

# (Trans)Panamerican: gender and sexuality in the 31st São Paulo Biennial

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## Abstract:

This article discusses the 31st São Paulo Biennial from a sociological and feminist perspective. We focus on how representations of the queer and the feminine bodies circulated during the event and focus the analysis on two projects: “Espaço para Abortar” and “Dios es Marica”. The text assumes an intersectional perspective with attention to the roles that gender, religion, sexuality and the politics of representation play in the formation of curatorial projects, artistic discourses and artists’ poetics. We also focus on the social context and conditions of possibility that produced the visibility of gender and sexuality representations during the 2014 São Paulo Biennial.

**Keywords:** Gender, Sexuality, politics of representations, body, São Paulo Biennial

## (Trans)Panamericana: gênero e sexualidade na 31ª Bienal de São Paulo

## Resumo:

Este artigo discute a 31ª Bienal de São Paulo a partir de uma perspectiva sociológica e feminista. Focamos em como as representações dos corpos queer e feminino circularam durante o evento focando na análise de dois projetos: “Espacio para abortar” e “Dios es Marica”. O texto assume uma perspectiva interseccional dando atenção para como gênero, religião, sexualidade e as políticas de representação relacionam-se com a formação de projetos curatoriais, discursos artísticos e as poéticas artísticas. Também focamos no contexto social e nas condições que possibilitaram e produziram a visibilidade das representações de gêneros e sexualidades durante a bienal de São Paulo de 2014.

**Palavras-chave:** Gênero, Sexualidade, políticas de representação, Corpo, Bienal de São Paulo

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## INTRODUCTION

The Arts have long interested sociologists. From Max Weber, Georg Simmel to Pierre Bourdieu - who helped us comprehend some of the dynamics between art institutions, artists and the public - the field of the Sociology of the Arts has grown over the years. Although most contemporary productions have been published dispersedly, making it harder to map methodological approaches and concepts that could consolidate this emerging field of study, the relationship between the two areas has contributed to the development of important researches and has widened our understanding of both sociology and the visual arts.

In the 1970s and 1980s, the consolidation and contributions of Cultural Studies as an interdisciplinary field of analysis helped researchers to unsettle the boundaries of strict academic divisions. This process also shed light on power dynamics within processes of knowledge construction, raising important questions about the politics of art and representation (Cf. Hall). In this manner, cultural studies has expanded the sociological analysis of the arts. We draw many of our reflections from that analytical framework, as well as from Feminist and queer theories, as we will explain below.

Feminist and sexual rights movements recognized the impact of gender and sexuality in the organization and the politics of art worlds (KORSMEYER, 2004). From the 1970s on, articles on these topics began to be published; at the same time, organized groups of artists demanded changes in traditional practices in order to include artists then considered to be part of minority groups such as women, black and brown people, gays, lesbians and transgender people. From the Women of Color movement and academic activism, proposals to analyze social life through an intersectional perspective emerged. Scholars such as Kimberlé Crenshaw and Patricia Hill Collins drew attention to the fact that people live complex multi-faceted realities that intersect multiple social locations and standpoints (BILGE, 2013). Their perspective is that inequalities and privileges are constructed in the relation between different social positions and standpoints, which are always contingent, and are central to our reflections here.

This article discusses the 31st São Paulo Biennial (2014) in Brazil<sup>3</sup>. The edition was conceived at a time of political outbursts that took thousands of people to the streets of the country. The demonstrations that spread across the nation were initially hard to understand, yet pointed clearly to bigger changes to come<sup>4</sup>. In the face of this situation, the curatorial team lead by Charles Esche, director of the Van Abbemuseum in the Netherlands, decided to organize an event that would be engaged with and conscious of contemporary social conflicts. Its title, “*How to (...) things that don’t exist*” left artists and audiences the possibility to fill in the blank with words that evoke that which may be invisible or not yet well understood in contemporary societies.

In this context, gender and sexuality were presented as topics of interest of the curatorial team<sup>5</sup>. These concepts were applied in relation to other ideas such as the word transcendence, evoked as a possibility for change and transformation. Religion, race and ethnicity were also thought of in relation to gender and sexuality, in order to understand cultural formations and practices in Latin America. The 31st São Paulo Biennial showcased works of art and artists not often seen on the mainstream commercial exhibit sites, thus representing new possibilities for reflection and discussion.

