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# Just Another Exhibition

Histories and Politics of Biennials

*Federica Martini and Vittoria Martini*

In a 1968 interview, the artist Pino Pascali referred to the Venice Biennale as a place where anyone could exhibit, since it was certainly not “a shrine”, but an exhibition like any other.

That same year, in a television interview, Harald Szeemann reasserted the concept behind *Science Fiction*, the 1967 exhibition held at the Berne Kunsthalle. It focused on the sociological dimension of science fiction, thus revealing its interdisciplinary nature. In the exhibition, art found “its place in any case” and the result, according to Szeemann, was not “just another exhibition”.

Therefore, in 1968, Pino Pascali’s negative assessment and Harald Szeemann’s methodological stance had both brought to light, albeit in a complementary way, the need to review exhibition practices and the system of values on which they were founded.

Recently, contemporary biennials have been similarly questioned. In 2009, when the idea of creating a new biennial in the Norwegian city of Bergen, was introduced, an international committee was organised to verify in which form and under which auspices could a different and much needed biennial be created, one which was not merely an “exhibition like any other”.

Today’s biennials, at times spectacular and often expanding beyond the traditional exhibition space, fail to represent, in terms of their exhibition format, an exception to museums of contemporary art, art fairs, and kunsthalls.

The rapid spread of the biennial phenomenon over the course of the 1990s is a significant symptom of the globalization of the art system, resulting in its overexposure. From then onwards, the biennials have added the role of laboratory for curatorial experiments and visibility for international art and exhibition practices to the mission of rendering even the most local art scenes international. Gradually, other tasks have been assigned to perennial exhibitions, namely the burden of relaunching marginal cities, both in terms

of their economy and tourist industry. The new responsibilities have lent them that additional value, which only cultural events can provide, by relaunching any given territory on the economic and cultural global map. In this sense, biennials are at the same time magnifying glasses and mirrors of international art practices.

Due to their hybrid nature, halfway between a museum and an art fair, biennials have become the Esperanto and sometimes the “newspeak” of contemporary art. The excitement of recent years has helped re-define the art system, and perennial exhibitions are now seen as those entities which, together with museums and universities, are contributing to creating a history of present-day art. Hence, it has become fundamental to understand their nature and refer back to the roots of the exhibition model and its archetypes. For this very reason, in this book, so much attention has been placed on the Venice Biennale. It is not so much because there is some desire to build a myth from its origins, but because of its characteristics and problems that anticipate some of the critical issues common to contemporary exhibition practices. Starting from these very issues, from their similarities or differences, we can define numerous perennial exhibitions of the 1990s and the twenty-first century.

Although Venice is not “the mother of all biennials”, but only of some, by analyzing its history, we can observe and understand the initial motivations, delays, and revolutions of exhibitions such as Kassel, La Havana, Johannesburg, or Manifesta.

This book intends to set the biennials within the framework of the history of exhibitions, in order to observe the transformations of recent curatorial practice in relation to the issue of internationality and national representation.

Starting from the first Venice Biennale, successor to the World Fair, the first chapter analyses the evolution of biennials and investigates the issue of the system, based on national representation, used by perennial exhibitions.

The second chapter examines the 1976 Biennale, as a point of rupture in the history of the Venice Biennale, since it marks the beginning of theme-based exhibitions as a solution to the fragmented exhibition space brought about by national pavilions.

Beginning with the exhibition *Magiciens de la Terre* (1989), the third chapter assesses the input of contemporary biennials in the review of the relationship between centre and peripheries. In the dialectics of curatorial practice and globalisation of the art system, biennials define a new function, one that enables them to start producing history.

The conversations with Alfredo Jaar, Thomas Hirschhorn, Stéphanie Moidson, and Antoni Muntadas focus on some of the issues which emerge in each of the chapters, in order to open up to different ways of thinking about national representations, making history, and conceptualizing the biennial format in contemporary art.

*Federica Martini and Vittoria Martini*

## One Biennale, Many Biennials

*Federica Martini*

### METAPHORAI AND AREAS OF CONDENSATION

In the chapter “Spatial Stories” from *The Practice of Everyday Life*, by Michel de Certeau, the author points out a curiosity of modern Greece, where means of transportation are called *metaphorai* in the Greek language<sup>1</sup>. Vehicles, just like narrations, continues de Certeau, traverse and organise places every day; they differentiate and connect them, giving life to phrases, stories, itineraries and routes.

The contemporary art system is also traversed by metaphors connecting places drawn nearer by the notion of globalization<sup>2</sup>. The most widespread of these is the large-scale exhibition, often defined “biennale” regardless of its periodicity, in honour of the Venice Biennale<sup>3</sup>. The Venice Biennale was founded at the end of the nineteenth century as a means of representing the international art scene, as well as supporting and promoting local artistic output. In the 1990s the biennale exhibition model became an object of study and attention on behalf of the media, furthering the spread of “ideas of the world” seen through the filter of present cultural creation<sup>4</sup>.

Since its beginning, the perennial exhibition has striven to exhibit art of the present and to narrate places and cultural contexts in which art is created, emphasising, and according to the times, the questions and discussions presiding over the production of local and international art. Similarly to the *metaphorai* of de Certeau, biennials condense and connect places and works of art, as well as diverse ideas about nations and cultural identity, in an exhibition context. Seen as areas of condensation, as maps, or networks, as places of memory, or spaces of modernization, the biennials appear to follow the romantic attitudes of Phileas Fogg, the fictional character invented by Jules Verne, and his ambition to represent the complexity of the world, as well as the spirit of a period, in a compressed journey.

This nineteenth-century matrix is fueled by the custom of bringing together artists from a wide range of geographical regions and cultural positions. In this sense, the logic behind the perennial exhibitions corresponds to the presentation of documents acquired on a journey of discovery that is both local as well as international. In 1955 Claude Lévi-Strauss wrote about the craft of the explorer and the limits of discovery. He observed that the art of exploring “does not consist, as we may think, in discovering unknown facts after long and thorough study, but in covering a considerable number of kilometres, while collecting fixed and animated images, preferably in colour”. Such images, continues Lévi-Strauss, “can help keep a room full of listeners attentive for days, miraculously transforming the most obvious and banal things into revelations. This, solely on the grounds that the author, instead of having compiled the images from one fixed place, has sanctified them over a journey of 20,000 kilometres”<sup>5</sup>. The impossibility of discovery and its sensationalism constitute an important point of contact between the *mise-en-scène* of World Fairs and the biennale. In the context of biennials, what do the images documenting a journey represent? “Unknown facts discovered after long study”, or the confirmation of “revelations” and practices already underway? In other words, how has the diffusion of biennials throughout the world contributed to creating new models of representing the international art scene?

The spectacular nature of the biennale of contemporary art reveals its vocation for producing exhibitions and conceptual representations. Timothy Mitchell observed that in the World Fair “the reduction of the world to a system of objects is a consequence of their careful [spatial] organization, capable of evoking broader meanings such as History, Empire, and Progress”<sup>6</sup>. This system of objects, resulting from the classifying eagerness of the World Fairs, introduces into the city centre “a reduced, yet still accurate, reproduction of the European vision of the world ‘inside the metropolis centre’, and presents it to a large, local, national, and international public of visitors, spectators, and tourists”<sup>7</sup>.

In the transition from universal exhibitions to the present-day situation, the nineteenth-century representation of the world results in a dual tendency to globalise biennials. On the one hand, observes Tim Griffin, biennials “reflect” a globalised form of the art system, and on the other, they are reconfigured according to this new idea<sup>8</sup>. In addition to creating exhibitions, biennials more and more frequently produce concepts and question theoretical positions concerning geographies and ideas of national and transnational space, confronting the dialectics of centre/margin and inclusion/exclusion<sup>9</sup>. Russell Ferguson clearly outlines the problem in *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*, where the need for analysing the “source” that generates a cultural system, polarized in centres and peripheries, is affirmed<sup>10</sup>. Ferguson asks such questions as: What are the centres? Or, in other words, on what basis (with respect to whom or to what) are the art scenes that are represented in the biennials defined as subordinate or central? The difficulty of the operation lies in the effective “invisibility” of the source of the matter, as in the capacity of the artistic institutions to absorb and neutralise the critical debate outside the mainstream.

The Venice Biennale, founded in 1895 and considered the oldest and most well-known of the large-scale exhibitions, was the privileged place, at the end of the nineteenth century, for debate on regionalism and on the recent unification of Italy, due to its ability to bring together contemporary art works and artists from different nations for the benefit of a wide audience<sup>11</sup>. In 1968, the desire to recount a “world [that] is shrinking” while “cosmopolitan sensibility expands” was still an important element in the design of the biennale: “A big exhibition is a compressed journey, the journey to the Orient or to Africa, taken by the exhibition visitor in the course of a day”, writes Lawrence Alloway<sup>12</sup>.

The world compressed into the regional and national halls of the Palazzo delle Esposizioni began to expand, in 1907, into the Giardini area of the city’s Castello district. It took on the appearance of a micro-theme park, defined by its number of national pavilions. Near the end of the 1960s expanded into other public spaces and buildings in the city. Alongside its historical expansion from the Palazzo delle Esposizioni to the Giardini and, beyond, into the city, the Biennale witnesses not only the emergence of different exhibition models but also a change in aesthetic position. If, at the beginning, the aim was to represent the world through art, over the course of the nineteenth century biennials gradually became the seats for critical reflection on how artists represent contemporary reality in a globalised context. More and more frequently the biennials presented, more or less voluntarily, crucial elements of contemporary culture, of the construction of difference and eccentric subjects within and outside the art system. As diverse “exhibition concepts” followed one after the other, different questions on cultural identity and its representation in art arose. In this sense, the Venice Biennale can be seen as an “area of condensation” of concepts and of ideas regarding nations and the ways in which exhibitions are designed.

#### SECESSIONS, LABORATORIES, DELAYS AND REVOLUTIONS

In *Roman des origines et origines du roman*, Marthe Robert defined the novel as a sort of Frankenstein, which combines the legacy of the epic novel, of poetry, and of the short story to create a new writing, born from a mixture of different traditions and literary models<sup>13</sup>. As with novels, the biennials also join and condense different exhibition models and concepts. Historically, large-scale exhibitions kept track of the experiences of World Fairs and of the Secessions; they encompassed elements and metaphors of contemporary exhibitions like fairs, cultural festivals, and the notion of laboratory museum, while remaining open to curatorial experimentation and to discussion on how to organise such events<sup>14</sup>. As the role of curators evolved together with their ideas of what exhibitions were, different metaphors of exhibitions intertwined. The commemoration of the past intersected the celebration of the present; the logic of network was grafted, according to the epoch, into the spatial organisation of the map that the national pavilions in the Giardini of Castello evoked; the need for modernisation that arose in Venice at the end of the

nineteenth century was reinterpreted and updated, a century later, in the Shanghai Biennale.

The perennial exhibition's talent at condensing disparate temporal and spatial elements is also due to its gigantic size. Different forms of exhibitions are combined in biennials, that are both focusing on the past (retrospectives, personal, or collective shows dedicated to movements and tendencies), or on the present (shows on a single artist or a local setting), or, still yet, inquiries tied to a theme or to an art scene. The subtext accompanying the statement "the elaboration of modern forms of representation and knowledge" involves cultural identities and national representations, as well as their juxtaposition in a large scale event. Again, as Timothy Mitchell underlines, it is a remnant from World Fairs that plays a major role in the diffusion of an orientalist, eurocentric vision of the art system<sup>15</sup>. The assembling of these options lets us question the ways in which exhibitions contribute to producing the consciousness of an era, and to reflecting - writes Yves Michaud - the vision an intellectual, economic, and ruling class of that time period wishes to offer<sup>16</sup>.

