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Arquivo Histórico Wanda Svevo - Fundação Bienal de São Paulo
An archive between past and future

Fernanda Araujo Curi

Bienal de São Paulo Foundation's Archive—Arquivo Histórico Wanda Svevo—is completing its 60th anniversary in 2015. It is an honour to be participating at this conference presenting the history and the current projects of such a pioneer documentation center. Indeed, many researchers refer to the Archive as “the most important collection of documents regarding modern and contemporary art in Latin America”.

Created in the beginning of 1955, between the 2nd and 3rd Biennials, the Archive was born at the very moment São Paulo was establishing itself as a modern, industrial and international city. “The fastest growing city in the world” was the slogan used at the time, which has proved to be right: from the 2.5 million people living in the city in the 1950s to the current 20 million we are today.

The Bienal Archive keeps documents since 1948, when the Museum of Modern Art of São Paulo—MAM-SP—was founded. To make a long story short, the MAM-SP is the father of Bienal de São Paulo. The Museum was created by the industrialist Francisco Matarazzo Sobrinho—known as Ciccillo—one year after the Museu de Arte de São Paulo (MASP). Together, they were the first São Paulo art museums that helped to establish the province's incipient art scene, marked only by one major event until then: the Week of Modern Art of 1922.

MAM-SP was responsible for the first six editions of Bienal de São Paulo, created by the same industrialist Matarazzo, who imported the model from Venice, which was the only art biennial in the world at the time.

The 1st Bienal de São Paulo was a great success in 1951, “a mix of boldness and luck” as many have defined. Boldness not only from the couple Matarazzo—Ciccillo and his wife Yolanda—who together have managed through a network of contacts to convince 21 countries of the world to bring their artists to participate on a big art exhibition in far away and unknown São Paulo, Brazil.

Most important was the intellectual force of the MAM-SP professionals, which was essential for the reinvention of an Italian Biennale made in Brazil, such as artistic directors Lourival Gomes Machado, Sergio Milliet, Wolfgang Pfeiffer and Mario Pedrosa. Also pivotal were some of the

Brazilian artists who not only took part by exhibiting their works but also on the installation of the whole exhibition—as there were no professionals for such job available at the time.

The 2nd São Paulo Bienal was when the event established itself, in the midst of São Paulo's 400th anniversary—the biggest celebration the city had ever had. Also organized by the same captain of industry Ciccillo, the city's 4th centennial festivities were not only opened by the 2nd Bienal—which had as its highlight nothing less than Picasso's Guernica—but also by the inauguration of the Ibirapuera Park with its set of modern pavilions designed by Oscar Niemeyer and team. Since then the Bienal events have all taken place at Ibirapuera and from 1957 on in its largest pavilion—the same place where the Foundation and its Archive are located.

Another Italian immigrant, Wanda Svevo, who worked as the General Secretary of MAM-SP, decided among all of those events that it was important to start gathering documentation in order to create a “Historical Archives of Contemporary Art”. A few years after giving impulse to this attempt she died on an airplane accident and the archives were then named after her. It is important to emphasize the vision of such a person, someone who saw the importance of collecting reference material and the documents produced by the museum exhibitions, including the Bienal's. Older brother MoMA, founded in New York in 1929, only constituted its archives in 1989—a fact that comes to show how pioneering the creation of the Bienal Archive in São Paulo was at the time.

At that year of 1955, German Documenta was being born and Venice Biennale was turning 60 (just as the Archive is today). The Archive founder Wanda Svevo imported references from Venice, including their cataloguing standards and information files. She sent letters with forms to be filled up by artists all around the world and sent back with other material of their work such as catalogues and images. The artists' dossiers is an important collection comprising 15,000 of the dossiers currently in the Archive.

Wanda Svevo's death in 1963 coincides with the moment when the Museum and the Bienal split and the foundation was created. The Bienal became too heavy for the museum because it had to relinquish its collection's management to organize a mega-exhibition every two years. Ciccillo became the president of the Fundação Bienal where he kept all the archive documentation. Meanwhile, in a very controversial act, he donated all the museum art works—which were mostly acquired by the Bienal prizes—to the University of São Paulo and its future contemporary art museum, MAC-USP.