The curatorial team that conceived and put the project for the 31st São Paulo Biennial into practice was made up of a group of international professionals led by Esche, with the participation of Nuria Enguita Mayo and Pablo Lafuente from Spain and the Israelis Oren Sagiv and Galit Eilat. The assistant curators were of Benjamin Seroussi (France) and Luiza Proença (Brazil).

The Biennial was held from September 6 to December 7 and included 81 projects and more than 100 participants, totaling close to 250 artworks.

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3 This paper presents some of the preliminary conclusions of a broader doctoral research project by Milena C. de Souza and supervised by Professor Miriam Adelman called: “Trans-Panamerican: gender and sexuality in the production of Latin American Contemporary artists”.

4 Since the demonstrations that began in 2013, the political situation in Brazil has become increasingly complicated. After democratic elections in 2014 that reelected president Dilma Rouseff, the political opposition started a campaign calling for new elections. A series of corruption scandals involving politicians from virtually all political parties in positions of power and control within the government began that same year, and concluded with President Rouseff’s temporary removal from office. Since the beginning of 2016, the country has been governed by former vice president Michel Temer.

5 The curatorial team is constituted by one or more main curators and assistant curators. The hierarchy between the people involved varies according to the main curator’s work perspective. The last São Paulo Biennial edition intended to be more horizontal than usual.

From a range of artists who took part in the Biennial with a poetics evoking gender and sexuality, we chose to here analyze the works of a group formed by Latin American artists<sup>6</sup>. For the purpose of this article, we will comment two of them: the installations created by curator Miguel Lopes called “Díos es Marica” (God is a fag), with the participation of Nahum B. Zenil (b.1947) - Mexico; *Las Yeguas del Apocalipsis*: Pedro Lemebel (1952-2015) y Francisco Casas (1959) - Chile and Sergio Zevallos (b.1962) - Peru, and “Espaço para abortar” (Space to Abort) created by the feminist anarchist group *Mujeres Creando* (Bolivia).

The choice to restrict our analysis to Latin American artists was made to better understand specific dynamics and intersections within Latin America. We understand Latin America as an area limited by (pos) colonial parameters and as a place of discursive production on cultures, bodies, genders and sexualities. Since the São Paulo Biennial is one of the most important events from this part of the globe and was conceived to represent artistic productions from the continent, its importance in the construction of discourses on art and artistic memories of the region is clear.

Taking into consideration that this was the first time gender and sexuality, specially the concept of transgender, were presented as part of a São Paulo Biennial curatorial project, we are interested in the cultural politics “where, when, and how representations produce, reflect, and potentially subvert inequalities” (GRZANKA, 2014, p.132) that enabled this artistic production to be displayed. We pay special attention to how representations of queer and female bodies circulated during the event and how they might have disrupted some of the more traditional organizational practices of the biennial. In this text, the 31st São Paulo Biennial is addressed from an intersectional perspective, that is, with attention paid to the roles that gender, race, religion, sexuality and the politics of representation play in the formation of curatorial projects, artistic discourse and artists’ poetics. We will therefore also focus on the social context and conditions of possibility that produced the visibility of gender and sexuality representations during the last São Paulo Biennial.

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6 Although artists such as Ocaña (Spain) and Yael Bartara (Israel) had works that deal with transgender representation displayed, they are not analyzed here.

## A BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO A CULTURAL HISTORY OF GENDER NON-CONFORMITY IMAGERY

In discussing representations of female and queer bodies and the presence of women and queer artists in major sites of art production and display, we face a non-linear narrative and the fragmented pieces of an archive that, when put together, give us multiple versions of the history of art. In fact, over the last decades, what could be called a feminist and queer cultural history has been written and analyzed by authors such as Richard Meyer, Catherine Lord, Jennifer Doyle, Amelia Jones, among others. Their researches show that the emergence of these representations do not have a concise beginning; rather, they are a part of the history of visual representation in the West. What has systematically changed over the years is how these images have circulated among the public and the labels that have been attached to them.

