become possible to create an information which can be inserted into living matter and become hereditary. To create a work of art which will live, will multiply, and will itself create other works of art practically forever. This is, in essence, what biotechnics is about, this is, in essence, the new "art of living". Is it conceivable that there are people who want to go on putting information into stone, on canvass, on paper, or even into the electromagnetic field, if they can create living beings instead, and do this by a method which is far more intelligent than the one "God" used when He created living beings?

At this slightly immodest point a word of caution concerning "creation" is in order. The term "creation" may mean two things. One is the production of a new information by recombining the elements of available information. This is called "variational creation". The other thing is the production of a new information by introducing some new element into available information. That new element may be called a "noise", and one might say that this is "true" creation. So far, biotechnics have restricted themselves to "variational creation": they have re-combined the elements of available genetic information. While "God", apparently, has had recourse to the other method, to "true creation". But there seems to be no reason why biotechnics should not do the same in the future. This must be considered more closely.

The genetic information that flows through the biomass is, all of it and without any exception, encoded in the same material, (nucleinic acids), and it has, all of it and without any exception, the same structure, (the double helix). Thus, all manifestations of life on Earth, be they as different from each other as is a pine tree from a chimpanzee, are variations on the same type of information. Should there be, somewhere in space, (or even here on Earth), some phenomenon which is very similar to life processes, but in which the information it carries is encoded in a slightly different way, we would not recognize it as being life, which is why the search ^{for} of alien life forms in space is a self-defeating endeavor. So far, all ~~the~~ biotechnics is doing is to manipulate available genetic information. It does not change either the material or the structure of that information. It does the same thing "natural evolution" does: "variational creativity", the sole difference being that it does not do it by chance, but according to a deliberate program. But there is no reason why the material and/or the structure of genetic information should not be interfered with in the future. And if this were done, if even a single atom within a molecule of a nucleinic acid should be substituted by a different atom, (if even a very modest "noise" should be introduced), we would have created a form of life as it never existed before in the world. This would be "true creation".

Now consider for a moment what is implied in this statement. It says that we now possess a technique to create a whole series of forms of life, (and not only a whole series of living beings), such as they never before existed. We know that the form of life which exists on Earth has, in the very long run, resulted in complex nervous systems, and thus in sensations, perceptions, desires, thoughts, decisions, in sum: in "mental processes". No doubt: the mental processes which characterize humans are very different from the ones which characterize octopusses or bees, but still: they have, all of them, the same information for foundation. And we now possess a technique which permits us to create a series of foundations for mental processes such as they have never before existed. Mental processes for which terms like "sensation", "perception", "desire", "thought" and "decision" are no longer appropriate, because they describe only mental processes as we know them. In short: The statement that we are now capable of creating new forms of life implies that we have become capable of creating "spirits" which we are incapable of understanding.

Is this not a description of magic? And of the magical power which is said to characterize artistic creation? Is it not said of art, (by Romantics and by not-so-Romantics), that it creates what has never existed before, ("originals"), that it brings to life, and that it results in something the artist himself is incapable of understanding? So far, all such affirmations were metaphors, but now, with biotechnics, they have become literally true affirmations. And this is so revolutionary about biotechnics, about this new "art of living": that it enables us to become literally, and not only metaphorically, creative. Thus it might be said ~~the~~ biotechnics is art in the literal sense of that term.

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If we consider the future as it begins to emerge from the mists of the two revolutions we are witness to: from telematic and from biotecnical, revolution, we are impressed by the fact that it promises a world where life may be calculated, programmed and computed. But what is even more impressive is the promise that we may become truly creative artists, masters in the art of living. With this curious reservation, however: we shall be incapable of understanding the spirits we shall be giving life to.