

**ARTFORUM**

SLANT

# SMOKE SIGNALS

September 13, 2021 • Silas Martí on the 34th São Paulo Bienal

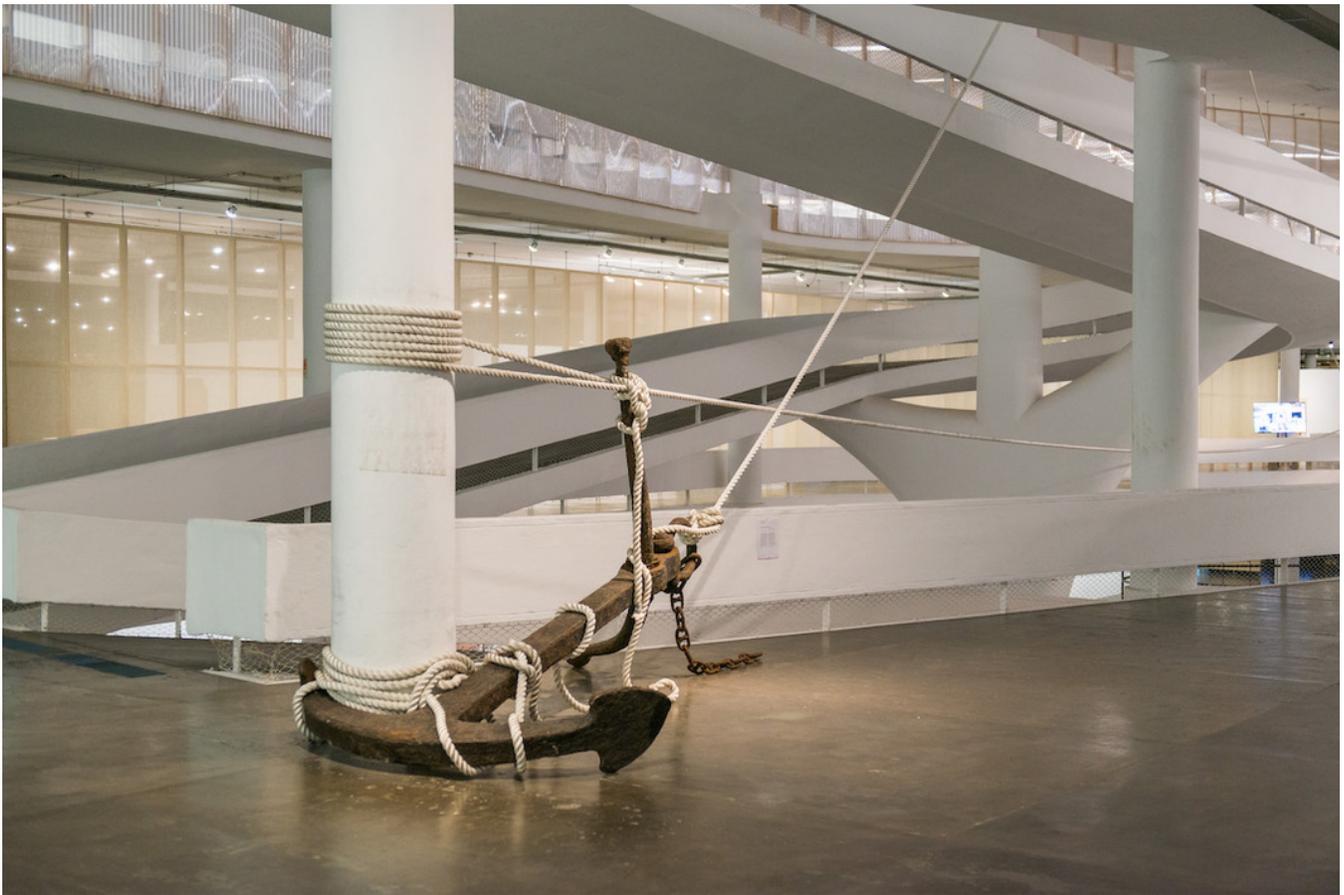


Uýra, *Elementar (A última Floresta – Terra pelada)* (Elementary [The Last Forest – Bare Earth]), 2018, photographic print, 17 3/4 x 28 1/2".

