

Curating the Mercosul Biennial in Brazil: An Interview with the Blanton's Gabriel Pérez-Barreiro

by ERIN ALDANA



GABRIEL PÉREZ-BARREIRO, the curator of Latin American Art at UT's Blanton Museum of Art, was recently chosen to be chief curator of the Mercosul Biennial, which takes place in the Brazilian city of Porto Alegre in the southern state of Rio Grande do Sul. Mercosul, or Mercosur in Spanish (from Mercado

Común del Sur in Spanish or Mercado Comum do Sul in Portuguese), is a regional free trade agreement established in 1991 among the South American nations of Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay, Venezuela, and Paraguay (Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, and Peru currently have associate member status). The Biennial emerged in 1996 as an attempt by business and artistic leaders in Porto Alegre to establish

their city as an alternative to the Rio de Janeiro/São Paulo cultural axis and the dominance of the São Paulo Biennial. While the economic alliance eventually failed, the Mercosul Biennial achieved greater success as it asserted a regional, South American identity in contrast to the international model used in São Paulo.

Gabriel has used this opportunity to explore an alternative model for exhibiting contemporary art, one that emphasizes the role of education in making the work of art comprehensible to the viewer. The solution that he eventually developed is based on the idea of "the third bank of the river," the title of a 1962 short story by Brazilian author João Guimarães Rosa. In this story, a man decides, suddenly and inexplicably, to live on a boat in the middle of a river on whose banks he had previously lived a normal life with his family. After a time, his family is forced to accept the man's stubbornness, and the ecology of the river itself becomes changed by his presence as the third bank of the river. For Gabriel, "This metaphor of a third bank resonates on many levels with a deeply human and contemporary need to move beyond the binary oppositions that structure our lives."

Having known Gabriel for several years and addressed some the issues of art education in my own work, I was eager to sit down with him and find out more about his involvement with the Biennial.

EA: I was wondering if you could begin by describing the process by which you were chosen to become the curator of the Biennial.

GPB: Well, the invitation really came out of the blue. I was never expecting it, mostly because I was familiar with the Biennial, and they had a structure—which was a Brazilian chief curator and then a curator from each of the countries of the Mercosul block—and I did not fit any of those categories. But I did know the person who had founded the Biennial, Justo Werlang. He had been president of the first edition Biennial and vice president of the following five and was about to be elected president of the sixth and, but I did not know any of that. He was just someone I knew in his activities as a collector and as president of the Iberê Camargo Foundation with which I had some contact because I had gone there to give a talk a few years ago about the Blanton. So he was someone who was very much in my peripheral vision.

Justo and I met in Buenos Aires exactly a year ago at the ArteBA art fair and he said, “I really want to meet with you—there are a few things on my mind and I would just like to get your feedback.” So we went for a coffee and he sent me an e-mail with what he identified as the critical issues for the Biennial. It was the kind of thing that I love talking about—cultural policy—and I thought he just wanted an outside perspective to help him think through some of these ideas, but we ended up having a four-hour coffee. And we were talking about the major challenges, which were the repetition of the model, the fact that the current generation of Brazilian curators did not know Latin American art the way an earlier generation had, and at the end he asked me to send in a proposal.

EA: How did these issues with past Biennials develop as problems? Did Justo arrive at these criticisms on his own, or did they come from the general public?

GPB: I would not want to give the impression that there was a major crisis. I think what Justo

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was doing was to anticipate problems rather than try to solve them after they have already happened. It is an event that gets almost a million visitors, so there is a general acceptance of it, people are excited about it. I think when we started to dig under the surface, the question was not so much “What are people criticizing?” it was “Is this Biennial responding to needs in the right way?”

The event is like a parachute that just lands once every two years and by the time the public gets used to it, it goes away and two years later there is something different. That was making the Biennial into a sort of theme park—it is a problem that all biennials are facing.

EA: I was wondering how you came up with the idea of the Third Bank—were you already familiar with the work of Guimarães Rosa or did someone suggest him to you? Also Paulo Freire—I think it is very striking that you chose two Brazilian intellectuals to form the theoretical underpinnings of the exhibition. I wanted to find out more about how you came to these

choices and whether you see them as ameliorating the fact that you are not Brazilian?

GPB: It is really funny because everything is relative—Rio Grande do Sul has a relationship with Brazil that is like the relationship of Texas to the United States—they are very proud of their separate identity. I thought people would welcome the fact that I was using the work of a Brazilian writer, but the first thing they said was, “Yeah, but Guimarães Rosa is from Minas Gerais, not Rio Grande do Sul,” which had not even crossed my mind.

