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Demanding a Change of Perspectives. Review of the 11th Berlin Biennale

Hannah Grimmer

To write in a few pages about an exhibition format that dates back to 1998 and (almost) completely reinvents itself every two years is no easy task. In particular, the last version of the exhibition complicates a summary reporting: Firstly, as the 11th version of this Berlin art show differed significantly from its predecessors by focusing for the first time decidedly on art from Latin America. Secondly, as it was designed to be a year-long process and had to be rescheduled, changed, and postponed several times due to the pandemic. The 11th Berlin Biennale began in September 2019 at the ExRotaprint in the West Berlin district of Wedding. The first three parts of the Biennale took place there and already anticipated the entire exhibition event through their titles: *exp. 1: The Bones of the World*; *exp. 2: Virginia de Medeiros and the Feminist Health Care Research Group*; *exp. 3: affect archives Sinthujan Varatharajah – Osías Yanov*. The preceding abbreviation “exp.” can be understood as *exposição* (exhibition) or *experiência* (experiments/experiences). The main exhibition itself, referred to by the curators as “epilogue”, opened (instead of July) in September 2020 and was on view at four exhibition spaces until 1 November 2020: ExRotaprint, daadgalerie, KW Institute for Contemporary Art and Gropius Bau. A quartet was in charge of the curatorial direction: María Berríos, Renata Cervetto, Lisette Lagnado and Agustín Pérez Rubio, whose regional focuses are Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Denmark and Spain. The title of this “epilogue” was *The Crack Begins Within*.

Even if it sounds like a *soft opening*, the slow approach over the course of a year was developed independently of the pandemic. With the workshops and exhibitions at ExRotaprint, a former printing press factory, the curators paid tribute to the *Clube dos Artistas Modernos* (Club of Modern Artists). The latter was founded in 1932 in São Paulo (Brazil), among others, by the artist Flávio de Carvalho (1899-1973). As a self-organised association, it was characterized by its independence from existing art institutions, from whose elitist attitude it distanced itself and thereby blurred the boundaries between the private and the public sphere. This is worth mentioning here because de Carvalho played a pivotal role for the entire Biennale and works by him were exhibited at KW and at Gropius Bau. The artist, whose work is little known in Germany, understood his artistic actions as *experiências*. In the critical examination

of de Carvalho's work, a central objective of the Biennale became apparent: to change perspectives in order to be able to recognize new connections. For example, a number of Käthe Kollwitz's prints were on display at the Gropius Bau. This traces back to 1933, the year Kollwitz was forced to resign from the Prussian Academy of Arts, while an exhibition with 84 of her prints was held in this very *Clube dos Artistas Modernos* in São Paulo.

Bringing this altered perception of artistic relations to the German capital was a key claim of the curatorial concept: the so-called Global South, in particular Latin American countries, served as both starting point and communication partner in one. Occasionally, one could read in the press that not all contemporary artists succeeded in creating a 'lastingly stirring aesthetic form' and their art was characterized by an 'aesthetic weariness' (Maak, FAZ, 07.09.2020). Likewise, many positive reviews were to be found (stating that this biennale probably was 'empathetic like probably no other before' (Kuhn/Rieger, Tagesspiegel, 04.09.2020)), but it is rather upsetting when elsewhere any kind of difference was described as a kind of naïve 'primitivism' (Rauterberg, Die Zeit, 09.09.2020). These assessments express that not everyone was willing to follow the required shift of perspective. But it was the art on display making it evident that it is time to ask certain questions more vigorously. For example, the series *The Museum of Ostracism* (2018) by Sandra Gamarra Heshiki indicates that the separation of "art museums" and "anthropological museums" has long been obsolete and that questions of restitution should likewise be discussed differently. Carlos Motta's three-part work *Requiem* (2016) addresses the possibility of alternative narratives and archives, especially in the context of the Christian church. The Graphic Novel *Xêzên Dizî* [The Hidden Drawings] (2018-20) by Zehra Doğan exemplifies a connection between activism, journalism, and art. When works as multi-layered as these are labelled "folkloristic" (Rauterberg, Die Zeit, 09.09.2020) it primarily testifies to one's own ignorance. In any case, it is certain that the 11th version of the Berlin Biennale did not want to make things easy for its primarily European audience – and that was a good thing.

I would like to elaborate further on transnational solidarity which played a particular role in the curatorial program. The tour at the Gropius Bau ended with the Chilean Museo de la Solidaridad Salvador Allende (MSSA). The eventful history of this museum began in early 1971 in Santiago de Chile as the Museo de la Solidaridad (Museum of Solidarity). It was during the government of Salvador Allende, whose term in office was to end after only three years on 11.09.1973 with a violent coup by the military. Allende's short presidency cannot be thought of without the artistic support he continuously received, even after his death. At that time, a worldwide call was

launched for artists to donate works to support the Unidad Popular, the electoral alliance behind Allende. Thanks to this *Operación Verdad* (Operation Truth), which was directed against a US-funded smear campaign, works by artists such as Frank Stella, Lygia Clark and Alexander Calder made their way to Chile, and the museum finally opened in 1972. On the one hand, these events must be seen in the context of the Cold War, in which nearly all countries in Latin America were a geopolitically pertinent location for the USA, over which it exerted powerful influence. On the other hand, they foreground the strong links between art and politics. When the coup shook the South American country and led to a brutal, sixteen-year dictatorship, the museum also had to go into exile. This gave rise to the Museo Internacional de la Resistencia Salvador Allende (MIRSA), a museum without a building that supported Chilean exiles and dissidents in the form of international traveling exhibitions. With the end of the dictatorship, the museum was able to return to Chile in 1990 and was given the name it bears today.