#### BIENNIALS AND PLACES OF MEMORY

##### DOCUMENTA, THE JOHANNESBURG BIENNALE AND GWANGJU BIENNALE

Germano Celant, the director of the 1997 edition of the Venice Biennale, chose for its title *Past, Present, Future*. In biennials, the most visible of these three time references is that of the present in contemporary art: the exhibition's synchronous approach that represents the globalised situation of the art system. The biennials' global-scale presence transformed them into a sort of "cyclical historical spectacle"<sup>17</sup>. This augmented the feeling of finding oneself faced with an ubiquitous and simultaneous exhibition, or in one single large exhibition located, more or less at the same time, in different parts of the world<sup>18</sup>. From a chronological point of view, biennials regularly intersect with the histories of the countries organising them. In the periodicity and rituality of such events, biennials reveal a dual nature of both temporal maps and places where the act of representing the present reveals the celebration of national identity and the past. Indeed, many biennials are designed during transitional phases and are seen as turning points for the community of the country presenting them: the Venice Biennale used the silver wedding anniversary of Umberto and Margherita of Savoy, king and queen of Italy, as a motive; the São Paulo Biennial was founded two years prior to the celebration of the city's four-hundredth anniversary (1951); and the Alexandria Biennale in Egypt (1955) was inaugurated on the occasion of the third anniversary of its national revolution.

Using Michail Bachtin's definition, the biennale could be described as a "chronotope", or "time space", where "time becomes dense, compact, and artistically visible; space intensifies and flows in the movement of time, of intrigue, of history; the descriptions of time manifest themselves in space, to which time gives meaning and measure"<sup>19</sup>. In the case of biennials, works of

art are primarily repositories of narrative events and the temporal dimension, responsible for the exhibition's process and its connection to the collective history of a given nation or city. However, there is yet another component, in some ways "monumental", that makes the biennale a place in which time and different types of narratives meet. Pierre Nora defined *lieux de mémoire* as the places of collective memory born after the dissolution of common memories<sup>20</sup>. Nora observes that the place of memory includes the most material and concrete of objects (monuments, archives, museums, persons), as well as the most abstract and intellectual (institutions, symbols, events). In both cases, places of memory are objects of the past, which become places of the present aimed at preserving the collective memory.

Such elements can also be found in the design of certain biennials, namely that of documenta in Kassel<sup>21</sup>. After having regained both a militarily and politically strategic position in Nazi Germany, Kassel found itself in a marginal position following the division of Germany. After it was refused candidacy for capital of the federal government at the end of the 1940s, the city became, in 1955, the seat of the Bundesgartenschau (Federal horticulture show). The occasion sparked the interest of landscape architect Hermann Mattern, Professor at the Kunstakademie Kassel, who launched the idea of hosting an exhibition in the centre of Friedrichsplatz. His colleague, architect and university lecturer of painting, Arnold Bode, convinced him to relocate the exhibition to the site of the ruins of the Museum Fridericianum. This museum, constructed in 1769 and the second oldest in Europe, had suffered extensive damage during the war and was left with only its supporting walls standing. For this reason, explained Arnold Bode, documenta of Kassel, in the eyes of its organisers, seemed "an ideal undertaking for portraying the idea of Europe through an art exhibition located thirty kilometres from the East German borders"<sup>22</sup>. On a symbolic level, Kassel was the ideal location, according to Arnold Bode, for exhibiting avant-garde art in Germany again, as it had been banned in 1937 when the Nazi regime "interrupted the long-standing German tradition of avant-garde exhibitions" with the opening of the show *Entartete Kunst* (Degenerate art) in Munich<sup>23</sup>.

In certain, often traumatic, times throughout history, biennials have taken possession of strongly symbolic places, with a twofold objective of preserving their history and opening them up to the present through the organisation of contemporary art exhibitions. Such is the case of Gwangju, site of the May 18, 1980 massacre, when thousands of demonstrators were killed by South Korean police during a demonstration against the expansion of martial law by dictator Chun Doo-Hwan. In 1995 Gwangju was chosen to be the seat of the first biennale of contemporary art in South Korea, making it a symbol of the country's openness towards the international art scene. During the inaugural speech at the first edition, the mayor of Gwangju expressed hope that the biennale "would help clear up misunderstandings about the history of Gwangju [...], a luminous city that uses art to shed light on the dark reality of Korean separation"<sup>24</sup>. In the exhibition catalogue, curator Lee Yongwoo described the event as intensely different from the nostalgic salvaging of the Grand Tour carried

out by the Venice biennale: “The international biennale of Gwangju asks precise questions about Korea’s contemporary history while caring for its wounds”<sup>25</sup>. The first edition of the biennale, entitled *Beyond the Borders*, was accompanied by lateral events such as the exhibition *Gwangju Memory of May*, dedicated to the generation of 1979-89, and the collective show *Art as Witness*, concerning the relationship between contemporary art and democracy<sup>26</sup>.

The case of the Johannesburg Biennale is different, with its historical pretext based on the country’s first democratic elections and the reintegration of South Africa into the United Nations. The event represented a crucial moment in the debate over the decentralisation of African contemporary art, so far as the biennials, according to artist Kendell Geers, were already presenting themselves at that time as “a new form of cultural colonialism. Although western curators were visiting marginal regions in search of new talent, non-western artists still had to travel towards the art system centres not only to become truly international, but to be also officially recognized as marginal”<sup>27</sup>.

The choice of Johannesburg as a site for a biennale is in itself significant. Although not the capital of the Republic of South Africa, it is one of the most populated cities in the world, a crossroads between the diamond trade and the symbol of apartheid. The opening of a biennale was meant to encourage “the long awaited return of South Africa to the international visual art arena”<sup>28</sup>. Even though a triennial of contemporary art had been organised in Cape Town in 1985, it was not until the early 1990s that more and more attempts were made in Africa to reposition the local art scene on an international level. While events like the Bamako Biennale (1994) were being founded, there was also an increase in exhibitions which, following *Magiciens de la Terre* (1989), aimed at destroying the foundations of western exoticism, intent on relegating African art to the sphere of craftsmanship, if not, once again, to the metaphor of affinities of modernist origin. Within this framework, the history of contemporary African art is reinterpreted from the perspective of modernity and conceptual research, of critical debate on the ways culture is produced, and on colonial legacy. The focus of the artifact is replaced by the analysis of the context that led to the fruition of African art and by the way the visitor is meant to approach the exhibition.

#### BIENNIALS, MAPS AND NETWORKS. THE VENICE BIENNALE AND MANIFESTA

The success of contemporary art biennials between the nineteenth and early twentieth century preceded the opening of the first museum of contemporary art in the U.S.A., the MoMA in New York, by nearly thirty years. Under the direction of Barr, remarks Yve-Alain Bois, works of art at the MoMA were no longer presented “as documents of national history” as they were rather displayed as documents of a history of style<sup>29</sup>. The need for such a change involved, over the course of the twentieth century, also contemporary art biennials. Although the first large-scale exhibitions, in particular the biennials

of Venice, São Paulo, and Alexandria (Egypt), preserved what Nairne defined as the national “competitive origins” of the World Fairs, in actuality, since the beginning of the nineteenth century, the biennials’ structure of national representation has been based on the desire to exhibit a contemporary style and to offer a key to understanding the present<sup>30</sup>. The international nature and form of the exhibition, increasingly diffused throughout the city, makes the biennale an international mapping experiment that unfurls over local space.

The national pavilions in the Giardini of the Venice Biennale represent a fundamental moment in this movement. From the first editions at the end of the nineteenth century, to the construction of the first national pavilion of Belgium in the Giardini di Castello (1907), the Italian Pavilion of the Venice Biennale has presented itself, along with the Crystal Palace of the Great Exhibition of London (1851), as a succession of rooms, each dedicated to a precise geographical area which emerged following the unification of Italy, and to a selection of countries<sup>31</sup>.

According to Elke Krasny, within the framework of World Fairs pavilions join their original function as “garden architecture” to the mission of representing culture and national identity<sup>32</sup>. This structure re-emerges in Venice where the universal exhibition’s principle of pavilion-nation is taken up again and “specialised” in the representation of national art. The Giardini gradually took on the twofold appearance of basic map of the European state-nations, and site for the spectacularisation of art<sup>33</sup>. Hans Schabus’ *The Last Land*, presented in the Austrian pavilion for the Biennale 2005, brings into question this dual front. Schabus uses the pavilion designed by Joseph Hoffmann in 1934 as a lens to analyze the history of Austrian participation in the Biennale as well as the history of the pavilion architecture and, in a broader sense, the relationship between Venice and Austria. Situated on the island of Sant’Elena, on the border between the Giardini and the city, the Austrian pavilion is covered by Schabus with a wooden structure. Such as a temporary mountain that is set against the background of the city of Venice, Schabus’ work implants an iconic element of Austrian landscape in the Giardini di Castello and affects the view on the city. Seemingly inaccessible, the interior of the pavilion shows a labyrinthine structure of beams, walkways and stairs that allow the visitor to reach the top of the mountain from the inside.

Developing from the official history of the site where the Austrian pavilion is situated, Schabus’ monumental structure holds, almost like a retina, fragments of non-official narratives.

The desire to anchor a nation’s history to antiquity, and to naturalise the myth of its origins, has been constant in the history of nationalism. Such an attempt may appear paradoxical considering that the idea of nation is actually a relatively recent invention. Connected with the “invention of tradition”, a process leading to the creation of architectonic symbols, monuments, and ceremonies<sup>34</sup>, nations such as the French Third Republic, and Germany during the Second Empire, reached a highly symbolic level close to the time of the First World War. During this same period, construction of the French and German pavilions in the Giardini of the Biennale was underway.

The relationship between the geographic narration of the pavilions as a whole and the exhibition space of the Biennale provokes what Irit Rogoff defines as one of the “many socio-cultural narrations based on geographic awareness”<sup>35</sup>.

The occupation of space based on these narrations establishes a place ripe with subjectivity and power dynamics. The Giardini represents this material place where the exhibition’s geographic and spatial issues meet. When Curator Stefan Banz invited Gianni Motti to represent Switzerland in the 51<sup>st</sup> Venice Biennale in 2005, the artist, at first, proposed changing the names on the facades of the national pavilions. Since the project aroused little enthusiasm from the national delegations, Motti proposed a second project: rename the street where the Swiss Pavilion is located to “Viale Szeemann”, thus influencing the topography (and the toponymy) of the Giardini rather than its international cartography<sup>36</sup>. With this design, the map of the Giardini can be interpreted as the result of reciprocal relationships existing among things and events that make up its morphology. In the case of the Biennale, this map ensues from the ensemble of pavilions and from the temporary events of the different editions. Its design is also a result of the short life of its transitional spaces, such as the streets, avenues, and micro-gardens located near the buildings. From among these stand out the teak tree, planted by Rirkrit Tiravanija, in 1999, to symbolise the absence of a Thai pavilion, as well as the 2003 project of a diffused Palestinian pavilion, and the Albanian pavilion by Sislej Xhafa, located outside the Giardini grounds but still perceptible from within.

By considering the map as a compilation of relationships among objects in space, the pavilions’ proximity to one another in the Giardini reveal a clear design: the central position of the Italian Pavilion; the triangulation of France, Great Britain, and the United States; the close vicinity of Holland and Belgium, and of Denmark and Iceland; the gathering of Sweden, Norway, and Finland into the North Pavilion. The edges of the Giardini also clearly delimit an inside-outside dialectic: the pavilions located within the historical perimeter of the Venice Biennale are set apart from the “official” exhibitions of countries recognised by the United Nation and located in the city’s historical buildings, and from the “unofficial” participation on part of unrecognised countries<sup>37</sup>.

In the 1980s the reaction against the traditional exhibition’s system of inclusion-exclusion led to the creation of the Havana Biennial. The first edition of the Cuban biennial, in 1984, centred on Latin-American and Caribbean art, underrepresented at the Venice Biennale. In 1986, the second edition included the participation of artists from Asia and Africa. The purpose of creating an alternative map to the official layout of the “main biennials” was formalised in 1989, with the third edition of the exhibition, entitled *Tradition and Contemporaneity*<sup>38</sup>. When places that are geographically distant from one another move closer together, they do so on a cultural level and not according to geographic proximity; this opposes a vision of the Venice and São Paulo map as archipelago in structure<sup>39</sup>.

The Havana and Venice biennials are two concrete examples of Michel de Certeau’s idea of the map: “On the same level, the map gathers together

(...) disparate places: some derived from tradition, others produced by observation”<sup>40</sup>.

