

Interview about the work “John Doe”
14th Mercosur Biennial – Beta Redação
Laura Santiago
2025

Q: Is this your first participation in the Mercosur Biennial? How did the invitation and the process unfold?

A: This is my second participation in the Mercosur Biennial. The first was exactly ten years ago, in the 2015 edition titled “Messages from a New America.” On that occasion, my involvement was different, as the curators chose to work exclusively with pre-existing works — there were no commissioned projects like in this edition. I believe one of the greatest strengths of the Mercosur Biennial is when artists are invited to create new works, especially when they are challenged to think about projects for unconventional spaces, outside the museum circuit. One memorable example was the exhibition “Unseen City,” from the 8th Biennial, which proposed interventions in places around the city that usually go unnoticed in daily life. I clearly remember closely following the creation of one of those projects, when the artist Elida Tessler conceived a piece for the Garagem do Livro, a second-hand bookstore near the Gasômetro.

I’m very interested in the issues surrounding space and the context in which art is exhibited. Installation is one of the central mediums of my work — I consider myself an artist of spatiality, I like to create proposals that emerge from specific places. With this in mind, the curators of the 14th Biennial contacted me and proposed that I develop a work specifically for the POP Center.

The invitation immediately excited me. I already had a certain emotional connection to the place: since I lived in Cachoeirinha for many years, it was at that bus terminal beneath the shopping center that I used to arrive in and leave Porto Alegre.

From there, I developed the project “John Doe,” a piece that dialogues with its surroundings by incorporating the characteristic visual aesthetic of the location — digital signs, flashing lights, colorful LEDs, electronic devices.

The installation takes place in a space that resembles a courtyard, where five colorful booths display neon lights based on petroglyphs revealed by the extreme drought

of the Rio Negro in the Amazon in 2023. During this event, the river reached its lowest level in 121 years, exposing stone-carved faces over two thousand years old. In front of the booths, there is a wall with a neon based on the pictogram created by the U.S. Department of Energy to warn future civilizations about nuclear danger — an attempt at communication that transcends time. This symbol incorporates the painting *The Scream* by Edvard Munch, surrounded by a phrase the artist wrote in his diary in 1892: “I felt as if a vast, endless scream passed through nature.”

I see “John Doe” as an anachronistic convergence of images — they transform over time, gaining new meanings. The Rio Negro petroglyphs, whose interpretations are unknown, were used by the media as symbols of the climate crisis. Similarly, Munch’s work has been reinterpreted to warn about dangers in a distant future. One day, this pictogram — and even Munch’s painting — might become as enigmatic as the petroglyphs themselves.

By turning them into colorful neons, to me, these images begin to resemble decayed emojis. And that deterioration suggests a kind of nightmare of our time — where warning signs from the past and the future collide in the landscape of the present.

Q: Your work is being exhibited in one of the most popular areas of the capital, which is part of the Biennial’s official route for the first time. What does it mean to occupy this urban space with contemporary art?

A: I honestly think that this is one of the best things that can happen to art — and to the artist: when it finds space in a genuinely popular environment. We often think it’s the art that elevates the space, that transforms or enhances it. But to me, it’s the opposite. It’s the lively, busy, accessible space, full of the energy of daily life, that has the power to elevate the art. The POP Center is not being elevated by the presence of the Biennial — it’s the art that deeply benefits from being there. It’s a privilege for me and for the work to occupy that place.

I come from a working-class family, and growing up in that context meant not going to museums or cultural centers. I remember going to the Porto Alegre Book Fair with my parents, passing by the Rio Grande do Sul Art Museum and saying, “One day we should go in.” But the idea just hung there in the air and faded. The museum felt like a distant, almost unattainable place. It was an imposing building that gave me the feeling

it wasn't meant for me. I was curious, of course, but also ashamed — as if I didn't belong in that world.

That's why I find it so interesting when art moves out of those conventional spaces and meets people in their daily lives, in their natural flow. Someone might be passing through the POP Center to get their phone fixed, buy electronics, clothes, a toy... and suddenly stumble upon the artwork. It's almost an accidental encounter — and that's exactly what makes it so meaningful.

