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Debates

The Brazilian Art World is Here to Stay, Economic Crisis or Not

JANUARY 27, 2016

There is no doubt that the Brazilian contemporary art world will suffer from the downturn which the country's economy is currently experiencing. But there is an economic determinism underlying Charlotte Burn's provocative text which I do not share, and by consequence, neither do I share her pessimism about the future of the Brazilian contemporary art world. This economic determinism reduces cultural fortunes to economic ebbs and flows, or, as Burns claims: 'where economies emerge, the art market follows'.

Luckily contemporary art worlds cannot be reduced to economics. Their rise requires more than economic growth while, conversely, without growth, contemporary art worlds can still be sustainable. To begin with, if economic growth would be all that matters, it would be hard to understand the highly different performance of the four countries in the BRIC-acronym: while all four countries have seen prolonged periods of high economic growth since the 1990s, Russia in particular has hardly been successful in converting economic wealth into cultural riches. But even compared to China, Brazil has been doing extremely well: it is fair to say that Brazilian contemporary art has gained much more recognition globally, in spite of the fact that its economic growth as well as the number of its super-wealthy citizens was significantly lower in that country than in China.

In order to understand why contemporary art worlds flourish, economics does not suffice. To begin with, a historical perspective is needed. The boom that the contemporary art market in Brazil witnessed over the last decade was only the latest stage in a much longer process of art world emergence. This emergence has been a slow and tedious process, as it almost invariably is (Europe and the United States are no exception in that respect). It is the result of the persistence, passion, and painstaking efforts of many people, some professional, other amateur, some rich, others poor, some local, others foreign, some acting on their own, others concertedly. It took decades before the fruits of their labor could be harvested.

The roots of the contemporary art world go back at least a century, to the *Semana de Arte Moderna*, a week of festivities organized by a group of artists in 1922, which marked the

beginning of modernism in Brazil. The institutional development of the art world continued right after WWII, with the establishment of the first modern art museums and private galleries, and, in 1951, the Bienal de São Paulo. It was the world's second biennial. Although none of the private galleries survive, the history of some of Brazil's contemporary galleries goes back to the 1970s. Well before Brazil's economic boom, entrepreneurial gallerists such as Luisa Strina, Thomas Cohn or Marcantonio Vilaça managed to make a market for contemporary Brazilian art. They did so in times of dictatorship, political corruption, and economic hardship. The present economic downturn will not be able to destroy what has been built up over the course of a century.

Another reason why I am not that pessimistic about the future prospects of the Brazilian contemporary art world is because of the recognition that an increasing number of Brazilian artists, both alive and deceased, have received over the last decade from major international museums including Tate Modern and the Museum of Modern Art in New York. It is no exaggeration to state that Brazilian artists are retrospectively being included in the canon of modern art. At Sotheby's, Christie's, and Philips in New York, works by Brazilian artists such as Lygia Clark, Sergio Camargo, Adriana Varejão or Beatriz Milhazes are regularly sold for over a million dollars. There are no signs that international galleries have lost interest in representing these artists. The international careers they have managed to build makes the artists less vulnerable to the ebbs and flows of the Brazilian economy or, for that matter, the local Brazilian art scene. This international recognition also pertains to Brazilian galleries; for instance, the number of Brazilian galleries participating at Art Basel outnumbers any other emerging country. As a result, their collector base is no longer exclusively local.

Surely the Brazilian contemporary art world has its weaknesses, but they are not so much related to the business cycle as to local configurations such as the relatively weak role of public museums in the country, which continue to be underfinanced. As a result, audiences have comparatively little exposure to contemporary art in the systematic fashion that only museums can provide, while artists have few opportunities to exhibit their work outside of commercial circuits. For recognition, Artists by and large depend on foreign institutions. Also, high import tariffs and opaque customs procedures continue to prevent local collectors from acquiring international art. As a result, Brazilian galleries have little incentive to represent foreign artists, which lends a rather eerie local character to the contemporary art world. This, rather than the economic downturn, may be the real reason why foreign galleries have lost some interest in the country.

Will Brazil's Cultural Scene Thrive Despite Recession?

MODERATOR

The Provocation

Charlotte Burns