However, what at the Havana Biennial is considered selection criterion, and what limits curators from choosing artists from marginal places in the globalised art system, or from minority groups, assumes, in the case of the Venice Biennale, a spatial structure that de Certeau defined as *itinerary*: “Based on ordinary narrations, the question ultimately concerns the relationship between an itinerary (considered as a discursive series of operations) and a map (considered as a *mise à plat*, or sum, of observations)”<sup>41</sup>.

The nineteenth-century idea of national representation, of which the pavilions of the Giardini in Venice are an example, was gradually modified starting from the second half of the 1950s. Contemporary artists such as Ferguson, Nairne, and Greenberg renounced the idea of an univocal national identity because their work depended more and more on accessing the transnational system and multiple exhibition spaces<sup>42</sup>. This situation drew deep criticism from curators and artists and led to the birth of other biennials which, like Manifesta, programmatically refused the fragmentation of exhibition space dictated by the Venice Biennale.

The first edition of Manifesta, organised in Rotterdam in 1996, highlighted, in fact, another tendency in the history of biennials. As the large-scale international exhibition was being diffused in countries that were considered marginal, in Europe the biennial model was being adopted also in peripheral cities with respect to traditional cultural centres. The biennial model spread to Lyon, Barcelona, Oslo, Valencia, Tirana, Liverpool, and Uppsala. Simultaneously, Manifesta positioned itself as heir of the post-1989 geo-political agenda. The organisers of Manifesta remembered how the fall of the Berlin Wall produced a moment of “euphoria”, where it was possible to imagine replacing the model of national representation with a network of European cities which, in turn, would host the biennale. The itinerant exhibition, or - in Deleuzian terms - the “nomadic and “European but not Eurocentric” exhibition, drew its inspiration, as René Block recalls, from a project by artist Robert Filliou. The first phase of the project, *Approaching a Biennial of Peace*, opened in Hamburg in 1985<sup>43</sup> and consisted of an itinerant show on an European scale. The second edition, scheduled to take place in 1987, in Amsterdam, went unrealised due to Filliou’s death.

The other example of abandoning the national selection criteria took place at the São Paulo Biennale in 2006. Curator Lisette Lagnado proposed eliminating a system that, besides being obsolete, did not coincide with the spirit of architecture – designed by Oscar Niemeyer – that had hosted the Biennale since 1957. “In socio-political terms, the large migrations of the twentieth century have diluted the notion of a national identity without cultural miscegenation... The concept of ‘national representations’ is, in my view, something that belittles artists, and tends to highlight richer countries while smacking of benevolence to the poorer countries”<sup>44</sup>.

Lagnado’s project was inspired by the work of Hélio Oiticica, Brazilian conceptual artist, who in the 1970s researched the aesthetic and political ties



existing between social spaces and urban realities. The works of Oiticica, by nature, refused any kind of aesthetic or national categorisation. In the same way, the Biennale of Lisette Lagnado was conceived as “a spatial narration” from which “the flow among the works” ensued, or in other words, the structure of the exhibition. As a countertrend to the international vocation of contemporary biennials, the São Paulo edition focused particularly on the local and national scene from which seventy-five per cent of its visitors came. It also extended the duration of the exhibition by organising workshops and conferences in 2005, and intended, with reference to Oiticica’s work, to abandon the logic of “transnational novelty” in order “[to create] history from within our own position of relevance and not inventing it from the outside”<sup>45</sup>.

The model of map, and of representing the international scene, leaves room for repositioning multiple artistic realities in a sphere of art that abandons the centralising principle of “art capital” for a decentralised notion of network. The anti-nationalism of many biennials drew, in the 1990s, many supporters, not least Achille Bonito Oliva. For the 1993 edition of the Venice Biennale, Bonito Oliva proposed getting rid of the constraints of national representation by inviting the pavilion commissioners to select artists irrespective of their origins. That same year, the Whitney Biennale adopted the question of cultural identity as a theme – a powerful statement for a biennial, founded in New York in 1932 and specialised, as the museum that organised it, in American art. Emphasising this aspect, Paul Ardenne defined it as a “national biennial”, adding it to the list of World Fairs that enhance the local scene<sup>46</sup>. The same objective was pursued by “regional biennials”, such as that of Buenos Aires, Dakar, and the Caribbean, which reunited, under the umbrella-term of “biennial”, geographic realities and artists connected to one another by common cultural and historical experiences. Such biennials had the dual task of giving visibility, and creating opportunities for the strengthening of communication and internal exchange networks among the different regional entities involved, and among these and the international scene.

The biennials of Alexandria and Cairo also belong to this last category. These biennials were born at two very different historical moments in Egypt, the only country on the African continent to have a national pavilion in the Giardini of the Venice Biennale. The Biennial of Alexandria was established at a very particular moment in the city’s history, when the cultural centrality of Alexandria was declining and the importance of Cairo rising, the latter having become the eighteenth most populated city in the world<sup>47</sup>.

The Cairo Biennale, on the other hand, was founded in 1984, the same year as the Havana Biennial. From its conception, it addressed a region which partly included the Mediterranean of the Alexandria Biennale: that of the Arab countries. It was not until 1986, with a partial amendment to its original mission, that the Cairo Biennale opened its doors to artists from non-Arab countries.

As Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev observes, the strictly chronological criterion, based on the position of the biennials in the art system, must, nevertheless, be correct in relation with the moment that the biennials gain visibility on an international level<sup>48</sup>.

In “The Global White Cube” Elena Filipovic describes the contemporary art biennial as a “timeless, hermetic, and always the same as itself” event, regardless of its geographic position and its context<sup>49</sup>. The fascination for otherness and the “ethnophilia” shown by many biennials influenced the formulation of its history. Alongside producing images of the world and interpretations of the geography of the art system, the biennials also contributed to fostering false myths. One such example is the idea that the proliferation of biennials in cities and countries that were normally considered peripheral, led to the steady enlargement of the geography of the art system. Although today’s art system is undoubtedly more polycentric than in the past, the inclusion of non-western artists into the present-day art scene still remains a problem<sup>50</sup>. One example of this can be seen in the catalogue of the 2009 Istanbul Biennial where the decision was made to publish certain statistics on the “native countries” of participating artists<sup>51</sup>. The statistics showed that twenty-eight per cent of the artists were originally from western countries, and seventy-two per cent from non-western countries. These results changed, however, when statistics on the countries where the artists lived and worked were examined: forty-five per cent of the participants lived in western countries, whereas only fifty-five per cent lived in non-western countries.

The migration toward art system “centres”, as well as the inclusion of what was considered as “subordinate” art, are still open questions. They do not appear in the different classifications of criticism put forth at the beginning of the twentieth century and driven by the assumption that, irrespective of their specificities, biennials belong to a single phenomenon, tied to the globalisation of the art system. Along these lines, Paul Ardenne separates the different *mega shows* according to the principle - whether they be adopted, regional, national, or international - of identity-creating representations<sup>52</sup>. Whereas René Block suggests differentiating them by typology of organisation, according to which the Venice Biennale figures as an exhibition that strives to represent art on a “worldwide” scale, making itself a mouthpiece for the international cultural scene and involving national participants also on a cultural-diplomatic level<sup>53</sup>.

Another viewpoint is offered by the interpretations of Okwui Enwezor and Charlotte Bydler. Enwezor describes the different biennials based on a relationship between the city and country hosting the exhibition, the history of the exhibitions, and the global setting<sup>54</sup>. From this perspective, the biennale emerges as an “expression of power and progress”, as is the case with the first Venice biennials and Carnegie International, or with the “post-traumatic” biennials linked to a country’s desire to reposition itself in the international scene following a historical event that contributed to reshaping or upsetting its identity. Charlotte Bydler, on the other hand, proposes a classification based on the images biennials have wished to present, through their history and methods of communication, to the public. With this view in

mind, the biennials of Venice, Carnegie International, São Paulo, and Sydney fall into the category of “philanthropic-capitalistic enterprises”; whereas Documenta, the Venice Biennials from 1948 onwards, graphic art biennials, the Havana Biennial, and Dak’art are seen as expressions of the post-war international political climate, dominated by the logic of “blocks” and international alliances. Others still, such as Istanbul and Gwangju, tied to the cultural climate of the 1990s, take on the character of an event produced, according to the rules of contemporary culture, with great “flexibility”<sup>55</sup>.

‘Every epoch has its own biennial’ might be one conclusion to these analyses; analyses united by their common volition to inscribe the buoyancy that characterised the last decade of the twentieth century into a larger context. Each of the classifications, mentioned above, groups large-scale exhibitions together by their structure, the space they represent, or the image they produce. However, the latent motivation that enables a thorough understanding of the biennial-phenomenon is the constancy of their basic principle. Although very capable at producing different metaphors and concepts, contemporary biennials function, just as their nineteenth-century counterparts, according to the presence of international artists and the promotion of the local scene. They could be defined, as Peter Sloterdijk defined them, as “Crystal Palace exhibitions”: buildings with transparent facades reflecting and organising, within their interiors, images and representations of the outside world<sup>56</sup>. Seen as such, biennials appear as Frankensteins, grafted with contemporary problems in a nineteenth-century body. In the continuity between the desire to reproduce the world on a small-scale, emblematic of the nineteenth-century exhibition, and today’s biennale-as-a-platform for discussing global issues, we begin to understand why certain questions, which were at the centre of debate at the turn of the century, such as that of national representation, remain unresolved still today. The debate on curatorship has generated new themes and metaphors, but the basic conceptual order, the exhibition structure and its mission, and its relationship with the public have remained essentially unchanged.

For the future, it is the format of the exhibition that merits intervention<sup>57</sup>. Periodicity, seen initially as the necessary distance for writing a history of present-day art, is today unhinged by the propagation of cultural events, biennials, fairs, and festivals, which take place simultaneously in different regions of the world. Perhaps we must indeed begin by examining temporality, and the relationship of the local scene, in order to re-qualify the biennale in contemporary discussions.

## notes

1. de Certeau, Michel, *L’invention du quotidien, vol. I, L’art de faire*, Paris, Union générale d’éditions, 1974.
2. Mieke Bal defines metaphors as “words-as-concepts” or “words that merge their old meanings into new, concrete, visual ones, to form a concept that is rather like a theoretical object.” Bal, Mieke, *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities: A Rough Guide*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2002, p. 110.
3. Different names have been proposed for classifying this type of exhibition. Some, based on temporality, differentiate the exhibitions into biennials, triennials, and quadrennials. One exception to this principle is Documenta, in Kassel, which takes place every five years; while Skulptur Projekt, in Münster, Germany, is held every ten years. Recently, terms such as *perennial exhibitions* and *large-scale exhibitions* have arisen, with reference, in the case of the latter, to the size of the exhibition.
4. A recent example of this perspective can be seen in the title of the 2009 Venice Biennale, “Fare mondi / Making worlds”, chosen by Director Daniel Birnbaum. As an introductory note to the exhibition, Birnbaum observed, “The geography of the world of art has rapidly expanded and new centres have emerged among China, India, and the Middle East. My aim is to create an exhibition that, even though articulated in individual areas of intensity, will be one exhibition.”
5. Cf. Griffin, Tim, “Global Tendencies: Globalism and the Large-Scale Exhibition”, *Artforum*, vol. XLII, No. 3, November 2003, pp. 152-163, 206, 212.
6. Lévi-Strauss, Claude, *Tristes Tropiques*, Paris, Librairie Plon, 1955.
7. Geppert, Alexander, “Città brevi: storia, storiografia e teoria delle pratiche espositive europee, 1851-2000», *Memoria e ricerca. Rivista di storia contemporanea*, No. 17, September-December 2004, p. 8. This aptitude, at work in the Venice Biennale and in other cultural events imbued with a system of national representation, becomes particularly evident in the second half of the 1970s (see Wallis Brian, “Selling Nations: International Exhibitions and Cultural Policies”, *Art in America*, No. 79, September 1991, pp. 84-91).
8. Cf. Griffin, *op. cit.*
9. For questions concerning the representation of alterity in contemporary art, see Karp, Ivan and Lavine, Steven D. eds. *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Public Display*, Washington, D.C., Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991 and Clifford, James, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art*, Cambridge - Ma., Harvard University Press, 1988. With regards to contemporary art exhibitions, a turning point took place with the exhibition *Magiciens de la Terre* (1989), curated by Jean-Hubert Martin, in which were included, for the first time, the same number of western and non-western artists. In 1993 the Venice Biennale, directed by Achille Bonito Oliva, and the Whitney Biennial, suspended the traditional criteria of national representation for one entire edition.
10. Ferguson, Russel et al., ed. *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*, New York, The New Museum and New York - Cambridge, Ma., MIT Press, 1990, p. 9.
11. West, Shearer, “National desires and regional realities in the Venice Biennale, 1895-1914”, *Art History*, No.3, September 1995, p. 403.

