

Interdisciplinary approaches in historiographical curatorial practice

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Abstract: This paper examines historiographical curatorial practices and theories of decolonialism in contemporary art, focusing on the exhibition in the Brazilian Pavilion at the 60th Venice Art Biennale. The curatorial approach in the pavilion re-examines and reconfigures historical, social, and political events through a critical lens, with the aim of documenting the situation of indigenous communities in Brazil. Through the use of multimedia installations and collaborative artistic practices, the curatorial team proposes a complex discourse on memory, ecology, and spirituality. This curatorial method functions as a platform for interdisciplinary dialogue while promoting a model of resistance and social justice through art. Relevant case studies will detail how curatorial discourse offers new perspectives on cultural identity and contributes to the transformation of exhibition spaces into places of critical reflection and cultural exchange.

Keywords: historiography, curatorial practices, cultural memory, decolonialism, curatorial discourse.

Introduction

Contemporary curatorship has become an essential tool for the critical re-examination of history, managing to overcome the limits imposed by established practices and the dominant narratives perpetuated by them. In essence, historiographical curatorial practices not only interrogate the past, but also reconfigure collective memory through an interdisciplinary lens, integrating diverse perspectives, especially those marginalized or excluded from official discourses. This type of approach is not limited to the exhibition of objects or events from the past, but becomes a cultural and political act that challenges hegemonic structures and promotes inclusion.

A relevant example of this methodology in curatorial practice is the Brazilian Pavilion at the 2024 Venice Art Biennale, entitled “Ka’a Pûera – We Are Walking Birds”¹. The exhibition explores the histories and cosmologies of

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¹ “Ka’a Pûera – We Are Walking Birds” is an expression that combines terms from the Guarani language (an indigenous language of South America, spoken mainly in Paraguay, Brazil and Argentina) with a poetic phrase in English. Ka’a Pûera: In Guarani, “Ka’a” means “forest” or “vegetation” (associated with nature), and “Pûera” can mean “what was” or “what is gone” (there

Brazil's indigenous peoples, challenging the colonial frameworks that have dominated global cultural narratives. Through a mix of collaborative practices, multimedia installations, and site-specific methods, the Pavilion's curators have transformed the exhibition space into a platform for critical dialogue and cultural redress.

This initiative exemplifies how contemporary curatorship can function as a form of interdisciplinary research, where oral histories, visual art, and technology converge to create an immersive and transformative experience. Moreover, the Brazilian Pavilion highlights the potential of curatorial practices to contribute to the process of decolonization, providing a visible platform for indigenous voices and their unique perspectives on the world. In this sense, the article aims to analyse the impact of these methodologies on global artistic discourse and on the transformation of exhibition spaces into sites of cultural resistance and collective memory. Thus, curatorship becomes an active act of historical rewriting and a means of creating inclusive and representative narratives.

Historiography, as defined by Michel de Certeau², is not simply the factual recording of historical events, but an active and dynamic process by which history is constructed, reinterpreted, and reshaped in the light of political, economic, and cultural factors. This vision fundamentally changes the way exhibitions are conceptualized, with curators transforming themselves into critical agents who rewrite history from alternative perspectives and challenge dominant narratives. In this sense, exhibitions become platforms through which the power structures implicit in the way the past is represented can be questioned.

Claire Bishop emphasizes the importance of democratizing exhibition spaces, transforming them into places where marginalized voices gain central visibility³. By emphasizing alternative narratives, these spaces contribute to a better understanding of cultural and social complexity. Okwui Enwezor, through ground-breaking projects such as "Documenta 11"⁴ of 2002, redefined how exhibitions can function as critical tools for decolonizing art, integrating

is a connection to loss or transition). Together, the expression could be translated as "The Forest That Was" or "The Lost Forest". "We Are Walking Birds" is a poetic metaphor, suggesting the freedom, mobility and fragility of humans, likened to walking birds. It can imply a deep connection with nature or a sense of constant migration and adaptation (according to www.e-flux.com accessed on 28.11.2024).

² Michel Certeau (1988). *The Writing of History*, Columbia University Press, New York, p. 32.

³ Claire Bishop (2012). *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*, Verso Books, London, p. 18.

⁴ It was a revolutionary event in the history of art exhibitions, focusing on themes such as postcolonialism, globalization, and social justice. Structured into five "platforms" that included conferences, debates, and publications, this edition redefined the way international exhibitions could address complex political and social issues.

marginalized perspectives from the Global South⁵. Through such initiatives, Enwezor not only challenged the hegemony of Western narratives, but also created a model of exhibition that values epistemological and cultural diversity. In this context, the concept of “epistemic disobedience” developed by Walter D. Mignolo becomes a key tool for curators who seek to decolonize knowledge systems. This theory proposes the rejection of hegemonic paradigms and the recognition of the plurality of forms of knowledge, including indigenous or marginalized ones⁶. Together, these theories provide a solid theoretical framework for contemporary curatorial practices, transforming exhibitions into spaces of critical dialogue, inclusion, and cultural resistance, where polyphonic diversity is not only tolerated but celebrated.