**“THOUGH IT’S DARK, STILL I SING”** is the name of the show. Though it’s a pandemic and the country is on the verge of collapse, still we find ways to celebrate. Nothing spells dystopia more than a tightly packed queue of art-world elites each waiting their turn to be tested for Covid-19 before entering the VIP opening of this year’s much-anticipated thirty-fourth Bienal de São Paulo. Screens mounted at the door of Oscar Niemeyer’s modernist pavilion in the city’s biggest park beeped and grew brighter with each test result, allowing the patient to step into the premises. It felt like boarding a spaceship to another world, far from the everyday chaos and destruction we living in Bolsonaro’s Brazil have felt long before the pandemic.

The strength of this exhibition, in fact, lies in its fresh and surprising ability to hold up a mirror to the horror we witness every waking moment. I speak from the heart as a wearied citizen of a country that has never seemed stranger and more violent than right now. To say we face a disaster would be euphemistic. The tyrant who now presides over Brasília—the capital city designed by the same architect whose building has hosted this show for nearly seven decades—has made the destruction of anything artistic or cultural or decent a state policy. And so, it is nothing less than a miracle that an ambitious edition of the Bienal has finally materialized. The buoyant energy of the crowd at the opening was palpable, proof that something we call art has persevered, somehow, against all odds.

But not without injury. The art of plague-ridden, quasi-dictatorial Brazil has surfaced with blood and bruises. It seems like everything in this show is steeped in soot, smoke, and ash. Fire, the agent of destruction, is long extinguished. Here we’re dealing with the smoldering remains. In a nutshell, the show, orchestrated by Jacopo Crivelli Visconti and Paulo Miyada, seems to stand on the ruins of a nation. Those familiar with the New York Museum of Modern Art’s historic landmark 1943 exhibition “Brazil Builds,” touting the fabulous and wondrous nature of this country’s modernist buildings, are here greeted with something closer to “Brazil Destroys.”



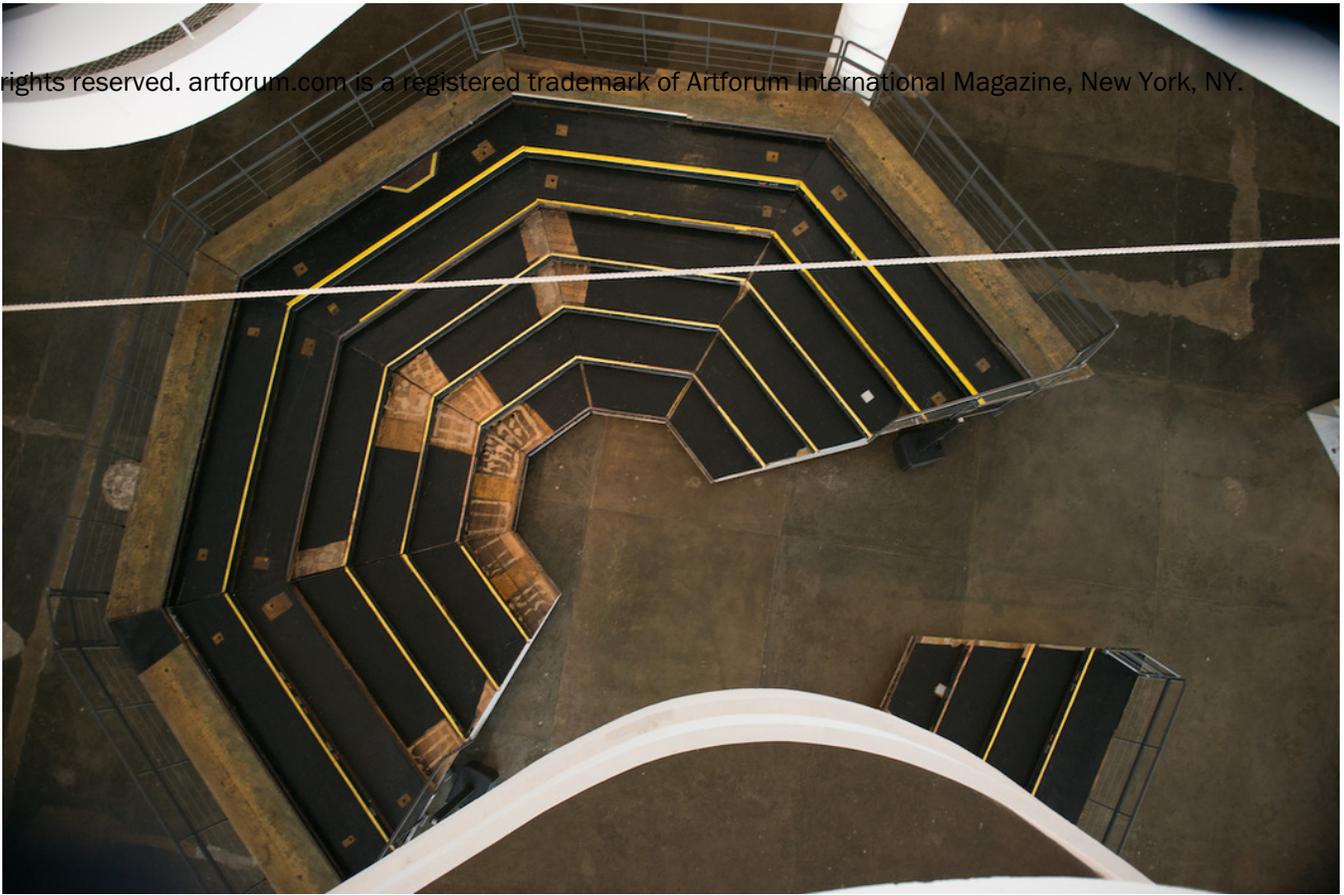
**Arjan Martins, *Complexo atlântico (Corda)* (Atlantic Complex [Rope]), 2020.** Installation view, Ciccillo Matarazzo Pavilion. Photo: Levi Fanan.