12. Alloway Lawrence, *The Venice Biennale 1895-1968: From Salon to Goldfish Bowl*, New York, New York Graphic Society, p. 38.
13. Robert, Marthe, *Roman des origines et origines du roman*, Paris, Éditions Bernard Grasset, 1972.
14. The new figure of exhibition “exhibition maker” found its match, since the early 1970s, in the first curatorial and museum studies programmes (“Art History and Museum Studies”, Whitney Museum, New York, 1972; École du Magasin de Grenoble, 1987; “Sous-sol, pratiques curatoriales”, Ecole nationale d’arts visuels, Geneva, 1987).
- Since the onset of Documenta V (1972), directed by Szeemann, the visibility of the profession of curator, and the multiplication of contemporary art biennials, grew hand in hand, reaching a climax in the 1990s. Comparing different experimental exhibition models throughout history often results in an anachronistic vision of the experience of contemporary exhibitions in biennials. Due to their ephemeral nature and connection with current events, biennials lend themselves to becoming environments in which the artist and the curator question the function of the contemporary art exhibition and of the large periodical exhibition. Not until the 1990s was the Biennale able to promote itself as a workshop for experimental curating and to recover, at least in part, the lag in the analyse of such.
15. See Mitchell, Timothy, “Orientalism and the Exhibitionary Order”, Mirzoeff, Nicholas ed. *The Visual Culture Reader*, London-New York, Routledge, 1998, p. 293 and Said, Edward, *Orientalism*, New York, Pantheon Books 1978.
16. Michaud, Yves, *L’Artiste et le commissaires. Quatre essais non pas sur l’art*

- contemporain mais sur ceux qui s’en occupent*, Nîmes, Jacqueline Chambon, 1989, p. 130.
17. Conversations between the author and Daniel Knorr, October 2006.
18. An example of this is Claire Doherty’s analysis, which assigns to the biennials the role of a “natural house for situated artistic practices”. In doing so, she pinpoints their character of “full-blown circuses in the city”, in the proximity of the festival structure, and the reasons for searching for time-based art forms, such as performances, projections, workshops: signs of the privileged relationship existing between large-scale exhibitions and the debate on exhibition space. Doherty, Claire, “Location, Location”, *Art Monthly*, November 2004, No. 281, p. 12.
19. Bachtin, Michail, “Le forme del tempo e del cronotopo nel romanzo. Saggi di poetica storica” (1925), *Ibid. Estetica e romanzo*, Turin, Einaudi, 1979, pp. 231-232.
20. Nora, Pierre, *Les Lieux de mémoire*, Paris, Gallimard, 1984.
21. For the history of *Documenta*, see Glasmeier, Michael ed. *50 Jahre/Years Documenta 1955-2005: Archive in Motion*, Kassel - Steidl, Göttingen, Kunsthalle Fridericianum, 2005 and Cestelli Guidi, Anna, *La “documenta” di Kassel. Percorsi dell’arte contemporanea*, Genova, Costa & Nolan, 1997
22. Glasmeier, *op. cit.*, p. 172.
23. Grasskamp, Walter, “Documenta – Kunst des XX. Jahrhunderts. Internationale Ausstellung im Museum Fridericianum in Kassel”, Klüser B., Hegewisch K., eds. *Die Kunst der Ausstellung. Eine Dokumentation dreißig exemplarischer Kunstaussstellungen dieses Jahrhunderts*, Frankfurt am Main, Insel, 1991, pp. 116–25.

24. [www.universes-in-universe.de]: For the relationship among history, trauma, and biennials see Enwezor Okwui, “Mega-Exhibitions and the Antinomies of a Transnational Global Form”, *Biennials*, monographic edition of *MJ – Manifesta Journal: Journal of Contemporary Curatorship*, No. 2, winter-spring 2003–4.
25. Yongwoo Lee, “Remapping the Borders”, *Beyond the Borders*, Kwangju Biennale, Exh. cat., pp. 101-19.
26. The inclusion of international artists and curators is not, however, an antidote to the configuration of prevalently national exhibitions in connection with the Gwangju biennale, intent on analysing the particulars of twentieth-century Korean art; among which let us recall: *Originality in Korean Art, Korean Contemporary Art, Eastern Spirit and Ink Painting*.
27. Fichtner, Heidi, “Global Art – Report”, *Nu: The Nordic Art Review*, No. 3, 1998, p. 10.
28. McEvelley, Thomas, “Arrivederci Venice: The ‘Third World’ Biennials”, *Artforum*, Vol. XXXII, No. 3, November 1993, pp. 114-116. South Africa exhibited in the so-called *Sale straniere* (Foreign Halls) of the Venice Biennale’s central Pavilion from 1950 to 1968, with the exception of 1960. The worsening of its racial laws had resulted in the ostracism of the country, made official by the UN resolution in the 1970s. An exhibition held in the African pavilion in 1990 did not result in the readmission of South Africa to the Venice Biennale. Only in 1993 was the invitation to participate renewed by Director Achille Bonito Oliva. On this occasion works by Sandra Kriel and Jackson Hlungwani were chosen to represent South Africa, as well as the collective exhibition *Incroci del Sud: Affinities – Contemporary South African Art*, which involved the work of twenty-

- four South African artists exhibited at the Fondazione Levi. A lateral event of the Biennale directed by Bonito Oliva was *Fusion: West African Artists at the Venice Biennale*, at the Museum for African Art in New York, curated by Thomas McEvelly and Susan Vogel.
29. Bois, Yve-Alain, “Exposition: esthétique de la distraction”, *Le Cahiers du Musée national d’art moderne*, No. 29, September 1989, pp. 57-79.
30. Nairne, Sandy, “Exhibitions of Contemporary Art”, Barker, Emma, ed. *Contemporary Cultures of Display*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1999, pp. 105-26.
31. Anderson, Benedict, *Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London, Verso, 1983. In the first editions of the Venice Biennale, more rooms were added to the “regional” section, which in general were meant for international artistic research and in which selected foreign works were exhibited based on the criterion of national representation. Following 1907, and throughout the entire twentieth century, the areas of the Italian Pavilion dedicated to international art gradually made way for the national pavilions. Although the pavilion presented itself as an exhibition unit primarily in the Venice Biennale and in the universal and national exhibitions of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, on a symbolic level, intended as an exhibition unit dedicated to national representation, the model was also taken up by the Biennale in Alexandria Egypt and the São Paulo Biennale in Brazil. This influenced the design and organisation of these two exhibitions which had been created in the 1950s as direct emanations of the Venetian model.
32. Krasny, Elke, “The Butterfly, the Garden, the Island, and the Mountains”,

Hans Schabus: *The Last Land*, Exh. cat. 51<sup>a</sup> Biennale di Venezia. 2005, pp. 72-80.

33. At the beginning of the twentieth century the Giardini, site of the Biennale, appeared as a miniature version of the western world. This was all the more evident in the relationship of spatial proximity existing among the permanent architecture of the pavilions, which reflected the European geopolitical balance existing prior to the First World War. Already by the 1950s, the physiognomy of the Giardini resembled that of its present-day form, with partial modifications occurring with the construction of the Brazil Pavilion in 1964, and the Korean Pavilion in 1995. See Martini Vittoria, "A Brief History of I Giardini", in *Muntadas On Translation I Giardini*, Actar, Barcelona 2005.

34. "Nations, in these views, are the product of 'cultural work' on the part of elites; without that cultural work, without such elite narratives, the nation is unimaginable and incommunicable". Smith, Anthony, *The Nation in History: Historiographical Debates about Ethnicity and Nationalism*, Hanover, Brandeis University Press - Historical Society of Israel, 2000, p. 53. For further discussion on the theory of nationalism and national identity, see Smith, Anthony, *Nationalism and Modernism: A Critical Survey of Recent Theories of Nations and Nationalism*, London-New York, Routledge, 1998 and Hobsawm, E. J., Ranger T. eds. *The Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1983.

35. Rogoff, Irit, *Terra Infirma: Geography's Visual Culture*, London-New York, Routledge, 2001, p. 22.

36. "The idea was to create confusion. I contacted a dozen or more pavilions and seven out of eight immediately refused the idea. Above all, it was the curators

who didn't like the idea. After that I thought about a book, but didn't write one in the end. Some of the suggested swaps were: USA-Venezuela, Italy-Albania, Japan-China, Great Britain-Russia, Israel-Brazil, Germany-France, Switzerland-Romania, Spain-Serbia and Montenegro, Egypt-Austria". Gianni Motti, correspondence with the artist via e-mail, December 2006.

37. For further discussion on the expansion of the Venice Biennale into the urban space, see Martini, Federica, "Scattering, Spattering, Puddling and Pulverising: Urban Spaces, Theme Shows and Contemporary Art Biennials", Ricci, Clarissa, et al eds. *Starting from Venice: Studies on the Biennale*, Milan, 2010.

38. "The Havana Biennial was created in response to the need for a space in which artists from Third World countries could dialogue. Although they shared many common problems, artists (of non-western countries) did not know each other well enough, nor were they known very well in the main centres of contemporary art...For this reason, the Havana Biennial must help make contemporary art as understandable as possible in Third World countries. It should encourage analysis of the context from which contemporary art has emerged." Llanes, Lillian, "The Havana Biennale", Heinrich, Barbara, ed. *Das Lied von der Erde: Biennalen im Dialog/Song of the Earth: Biennials in Dialogue*, Exh. cat., Museum Fridericianum, Kassel. 2000, p. 12.

39. The disjointedness and horizontality of an archipelago are seen by Édouard Glissant as the most suitable spatial form for representing a world undergoing "creolisation". "World cultures, which are today simultaneously in contact with one another and completely aware of the fact, change through the exchange of

irreparable blows and unmerciful wars, but also through the strides of awareness and hope that allow them to say – without being utopic or, rather, accepting to be so – that humanity today abandons, though with difficulty, the deep-rooted conviction that the identity of a living being is valuable and recognisable only on the grounds that the identity of all other beings is excluded". Glissant, Édouard, *Introduction à une poétique du divers*, Paris, Gallimard, 1996, p. 14. Also see, Obrist, Hans-Ulrich, "Interview with Édouard Glissant", *R*, No. 1, 2002, pp. 34-39.

40. de Certeau, *op. cit.*, p. 175.

41. *Ibid.*

42. Ferguson, B. W., Greenberg, R., Nairne, S., "Mapping International Exhibitions", *Curating: The Contemporary Art Museum and Beyond*, monographic number of *Art & Design*, No. 52, 1997, p. 30.

43. Filipovic E., Vanderlinden B., eds. *The Manifesta Decade: Debates on Contemporary Art Exhibitions and Biennials in Post-Wall Europe*, Cambridge - Ma., The MIT Press, 2006, p. 196.

44. Trainor, James, "San Paulo Biennale 2006", *Frieze*, No. 96, January 2006, p. 24.

45. *Ibid.* p. 25.

46. Ardenne, Paul, "L'Art mis aux normes par ses biennales, même?", *Art Press*, No. 291, June 2001, pp. 40-43.

47. Together with that of São Paulo, the Alexandria Biennale is remembered for its fidelity to the Venetian model in its choice to maintain the criterion of national representation. Its internationalism adopted, however, a specific tone, identifiable in its nostalgic approach to the history of the city and Mediterranean culture – the latter being the region of reference for the Alexandria Biennale. Bassam El-

Baroni pointed out one of the limits of the exhibition: the attention placed on the celebration of Alexandria's past, an attention that impeded the "rethinking" of the local setting and its possible repositioning. Bassam El-Baroni, "Remodelling required: Official Biennales in Egypt and International Biennale Culture", speech at the symposium *La critique d'art et ses pratiques curatoriales dans des contextes minoritaires*, 26-28 January 2005, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

48. Conversation with the writer, 7 September 2006.

49. Filipovic, Elena, "The Global White Cube", Filipovic E., Vanderlinden B., eds. *The Manifesta Decade...*, *op.cit.*, p. 67.

