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What Does the Curator of Sao Paulo Art Biennial Think About Israeli Art?

Jochen Volz, in Israel for a look at the local art scene, says that next year's Sao Paulo Art Biennial will focus on the uncertainty that rules our lives.

Shany Littman | Oct 29, 2015 3:11 PM



Jochen Volz. Credit: Nir Keidar

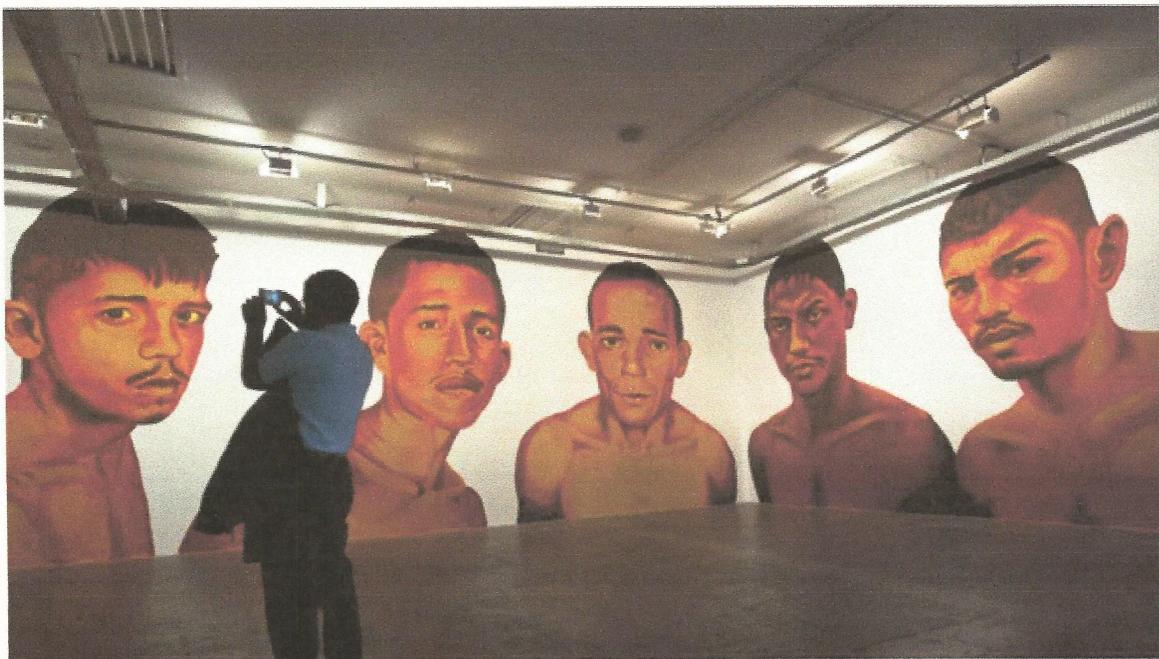
In these tense days, the lobby of the Diaghilev Hotel in Tel Aviv looks like something out of a movie scene. On the street, fear of terror attacks is everywhere, but inside the hotel, all that disappears. Relaxing bossa nova music plays in the background, art decorates the walls, the guests are dressed nicely and speak softly, and from a certain angle, the plants on the patio appear almost tropical.

Curator Jochen Volz, at the end of a six-day visit to Israel – with a group of curators brought here by the Artis nonprofit organization, which seeks to increase awareness of Israeli contemporary visual art in the world – doesn't look worried at all, despite the unfortunate timing. Major local artists have been lining up to see Volz, who is currently working on one of the world's biggest art events: the 32nd Sao Paulo Art Biennial, scheduled to open next September. Volz says there is a good chance he will invite Israeli artists to exhibit at the biennial, but says it's too soon to name any names.

As part of their visit, Volz and his six colleagues visited the Israel Museum, the Tel Aviv Museum of Art, the Ein Harod Art Museum, Beit Hagefen in Haifa, the Petah Tikva and Herzliya art museums, the Israeli Center for Digital Art in Holon and private galleries, among other places. Due to the tense security situation, however, they were not able to attend an event in which they were originally supposed to take part: the opening of an exhibition of contemporary German art at the gallery in the Israeli Arab village of Umm al-Fahm.