As John Berger (1999) has pointed out, classical representations in the arts have privileged the heterosexual and white male gaze that situated women as objects of desire which also served to set the standards and themes that were considered of central artistic interest. During the 19th and early 20th centuries, professional art education in Europe and Latin America was restrictive. Women were not able to take art classes to become professional artists because they were forbidden to take part in classes that involved the representation of nude bodies (SIMIONI, 2008). Art education was also expensive and limited to the most privileged classes, which for most part were also white people. These and other factors restricted the cultural practices that determined what was to be considered as art and created a situation in which a small group of subjects shaped institutional practices, judgments and standards.

In *Art and queer culture* (2013) Richard Meyer analyses the phenomenon of what he calls “traffic in images”. He demonstrates how images that diverge from the heterosexual matrix have circulated in an underground world of representations. Meyer affirms that most of these images were not considered to be art and were not displayed in most museums and galleries. Thus, they circulated in the underground artistic scene and were executed for a small group of buyers. Alternative medias such as photo cards and magazines were also commercialized among those who were not part of the mainstream artistic world.

It is interesting to note how images that question hetero-centric and masculinist social and cultural organizations are present in the world and how

they may or not be considered art. Although they are not always present in the mainstream art world, works informed by a non-binary gender approach and what could now be considered a gender perspective, have a long trajectory. The famous European modernist Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968) for example, sometimes took self-portrait photographs in drag, assuming a female alter ego. The artist Claude Cahun (1894-1954) also questioned binary gender identities through self-portraits in which she would assume different identities (CASANOVA, 2001).

During the second half of the 20th Century, the body was systematically questioned by artists: “New sensibilities blossomed in the postwar period and came to a head in the ‘turbulent sixties’, urging critical disengagement from the Cartesian rationalism that had been so deeply rooted in modernism” (ADELMAN & RUGGI, 2015). As described by Sally Banes (1999) the 1960s inaugurated a period of experimentalism in the arts that forged new ways of understanding and expressing subjectivity, the body, gender relations and sexualities.

Artists that were working from the late 1950s to the 1980s explored these questions, opening the doors for debates concerning post-modernism in the arts. Some artists and works we would like to highlight are Martha Rosler (United States) and her iconic piece *Semiotic of the kitchen* (1975), *Las Yeguas del Apocalipsis* performances in a dictatorial Chile, Monica Meyer’s activism in collective *Polvo de Gallina Negra* (Mexico).

The work of pioneering Brazilian artist Flávio de Carvalho (1899-1973) “New look: summer fashion for a new man of the tropics” (1956) constituted of a performance in which he dressed in clothes he had designed and sewn himself. The look was composed by a short sleeved shirt, short skirt and a pair of sandals. He simply walked along the streets of Rio de Janeiro and documented people’s reactions. According to Richard Meyer, “Though most critics and commentators ridiculed the performance at the time, a columnist for *A Gazeta* newspaper endorsed it as ‘a conscious festival of revolt against conventions that need to be overcome’” (2013, p.111).

## **THE BIENNIAL AS A SITE OF ART DISPLAY**

For more than a century, museums and galleries have been central sites of display and reflection for the art worlds. The emergence of the biennials has changed the landscape and the political relations among artists and institutions: “biennials have become, in the span of just a few decades, one

of the most vital and visible sites of contemporary art and the production, distribution, and generation of public discourse around it” (FILIPOVIC, et al, 2010, p.15). It is no coincidence that these events spread across the world at the same time the politics of representation were changing intensively. In a sense, the ephemerality and contemporary characteristics of the biennials were privileged spaces to debate the rapid changes and propositions of the art worlds.

As most contemporary exhibitions, Biennials are organized around a central proposition. In fact, such a tendency started after Documenta 57 in 1972 when the curators explored “social constructions of reality through images”. Now, after a few decades, and the popularization of the curatorial strategy of organizing expositions around themes, we are faced with the problematic relation between art works, discourses and curators<sup>8</sup>. Although we will not address this issue in particular in the lines that follow, it is clear to us that when writing about contemporary Biennials, one must try to understand some of the central discourses and proposals made by the curatorial team.

The conception of the project of the event is directly related to which artists are going to be invited to take part. A second point that needs to be highlighted is that with the ascendancy of themes, curators have become even more central figures, responsible for the conceptual frame of the exposition and its articulations. Therefore, the directors’ choice of the main curators of Biennales reflect certain inclinations and openness to specific topics of discussion.