50. Cf. Moulin, Raymonde, *Le Marché de l'art. Mondialisation et nouvelles technologies*, Paris, Flammarion, 2003.

51. *What Keeps Mankind Alive? – The Texts*, ed. WHW, Exh. cat., Biennale of Istanbul. 2009, p. 18

52. Ardenne, Paul, *op. cit.*

53. In contrast to this, the model the Biennale of Sydney differs from that of Venice's in its thematic connotation being more pronounced and artist participation being tied to external financing. Different, further still, is the case of Gwangju, free from the principle of national representation, and the case of Manifesta, characterised by the itinerancy of its exhibition (and administrative) site. See Heinrich, Barbara, ed., *op. cit.* and Bydler, Charlotte, *The Global Artworld, Inc.: On the Globalization of Contemporary Art*, Uppsala, Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis, 2004.

54. Enwezor, Okwui, *op. cit.*, pp. 20-21.

55. Bydler, Charlotte, *op. cit.*

56. Sloterdijk Peter, *Im Weltinnenraum des Kapitals. Für eine philosophische Theorie der Globalisierung*, Frankfurt am

Main, Suhrkamp, 2005 The reference is to the first World's Fair, inaugurated in London in 1851, for which the Crystal Palace - a visionary exhibition pavilion designed by Joseph Paxton - was built. Erected as symbols of the first World Fair, the transparent surfaces of the Crystal Palace inspired organisers of other world fairs, and the Crystal Palace model was taken up in Chicago and Munich.

57. The juxtaposition between the Crystal Palace, symbol of the Great Exhibitions, and the biennials, is first evoked by Lawrence Alloway in *op. cit.*

Nourished by Walter Benjamin's reflections on Parisian "passages" (see Buck-Morss Susan, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project*, Cambridge-Ma. - London, MIT Press, 1989), and by Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer's notes on the World Fairs (*Dialektik der Aufklärung. Philosophische Fragmente*, Querido, Amsterdam 1947), the comparison was consolidated in the 1990s thanks to philosophical debate on museum studies and the historical interest in World Fairs and in the symbolic apparatuses constructed by nationalisms. In the recently published *The Biennial Reader*, the first anthology on biennials of contemporary art, the section "Histories, Precedents, and Origins" includes two essays on the Crystal Palace of London: the first by Preziosi, Donald, "The Crystalline Veil and the Phallomorphic Imaginary" (2001) and the second by Pastor Rocas, Marian, "Crystal Palace Exhibitions" (2005), in Filipovic E., Van Hal M., Ovstebo S., eds. *The Biennial Reader: An Anthology on Large-scale Perennial Exhibitions of Contemporary Art*, Ostfildern, Hatje Cantz, 2010.

## A Conversation with Antoni Muntadas

*In 2005, you were invited to represent Spain, your country of origin, at the Venice Biennale. You produced a new artwork of the series On Translation, I Giardini. Did the fact that you were asked to represent your country of origin influence your work to some degree? If you had been invited, say, by the U.S., where you have been living for many years, would your work in Venice have been any different?*

When I receive this type of invitation, my answer is what shapes the project. Venice clearly provided a specific context for its singularity in conveying a concern that has also interested me in recent years, the idea of *On Translation*.

Therefore, "On Translation" became the identity of the pavilion, while the context of the Giardini and the Biennale lent a specific quality to the project. In Venice, I didn't really consider the fact I had to work in the Spanish pavilion, but more importantly the chance I had to extend a concern of mine, which is translation, to an extra national and transcultural context. Had I been invited by the American, Brazilian, or Catalan pavilions, my point of view would have still been the same. Mine is more of an idea for a project: it is more important to discuss the idea than to refer it to a specific country. I believe that in certain historical moments, including the present, the pressing nature of a theme may not only permeate the cultural use, but also the social and political use that an artist makes of a pavilion. Each specific pavilion may then work on a particular issue pertaining to that country, as for example the Palestine Pavilion (*editor's note* Stateless Nations, Biennale 2003). I feel that a work of art is not the result of a person who operates or lives in a place, but it is defined by the context in which that work is created; its place of production. The work is linked to the place; the way it takes shape is related to the context.

I believe that participation is transnational, and the idea of translation of my project for the 2005 Biennale was not linked specifically to Spain, but conceptually to the context. When we hung the banner on the facade of the pavilion (“Beware: Perception Requires Commitment”), I did not intend to cover the inscription “Spain”, in order to erase all traces of specific nationality. Instead I wanted to give a leitmotif to the pavilion, which, in so doing, became the “pavilion of translation”.

*With On Translation: I Giardini, you investigated the area in which the Venice Biennale was founded, as a territory and a symbolic place where history has been made real. You decided to work on the structure of the Biennale itself. Do you think that such a structure, made up of a central show and the single exhibitions of the participating countries, can be considered productive nowadays? Do you think this can be a place where artists are able to bring into question identity issues, and develop a critical discourse on the system of national representation?*

It is clear to me that the Venice Biennale is unique both in relation to its history and to its singular spatial layout. It is a completely different space from, say, the São Paulo Biennial where, between one biennial and the next, Niemeyer’s building is used for other events. The Venice Biennale is located in an area, “the Giardini”, which is a public space taken away from the city, in order to become exclusively the seat of the exhibition. In this sense, *On Translation: I Giardini* arose from the idea of the public space of the Biennale becoming a sort of theme park, a production area. In my project, I wanted to highlight this feature of the Biennale.

I believe that today, in 2011, the issue of identity is very confused. Present-day artists are nomads, because, as I said before, a work of art comes about in the place where it is produced, that is in any given territory. Therefore, the Venice Biennale should be seen as a place for work and discussion, rather than focusing on its nationalistic and patriotic aspects.

The concept of country and patriotic belonging has lost its importance. In 1991, I produced a piece called “*Home, where is home?*” as a comment to the emerging nomadic issues. I worked on the concept of *home* and *house*: the first being what you feel is the essence of a “house”; the second, i.e., *house*, the physicality of a house in a specific setting. *House* is where you are and where you are working, and it can be in different places.

The Venice Biennale is located in a unique urban setting; it is a unique situation that has been preserved over time. The specificity of Venice lies in this very singular trait, which leads artists to work almost site-specifically.

## The Evolution of an Exhibition Model

### Venice Biennale as an Entity in Time

Vittoria Martini

In 1968 the English art critic Lawrence Alloway concluded his journey through the history of the Venice Biennale, with these words:

The Venice Biennale (...) has reduced our ignorance about twentieth-century art. Thus, in future, anthologies or compilations based on the past model will not be sufficient to hold neither specialists, nor the wider public. Greater control of exhibitions, so that relevant themes can be cogently displayed, may be necessary, though obviously this will present difficulties, given the Biennale’s cellular structure... The problem for the Biennale now is to work out a control system to replace *laissez-faire*, without losing the cooperation of the thirty-seven nations that participated in 1966<sup>1</sup>.

*The Venice Biennale 1895-1968: from Salon to Goldfish Bowl* was one of the first books to present history of art from the viewpoint of its distribution and for years, it was the only existing critical account of the most celebrated and long-lived of the biennials. By analyzing the Venice Biennale as a system, Alloway presented a history of the institution in connection with art in society, looking at works of art not as artistic objects in themselves but as part of a system of communication. Conceived as “an entity in time”, the Biennale was able to adapt itself to political and social changes without ever losing “the spirit of its institutional identity”<sup>2</sup>.

The book covered the period up to the beginning of the dispute, ending with the words from the quotation above: an urging that was the inevitable destiny of the major perennial Venetian exhibition, which would have otherwise died as a cultural fact. The English critic understood how urgent it was for the Biennale to devise a “control system” of its exhibitions that would solve the complex “cellular” structure. Such a structure had to exist over the years, and had established itself on the basis of the incommunicability between the main exhibition and the autarchy of the participating nations. Indeed, the

Biennale had no say regarding the art-related choices of those countries that participated in their national pavilions. Towards the end of the sixties, the situation had resulted in a large international exhibition which was heterogeneous, incoherent and no longer competitive in terms of its critical approach. At the same time, the *laissez-faire* approach, the consequence of its old normative structure that prevented any type of managerial planning, resulted in the loss of the Biennale's cultural role and specificity. At the end of the sixties, the Venice Biennale as a public institution did not seem to perform its role of producing culture, but it had more of a merely commercial function.

This story is inserted, chronologically, at the very point where Alloway's ends, that is when the Biennale's institutional and functional crisis had reached its peak, thus causing it to be the objective of the 1968 protests. The Venice Biennale can be seen here as an archetype, as a "source" to examine and as the centre of that art communication system represented by biennials. As an archetype, the Venice Biennale is an "area of condensation, place of memory, map, network, space of modernization"<sup>3</sup>, containing within itself, at the same time, all the features which distinguish contemporary biennials.

The seat of the exhibition, Palazzo delle Esposizioni, was originally conceived as a place for welcoming Italian and foreign artists invited by the International Committee. Italy had recently been united and an Italian cultural and linguistic identity did not yet exist. The International Art Exhibition, which was conceived as an "educator and initiator of a new, modern culture for 'giovane Italia'", immediately became ground for dispute<sup>4</sup>. This was because the international aspect of the exhibition, sanctioned by the statute of 1894, had already been called into question in 1901, when the General Secretary of the Biennale, Antonio Fradeletto, established the "sale regionali" (Regional Halls) to be used for hosting the Italian artists divided by schools. The progressive Italianization of the exhibition resulted in a growing need for exhibition space for hosting foreign artists<sup>5</sup>.

In 1907, with the excuse "of guaranteeing the most favorable international solidarity", Antonio Fradeletto conceived the national pavilions as allowing Italian artists to show divided according to their region, and foreign artists to have an independent exhibition space<sup>6</sup>. The proposal was so successful that by 1914, seven large international powers had already erected pavilions, bringing "art from all over the world" to Venice<sup>7</sup>. By statute, the national pavilions were (and still are) completely independent from the administration of the Biennale, operating as embassies to which the principle of extraterritoriality applies<sup>8</sup>. Consequently, over time, a "cellular" structure, that is a non-uniform, but rather, dispersed exhibition came into being; one that was not international, but made up of the "autonomous participation of single countries", amongst which no cultural interdependency existed<sup>9</sup>. This situation did not create problems until the end of World War II, when Europe found itself transformed both geographically and politically and the very concept of state-nation fell into crisis.

At the end of World War II, after more than fifty years since its foundation, the Biennale had to find a cultural role in order to reintegrate itself into the international art scene. According to the Secretary General Rodolfo Pallucchini, the "new climate of liberty" could only be reached by turning back to the origins of the exhibition. By this he meant following, almost literally, the declaration found on the catalogue of the first edition of the International Art Exhibition: "attracting more public by the notoriety of the illustrious foreign artists who would be competing". The new approach would offer those who were unable to travel so far, and in particular young Italian artists, the chance to "get to know and compare" the different international art movements<sup>10</sup>. Through a series of exhibitions which presented the most recent movements in international art without ever disengaging from historical analysis, the exhibition formula for the first post war editions of the Biennale was met with great success<sup>11</sup>. But in the introduction to the 1956 catalogue, Rodolfo Pallucchini declared that the cycle of historical exhibitions had ended and that "it would be idealistic to think that a complete picture of the arts can be given every two years to the Biennale"<sup>12</sup>. According to the General Secretary, the historical-informative activity of the Biennale was brought to completion and it was now time for another phase, that of "arte nuova" (New Art) shows<sup>13</sup>. Meanwhile, Pallucchini's term had come to an end and the cycle of historical exhibitions was exhausted, thus intensifying the debate concerning the function of the Biennale on the international exhibition scenario.