For two reasons, it is worth explaining why this history was central to the curatorial approach of the 11th Berlin Biennale: First, the MSSA and its turbulent development are emblematic of the fact that artistic work cannot be understood without its surrounding social, political and economic context. These are not separate fields, as art history often seems to suggest, but rather many artists have always interacted with political events. I would argue that this is what this Biennale was emphasizing. Second, transcontinental (or global) solidarity does not have to be an empty phrase. The idea, which is inherent in the title of the museum, had its origin in 1967 at the conference of the *Organization of Latin American Solidarity* in Havana (Cuba), of which Allende was the director. As a museum in exile, solidarity was perpetuated, which links to the exhibition in Berlin: in 1974, a portfolio of 32 graphics was printed in West Germany under the title *El pueblo tiene arte con Allende* (The people have art with Allende). As recently as 1970, these prints were on display in a traveling exhibition throughout Chile. In 1982, the exhibition *Artists from Latin America* opened at the daadgalerie in Berlin, in which half of the works originated from the museum's collection. René Block, then director of the daadgalerie, travelled to Paris to select works by exiles living there. Sixteen of these prints could be seen in the Gropius Bau in 2020. Furthermore, a large-scale work by Gracia Barrios consisting of sewn-together pieces of fabric was on display. The 11th Biennale was dedicated to the memory of this artist, who died in 2020 and supported Allende with her work *Multitud III* (Crowd III).¹ On the opposite wall there were ten *Arpilleras*, created by women who can no longer be identified today. These stitched and embroidered works are from 1973 to 1985 and underline the prominent role of female* resistance against the Pinochet dictatorship.

1 Further, the Biennale was dedicated to the memory of the U.S. blogger Amanda Melissa Baggs, who also died in 2020.

Why is this so relevant? What makes this exhibition space particularly special is that it can be seen as a symbol of real practiced and international solidarity. This room shows that the common, separate understanding of art and activism is not tenable or at least not universally valid. Besides, the present caught up with the planning of the exhibition, and the topicality of the works from the 1970s can be illustrated by an example: Two of the prints mentioned above feature eyes [Luz Donoso, *La lágrima*; Ricardo Mesa, *¡Ojo!*]. Since the social uprising that gripped Chile in October 2019, they have been the symbol of rebellion against social inequality and against police and military violence. In the Chilean art emerging with the social movement today, references to the art of the 1970s are omnipresent.

Other works were by the *Grupo de Estudiantes Plásticos* (Plastic Students Group), which came together in the mid-1940s at the *Escuela de Bellas Artes* in Santiago and included the already mentioned Gracia Barrios and her husband, the painter José Balmes, or Guillermo Núñez. A personal highlight for me was subsequently going to KW and seeing works from the 1980s by the West Berlin artist Galli (*1944). Their aesthetics, the fragmented representation of the body and the colourfulness, resembled each other in an astonishing way. Indeed, (art-) history should not be told (only) as national history.

Rethinking and unlearning familiar categories was a desirable goal of this Biennale, though it failed on various levels: the texts were written in such a complicated and inner-discursive way that they were sometimes not very informative or able to do justice to the claim of inclusion. Instead, curatorially charged terms (such as healing, dichotomies, fragility, resistance) were strung together and hardly explained in a generally understandable manner. Moreover, the complex references and connections that I wanted to elucidate here with the example of the MSSA were certainly not clear to every visitor of the exhibition. Unfortunately, in this respect, there was not enough low-threshold mediation work carried out.

Nevertheless, I want to accentuate that the Biennale succeeded in presenting and implementing the important concept of solidarity from a curatorial angle. Sadly, due to the pandemic, many artists from other continents, namely Latin America, were unable to travel to the exhibition and thus a dialogue, taking place in real space, was not possible. That was a pity, because surely, they were the centre of the exhibition.

In conclusion, it remains to be noted that, according to the exhibition texts, the curators borrowed the title *The Crack Begins Within* from the Egyptian poet Iman Mersal (*1966). This is at least a little irritating: It is correct that the expression is discussed in her essay "On Motherhood and Violence" but Mersal had taken it from a poem by

Anna Świrszczyńska (1909-1984), which she preceded her essay with. It is about her role as a mother and her confession of not wanting to be the egg that breaks when her child is born. Inevitably, the first sentence of Hermann Hesse's (1877-1962) *Demian* comes to mind: The egg is the world and who wants to be born must destroy a world. For the 11th Berlin Biennale, this probably means: Anyone who wanted to engage with the exhibited art had to set aside common paradigms and the here well-known patterns of reception and thus destroy a world. In this way, however, new dialogues and whole worlds of art were revealed to the keen viewer – especially from the multifaceted and diverse continent behind the label Latin America.