Biennials generate a lot of speculation across art worlds. Just before the events are held, people talk about the direction of the project, the list of participating artists and the curators involved. This process brings a lot of attention to the participating artists and becomes a showcase for their work. Since these events have the power to bring not only aesthetic discussions, but also contemporary social and cultural debates to the table, the weeks preceding their commencement are special opportunities for highlighting questions

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7 The document is an exhibition of art that takes place every five years in Kassel, Germany. It is considered one of the most important events of the art world because of its cutting-edge contemporary art display.

8 Curators are art world professionals responsible for the concept of the art shows. Their attributions may vary according to especial projects but they are usually responsible for choosing the theme of the show, participating artists and the team of professional responsible for the major decisions.

beyond the physical quality of the objects that are going to be displayed. This occurs because although it is possible to imagine the event, the public does not yet know the works that are to be displayed. Therefore, narrative discourse takes a central role, fueled by the absence of the images, which at that moment live only in the imaginations of the public as part of works that are specially commissioned and will come to life only a few days before the event. We believe that the process of imagining the event is a powerful tool for political discussion and, as we discuss in the following section, this was the case of the last São Paulo Biennial.

## THE PROJECT OF THE 31ST SÃO PAULO BIENNIAL

The project of the 31st São Paulo Biennial was created during a period in which Brazil got a lot of international attention. The country was getting ready to host major events such as Fifa World Cup (2014) and Rio de Janeiro Olympic games (2016). At the same time a series of massive protests started in June 2013 and soon spread throughout the country<sup>9</sup>. The last São Paulo Biennial was curated in this scenario and some of the choices made by the committee reflect it.

On April 2013, a few days after Charles Esche was announced as the leading curator for the 31st Biennial, he gave a *skype* interview to Tiziana Casapietra from Italian contemporary art website *radicate. eu* expressing his contentment to be involved in such a significant event and pointed out some of his strategies:

First of all I am doing the reverse of most the curators of São Paulo Biennial have done in the past. They have known more or less the Brazilian situation and gone out to the world to research what should be brought to São Paulo. In a sense I am doing exactly the opposite. Obviously I don't know the world but I

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<sup>9</sup> The protests started when São Paulo government raised the bus ticket by R\$0.20. When activists questioned the raise stating that the population couldn't afford it, the official response was: "but it's only 20 cents". A day later protesters organized a march and thousands of people showed up on the streets saying: "it's not just because of 20 cents". The government response was truculent and many people were physically injured by the police, among them journalists from *Folha de São Paulo*, one of the country's most important newspapers. Facing the same raises on public transportation and as a demonstration of political support, many cities across the country organized their protests which later became known as *Jornadas de Junho* (June Journeys). Responding to the political tension, municipal, state and federal governments committed to make changes. Besides the urge for a practical and fast response, the political conjunction was also particularly delicate as 2014 was going to be an election year. Until Today, the repercussions of these events are being analyzed by scholars.

know more or less the artists and the kind of work I want to bring here. Of course I am going to do some research and there will be some new names, and new projects. But in 65% of the cases I have such an experience that I am going to work with people that I have worked with, that I trust and that I admire. But where the work will happen is in Brazil and South America in general, but thinking about Brazil itself. In other words, from my outsiders' perspective to figure out what is going on here, culturally but also politically and socially (CASAPIETRA, 2013).

As the interview unfolded and from Esche's remarks on the Biennial we perceive his recognition of the political climate and his inclination to address it directly. He also revealed that his idea was to focus on the present and on South America. He also points to his own experience and the fact that he was going to explore it and work mostly with artists he "trusted". Throughout the interview, Esche expressed concern about the world political situation in general and what he considered to be a "cynical view" of it on the part of the most powerful nations.

In another interview to *Studio International* magazine, Esche explains in more detail what he expected from the biennial and how social and cultural changes are connected to the art world:

It would be absurd and abusive to what is going on there on the streets, just taking photographs of the protest and putting them in the pavilion. We have to take risks. But I don't think it is about representing what is going on out in the world in the Biennial. There has to be a transposition, a turn between what is happening there and what happens in the Biennial. What is the reason to bring it into the Biennial? (MENEZES, 2013)

The political focus of the event was highlighted by many news channels, among them the newspaper *The Guardian* which in September, 15th just after the opening of the event, wrote that the Biennial focused on "the world's most active political and social fault lines, from conflict in the Middle East to forced displacement in the Balkans, attacks on democracy in Russia and gender issues". The political atmosphere of the event became clear when a group of participant artists questioned funding from the Israeli embassy and called for a boycott of the event. The issue was put to an end with the decision that the

embassy would only support Israeli nationals. The episode left the feeling that the event was going to be highly politicized.

