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OF THE BIENNIAL PHENOMENON

The article is about the importance of the biennial phenomenon, contemporary art and its historical and art valid. How can the contemporary art be written into history of biennale? Is the notion of "contemporary art history" or a "history of contemporary art" a contradiction in terms? This article accepts the challenge of exploring the complexities both of contemporary art as a now "historical" phenomenon (as the years between "now" and 1985 expand in number) and of contemporary art as potentially the cutting edge of what people calling themselves artists (or understood by others as such) are making and doing in this increasingly complex and globalized economy of cultural practices. And of course, for better understanding there is an investigation of the long history of biennale all over the world and the main principles and the thoughts that can be useful in the preparation of some biennials.

Key words: *culture, biennial, contemporary, legitimacy, curator, Manifesta, phenomenon, art, festivalism.*

Biennale is an event that happens every two years. It is most commonly used within the art world to describe large-scale international contemporary art exhibitions. This term was popularised by Venice Biennale, which was first held in 1895. The phrase has since been used for other artistic events, such as the "Biennale de Paris", or even as a portmanteau as with Berlinale (for the Berlin International Film Festival) and Viennale (for Vienna's international film festival). "Biennale"

is therefore used as a general term for other recurrent international events.

But maybe I should start out by saying a few things I loathe more than panels, talks, and articles about the theory or practice of biennials. The biennial phenomenon exploded in a decade — the 1990s — that also witnessed the emergence of the curator as a professional figure, which was soon followed by the creation of academic courses for curators, and subsequently a new didactic approach associated with contemporary art. The result: The exhibition model of periodic, recurring shows is often accompanied by generic, impressionistic criticism, by interminable round tables paradoxically held during the biennials themselves, and a plethora of meta-reflections that have become a genre unto themselves [4, 11].

Moreover, I am afraid that as a result of these at times aggressive critiques of the biennial pattern, we have witnessed at the outset of the twenty-first century a shift from the exhibition to the art fair. Whereas the mayors, politicians — and occasionally curators and artists — of the 1990s dreamed of creating new biennials, in the first decade of the 2000s the same people discovered that an art fair is a much more tempting opportunity to spruce up their city's image. And I don't think I even have to spell this out, but if forced to choose between an art fair and even the worst biennial, I'll always opt for the latter, if only because at biennials the artworks aren't chosen because of their market value.

If you think about it, the biennial boom in the 1990s had a series of very positive effects. First of all, the proliferation of biennials coincided with a movement to redefine the boundaries and redraw the map of contemporary art. It's certainly no coincidence that in 1993 the Aperto section of the Venice Biennale offered the first signs of a new, global art world — a phenomenon that had perhaps been foreshadowed, but in a much more problematic way, by Jean-Hubert Martin and his *Magiciens de la Terre* at the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris in 1989. Nor is it a coincidence that in 2011 dozens of countries still tried to affirm their identities in the international arena of the Venice Biennale in which nearly ninety nations from around the world now take part. Biennials — even the best established ones like Venice — are much more permeable terrains than traditional museums; they are spheres where changes can be more easily made, categories more freely mingled. And if we think about some of the most important and innovative events, like the Havana Biennial (established in 1984), the Gwangju Biennale (established in 1995),

the Johannesburg Biennial (established in 1995), the Sharjah Biennial (established in 1993), or, much earlier, the São Paulo Bienal (established in 1951) — leaving aside many other examples like Manifesta, the Berlin Biennale, and the Tirana Biennial — it immediately becomes clear that each of these institutions has opened up new channels or new intellectual “trade routes” — to borrow the title of the 1997 Johannesburg Biennial curated by Okwui Enwezor—which very often have turned around or at least shaken up the Western canon of art history by playing an essential role in increasing the biodiversity, so to speak, of the contemporary art world [1, 73–74].

Of course, the most obvious criticism of biennials stems precisely from the opposite observation. According to the most predictable script for biennial bashing, the problem with these periodic shows lies in the fact that — especially in the 1990s — a certain group of artists or certain kind of artist could be found exhibiting at almost all the biennials around the world, in a sort of traveling circus of contemporary art. Biennials would thus be responsible for stifling local diversity by simply importing works and artists who — according to refrains we all know by now — swoop down on a city during the exhibition “like UFOs” without “putting down roots”, like “McDonald’s or cultural franchises”. Obviously, these are criticisms that have a certain legitimacy and importance. It’s hard to deny that for many founders and organizers of biennials, these periodic shows are just an opportunity to tap into an entirely Western fashion phenomenon. The success of a biennial is thus measured precisely on the basis of how well it manages to imitate the original model, with the foreseeable assortment of art stars, entertainment, and bloated, often interactive, meaningless work — that poisonous mash that critic Peter Schjeldahl has perspicaciously called “festivalism”. At the risk of seeming overly reductive and simplistic, I have always been tempted to respond to these criticisms by saying that there is no such thing as a “biennial model”. Actually, if there is a truly liberating aspect to the way biennials mushroomed in the 1990s, it is that today there is no single pattern. Their proliferation has done away with any illusion of unity.