Occupying the POP Center with contemporary art is a smart curatorial decision and also a political and symbolic gesture.

Q: Do you believe that the exhibition site changes how the audience relates to the artwork?

A: Absolutely. The space where art is exhibited has a direct impact on how it is perceived, experienced, and even understood by the public. Let's take a traditional museum, for example. It imposes, either explicitly or subtly, a set of expected behaviors. A good example is the Iberê Camargo Foundation: right at the entrance, you're faced with that iconic pictogram sign showing what is and isn't allowed inside. From that very first moment, a kind of code of conduct is established for bodies moving through the space. This inevitably shapes the experience — there's a certain "way of being" in the museum that directs how you relate to the artwork. In a place like the POP Center, these behavioral norms don't exist in the same way.

There, the public approaches the artwork with a different gaze — often more spontaneous, freer, less mediated by institutional protocols. The experience can become more open, more unpredictable even.

This lack of rigidity can make the encounter with art more democratic, more accessible.

Q: What kind of reaction or reflection do you hope to provoke in people who pass by this work?

A: Honestly, I don't expect a specific reaction — and I'm not trying to deliver a direct or clear-cut message either. One of my main concerns when creating is precisely

to avoid making the artwork's intention too obvious at first glance. I prefer to build works that have layers, that can be interpreted in different ways, that raise more questions than answers.

Often, I use irony, play on meanings, and juxtapose seemingly disconnected elements. In "John Doe", the proximity of anachronistic images — like ancient petroglyphs, the nuclear warning pictogram, and commercial neon signs — may generate estrangement. Maybe the work feels mysterious, maybe it confuses people, maybe someone even mistakes it for a product for sale in the surrounding stores. And that's okay if it happens.

I like the idea that the artwork might go unnoticed by some, spark curiosity in others, or even create some discomfort. What interests me is that openness — the possibility of different interpretations, chance encounters, and unexpected reactions.

Q: Considering that the starting point of the work was a drought in 2023, how do you see the role of art in times of climate and social crisis?

A: To be honest, I really don't know what — or if there is — a clear role for art in these times of crisis. I have doubts about whether art, on its own, can bring about real change in the world we live in. Does anyone walk into a museum, see a piece about the climate crisis, and leave determined to change their way of life? Can we, with an installation or an image, move someone from contemplation to action? While researching for "John Doe", I came across a debate that illustrates this complexity.

In 2018, a group of artists and researchers from NYU's ITP (Interactive Telecommunications Program) created a project called "Climoji". The idea was to develop emojis representing the climate crisis — visual symbols to communicate disasters like melting ice caps, ocean pollution, droughts, and wildfires. These icons were meant to circulate in digital daily life as naturally as smiley faces and hearts. A symbolic yet political gesture: inserting the climate crisis into everyday language.

But then comes the critique: isn't this just a watered-down form of engagement? In 2023, journalist Shira Jeczmiem argued that trying to engage Gen Z with emojis was condescending. She pointed out that this generation is already fully aware of the severity of the issue and is taking concrete action — hitting the streets, pressuring companies,

changing consumption habits. So maybe the language of art needs to seek other forms — less symbolic, more radical, or at least more grounded in experience and action.

These contradictions were present throughout the creation of the work I did for the Biennial. When I think of the images in “John Doe” — the ancient petroglyphs, the nuclear warning pictogram, the colorful neon signs — I ask myself: what are they really saying? What do they mean? Are they warnings? Alarms? Invitations to change? Or maybe they’re something more ambiguous, more open... maybe they’re passage-images. Not pointing to a specific path, but helping us traverse a time of transformation — whatever the destination may be.

Maybe the role of art, if it has one, is this: not so much to say what to do, but to provoke a pause, a crack in the flow of daily life. A space of estrangement, where we can stop, look, get lost for a moment — and maybe come out of it with a new question.