Besides the expectations related to the political scenario, the months before the event also revealed the interest on the part of specialized media as to how the biennial would deal with gender and sexuality. Days after the revelation of the complete curatorial team, a statement came out further raising expectations: “*Se tudo correr bem, esta 31a edição da mostra, orçada em R\$24 milhões, deve entrar para a história como a trans-Bienal*” (If everything goes as planned, the 31st Biennial edition, with an estimated cost of R\$24 millions is going to enter history as the trans-Biennial). As the days went by, talk became more and more centered on the transgender community and names of the participating artists began to pop-up in the news. On June 16, 2014 *Folha de São Paulo* published an article about the presence of transgender artists in the event and connected the fact to a broader trend of transgender community visibility across the globe:

The latest fashion in pop culture, which has led the representatives of a more ambiguous sexuality to be celebrities and heralds of what is an almost plurisexual avant-garde. People like American drag queen RuPaul, actress Laverne Cox (the first transsexual to be on the cover of Time magazine), Brazilian model Lea T. and the bearded German singer Conchita Wurst are among the leaders of the new wave (MARTÍ, 2014).

As emphasized by *Folha de São Paulo*, the presence of transgender artists in the event brought lots of media attention, given the echo it encountered in a broader sphere of cultural life. A short video about the Biennial10 produced by the same media channel was dedicated to the topic and circulated online weeks before the event. The presence of transgender artists and transgender bodies were presented as a breakthrough in the history of the São Paulo Biennial.

The publication of the official list of participants revealed the presence of many artists widely known for their activism. In fact, some of them work or worked on the borders of art and activism producing works that raise questions that take us beyond specialized art critique. This is the case of the artists involved in the two installations we are going to discuss in the following lines.

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10 The complete vídeo is available on: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5ekx7g8QJVk>.

*Mujeres Creando* (MC) responsible for the work “Space to Abort” is a Bolivian women’s group that participated in the event for the second time and that is very well known in their country for their feminist anarchist actions. MC is often in the Bolivian news and many people do not know that they have participated in important art events during the past years. All the artists presented in the installation “*Dios es Marica*” have also taken their works beyond art environments.

## **DIOS ES MARICA**

The segment called “*Dios es Marica*” (God is a Fag) was curated by Miguel López (Peru) and had the works of Sergio Zevallos, Nahum B. Zenil, Ocaña (Spain) and *Yeguas del Apocalipsis*. López is a young professional who has been dedicating his work to research and display artists who articulate topics of gender and sexuality in their works. He has created a common narrative thread connecting the images bringing different Latino contexts together through the idea that religion, and in particular Catholic culture, constrains non-normative sexual practices and gender identities.

Mexican artist Nahum B. Zenil (b.1947) participated with self-portraits showing himself as Frida Kahlo and as Mary mother of Jesus. The artist incarnates iconic female figures of Latin America. In addition to being an artist, Zenil is also an important gay rights activist in Mexico and organizes the *Circulo Cultural Gay*, an event which since the 1980s has played an important role in the country’s artistic, cultural and political scenes. Zenil’s openness regarding his sexuality as well as the centrality it takes on in the development of his art work represented a breakthrough on the Mexican artistic scene when he entered it several few decades ago.

In Nahum's visual works, his body is the vehicle that mediates his experience as a gay man in a conservative and religious Mexican society. Most of his works use the *retablo*, format which is a traditional wooden base for Latin American colonial religious imagery. The lines and the type of drawings he implements also make reference to more traditional types of 'folk art'. As we have mentioned, Frida Kahlo is a constant presence in his works. He borrows composition structures from her work and sometimes even represents himself in her body.

Imagining himself as Frida has many layers of possible meaning. First, there is the deference to her as an icon, as an image of such importance that it needs to be constantly replicated. Second, there is the fact that he is placing

himself within a particular version of art history: one that is Mexican and that recognizes the works of women artists.