Therefore the Bienal Archive kept the MAM-SP administrative documentation and the one related to the Bienal exhibition from 1948 to 1962—even though the museum was reopened in 1968, also in Ibirapuera Park. Since then, the documents produced over the 31 editions of the Bienal are preserved in the Archive among other materials gathered along these years.

It is a massive documentation of more than seven decades of art history, which was accumulated every two years with an enormous amount of documents produced in each

Bienal—each one realized by a different team for many years. There is no need to go into details of what seems to be a common denominator of many institutions with management discontinuity challenges. As policies are always fluctuating from management to management and never really established, many projects and ideas survive only for the moment of time in which a certain group of people is involved. If they change, projects can either take different routes or simply be extinguished. And this is reflected on this Archive, where it is easy to identify fragmented preservation projects throughout the years.

There are many indications that during the 60s and 70s the archive was taken care by two or three professionals who maintained the organization method proposed in the beginning: the archive produced collections, such as the artists' dossiers, the organization of newspaper cutouts, as well as books and catalogues in a library that grew in parallel. The effort of a small team was mainly directed at this "collecting approach" rather than at the organization and cataloguing of the increasing Bienal documentation—with its great varieties of formats and materials such as paper, photograph, video etc. These documents were put together on a separate room, which was called the "Dead Archive". Those times coincided with the dictatorship period in Brazil, which is also reflected on the many existent gaps on the documentation produced over that period.

There is evidence that during the 80s—alongside the redemocratization of the country—a new approach to the archive was taken, as there was a team of two professionals who recently came to the Archive to talk about the work they did back then. Vera D'Horta and Elza Barbosa opened the Dead Archive and started to uncover that precious history by organizing the documentation in a first attempt to understand the Archive as a whole. It was also the first time the Archive took part and had its documents exhibited in a Bienal, with a focus on the 50s documentation. But yet, with such a small team it was like "ants' work" with little by little done on a day-to-day basis and several reports being written stating the need for more resources to accomplish such work. Ivo Mesquita, who worked at the time as Cultural Advisor at the Foundation was responsible for many of the reports and revitalization plans for the Archive and also for the incorporation of a new Fonds, Ciccillo Matarazzo's personal archive.

In the beginning of the 90s a new management team brought new concerns to the Archive and investment via a partnership with the University of Campinas and São Paulo Research Foundation—UNICAMP and FAPESP. Human and material resources were brought in at this new phase of the archive—which changed its physical structure, incorporating sliding shelves. An effort to dig into the textual documentation was started. But it was a partial effort that could only get to the general organization of the first ten editions of the Bienal (until 1969).

In 1993 the Archive was designated a historical heritage by the state of São Paulo's preservation organ, CONDEPHAAT (Conselho de Defesa do Patrimônio Histórico, Arqueológico, Artístico e Turístico). It was more its symbolic value that was protected since at that point there was no inventory of its collections. In 2001, when the Bienal was turning 50, the

first archive electronic database was implemented using information about the exhibitions, artists and artworks based on the exhibitions' catalogues—rather than on the documentation.

During the 00s there were punctual projects favouring one or other part of the collections—such as the slide and negative collections, the Ciccillo Matarazzo's personal Archive—in projects financed by the government via companies such as PETROBRAS. Even though a focus on the preservation work was essential, all those fragmented efforts did not represent any knowledge production or implementation of standards and policies for collections management and preservation. The predominant mentality was that the only possibility to organize all those accumulated decades of documentation was doing it by collection, which made it harder to integrate the different materials that regarded the same subject. Besides, there was a new paradigm imposed by the digital documentation that had substituted the physical one, presenting even more challenges.

This process seems to have lasted until the new administration team of the Foundation has taken over after the great void left by the 28th Bienal of 2008, which became known as the “Empty Bienal”. The institutional crisis was exposed on that edition when curators Ivo Mesquita and Ana Paula Cohen decided to leave a whole floor of the pavilion empty. After that a new board has initiated a process of restructuring the Foundation, consolidating its departments, policies and finances.

Little by little those changes started to also take place in the Archive. Research and preservation protocols and policies were studied and initiated, and in 2012 the Archive's Blog was launched as a way to bring to light the precious collection—that until then was only known by specialists—to the general public. It was an important initiative that has also helped to integrate the Archive with the other departments of the foundation, calling attention to the fact that since the institution does not collect art works the only heritage it has is the documentation kept in the archives. As stated by Art Historian Francisco Alambert the Archive “is a ‘work’ as important as the biennials that nurture it”.