Upon closer inspection, I think the biennial is neither a model nor a format: rather, it is a tool that can be used to build very different shows and obtain very different results. It is precisely when the biennial is reduced to a format, to a formula, that it reveals all its weaknesses. In essence, the problem with biennials is perhaps a problem with the way

they are used, curated, and organized. It is not at all a problem inherent to their nature, especially since by this point there are few features that one can point to as being general characteristics of these events (the one exception being the Venice Biennale, the only biennial still partly defined by the presence of international pavilions). All that the other biennials around the world have in common is the fact that they are art exhibitions held every two years. I'm sorry if this definition is vague and simplistic, but it's the only one that really applies to the hundreds of very different shows that we call biennials. Unlike all other artistic institutions, biennials — precisely due to their temporary nature — are, at least theoretically, wide open to change and innovation. They are flexible tools that are just waiting to be reinvented and transformed with each new edition. No museum or kunsthalle in the world is geared to such complete and radical turnarounds as any biennial, and some, like the Berlin Biennale, Manifesta, or Performa, for example, are not even linked to specific venues, or even specific cities — in the case of Manifesta — and the organizers of each edition can choose not only the artists but the exhibition strategies, the locations, and methods used to present the artworks. No other institution offers curators or artistic directors the opportunity to control the entire choreography of an event, from the graphics to the choice of venues, from the selection of artists and works to the educational and cultural programming that accompany the show [2, 68].

I think it is because I look at biennials from the pragmatic, practical standpoint of someone who organizes them, but I tend to think it is the responsibility of curators and artistic directors to reinvent and transform the exhibition each time around, especially since biennials offer a condition of freedom (one might say even impunity and irresponsibility) that is completely different from a museum setting. Ideally, the curators can work without necessarily worrying about later biennials and the effect that the exhibition will have on the image of the entire institution. The curator of each edition knows that he or she will be leaving at the end of the show, and this awareness often puts them in the privileged position of being able to avoid the kind of compromises that are necessary if one is to continue working in the same organization for years [5, 19].

In my opinion, if a biennial is a dud — and many are — it isn't because the model is worn out, but because (though perhaps I am attributing too much responsibility to individuals) the curators were incapable

of rethinking or transforming the tool, turning it to new purposes or discovering new resources within it. The problem of biennials is therefore not that some format exists at the source and imposes predetermined choices. The problem is when biennials congeal into a genre that is always the same.

So how can one avoid this process of ossification and repetition? I have no recipes or magic charms, of course. At the most I can provide a few empirical examples stemming from my own experience. Far be it from me to present this as a list of rules or commandments. The notes that follow are just a series of observations in the field that have helped me structure my thoughts [3, 113–114]. They are very simple, but, for this reason, they have provided me some comfort during the preparation of biennial exhibitions. I should also point out that they are reflections in hindsight. While caught up in the preparation of these shows, I have found myself working in a much more organic way, without following any formula, but I can definitely say that those biennial I had take part I have attempted, more or less instinctively, to tackle the following questions. In writing down these notes, I have tried to be as candid and transparent as possible. Some assertions may sound generic and superficial, but I'm not aspiring to be exhaustive, nor am I trying to present a doctrine on biennial exhibitions. These are just some of the thoughts that have guided me in the preparation of some biennials, and I hope they'll be useful to those gearing up to curate or study other biennials to come.

Every biennial fits into a diachronic and synchronic sequence: In other words, when you work on a biennial, you have to work both in contrast and in relation to the preceding one, but also in contrast and in relation to other biennials around the world. Personally, when I worked worked on a biennial, I've found it very useful to try to summarize in a few words the "meta- physics" of the biennial at that particular moment, i.e., the reigning model. If you manage to define this model, then you're in a position to reshape it, or at least avoid getting bogged down in sterile repetitions of preestablished formulas. I also find it useful to identify types of previous biennials or exhibitions that have been relegated to marginal positions within the history and canon of contemporary art: Exhibitions that have been heavily criticized or forgotten can serve as interesting case studies or inspirations for transforming the format of biennials; in other words, to find new models to counter the reigning model of biennial.

Every biennial is site specific. It must react to and interact with the context in which it is held. But there are different ways of relating to the place where an exhibition is organized, and I'm suspicious of that subgenre of biennial art that mixes together a politicized attitude with unimaginative ways of engaging the audience. In other words, it is the responsibility of the biennial curator to invent new ways of interacting with the site and its public. I also find it useful to remind myself that it is important to consider not only where art comes from but also where it can take you. Most importantly, it is necessary to remember that interactive, playful art is not the only way of engaging the audience. Viewers can be drawn in through their intelligence and their eyes, not just by providing conventional participatory experiences. To a certain extent, this means that a new biennial is one that imagines and produces a new kind of viewer. It may also mean that a new, interesting biennial is one that imagines and produces a new site, either by changing the spaces where it takes place, creating new connections between the works and the exhibition spaces, or by offering a completely different experience of the sites that are traditionally used.