There are some encouraging signs. Half of the participants are women and a record number of native Brazilians are present, not to mention a strong showing of Black artists—the majority of this country’s population is Afro-Brazilian—and queer artists. Uýra, an up-and-coming performer, spearheads this new generation. They appear in a series of photographs, their self-described hybrid body—channeling both an Indigenous artist-educator and a drag queen who inhabits an ambulatory tree—adorned in heavy make-up and regalia made from nature and found objects. We see Uýra emerge from pools of waste, among wildlife threatened by the metallic claws of bulldozers, chewing bits and pieces of a string of staple seeds from the Amazon, the “lungs of the planet” set aflame by the current political administration. (The show’s title, fittingly, is a verse by Amazonian poet Thiago de Mello.) Upstairs, at the tail end of the show, one finds a series of works by Jaider Esbell, Daiara Tukano and American painter and printmaker Jaune Quick-to-See Smith, as well as the massive installation by Peruvian artist Ximena Garrido-Lecca—colorful pieces

divergent in their perhaps ingenuous vision of a bright future, animals alive and plants growing.

The pièce de resistance here is perhaps a meteorite rescued, intact, from the remains of the Museu Nacional, the country's main anthropological institution that, three years ago, burned to a crisp out of sheer negligence—a similar fate befell São Paulo's Cinemateca Brasileira this summer. In front of the rock hangs Carmela Gross's massive drawings of a volcanic eruption, black stains oozing even blacker clouds. Danish artist E. B. Itso shows the dark interior of a boarded-up building, a secluded refuge with no sunlight that allows for even greater freedom than the convulsive streets outside. Next up, Regina Silveira transforms naively rendered silhouettes of soldiers, a football team, and tanks into heavy shades that consume all available space on the canvas, outstretched and menacing, another parasite in the show and one that operates as a prelude to the trading floor installed by American artists Daniel de Paula, Marissa Lee Benedict, and David Rueter in the heart of the pavilion. A corroded stage, with marks left by its years on the Chicago commodity exchange, it registers sharply against the antiseptic whiteness of the architecture's interior curves.

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**Daniel de Paula, Marissa Lee Benedict, and David Rueter, *Deposition*, 2020**, rubber, wood, honeycomb aluminum. Installation view, Ciccillo Matarazzo Pavilion. Photo: Levi Fanan.

Black and white and the simplistic moral binary they represent is an obvious—perhaps necessary—leitmotif here. Beauty confronts horror, and the latter quickly gains the upper hand. The plot twist is that life and freedom prevails, not in the fantasy of this country’s tropical modernism and the flown-in offerings of established art-world darlings, but in the bleakest, most opaque and impenetrable of pieces, those that have banished light altogether. Consider the famous “negative paintings” by the late Antonio Dias—huge black compositions with white lines describing the perimeter of a prison cell or a cage afloat in outer space—or Spanish artist Ederne Rubio’s exhilarating footage of people roaming the interior of an enormous cave. In the darkest of places, this Bienal de São Paulo imagines the power of lost souls banding together, and by doing so, rediscovers the faintest glimmer of hope.

*Silas Martí* is a writer and editor of the culture desk at Folha de S.Paulo.

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