The discussion regarding the renewal of the Venice Biennale structures, initiated just after the end of the Second World War, proceeded in different directions Who did the Biennale address? What kind of public? What goal should the two exhibitions have: an informative, educative or critical one? How was the Biennale placed on the international contemporary art scene? These were the questions asked at the 1957 *Conference of studies on the Biennale*, which brought together, for the first time, different Italian specialists from the art and museum-related fields to consider the problems of the Venetian institution. On this occasion it was decided that the renewal of the Biennale's cultural function and its exhibition system had to proceed hand in hand with the renewal of its regulatory system. This is how the question of the Biennale's cultural function came to be inserted into the larger context of contemporary art exhibitions in Italy<sup>14</sup>. Indeed, due to its periodicity and the lack of other specific institutions, the Biennale had acquired a role similar to that of a museum: its exhibitions were created and managed with a museum-like approach<sup>15</sup>. As a consequence, the debate of the conference addressed the issue concerning the exhibition spaces, in particular that of the seat of the exhibition at the Giardini. The main pavilion had continually been rearranged without a coherent plan, and over the decades it had become a labyrinth which was both unsuitable and rigid<sup>16</sup>. The Biennale had to overcome and free itself from "museum aesthetics", in order to renew and readjust its needs to the character of contemporary art and culture. Hence, it was evident that the functional renewal of the Biennale should be subordinate to the renewal of its exhibition space. What became evident on that occasion was how

the exhibition spaces of the Biennale should have been open, “timed”, so as to create a structural conformity between the location and the role of the exhibition as a “culturally alive instrument”<sup>17</sup>.

By the early sixties, the Venice Biennale was no longer one of a kind. Based on the Venetian model, while at the same time updating it, the São Paulo Biennial (1951) was established, followed by documenta in Kassel (1955), and the Paris Biennale (1959) brought to light the obvious backwardness of the Biennale in terms of its exhibition system. To renew itself the Biennale had to appear younger than its new competitors did, although its history seemed to have become more of a burden than an asset. By the end of the fifties, there were numerous obstacles to the project of renewal. There was mainly the age-old question of Italian participation denounced on more than one occasion by Pallucchini who defined it as “collection of samples” and not “an exhibition open to dialogue and exchange”<sup>18</sup>.

The main pavilion had become, especially after being managed by the fascist government, like a large *salon* for Italian artists who were members of the unions, while the national pavilions, for reasons of space, could present few artists. For this reason, the International Art Exhibition as a whole was obviously imbalanced. In 1969 the “Studio International” emphasized the unfeasibility of the Biennale system, which presented art divided by nation, when it was already taken for granted that contemporary art was supranational<sup>19</sup>. “Studio International” claimed that the Biennale put all its faith in its geographical position and in the overabundance of works, without taking into consideration where the works originated. In such a situation, any special exhibition organized by a committee appointed by the Biennale would be unable to harmonize the exhibition as a whole, resulting in a disjointed exhibition with no critical direction. The “excessive broadness” of the Italian section debased any innovative direction the entire exhibition might have had.

As a result of being hostage to the Italian artists who had colonized the main pavilion, it was left powerless when faced by the countries it hosted. Despite this, from the early fifties, and throughout the sixties, all forms of international art were presented at the Biennale, from Informal to Pop Art. Venice was the stage for the decline of Paris and the emergence of New York as capital of contemporary art, for the U.S. market and for American art. Its role was mainly celebrative. At the end of the 1950s, Venice was the most exclusive and delightful place for doing business and meeting the art world, a place above all others for international social life. In Lawrence Alloway’s own words, “the Biennale as a party”<sup>20</sup>.

But at the end of the 1960s, the *laissez-faire* approach could no longer work. Entrenched in a ghetto for experts and the *élite*, the Biennale had not been able to update its exhibition model. Consequently, it had lost its hold on reality in a rapidly changing world.

The need for a new statute for the Biennale, to replace the existing 1938 one, had been discussed since 1945. In succession, all governments between 1945 and 1968 recognized that Italian cultural authorities, among which the Biennale was the most obvious example, should be completely re-formed.

However, over five legislations and twenty-three years, the Italian ruling class was not able to formulate a new law.

The debate, which had never been placated, arose with new vitality with the events of 1968 involving all cultural institutions at international level.

As a consequence, in 1968, caught in the tidal wave of “global dispute”, the Biennial was overwhelmed by student protest because it encapsulated all the contradictions that more than twenty years of debate and controversy had not been able to solve. The Biennale was attacked especially because of its failure to take responsibility as a public institution. Instead of promoting independent culture, open to criticism and knowledge, it seemed to be irremediably linked to politics and spoilt by seemingly casual organisational criteria. This system presented exhibitions that were more interested in the market than in research and critical and scientific in-depth analysis. Secondly, the Biennale was being disputed both for its structural and cultural backwardness, and for its being frozen into an exhibition model that no longer had the cultural role of informing and bringing up to date. Its avulsion to any type of updated cultural production, and its persistent isolation from the life of the city in which it was located, was also under attack. Students had noticed that the Biennale had died as a cultural event and they voiced their opinion provoking violent clashes with the police<sup>21</sup>. News of the police repression at the Biennale caused a stir all over the world, thus discrediting both Venice, in relation to its tourist industry, and the Biennale in terms of culture. It was this very dispute, however, that drove politics to quicken the pace and ultimately reach tangible results for the formulation of the new statute.

On the occasion of its 20th anniversary of the first post-war Biennale edition, having recognized the institutional crisis and the need for a deep renovation strategy, the Biennale conceived its 1968 edition as conclusive to a cycle<sup>22</sup>. The wish to structure the edition in an innovative way compared to the past was mainly evident in the drastic reduction of the number of artists invited to participate in the Italian section. There were twenty-three, while only four years previously there had been seventy-two. The Biennale’s “innovatory intentions” of 1968 were achieved in its main exhibition entitled *Lines of Contemporary Research: from Informal Art to the New Structures*. It was the first time that the Biennale had organized an exhibition that placed all the current tendencies in international art side by side. Even Lawrence Alloway pointed out how the “thematic exhibition” appeared to be an opening, albeit moderate, towards another exhibitory form<sup>23</sup>. The title itself established that the aim of the exhibition was not to gain results, but rather to formulate an intention and establish a working method that could renew the exhibition-review model, one which, in 1968, was still the formula used by the Biennale. However, although innovative and full of good intentions, the title of the main exhibition was not in itself sufficient to present a coherent show in line with the current state of the arts, which would provide the key to interpreting the entire International Art Exhibition.

In August 1968, Germano Celant defined the Biennale as a “Nineteenth-century ferry that sails indifferently on the waters of the May Revolution”<sup>24</sup>.



It was necessary to adjust the Venetian institution to the needs for “independence, representativeness, and participation”, qualities that were increasingly perceived and present in the areas related to its cultural activity<sup>25</sup>. At the same time, there was a pressing need to consider its institutional revival, “to thoroughly re-think the conventional ‘exhibitional’ structure itself”.

In September 1968, when the 34th International Art Exhibition was still open and Venice’s film festival on the Lido was under dispute, an important round table was held in Venice to deal with the crisis of the Biennale. In the Venetian headquarters of the magazine “Metro”, the editor Bruno Alfieri organized *Proposals for the Biennale. A round table conference, a project*. He invited Giulio Carlo Argan, Gillo Dorfles, Ettore Colla and Germano Celant to discuss the project for reorganisation that he had presented in order to “stimulate reactions and ideas”<sup>26</sup>. In this occasion, Gillo Dorfles denounced “the antiquated exhibition system” and suggested to make “a clean break with the arrangement by national pavilions”<sup>27</sup>. He maintained that by abolishing the pavilions, the conceptual unity of the exhibition would have been assured, and the exhibition would finally be able to offer a complete outline of the international art situation. Dorfles envisaged a “permanent unitary structure made up of extremely open and mobile elements” Germano Celant also wanted to abolish the pavilions because they were the main reason behind the dispersive nature of the exhibition. Indeed, they conditioned the space in a pre-arranged way suppressing its “fluidity”, an essential prerequisite to accommodate any contemporary art practice. According to Celant, the Biennale was dead because of both “creative and spatial asphyxiation”<sup>28</sup>. In this context, the Biennale still continued to present itself more like a universal show than an international exhibition, as, for example, documenta.

In December 1969, the Biennale convened a meeting with the commissioners of the nations who owned the pavilions, in order to jointly discuss the programme for the 1970 edition<sup>29</sup>. To involve the foreign commissioners in the discussion was to give out an important signal to overcome the institution’s structural limits. The proposal was “to experiment a totally new Biennale”, and in view to tangibly convey the idea of a reorganised and “open” Biennale, the owners of the pavilions were called to take active part in the exchange of views<sup>30</sup>. During that meeting, for the first time ever, it was suggested to give a theme to the central exhibition to which national participations could also adhere.

A general theme would allow the Biennale Art Exhibition to overcome its dispersive structure and lend it the coherence to which it aspired. The general theme would have to be “wide and flexible” enough to ensure that the maximum number of pavilions adhere to it. Sweden was unwilling to accept, since it felt that no radical break had been made with the past. It believed that the only way to overcome the disparate nature of the exhibition was to put forward a precise theme, which all pavilions would have to follow<sup>31</sup>. According to Sweden, this was how the Biennale could link the “specific theme” of the special exhibition to the “general” one applied to the entire exhibition. Once again, however, the Biennale was faced with the insurmountable obstacle

represented by the statutory autarchy of the national pavilions, since it could only suggest they adhere to the theme rather than being able to impose it. Work by the Biennale towards a radical transformation of the exhibition structure of the international show was resumed for its 1972 edition. The general theme presented was *Work or Behaviour*, a theme that was “wide and flexible” enough. This would be the “framework of interest and research” and the focus of the Italian section. The foreign nations were invited to “refer to” or “establish a link with” the “proposed theme”<sup>32</sup>. The “operational theme” of the Italian section would provide the “ethical and cultural values”, that is the direction for the whole exhibition which, as a result, would reach “a further conceptual harmony in terms of its layout”. Hence, the theme *Work or Behaviour* had become a clever compromise, inspired by a sort of “aesthetics ecumenism”, one that would leave nobody unsatisfied.

The 1972 Biennale fell on the same year as documenta, the periodical exhibition started in 1955 and held in Kassel every four years. In Kassel, that year, the exhibition was curated by only one commissioner, Harald Szeemann. The curator had decided to abandon the traditional criteria of selecting work based on quality and significance, in favour of one that depended on the general theme he had presented<sup>33</sup>.

While the theme in documenta had become the real subject of research, in Venice it only seemed to have given a coherent feel to the exhibition, while any type of research was absent. Therefore, the same year, two great periodical international exhibitions showed how differently a system of structural analysis could work in an aesthetical field focused on the development of art practices. The theme *Work or Behaviour* was very significant at a time when artistic practice was gradually moving towards a “dematerialization”<sup>34</sup>. Works of art had become “concepts, processes, situations, information”, a fact which was also contained in the subheading of the exhibition *When Attitudes Become Form*, organized by Szeemann himself in 1969, and based on the duality between behaviour and work of art. Hence, the experimentation of new exhibition practices was a consequence of the birth, in the same years, of new art practices.

The 1972 Biennale proved to be still far removed from international current issues because it presented the problem in an unfocused way without contributing critically to the debate. On the pages of “Art International”, the critic Henry Martin expressed his disappointment in noting that the size of the exhibitions in Venice in 1972, was so large as to cause admiration, but at the same time generate discouragement for the enormous potential that the institution had been unable to exploit. The unsolved problem remained the same: the Biennale had to make clear what type of large perennial exhibition it wanted to be. Was a different formula possible, one that was not the usual incoherent ensemble that continued to turn the Biennale into the “show of shows”? According to the English critic, *Work or Behaviour* was not a theme, rather a mélange that failed to put forward any questions but a bitter observation: “And one ends up with the total waste of what might have been a truly important experience if structured in some other way”<sup>35</sup>.

On 25th July 1973, the President of the Italian Republic passed law no. 438, named “New Regulations of the autonomous Body ‘La Biennale di Venezia’”. This fully reformed law replaced the 1938 one. Its first article ruled that the Biennale was a “democratically organised institution of culture”, which aimed at guaranteeing “full freedom of ideas and forms of expression” and at organising “international events relating to documentation, information, criticism, research and experimentation in the field of the arts”<sup>36</sup>. Therefore, the new Biennale had been provided with an open and project-based foundation, thus allowing for a working methodology based on experimentation, which openly acknowledged the requests of the 1968 protest.

