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36th Bienal de São Paulo
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Author
Artist

ArtReview
Mateus Nunes
Antonio Társis

36th Bienal de São Paulo Review: Pidginising the Biennial

Mateus Nunes Reviews 09 September 2025 ArtReview



Precious Okoyomon, *Sun of Consciousness. God Blow Thru Me – Love Break Me*, 2025 (installation view of the 36th Bienal de São Paulo – Not All Travellers Walk Roads, 2025) © Levi Fanan / Fundação Bienal de São Paulo

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***Not All Travellers Walk Roads* centres on the estuary as a curatorial image, with outstanding works fighting against the designs of their presentation**

The 36th Bienal de São Paulo takes its compass – and its title – from a 1990 poem by the Afro-Brazilian writer Conceição Evaristo, an inspiration which may remain inaccessible to Eurocentric minds for refusing the Western dictat of ‘transparency’ and diving deep in Afrodiasporic erudition. The exhibition advances a coherent and resilient conceptual structure, though, a consistently pertinent selection of 120 artists, rigorous research and, simultaneously, problematic exhibition design within the Bienal’s mainstay home of Oscar Niemeyer’s modernist pavilion. *Not All Travellers Walk Roads*, as both title and guiding argument, offers new routes of experimentation and affect that open onto a present of uncertainty and serendipity. The subtitle, *Of Humanity as Practice*, further clarifies the lyrical title, underscoring that this Bienal is concerned with social gathering, collective imagination and listening acts.

Led by chief curator Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung (currently director of Berlin’s HKW) with cocurators Alya Sebti, Anna Roberta Goetz and Thiago de Paula Souza, and cocurator-at-large Keyna Eleison, this edition is the culmination of Ndikung’s research on pidginisation as curatorial practice, tangling with Édouard Glissant’s claim to the right to opacity in his *Poetics of Relation* (1990) as much as with the individual trajectories of each cocurator. Its central curatorial image is the estuary – aqueous environments where distinct bodies of water meet to generate new life – while it itself branches into its own tributaries in a vigorous public programme of parallel activations, such as meetings with performance, music and poetry, that frame the Bienal as a crossing of a watercourse (may it be a brook or an ocean) for reencounter, treating time itself as a platform.

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Pol Taburet, *Someone's Child*, 2025 (installation view). © Levi Fanan / Fundação Bienal de São Paulo

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The striking presence of commissioned works underscores the depth of exchanges with artists during the lead-up to the exhibition, reminding us that all curatorial practice is carried out collectively. Pol Taburet's *Someone's Child* (2025), for instance, is a commanding installation of large bronze and cement sculptures that fill a dedicated room: humanoid figures with oversize trumpets occupy the floor and perch on wall-mounted ledges like Catholic saints. They encircle a being that looks like what might happen if the snake in Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's *Le Petit Prince* (1943) – which swallowed an elephant and resembled a hat – were to don two Joseph Beuys-style hats. Both intimidating and seductively figurative, the sculptures trigger speculation about what they are; their ethereal quality, accentuated by monstrous yet sacral overtones, is intensified by a spectral sound installation and ceiling diffused lighting, producing a liminal atmosphere.

To frame collective joy as a curatorial argument is, in itself, a critique of present structures. Alongside such expressions of humanitarian exultation, the Bienal also features works that entwine confrontation and resistance that express denunciations of ongoing genocides. Christopher Cozier's *After the Appeal Will Come the Next Delivery* (2025) features multiple flags raised outside the Bienal pavilion. With its palette of green, red, black and white (resonating with Felix Gonzalez-Torres's *Forbidden Colors*, 1988, not on show), the work signals the urgent need to cease any genocide, such as the ones unfolding in Gaza and Sudan. Forensic Architecture/Forensis's newly commissioned video *The People's Court I* (2025) traces the harrowing, ecocidal, sea-level rise in the Niger Delta caused by oil giants such as Chevron. In less than eight years, more than a thousand homes, hospitals and schools have been submerged, alongside the decimation of mangrove flora in the Ugbo Kingdom. Also consequential is Madame Zo's extraordinary textile abstractions – woven from cotton and silk yet laced with filmstrips, shredded newspaper and magnetic tape – born of her critique of Madagascar's ecopolitical structures.