The Archive is currently structured by three Fonds: Francisco Matarazzo Sobrinho (around 6000 documents), Museu de Arte Moderna and Fundação Bienal de São Paulo (more than 2 million documents). It is essentially composed by textual documentation (more than 4,000 boxes at MAM and Fundação Bienal), iconographic documentation (around 170,000 items among them enlargements, flexible support and digital images), sound (around 250 items) and audio-visual (around 2000 items). Besides the Fonds, the Archive comprises collections of the Artists and Art Theme Dossiers (around 16,000), Clippings (260 binders) and Library (more than 20,000 items).

In 2014 the textual documentation collection survey project—which had external consultancy—established the preliminary Classification Plan, which led to the implementation of Projeto Acervos in 2015 to proceed with the inventory of the textual documentation and other collections. Recovering the pioneering characteristic of this Archive, this project proposes an integrated work of the archive's fonds and collections. Instead of prioritizing this or that segment

the focus is on finally creating an inventory of the whole collection, establishing cataloguing procedures and new research tools, as well as the Archive relational database. Instead of spending on expensive materials and focusing on the physical care of the documents it understood as its aim to hire a large team of professionals of different specialties: from documentalists, historians, archivists, and conservators to librarians, art and architecture students.

Different tasks are being taken simultaneously and nurturing each other. A Study Group was created to bring the whole team of 32 people together once a week to investigate one edition of the Bienal each time. The database is being rebuilt and researchers have been revising the data that will feed the new system. The textual and iconographic documents are being organized and catalogued as well as the audio-visual, clipping collections and the library.

Alongside this whole process, preservation and documentation management policies are being implemented in order to stop the arbitrary accumulation of documents and leave this antiquated behaviour to past.

In this way, the Archive is currently going through a fundamental change with the development of this integrated work for the collection's research, preservation and communication. The focus on the latter, especially by making use of new digital possibilities, is understood as absolutely necessary in order to challenge the passive role often associated with archives and libraries in general.

The need for museums to work closely with archives, libraries and other cultural heritage institutions to achieve common goals has been increasingly understood as vital by these field's professionals. But beyond the collaboration among pairs it is also essential to bring together partners such as smaller and thus more flexible and dynamic cultural agents and producers, to help with the innovation and development of projects—that can get difficult to be implemented if they are to remain only inside the institution.

Museums have emphasized their communication function in the last years by creating exhibitions, publications and educational programs both on and offline. The archives however, with their less appealing collections to the general public have got to strive in their effort to “communicate”. How can documents be made “common” and part of people's lives? Furthermore, and as this conference's theme suggests, how can we build attractive media environments for cultural heritage?

Departing from this challenge a new platform and research tool is being developed as the great outcome of this whole process in the Archive, in partnership with the film production company, Ebisu Filmes. Currently named LAB.DOC-Living Archive, it proposes the development of a virtual exhibition moulded on a narrative interface. This platform will be built on the conjunction

of a sensitive database—organized in a content management system according to a relational and semantic logic—and a browser inspired in web documentary experience.

Along with a selection of documents a series of short films will be produced with people who have worked/lived/experienced the Bienal throughout its 64 years. These memory pills combined with archival documentation will compose a Reference Collection. It will work as an editing table, in which different stories can be built—and shared—by the users through a multidimensional crossing of the Archive documentation and the memory of the project's interviewees.

This platform will not be about historical research only but will also be used for the Foundation's educational team to develop its activities for the current Bienal edition—and can be fed every two years with new content. Furthermore it can be connected with different archives throughout Brazil and the world, in order to enhance connections of complementary collections that are spread out and currently difficult to relate to one another. The capability of such a tool is limitless.

As an Architect and Museologist, it was definitely my work as a Researcher in this Archive which got me to deeply understand the value of the document, and of History. But above all, it was the Stories – the infinite universe of narratives that can be formed by those pills of memory—that have really fascinated me.

Departing from the premise that storytelling is the most ancient and universal way that humanity has invented as a process of transmitting culture and knowledge, LAB.DOC aims to bring this dimension of the human experience closer to the specialized environment of archives. The project's innovative idea and interface certainly brings back and updates to current times the pioneering feature of São Paulo Bienal Foundation and its Archive that is on its way to become a worldwide Reference Center for Art Research.

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