Las Yeguas del Apocalipsis was a collective formed by Chilean artists Pedro Lemebel (1952-2015) and Francisco Casas (1959). They worked together mostly through performances and visual installations and were very active during the 1980s and 1990s. The artists decided to pair up during the last moments of the Chilean dictatorship and were very active during the years of “*transición democrática*” (transition to democracy). The performances took place within the context of significant events. In 1989, for example, they performed the piece *La Conquista de América* for the Chilean Human Rights Commission. On that occasion, they danced the *cueca* (traditional Chilean dance) with their bare feet. Underneath them was a map of Latin America covered with shards of Coca-Cola bottles.

The artists often presented their Chilean identity as intrinsic to Latin America and showing their country as part of a broader context that connected artistic expressions originating in different areas. In the São Paulo biennial images of their performances and their self-portraits were displayed in the installation *Dios es Marica*. The pair ended their collaborative work in the 1990s yet kept working as artists for the years to come. In fact, Pedro Lemebel became a very important award-winning writer who has influenced younger generations of artists. References of the impact of his work can be found in texts by Paul Preciado, María Galindo (*Mujeres Creando*) and Víctor Hugo Robles (*El Che Gay*).

The final Latin American artist that took part in the installation, Sergio Zvallos, has an extensively body of visual work that encompasses drawings, paintings, performance, installation and photography. As the artists described above, he also uses his own body as a tool of contestation and site of expression. Zvallos works with strong colors, mostly black and red and develops an aesthetic of the grotesque and the possibility of death. His body is shown as non-binary as he combines traces of masculinity with artifacts considered feminine such as bras and garter belts.

Between 1983 and 1994, Zvallos took part in the *Grupo Chaclacayo* collective, with the German artist Helmut Psotta and the fellow Peruvian Raul Avellaneda. In 1989 they moved to Germany, fleeing political instability in Peru, and in Europe continued to produce visual works that would influence Zvallos's personal style. Their visual work brought religiosity, homoerotic representation, death, mutilated bodies, terror and the use of cheap materials

together, elaborated on the boundaries of trash visual production and the visual arts in order to problematize the legacy of colonialism and oppression in Latin America.

Gender disobedience was one of the groups' central points of discussion and their performances frequently combined pornography and religiosity. Such radical works were displayed in the underground Peruvian art scene and the controversy they caused kept them out of mainstream artistic circulation. Zevallos kept his artistic career alive in the years after the group disbanded, continuing to explore the possibilities of a queer Latin American body.

The works presented in *Dios es Marica* call our attention not only to how the intersection between religion, gender and sexuality produce difference and oppression, but also to the fact that the visual production they presented transformed a site of oppression into one of expression and opportunity. As Maxine Baca Zinn and Bonnie Thornton Dill pointed out: “[...] intersecting forms of domination produce both oppression and opportunity” (Zinn; Dill, 1996, p.328).

## **MUJERES CREANDO: WE NEED TO TALK ABOUT ABORTION**

Feminist activists María Galindo, Monica Mendoza and Julieta Paredes created Mujeres Creando (MC) in 1992 in La Paz, Bolivia. Over the years the group has grown and became an interdisciplinary space that facilitates encounters between people who are involved in the fight for social justice. The group develops different types of political actions that go from graffiti on the street walls, videos, performances, radio shows, pamphlets, among many others. Political action is understood as a creative act that enables connection and dialogue between people. Most of the group's actions take place on the streets, as a public space where people circulate, meet each other, socialize and fight for their rights. Bringing creative actions onto the streets means creating a place of enchantment and impressionability in an ordinary location, at least for a short period of time. “You didn’t burn our hopes, you burned our patience” says an MC graffiti in the El Alto region.

In Bolivia, as is the case in most Latin American countries, abortion is still criminalized. For MC, to decriminalize abortion is a matter of individual rights and public health and is intrinsic to the idea of decolonization (GALINDO, 2010). The need to talk about abortion creates an intersection of different subject positions and brings Latin American women from different

countries together This is how *Mujeres Creando* transforms a situation of violence and oppression into a process of creation and dialogue. Through the experience of abortion Bolivians, Brazilians and women from other Latin American nationalities meet.

A red point emerges from the middle of the crowd. The streets are full of people and from a distance it is possible to catch a glimpse of an object that is being carried by a group. At first, it suggests a Catholic procession, yet as we move closer we can read a few words written on its top: *no mouths shut, no uterus opened*. Above the red circle the form of a vulva made by a rigid metallic object from where a piece of light fabric opens up forming a tube that goes all the way to the floor. From the top of this object irons emerge to the sides constructing the forms of two legs spreading across the space. The women that take part of the walk often occupy the tube made of pink fabric.