That was not my first idea—at first I was thinking through the structure, the issue of regional versus global—either the exhibition could be very local, focusing only on the countries of Mercosul or the Benetton model, “Holding hands across the planet,” like the São Paulo Biennial. I kept thinking that both models were problematic and that there had to be a third way. I came across the idea of the Third Bank about eight years ago in a song by Caetano Veloso, and I thought it was such a great idea that I would have to use it some

time and filed it away for future reference. I had my first conversations with [Curator of Education] Luis Camnitzer and told him I was thinking about this idea, and he immediately began interpreting it in terms of education. He is the one who brought in Paulo Freire—that was not my idea. Freire is someone who has had a huge influence on Luis—so much of his philosophy is directly inspired by Freire, but I thought the combination was nice. For Freire, there is no teacher and student—everyone is a student. There is a dialogue, with the meaning created in the middle instead of a transfer of information in one direction.

EA: It seems that the educational component is a major aspect of the Biennial—how did you end up choosing Luis Camnitzer to be in charge of this part?

GPB: He was definitely the first person I spoke to, the first person I invited to work with me on this. It was clear from the first conversations with Justo that this was going to deal with education in a very serious way, education in the broader sense, with the visitors. It was really the question of what do you do with this audience, with an audience that is not the art world because most biennials are made for people like me. The first person I thought of was Luis. I felt like I needed someone who has thought more about this than I have, someone who has dealt with Latin American pedagogy in a way that I have not. Most of my debate is informed by issues in American or European museums and the issues are different in Brazil. Luis is very familiar with both worlds. He is very connected to that tradition in Latin America, but also knows the American scene very well, and we were always talking about the differences between them.

EA: And this is based on his work as an artist?

GPB: More on his work as an educator.

EA: I am not very familiar with his work as an educator.

GPB: It's funny, because that is how I met him the first time. I did a workshop with him in Madrid in 1999 or 2000 called *Art and Education: The Ethics of Power* and it was a life-changing experience. It was really

amazing—I thought this is someone who has such a clear and wise structure for thinking about art education. He never earned his living as an artist—he was not commercially successful for most of his life and had a day job teaching art, which he took really seriously. That is most of what we talked about, not his art work. As we got more involved, he got more excited about it. He did not realize the potential of the project we were dealing with and, really, neither did I. As we went through those first months, he would tell me that it was his life's project. No one had ever put him in the position of saying, "Here are a million people, here are two hundred and fifty thousand teachers"—the scale of the project is out of control. To not scare him, I would lie about the numbers and get him excited about it, then release them to him little by little.

EA: I was wondering about the possible connections between your ideas for this Biennial and the structure of America/Americas (the exhibition of the American and Latin American permanent collections at the Blanton)—I saw a continuity in the theme of what I refer to as anti-regionalism—was this conscious for you, is it something you have been thinking about for a long time?

GPB: Well, anti-regionalism is hard, those are two very loaded words. I tend to think about it as cultural geography—it's like a Third Bank thing, like the question of whether Fabián Marcaccio is Argentinean or American, what we did was turn around and say that that is not the right question—we need to change the categories and be able to talk about him being both of those things. It's not an either/or situation—your life is an accumulation of contexts, not a zero sum. If we manage to get rid of that division in the museum, what do we do with something called the Mercosul Biennial? Why do we assume that the artists live in a bubble? I think there are a lot of parallels—thinking about *America/Americas* really helped prepare me for the Biennial.

EA: I do not know if you want to answer the question of how this has been affecting your work at the Blanton (laughing).

GPB: That is fine—I should answer that question. Actually, it's impossible. I am supposed to be doing 50 percent at the Blanton and

50 percent at the Biennial, but actually I am doing 150 percent at both. It was innocent and cute to think I could hold two jobs in two different countries and continents. Actually, it has been fine—the museum has been really flexible in allowing me to do this and giving me the structure to do it—I have been able to maintain all of my obligations at the museum. The only good thing about it is you get a lot of air miles and sometimes can get upgraded.

EA: In conclusion, I have been thinking about the fact that UT has a strong tradition of interaction with Brazil in Latin American Studies. It seems that a lot of people at UT are probably interested in this project because it has the potential to create more relationships and improve ties between both the region of Latin America and Brazil, and I was wondering how you see that, the potential or what has already happened; also the idea that cultural exchange should not be a one-way street, but should go both ways?

GPB: That is a really important principle, and I think that is the big challenge for area studies in general that traditionally have been based on a Cold War model—a them and us mentality. This search for more collaborative, two-way projects is really important. At the museum, we are starting a new initiative to bring more artists-in-residence. We are just signing an agreement with the Iberê Camargo Foundation in Porto Alegre to bring a Brazilian artist-in-residence to UT with the Brazil Center, so we have been doing some of that before and are starting to formalize those arrangements. We are talking to a group in Argentina about having a bilateral exchange so we would partner a UT faculty artist with an artist in Argentina and they would host each other for a few months. I think there is a lot of potential in those kinds of relationships because they are organic—they figure out where their interests are. I am excited to see what will come out of it in the future and if we can keep working those relationships, because there is a lot of curiosity and excitement on both sides.

Erin Aldana is a Ph.D. candidate in art history, specializing in contemporary Brazilian art. She became acquainted with Gabriel during an internship she served at the Blanton. ✨