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Christopher Cozier, *After the Appeal Will Come the Next Delivery*, 2025 (installation view). © Levi Fanan / Fundação Bienal de São Paulo



Forensic Architecture/Forensis, *Delta-Delta: The People's Court I*, 2025 (installation view). © Levi Fanan / Fundação Bienal de São Paulo

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Antonio Társis presents *Orchestra Catastrophe: Act I* (2025), a vast walk-through installation composed of matchbox panels glued into large planes, handcrafted leather *atabaque* drums, dangling hunks of coal suspended like pendants from the ceiling and speakers. Exploring the multiple cultural resonances of the matchbox – long central to his practice – Társis draws on its use as percussion by samba musicians in Salvador, like Mestre Batatinha, while confronting the relentless global extraction of mineral resources. Charcoal blocks threaded with cords crash against massive drums by automated systems, producing vibrations that course through the visitor's body. Over time, the installation unravels: shards of coal placed atop upturned speakers tremble and splinter under deep bass, the sound of the exhibition's space captured live and amplified through the speakers. The louder and more crowded the Bienal grows, the more the work devolves into noisy entropy. Társis's inquiry zeroes in on the often-violent activity of mineral extraction in Africa – in Rwanda, Nigeria, Congo and Zambia – that fuels the global electronics industry. Each phone, each device that connects us, contains fragments of rare matter hewn from Africa, as well as China and Brazil. The Bienal's curatorial vision of creating an estuary where dispersed communities fractured by the African diaspora might converge finds its perfect expression in Társis's work – one of this edition's strongest.



Antonio Társis, *Orchestra Catastrophe: Act I*, 2025 (installation view). © Levi Fanan / Fundação Bienal de São Paulo

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The exhibition design emerges as perhaps its most contentious point, a multilayered issue. Its triumph lies in spatial generosity: works are granted room to breathe, circulation feels open and inviting. Yet vast curtains – undulating in vibrant orange, turquoise and ashen green, evoking river currents – function less as autonomous elements or dividers than as scenic drapery disguising the provisional walls the curators erected. Numerous smaller rooms – housing installations, videoworks and a large historical nucleus on the third floor – are hidden behind these veils.

This architectural paradigm is mirrored, perhaps answered, by Maxwell Alexandre's *Gallery 2* (2025). Sheets of kraft paper, a hallmark of a period of his practice, are painted white and suspended to emulate the white cube architecture of galleries. Both painterly and conceptual, the brilliant installation incisively critiques the power structures that choreograph institutional spaces and the discursive possibilities of painting itself, even scenographic or conceptual. Questions about power and performativity reverberate in other works within this staged cube-gallery – such as Isa Genzken's *Schauspieler III, 2* (Actor III, 2, 2015), camp mannequins in graffiti-tagged clothing that evoke multiple sociopolitical roles.



Installation view of the 36th Bienal de São Paulo – *Not All Travellers Walk Roads*, 2025. © Levi Fanan / Fundação Bienal de São Paulo

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I expected this Bienal to push harder against the modernist austerity of Niemeyer's white edifice, with a more emphatic chromatic presence, as Ndikung did with *O Quilombismo*, an exhibition he organised at HKW in 2023 that featured 12 artists present in this Bienal. To curate the Bienal de São Paulo always means confronting Niemeyer's caprices, above all the atrium whose ramps ribbon upward, visible from every level (a similar spatial specificity occurs, for instance, in the atrium of New York's Guggenheim or in Tate's Turbine Hall in London). Possible strategies include refusing its supremacy – as in the last edition, *Choreographies of the Impossible*, which erected new walls and blocked all sightlines across the atrium – or outright negation, as in the 28th edition, 2003's *In Living Contact*, known as the Biennial of the Void, which left an entire floor cavernously empty.



Ana Raylander Mártis dos Anjos, *A Casa de Bené*, 2025 (installation view). © Levi Fanan / Fundação Bienal de São Paulo

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Given this edition's curatorial framework, stripping the atrium of its symbolic weight seemed the likeliest path. Instead, it was given to weaker works, such as Laure Prouvost's *Flow, Flower: Bloom!* (2025), a chandelierlike kinetic piece, its voile petals scarcely convincing. Tanka Fonta's remarkable practice – worthy of the reverence afforded to Frank Bowling's 25 paintings – is reduced to a massive column wrap: though it reads like a mural with geometric elements with a cosmic aspect, the exposed cords betray it as a canvas ill-fitted around the atrium's pillar, with a makeshift finish.

Other works might have thrived in this central stage – particularly Ana Raylander Mártis dos Anjos's monumental installation *A Casa de Bené* (Bené's House, 2025). Nine towering wooden columns draped with textiles and leather that reconstruct her great-grandfather's demolished home in a mining-devastated town in Minas Gerais. This stunning installation seems to pierce floors: columns cut off at one ceiling continue on the floor below. Usually seen as vernacular or even naive, her ancestor's wattle-and-daub columns prove more historically resonant than the white Niemeyer pylons that flank them. Such is the structure through which the entire Bienal unfolds.

36th Bienal de São Paulo: Not All Travellers Walk Roads at Ciccillo Matarazzo Pavilion, São Paulo, through 11 January 2026