The 2024 Brazil Pavilion exhibition, entitled “Ka’a Pûera – We are walking birds”⁷ represents an emblematic example of historiographical curatorial practices applied in a decolonial context. It reconfigures dominant historical narratives through a critical lens that prioritizes the voices and perspectives of indigenous peoples in Brazil. The exhibition’s title, “Ka’a Pûera,” has a profound meaning, evoking the idea of regenerative space and connectivity—a concept that reflects not only physical migration, but also the spiritual and ecological resilience of indigenous communities in the face of colonialism and exploitation.

By emphasizing ecological and spiritual connections, the exhibition aims to re-contextualize historical narratives, placing indigenous cosmologies, oral histories, and cultural traditions at the centre. This approach challenges traditional colonial frameworks that have marginalized or distorted these perspectives and instead provides a platform for cultural re-claiming. The exhibition’s central narrative reflects not only a local history but also a global interconnectedness, highlighting the relevance of these perspectives in understanding current issues of ecology, migration, and identity.

A central element of the exhibition is the integration of collaborative practices and interdisciplinary methods. Collaboration with indigenous artists, such as Denilson Baniwa⁸, has allowed the curators to create an authentic

⁵ The phrase “Global South” used in the context of the exhibition “Documenta 11” curated by Okwui Enwezor, refers to a geopolitical and socio-economic category that describes countries in Africa, Latin America, Asia and Oceania, in contrast with the “Global North” (Europe, North America and other industrialised countries). This indicates not only a geographical position, but also a historical and economic relationship, derived from colonialism, imperialism, and global systemic inequalities.

⁶ Walter D. Mignolo (2009). *Epistemic Disobedience, Independent Thought, and Decolonial Freedom*, Theory, Culture & Society, SAGE Publications, London, pp. 159-181.

⁷ The artists are Glicéria Tupinambá, Olinda Tupinambá, and Ziel Karapotó, and the exhibition was curated by Arissana Pataxó, Denilson Baniwa, and Gustavo Caboco Wapichana.

⁸ Denilson Baniwa is an indigenous artist and activist from the Baniwa people, recognized for his contributions to contemporary art and for promoting the rights of indigenous peoples. In the exhibition that is the case study of this article, Denilson Baniwa is the curator.

discourse that reflects the realities and cosmologies of indigenous communities. The use of multimedia installations and immersive technologies also contributes to transforming the exhibition space into a dynamic place of reflection and interaction.

“Ka’a Pûera” not only challenges existing historical narratives, but also promotes an empathetic and critical understanding of the history of these communities. The exhibition thus becomes a space of cultural resistance and a living example of how history can be rewritten to include perspectives excluded from the dominant discourse. It illustrates the power of art to function as a vehicle for social justice and decolonization.

The curators of the “Ka’a Pûera” exhibition have taken an innovative approach, foregrounding indigenous epistemologies as valid and essential sources of knowledge. Rather than following the Western paradigm, which often marginalizes or ignores these perspectives, the curators have centred the cosmologies and oral histories of indigenous communities as defining elements of the curatorial discourse. This approach represents a form of cultural redress, demonstrating that these epistemologies are not only relevant but also fundamental to understanding a comprehensive and more equitable history.

Collaboration with indigenous artists/curators, such as Denilson Baniwa, was an essential aspect of the curatorial process, guaranteeing the authenticity and integrity of the cultural representation.

By directly involving these artists, the exhibition not only gives visibility to the traditions and stories of indigenous communities, but also critiques traditional hierarchies in the field of art, promoting a decentralized, participatory and collaborative model. This method represents a concrete example of decolonizing curatorial practices, redistributing narrative authority and including perspectives that might otherwise be excluded.

A central feature of the exhibition is Daiara Tukano’s “Walking Birds” installation, a work that completely transforms the exhibition space into an immersive environment. The installation juxtaposes natural elements, such as rainforest sounds and organic materials, with spiritual and symbolic dimensions of indigenous culture.

The audience is invited to actively participate in this multisensory experience, which transcends the traditional boundaries of art exhibitions. Thus, the space becomes a living place, dedicated not only to passive contemplation, but also to critical reflection on the connection between nature, spirituality and history. Through these elements, the curators manage to transform the exhibition into an experience that challenges colonial frameworks and promotes a deep cultural dialogue. “Walking Birds” becomes more than a work of art; it is a bridge to understanding indigenous identities, a manifestation of cultural resistance and an invitation to empathy.

The impact of interdisciplinarity on contemporary curatorial practices transforms the exhibition space into a meeting place for different forms of knowledge and cultural expression. By integrating ethnographic research, oral histories, and multimedia technologies, a discourse is configured that goes beyond the limits of linear paradigms of Western history. This interdisciplinary method allows for the reconfiguration of dominant narratives and proposes a more nuanced and inclusive perspective on history and collective memory.