The architect Vittorio Gregotti was appointed director of the new section of Visual Arts and Architecture. The choice to place a character like Gregotti in charge of the oldest section of the Biennale, clearly expressed a true desire to break with the past. From the beginning Gregotti expressed the need to transform the dispersive organisational system of the Biennale exhibitions, divided between the autonomy of the national pavilions, the special exhibitions, and the outdated system of selecting Italian participating artists through a committee. Gregotti wanted to change the working methodology by focusing on the preparatory stage of the exhibition, on research and elaboration of those “fundamental themes, in order to critically cover the entire production system of visual arts”<sup>37</sup>. Working by defined projects was the way to turn the Biennale from an anthological review of the most recent artistic output, into an organisation promoting the type of “research that expressed itself by means of the exhibition itself”<sup>38</sup>. Gregotti intended to set up the Biennale exhibitions as events focused on prominent issues, and consequently work by projects. The new director immediately stated his conviction that the history of the institution should not be cancelled from the reform, but should become instead the legacy and the basis on which to build. Only by following this working procedure could the Biennale become “a little more productive and a little less receptive”, less of a reporter and more of a protagonist, that true place of research and experimentation provided for in the new law<sup>39</sup>.

According to Gregotti, the new procedure should consist of three stages. Firstly, it was necessary to establish a system of general principles, then, having outlined the programmatic choices, place the exhibitions directly in charge of single experts<sup>40</sup>. In this perspective, the exhibitions of the Biennale would “question the same social function as those institutions which produce culture, that is to penetrate and restore significance to locations in the city and to the territory”<sup>41</sup>.

A new way had been paved for the Biennale. If the role of informing and updating had already been performed by other institutions, the Biennale had the unique chance to “present itself as a critically polycentric workshop”, owing to, or due to its distinctive exhibition structure<sup>42</sup>.

In 1974, it had been impossible to organize the traditional exhibition with the foreign nations, because of the change in legislation of 1973, the nomination of the new Board of Directors and the tardy appointment of the directors of the single sections. Therefore, it was the 1976 edition that was first officially

held under the new reform. The general regulation of the International Art Exhibition decreed that foreign countries “invited to set up their respective sections in the pavilions” were allowed to participate, along with those who had applied directly to the Biennale presidency, as they did not have their own pavilion<sup>43</sup>. Over time, it had become standard procedure for the Biennale to invite those nations with a national pavilion in the Giardini to participate, because the entry “Biennale di Venezia” was part of the state budget of nearly all the proprietors of the pavilions. In many cases there existed officials working in the overseas Ministries for Foreign Affairs or Culture who were in charge of permanently overseeing the affairs regarding the participation of their country in the Venetian exhibition. The Biennale would send the official invitation addressed to the governments of the countries proprietors of the pavilions, through the Italian Ministry for Foreign Affairs, to the embassies existing in Rome. Once the country had accepted the invitation, it was completely independent from the Biennale; it only had to communicate the chosen artist to be inserted in the catalogue within the set time.

According to the standard procedure established after the war, the organisation of the exhibition started more or less a year before the opening, that is between “June and September of the odd years”<sup>44</sup>. The 1973 reform caused such a complete upheaval to a well-consolidated equilibrium that it no longer appeared to be debatable. Article 10 of the new law decreed that, as from that moment, participation in the Biennale would be conditioned by a direct and personal invitation addressed to the artists by the Board of Directors of the Biennale<sup>45</sup>. With article 10, not only did the countries proprietors of a pavilion at the Giardini lose their traditional independence from the Biennale, but, substantially, they were also deprived of any authority whatsoever. During the 1969 international meeting, several commissioners had voiced their perplexity as to why their representation could not be included long-term in the Board of Directors<sup>46</sup>. Voices were circulating in the art world that in the wake of the 1968 protests, the Biennale was planning to demolish its pavilions. The truth was that the issue of international dealings was so relevant that on 31 July 1974, the new Biennale began its life with a meeting with the representatives of the foreign nations. Indeed, on the contrary to what had been established by the law, the Biennale aimed at collaborating “more widely, continuously and extensively than in the past”, in order to overcome “the sectorial, provincial and diplomatic character of the old Biennale”.

The reformed Biennale and its new Board of Directors thought it inevitable to revive the exhibition at international level by being able to “critically participate in the artistic and civil ongoing debate”<sup>47</sup>. So, in a series of meetings held with the foreign nations before consultants of administrative law, the Biennale dealt with the issue of the changed dealings with the pavilions imposed by the 1973 new regulations. The commissioners of the countries maintained that they would no longer be able to participate unless the Biennale guaranteed that they would have “a decisive role in choosing what should be exhibited in their national pavilions”. The issue at hand was simply of not only an artistic nature, but it referred to the ownership, administration and public financial support

involved in funding their participation. “We have discovered we are fossils in a system that is destined to be abolished with the new regulations”, objected the German commissioner Klaus Gallwitz. On the other hand, Gerald Forty, the British commissioner, suggested a solution that had already been adopted by the Paris Biennial, where a completely autonomous central international committee, nominated by participants, was in charge of the selection of artists<sup>48</sup>. Had an international central committee been formed in Venice, one that was able to choose freely without undergoing political pressure, the countries would probably be more motivated to collaborate financially. In order to follow article no.10 of the new law, it was decided that the selection of artists for the International Art Exhibition would have been made through the nomination of “widely known experts per each of the single countries chosen, acting on the basis of every potential confidential arrangement with the countries involved”. Legal advice provided by experts, clarified that the new law allowed the Biennale to work with each country on the basis of agreements that should be of a “unitary, global and unbiased nature, excluding any type of discrimination and expropriation”<sup>49</sup>. According to the Biennale, the Giardini area was both an Italian and international asset: it was impelling to achieve coordination in order to use the location to its best. The institution suggested that a “moral public domain” be established in agreement with the foreign countries<sup>50</sup>. This arrangement would change nothing in the traditional dealings besides reserving the director of the Visual Art Section the right to invite the artists as provided for in the new law<sup>51</sup>. Therefore, the “moral public domain” implied a pre-arranged use of common spaces on the basis of a programme drawn up with unanimous approval. The objective was to reach “an authentically international expression”, in order to present artists who also worked in different countries other than the ones who had a pavilion at the Giardini, thus lending a wider vision to the Biennale’s cultural scope. Both the board of the Biennale and the director of Visual Arts, together with the foreign commissioners would therefore nominate the national experts and select the artists to invite. In case of refusal of a country to accept the selected artist in its own pavilion, he or she would be invited to show at another location. The commissioners of the foreign pavilions would engage directly with the Visual Arts Section, and had power of veto. In so doing, the director became the sole person in charge of the entire exhibition. This procedure seemed to be the only plausible one, which would keep the proceedings within the law and, at the same time, establish more direct, productive, and collaborative dealings between institution and national pavilions.

“Contemporary culture has this key characteristic: it is an international culture”, maintained Gregotti. He was convinced that the core objective of the open debate with other countries was not to defend locations or representation; instead, it was far more productive to try to jointly re-establish an objective for the Biennale, in order to overcome its national character<sup>52</sup>. The request for independence of the various countries lay primarily in the selection of the artists, and was placed in this framework of overall selection. Gregotti believed that the issues on article 10 could be overcome through

collective work. This, he intended to carry out in collaboration with the foreign commissioners in order to single out “several fundamental themes significant to all countries”, and try to reach an agreement on the criteria for selection. The procedure would provide the chance to initiate a debate on a “common issue”<sup>53</sup>; the specificity and the act of sharing the theme would make the difference and pave the way for a new exhibition formula, thus transforming the exhibition. Only by adopting this working strategy, a new function could be found for the Biennale, one that no longer caused it to be a superfluous institution, but rather facilitated its specific use by establishing continuity with its own history.

The 1975 Biennale opened on 30 and 31 May with the *International Convention on the New Biennale*. If the two previous meetings had favored a fruitful exchange amongst countries, one which had allowed the new regulations to be examined and had established a new exhibition formula, the objective of this third seminar was to present a theme for the following year’s exhibition. According to Gregotti, the “collective produce” of the renewed Biennale had to be founded on tradition. This did not yet allow for a radical alternative to the complete renewal and the international participation structure.

The proposals presented by the Commission were discussed and eventually the theme of the “participation” was chosen by the foreign participants. Since it was still considered too broad, and he did not want to repeat the same mistake of vagueness as in 1972, Gregotti decided to overlap the theme with the notion of “environment”, one which was “general enough and is sufficiently precise to constitute the basis for a series of specific enunciations and projects by the different nations”<sup>54</sup>.

Thus, the “wide and flexible” theme suggested in 1969 and applied in 1972 became, in 1976, “broad and precise”, a nuance of adjectives which radically changed the theory behind the Biennale. The theme “environment and participation”, therefore, was not perceived as a compromise, but as “a real action, a real work condition” in which the two notions had originated from their political, other than creative, clash. *Environment, participation and cultural structure* was the theme-cum-title which set a broad ground for discussion and addressed all activities of the Visual Arts and Architecture section and the international participants, thus becoming a common basis for dialogue. The “environment” was intended as a notion both purely related to space and to a social context. The joint work carried out by the Biennale and all the participating countries, lent a new angle to the theme, thus opening the debate on an international scale, allowing those involved to take stock of the situation underway, and offering a coherent exhibition to the public.

The working strategy devised with the participating countries led to an edition in which all the exhibitions were variations on the general theme of the “environment”. Moreover, it became even more concrete because it was linked to, and was confronted with, a complicated historical and jurisdictional context: the seat of the Biennale. However, which was the new role that the Biennale had presented in order to differentiate itself from all the other large-scale perennial international exhibitions? Gregotti had no doubts: it

was primarily the “common platform for public funding” that distinguished the Biennale and its participating countries<sup>55</sup>. This distinctive characteristic would become productive if exploited so as to guarantee the autonomy it aspired to, or rather the possibility to develop themes that were of a “non-commercial” interest, ones which were crucial for the universal social, political, and cultural debate. According to Gregotti, the “new” Biennale had to become the international platform for critical debate on current issues which, starting from the visual arts, would invest the other fields of knowledge.

The first official edition of the reformed International Art Exhibition of the Biennale made its debut by invading the whole of Venice with eight exhibitions set up in six different areas of the city, and presenting the national participations in their pavilions, at the Giardini, after four years of absence. The new exhibition formula would be tested in the historical seat, in order to start afresh, symbolically, in the place where the structural problems first arose: old structures, new formula.

The entire 1976 edition radiated from the historical-critical exhibition set up in the central pavilion. The latter aimed at providing the public with the “general interpretative picture” of the theme<sup>56</sup>. *Ambient/Art. From Futurism to Body Art* was curated by the critic, Germano Celant, and set up by Gino Valle. The exhibition presented a historical reading of the relationship between artist and space. It analysed, in particular, the rapport between audience and artists in relation to physical locations over a period of time that covered the whole century, from 1912 through to 1976. *Ambient/Art* re-examined the notion of context in relation to visual arts, in the light of the “tradition of the new”.

The exhibition was divided in two parts. The first presented a series of “documents” which were the physical reconstruction of the most representative environments created by artists in the first half of the 20th century. For the second part, Celant had invited thirteen artists to create a site-specific environmental work in the space assigned to them inside the pavilion. The entire exhibition was supported by a considerable amount of documentation, which included archival material and photographs, following the curator’s specific educational-lead approach. The peculiarity of *Ambient/Art* which should be highlighted is the dual nature of the environmental theme given to the entire exhibition.

“Since we need to operate in a structure (Pavilion), the external architectural and environmental values of which have already been established, the only possibility that remains is to modify and organize its internal space. The exhibition concept is therefore based on the analysis, condition and modality of the inside interaction between the art and environment. By the latter, we intend the space limited by 6 floors (floor, ceiling, and four walls) that can also be defined as “brickwork box on a human scale”. The physical limits on which the historical research of the rapport between art and environment is based is, therefore a contained space<sup>57</sup>.