A biennial is ultimately just one big exhibition, which means it still has to operate as an exhibition, and if possible, a good one. All too often, many biennials seem to turn instead into a cacophonous free-for-all, jettisoning all aspirations to cohesion. Less successful biennials use generic titles to mask an almost interchangeable sequence of works. Perhaps for convenience or out of laziness, the works are usually presented as discrete elements — often with one room for each artist — that aren't even intended to come together into any kind of coherent whole. On the contrary, I think that a biennial is a form of choreography, and as such must be carefully constructed and controlled. A biennial without a coherent vision, theme, or mood is simply a wasted opportunity. And at risk of sounding too conservative, I'd say that biennials require a kind of craftsmanship that every curator has the responsibility to hone and perfect (from the extended wall labels to the public programs accompanying an exhibition, from the quality of the installation to the actual conservation of the artworks). A biennial should ideally be as good as or better than any museum exhibition.

And while I'm making sweeping statements, I may as well add that a biennial should tackle big issues. It should look at art to try and address *fundamental questions that are urgent for artists and for culture at*

large. That sounds ambitious, but the scale of most biennials allows for ambitious plans, and it is the responsibility of curators and organizers to use biennials to address issues that are crucial even outside the art world. What makes a biennial a big exhibition isn't just the number of artists, but the courage to tackle big issues. The currency of a biennial doesn't lie just in its skill at selecting the artists of the moment — if such a thing exists — but rather in its capacity to address problems that are topical and in some way fundamental. Of course, one ought to add that many recent biennials have been unsuccessful precisely because they tackled ambitious but generic themes that weren't rooted in the practice and works of the artists.

Historically, biennials have defined a canon of the art of the moment. But you can't construct one canon without dismantling others. Hence a trait found in the best biennials is that they both impose a vision of the contemporary world as well as redefine a lineage or history. In a word, the best biennials are revisionist: They must produce their own past, trying to redefine the categories of a historiography that also tends to stiffen into genres and stereotypes. Biennials are temporary museums into which new historical narratives must be introduced.

A biennial must provide artists with the resources, spaces, and energy to bring their work to a new level of complexity, although not in equal measure. I don't think biennials are settings in which all artists and all works must be treated alike. It is almost a universally accepted fact that biennials are particularly well suited to producing new work. On the other hand, when biennials end up being just a showcase for new projects, they risk overlapping with fairs and galleries. As hackneyed as it may sound, we must keep in mind that new is not synonymous with good. An ecological thought: New things should be produced only when strictly necessary.

There should be at least one element of madness in every biennial; at least one project, piece, or choice of venue that must be incredibly hard to pull off. There must be at least one financial, logistic, diplomatic or even organizational challenge that literally gives the curator nightmares and bouts of insomnia while preparing the exhibition. Without that element of madness, even the best biennial will always seem flat.

Biennials require money. And very often, it is part of the curator's job to find additional funding that will help expand the scope of the show. For me it has always been quite instructive to think of the biennial I took part as exhibitions I would never have had the resources to carry out

on any other occasion. In other words, it is the biennial that must justify the budget, not vice versa.

Biennials contain multiple works, multiple worlds, and multiple audiences. They must be able to shift smoothly from a micro level to a macro level and vice versa. A biennial is a show that must allow for an intimate, face-to-face encounter between one little work and one individual. They must also be able to operate on a mass, urban scale. The best biennials manage to function in both of these dimensions, just as they manage to speak with the same clarity and complexity to both a well-informed audience and one that knows almost nothing about art.

Contrary to what their name might suggest, biennials in fact only happen once: Usually, curators are invited to organize only one edition of a biennial; not many artists tend to show more than once in the same event; and the public returns to each edition of a biennial to see how different it is from its previous incarnations. It is this sense of finality, this sense of uniqueness that can become a tremendous motivation for each biennial to try and acquire that state of radical renewal that is at the foundation of each great biennial exhibition.

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Стаття присвячена феномену бієнале та актуальним питанням сучасного мистецтва, його історичної і мистецької спадщини. Як сучасне мистецтво може бути інтегровано в історію, чи правомірно

поняття «сучасне мистецтвознавство» або «історія сучасного мистецтва» — основні проблемні питання дослідження. Розкрито складність сучасного мистецтва як «історичного явища», проблеми сучасного мистецтва та художників, які живуть та працюють в умовах глобального економічно-культурного періоду. Дослідження, здійснене на матеріалі багаторічної історії бієнале, містить роздуми щодо основних принципів і положень, які можуть бути корисні при підготовці такого масштабного заходу.

Ключові слова: культура, бієнале, сучасне мистецтво, легітимність, куратор, Маніфеста, феномен, мистецтво, фестивалізм.

Статья посвящена феномену биеннале и актуальным проблемам современного искусства, его исторического наследия. Как современное искусство может быть интегрировано в историю, правомерны ли понятия «современное искусствоведение» или «история современного искусства» — основные проблемные вопросы исследования. Раскрыта сложность современного искусства как «исторического явления», проблемы современного искусства и художников, работающих и живущих в условиях глобального экономическо-культурного периода. Исследование реализовано на материале многолетней истории биеннале, содержит размышления об основных принципах и положениях, которые могут быть полезны при подготовке такого масштабного мероприятия.

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