A key aspect of the exhibition is the use of indigenous sounds and digital projections, which add a multisensory dimension to the visitor experience. Ambient sounds, inspired by the rainforest and the rituals of indigenous communities, create a deep connection with nature and their spiritual traditions. Digital projections, on the other hand, provide a dynamic visual representation of indigenous cosmologies, allowing the audience to see and feel history as a living and interactive phenomenon. This combination of sound and image transforms the way visitors perceive history, moving from a static interpretation to a fluid, immersive and personalized one.

Moreover, the exhibition's interdisciplinary approach emphasizes the interconnectedness between past and present, highlighting the continued relevance of indigenous narratives in understanding contemporary challenges, such as environmental protection or the decolonization of knowledge. Through ethnographic research, the artists and curators have managed to integrate real stories and experiences of indigenous communities, offering an authentic alternative to historical narratives dominated by colonial perspectives.

“Ka’a Pûera” thus demonstrates how interdisciplinarity can be used to create exhibitions that not only inform but also transform, thus becoming a remarkable example of curatorial practice that succeeds in contributing to the decolonization of art spaces. By prioritizing indigenous epistemologies and rejecting traditional colonial paradigms, the curators transformed the Brazilian Pavilion into a space of cultural resistance, providing a platform for marginalized voices. This approach emphasizes the role of curators not only as cultural mediators, but also as active agents of change, capable of redefining power structures in the art world.

Another relevant project with a historiographical curatorial practice is “Hello World: Revising a Collection” (2018), curated by Udo Kittelmann at Hamburger Bahnhof in Berlin⁹. This exhibition critiqued the Eurocentric perspective on modern art history and highlighted cross-cultural interactions, similar to the approach in “Ka’a Pûera”. Both projects illustrate how curatorship can function as an act of cultural justice, challenging cultural hegemony and promoting epistemological diversity.

⁹ This exhibition critically explored Eurocentric perspectives in museum collections, bringing into dialogue modern and contemporary works from Latin America, Asia, Africa, and the Middle East.

In a global context marked by growing inequalities and ecological and social crises, “Ka’ā Pūera” demonstrates how art can serve as a catalyst for intercultural dialogue. The exhibition not only provides a space for the representation of indigenous cultures, but also encourages the public to critically reflect on the colonial past and its implications for the present.

Historiographical curatorial practices constitute an innovative field of contemporary art, with the potential to profoundly transform the way history is interpreted and presented to the public.

They challenge dominant narratives, emphasizing marginalized voices and epistemological diversity. Exhibitions thus become more than exhibition spaces – they function as platforms for intercultural dialogue, critical reflection, and the construction of a more inclusive collective memory. “Ka’ā Pūera” demonstrates how the integration of indigenous epistemologies, oral histories, and interdisciplinary methodologies can create a fluid and immersive curatorial discourse.

Compared to other similar initiatives, such as “Documenta 11” or “Hello World,” the Brazilian Pavilion exhibition highlights the defining characteristics of historiographical curatorial practices: the deconstruction of hegemonic historical narratives, the collaborative integration of epistemological diversity, and the use of art as a vehicle for social justice. These features underscore the importance of curatorship as a form of critical inquiry and cultural act, capable of contributing to the redefinition of the relationship between art, history, and the public.

Furthermore, historiographical curatorial practices highlight a fundamental shift in the role of exhibitions. They become not only places for archiving the past, but also active platforms for cultural redress and social resistance.

They transform collective memory, connecting history with contemporary issues, such as decolonization, the ecological crisis, and the protection of threatened cultural identities. Thus, exhibitions position themselves at the intersection of art and activism, inviting the public to participate in a profound process of reflection and change.

Historiographic curatorship, therefore, becomes a form of intellectual and artistic activism, capable of rewriting history from an equitable, empathetic and transparent perspective. In a world marked by cultural polarization and social inequalities, these practices offer a viable alternative for constructing a collective memory that reflects the complexity and diversity of human experiences.

The Brazilian Pavilion at the 2024 Venice Art Biennale remains an eloquent example of the profound impact that these practices can have on contemporary art and society as a whole.



Photos from the 2024 Brazil Pavilion exhibition, called “Ka’a Pûera – we are walking birds”

Conclusion

The Brazilian Pavilion at the 60th Venice Art Biennale illustrates how contemporary curatorial practice can combine historiographical analysis with decolonial theory to challenge dominant narratives. By foregrounding indigenous perspectives through multimedia and collaborative strategies, the exhibition transforms the pavilion into a space of critical reflection and dialogue. Ultimately, it demonstrates how curatorial discourse can function as a tool for social justice, cultural exchange, and the redefinition of exhibition spaces as sites of ethical and political engagement.

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The photos are part of the author's personal archive.