The walking uterus that is placed between the metallic legs reminds us of its existence as an organ of the human body at the same time that it occupies the streets as an allegory and as an image. It creates a space in the city that brings the discourses that emerge from its existence into the public sphere.

*Mujeres Creando* took the uterus to the São Paulo Biennial of 2014. During the first weekend of the event, they held a walk across the *Ibirapuera* Park that brought dozens of women together. The feminist blogger and activist Nadja Dulci described the experience:

We all marched across Ipirapuera Park, all of us, many women, carrying the big sculpture that multiplied the size of our own bodies. And for two hours we were invited by Esther and Maria to place it gently on the green grass. At that moment, sitting around that beautiful sculpture, we listened to women that made the decision to put an end to their pregnancies. We listed, we were together, we hugged each other, we were emotional, we held each other, and we were strong. And with each story that was told inside that fabric that moved with the afternoon wind, we got emotional while understanding the oppressions women face because of the fact they made decisions about their own bodies (DULCI, 2014).

After this experience, an installation was constructed in the biennial pavilion. It was made up of a red fabric circle on the floor with the phrase *espaço para abortar*; on top of it was an iron piece carried across the park made up of an uterus placed at the center, a vulva and the red circle on the top that read, "no mouths shut, no uterus opened". Six other uteruses and two

screens were added, all forming a circle. When entering each uterus the public could listen to the voices of the Brazilian women who took part in the walk, telling stories about their experiences. On the screens were images of MC actions on the streets of Bolivia.

“Space to Abort” caused a lot of reactions. On the day of the walk, people from the conservative Plinio Corrêa de Oliveira Institute (IPCO) took part of the event and recorded the action on tape. A few women noticed them and asked them to leave. Several days later, IPCO posted a video on youtube affirming that *Mujeres Creando* were against god and made an apology for criminal behavior. On October 4, 2014, IPCO organized a public act in front of one of the entrances to *Ibirapuera* Park. In their words, “The 31st São Paulo ‘Art’ Biennial is promoting a scandalous set of blasphemies and sacrileges against our Lord Jesus Christ and the Holy Virgin” (IPCO, 2014).

Journalist Maíra Kubík took part in the act and wrote about an encounter she had had with a few teenagers. She approached them, anxious to get their opinions, about which she writes:

‘I think that abortion is a shame. It’s murder. They are going to hell’. Says one of the girls. ‘If you conceive a baby you have to have it and not murder it’, says another girl. ‘Condoms were made to be used. If it was pleasurable at the time of making the baby it should be pleasurable at the time of giving birth’, adds the third girl. ‘Now, abortion in case of rape I think is correct’ says the first girl. All of them nodded with their heads. Whispering, one of them told me that a friend from school, a 13 year old girl, went though an abortion not long ago. Without financial resources, she punched her stomach until she lost the foetus. ‘This is horrible’ (KUBÍK, 2014).

Debates on “Space to Abort” in the São Paulo Biennial became even more intense when a sign was placed in front of the work recommending the visit to people over 18 years old. *Mujeres Creando* took a stance against such restrictions, since that would impede school visits, and students form a considerable part of the targeted public. The São Paulo Biennial organization answered saying that the recommendation followed Brazilian norms and laws and because of that should not be viewed as censorship. According to the Biennial organization, the age recommendation would not interfere with visits and would only restrict access of particular groups. The sign remained in front of the work until the end of the event.

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The 31st São Paulo Biennial has left us with more questions than answers. If we look at the ephemeral characteristic of a biennial and how differently it positions itself from more stable and historical institutions such as museums, maybe questions and debates are the best legacy to leave.

Gender and sexuality were central topics of discussion and debate during the event and were presented in the context of a broader curatorial project that had the objective to engage with some of the most central cultural questions of its time. Both works here analyzed, *Dios es Marica* and *Espaço para abortar*, make us think about artists' different standpoints and how gender, sexuality and politics intersect in Latin America. *Dios es Marica* and *Espaço para abortar* are the works of artists who take their own gendered and sexual bodies as starting points just as they question the limits of and boundaries between art practice and political activism.

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