Volz says he came away quite impressed by the local art scene. “It was wonderful to see the variety of types of work, and the different generations of artists. The political situation is very present in the art, but it’s also very interesting to see how different artists perceive the situation and respond in different ways to it, sometimes directly and sometimes quite indirectly. I was also impressed by the great variety of art institutions here of different kinds, and all so close together geographically. It’s interesting to see how the artists move from one place to the other, and how they make a career within a small arena.”

Volz, 44, was born in Braunschweig, Germany, and is an art historian by training. He worked as a curator in Frankfurt before moving in 2004 to Belo Horizonte, Brazil, the hometown of his wife, the artist Rivane Neuenschwander. In Brazil, he was director of the Instituto Inhotim, an art center situated in a botanical garden in a rural area. He says the museum, which opened in 2006, became one of Brazil’s most popular contemporary art museums, drawing visitors from distant cities, despite its remote location. Working there had an important influence on his ideas about curating, and he describes the planning for the upcoming biennial in gardening terms.



A visitor taking a snapshot of a work by Brazilian artist Eder Oliveira, at the 2014 Sao Paulo Biennial. Credit: AFP

In 2009 he was a co-curator, with Daniel Birnbaum, of the Venice Biennale. For the last three years, he has lived in London, where he was program director of the Serpentine Galleries of contemporary art. Now he and his wife and their two children are returning to Brazil, where he will devote himself to preparations for the biennial there.

The Sao Paulo Art Biennial was founded in 1951 and is the second oldest in the world, after the Venice Biennale, which dates from 1895. Since 1957, it has been held in a single vast three-story building originally designed to house trade shows.

A state of uncertainty

Uncertainty is one of the main themes selected for the upcoming biennial.

“I believe that as a curator you are essentially responding to what the artists are already discussing,” explains Volz. “You listen to what they’re talking about. And right now I feel that a lot of artists are speaking about a state of uncertainty. We see the media always trying to create certainty, and it’s not believable. We communicate with one another and receive information through declarations and announcements that pretend to be certain, or try to project certainty and confidence. And at the same time it’s very clear that a lot of the things we believed in are not certain at all anymore... I think everyone understands that we’re in a continuous state of uncertainty. But no one talks about it. I wanted to start to talk about it, to make it the theme of the exhibition.”

Volz explains that uncertainty is connected to the essence of art. “Art never feels comfortable, and it’s always playing with the unknown,” he says. “Anyone who’s involved in art has to be optimistic. We all believe that art can bring change, that it can be a tool for understanding ourselves in the world and in society. Art isn’t looking for solutions; it asks questions.

And it's very important for that to be happening within a political structure [i.e., in a political-social context]. So I think it's important to use art to think about uncertainty."

Beginnings and endings

To prepare the biennial, Volz and four selected experts in different fields are conducting research all over the world, which focus on four different perspectives: cosmology, ecology, education and historical narratives. In the end, their findings will provide the theoretical backdrop for the Sao Paulo Art Biennial.

"We want to use curating and art research that isn't all done in Sao Paulo," says Volz. "To talk about cosmology, it'll be interesting to go to Santiago de Chile [to learn about] research overseen there by Danish curator Lars Bang Larsen. There are many artists, philosophers and poets there who've discussed the idea of eternal beginnings and endings. The idea of building and destruction, of earthquakes, tsunamis. We'll hold a three-day seminar there to think about how to discuss the theme of uncertainty and to bring it to the Sao Paulo exhibition.

"The question is, how do you bring a local subject, from four starting points, to one center, and how the discussion that begins in these places can become a central discussion. Because these are subjects that are usually ignored. No one talks about the extinction and destruction of natural regions and animal species in Mato Grosso [a state in Brazil] ... And in the Amazonas state [in Peru], it's actually interesting to talk about other things, like anthropology and education. We're trying to take a local discussion and give it wider exposure."

In 2014, several Israeli artists and curators, along with those from other countries, signed a petition calling on biennial organizers to return funding they received from the Israeli Foreign Ministry, after the logo of the Israeli consulate in Sao Paulo was displayed in the main exhibition space. The biennial opened in early September, shortly after Operation Protective Edge in Gaza. The artists contended that since the Israeli government was helping to fund the event, their works were being used to cleanse the Israeli conscience right after the war.



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