Germano Celant’s historical-introductory exhibition did not only intend to turn over a new leaf compared to the past, but it dictated the beginning of a new era. Indeed, in order to develop the concept of “environment” Celant analysed the context itself in which the exhibition would be developed, that is the central pavilion with its historical stratification caused by its different uses throughout the years: first as a ballroom, then as a riding school and for the previous seventy years, as the seat of the Biennale art exhibition<sup>58</sup>.

The original space had always been hidden because it was covered by the superstructure of exhibition layout. According to Celant, any exhibition concerning the history of the rapport between environment and art should develop in a context that is “aware” of its limits, a real context. So he decided to strip the space down completely, eliminating all the additional structures in order to reveal the original structures: the brickwork of the wall, the wooden beams, the skylights on the ceiling. “Cleansing the space to take history back in time”, was his theory, once he had realised that the only elements which remained of the original building were the floor, four walls and the ceiling<sup>59</sup>. Having reflected on which movement first used the walls not only as a pictorial support, but as an integral part of the work of art, Celant decided to reconstruct the environments designed by 20th century artists in Venice, in the Biennale, in order to take history of art back in time. The simple and “sincere” space with its flaking walls showing the brickwork, its visible wooden beams, and its ceilings revealing all the precariousness that so far had been the “temple of the arts”, allowed the public to immerse itself into the history of art, not through art objects but rather through space<sup>60</sup>.

*Ambient/Art* was an “active” exhibition where the very concept of “space” took on a precise meaning. This was achieved by comparing the environment of the exhibition, the Biennale’s original space, that empty area, with its reconstructed space that contained the history of art and artworks<sup>61</sup>. In *Ambient/Art* space and spectators were the absolute protagonists. Celant had perfectly grasped the concept behind the Biennale’s new thematic formula. His exhibition possessed all its characteristics: it was international and provided only one critical vision, the curator’s, giving an excursus which went from history to the current times. Moreover, the exhibition offered a critical reading of the Biennale space itself, which became the core of the international exhibition because it allowed light to be shed on how, in art practices of recent years, the interest in the rapport between the work of art and its surrounding space was growing, along with attention to the passage from closed project to circuit in which the location itself became both an element and a significant part of the project.

Despite presenting itself as a historical exhibition that followed a chronological order, *Ambient/Art* finally broke all links with the Biennale’s exhibition tradition of the past. There was no longer any difference between works of art and documents, between genres, masters and living artists. At the centre of things lay the curator’s point of view and his or her will to take the public on a journey into a non-conventional history of art.

The 1976 Biennale was criticized because it only offered one solution which seemed to be *ad abundantiam*, that is too many exhibitions all together, in the apparent attempt to please everybody. Moreover, the distribution of the exhibition forced the public to move from one part of the city to another, and therefore to have a lot of spare time, as if the exhibition were more for residents. However, Environment Participation and Cultural Structures set a record of number of visitors, one that to this day has yet to be broken. The new formula not only worked, but it was also a resounding success<sup>62</sup>. The equilibrium between historical, informative and updating exhibitions had multiplied the levels of interpretation and led to proposals which prompted communication with the spectators, who were also able to participate in debates, meetings and seminars based on discussion and exchange of ideas.

*Ambient/Art* was the backbone of the entire exhibition which visitors could decide how to visit on the basis of their interests, while keeping in line with the single main theme. With its new thematic exhibition formula, the Biennale had recovered a specificity and a cultural use at an international level. It needed to be based on the event, “on focusing each time on a central point of contemporary creativity”; only in this way could it acquire a precise role in the overdeveloped international exhibition panorama<sup>63</sup>. The objective was to trigger off a critical discussion in the attempt to reach the widest possible audience, without however imposing passwords or being prey of easy populism, but simply by producing culture. The goal was to transform the post-reform Biennale in an archetype and laboratory of a new way of planning large international exhibitions.

Independent research work conducted outside the market regulations allowed for free investigation, without ulterior motives, if not the ones of a genuine cultural and specific nature assigned to each edition. The selection of current and tangible social, political, cultural and artistic international pressing issues, and their in-depth analysis in various shows in collaboration with the participating countries, allowed the Biennale to present important and coherent exhibitions that were internationally relevant.

The “new” Biennale had now become a strength to be used to present and discuss current inconvenient social or political themes, a specific location for carrying out international debates on current cultural issues.

The thematic exhibition formula, tested for the first time in 1976, marked the birth of the contemporary Biennale and the end of the exhibition era based on reviews and a *laissez-faire* approach. However, 1976 was the first trial; it was re-presented in 1978 in a perfected way, but after that, the debate ended. Indeed, in 1980, the theme had already become a “pillar”, therefore more of a suggestion than a truly structured research theme. The difference is substantial and it lies between the 1972 edition of the Biennale and the 1976 one. It lies between a misleading general theme which was so broad as to hold all, and a well targeted collective project work; between a label that can be applied everywhere and a specific research theme that can be placed among the critical international issues or is a tangible or pressing current

debate. The 1976 formula was then adopted without provoking any more discussions and thus emptied of all its content. The attempt to put forward new proposals, in order to overcome the “multicellular” nature of the structure of the seat of the Biennale, was never made again. The few times sporadic artistic directors have seriously applied a thematic formula with its charge of content and complexity, the exhibition has always proven to work<sup>64</sup>.

While in 1968, in order to overcome the structural problem, it was suggested to adopt a Futurist type approach and destroy the national pavilions in the Giardini to create single open and flexible exhibitory space, in 1973, it was thought to be sufficient to insert an article in the new law reform to solve the problem. Instead, in 1998, the issue has been cleared up by imposing the restrictions of the Monuments and Fine Arts Office on the majority of buildings located in the Giardini area of the Biennale<sup>65</sup>. Originally temporary buildings, the national pavilions have today become monuments of nations fossilized in an era of splendour. Since 1995, all countries who wish to, can participate in the International Art Exhibition outside the Giardini, in the city itself. This situation has transformed the “cellular” structure described forty years ago by Alloway, in a unique “multicellular” structure full of new potential

By analysing the context in which *Ambient/Art* was to be inserted in 1976, Germano Celant understood that “Since we need to operate in a structure ... the external architectural and environmental values of which have already been established, the only remaining possibility is to modify and organize its inside space”. These words can be applied to the overall exhibition structure of the Biennale, if we also bear in mind Celant’s conviction of the need to develop interaction between art and context only in a “conscious” environment. From this stance, a new path of research could be paved for the Biennale. The institution would, once again, call into play its structural limitation, it would however, re-gain a unique cultural specificity. The number of participating nations is not important, what is important is the discussions that the Biennale can create along with them and owing to them. That very “awareness” of its structural layout, if taken beyond the folklore of the Giardini and of Venice as theme parks of contemporary art, could give life to a new “control system” of the Biennale exhibition, which as a result, would be renewed once again, without losing the “heart of its institutional identity”.

#### notes

1. Alloway, Lawrence, *The Venice Biennale 1895-1968: From Salon to Goldfish Bowl*, Greenwich (CT), New York Graphic Society 1968, p. 153.

2. Alloway, *op. cit.* p. 14.

3. See chapter 1 of this volume, p. 99.

4. West, Shearer, “National Desires and Regional Realities in the Venice Biennale, 1895-1914”, *Art History*, No.3, September 1995, p. 413.

5. West, Shearer, *op. cit.*, p. 417.

The percentage of Italian artists in

1895 was 45.26% of the total of artists exhibiting; in 1905, it was 54.7%.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 415.

7. Belgium (1907), Hungary (1909), Germany (1909), Great Britain France (1912), Holland (1912), Russia (1914).

8. The document to refer to as the example of the agreement between the Municipality of Venice and the foreign countries is *Municipio di Venezia, 1905/09 – III/4/22*, Venice Municipal Archive, Venice.

9. Alfieri, Bruno, "Editorial", *Metro: An International Review of Contemporary Art*, No. 12, 1966, p. 5.

10. Pallucchini, Rodolfo, "Introduction", *Catalogo XXIV Esposizione Biennale internazionale d'arte*, Venice, Edizioni Serenissima 1948, p.XII.

11. Roberto Longhi, a member of the subcommittee, believed that past history was repainted by "present history" and that "the past was the one to offer us not an already formulated rule, but the freedom of mind needed to well interpret the present". Between 1948 and 1956 Biennals help develop a taste for contemporary art, by informing the public and consecrating the artists from a didactic perspective of didactics.

Pallucchini's intent was to "develop contrition and recognition in the face of modern figurative culture, from which Italy had obtusely excluded itself for nearly a century", Bandera, Maria Cristina, *Le prime Biennali del dopoguerra. Il carteggio Longhi-Pallucchini (1948-1956)*, Milan, Charta 2000.

12. Pallucchini, Rodolfo, "Introduction", *Catalogo della XXVIII Esposizione Biennale internazionale d'arte*, Venice, Edizioni Alfieri 1956, p. XVII.

13. Alloway, *op.cit.*, p. 140.

14. "The legislative choices to make ... not only referred to the obvious need for a re-formulation of the outdated regulatory system on which the 'Biennale' was based, but also the expectation of a thorough critical review of its structure and objectives, in view of regaining competitiveness with other great international art events and the adaptation to the recent acquisitions of aesthetical research", Foreword, 1<sup>st</sup> Code of 'Biennale' di Venezia, Survey, Collection of Acts and documents, Secretary Office of 7<sup>th</sup> Permanent Commission, Senate of the Republic 1972, p. XI.

15. "The mistake that lies at the foundation of the decadence ... of contemporary art exhibitions, is especially ... the desire to continue to exhibit our work as if it were "old" like in a Museum", comment by Sergio Bettini, Comune di Venezia e Provincia di Venezia, Proceedings of the Conference of studies on the Biennale, Cà Loredan, Venice 13 October 1957, p. 25.

16. Zevi, Bruno, "Una camera mortuaria per i quadri italiani", *L'Espresso*, 1 July 1962.

17. Comment by Sergio Bettini, Comune di Venezia e Provincia di Venezia, Proceedings of the Conference..., *op.cit.*, p. 31.

18. Pallucchini, Rodolfo, "Introduction", *Catalogo della XXV Esposizione Biennale internazionale d'arte*, Venice, Edizioni Alfieri 1950, p. XI

19. Russel, John, "Ciao, with Friendship", *Studio International*, No. 913, July-August 1969.

20. "It is the four days of the official opening that lend a special value to the Biennale", Alloway, *op.cit.*, p. 23

21. "The worst danger for the Biennale at

the moment is to die as a cultural event, and to disappear from Venice, Italy and the world as a cultural event", comment by councillor Gianni De Michelis, Venice council, report in shorthand of the meeting held on 10 June, 1968, page eg-4/b, Venice Municipal Archive.

22. As the Secretary General, Gian Alberto Dell'Acqua, wrote in the introduction to the catalogue, in two decades "the aspect and the terms of contemporary artistic output [had] radically changed ... traditional technical categories were going through a difficult situation" and the world had undergone a rapid transformation. In this climate of profound changes, the 34th Biennale was conceived with "innovatory intent" compared to the past. Dell'Acqua, Gian Alberto, "Introduction", *Catalogo della XXXIV Esposizione biennale internazionale d'arte Venezia*, Venice, Fantoni 1968, p. 23.

23. Alloway, *op.cit.*, p. 26. Alloway's book was being printed at the same time as the opening of the 1968 exhibition.

24. Celant, Germano, "Una Biennale in grigio-verde", *Casabella*, August 1968.

25. Foreword, 1<sup>st</sup> Code of 'Biennale' di Venezia, Survey, Collection of Acts and documents, Secretary Office of 7<sup>th</sup> Permanent Commission, Senate of the Republic 1972, 1st shorthand minutes 21 September 1972, Foreword, p. XII.

26. Alfieri, Bruno, "Biennale portfolio", *Metro: An International Review of Contemporary Art*, No. 15, 1968, p. 55.27. *Ibid.*, p. 41.

28. *Ibid.*, p. 43.

29. Biennale's activities in 1970 and the XXXV International Art Exhibition, unit 226, A new Biennale, Historical Fund, Visual Arts Series, Historical Archives of Contemporary Arts, Venice (from now on

FS, AV, ASAC), and Working Committee of the meeting of the Employees for the Venice Biennale activities in 1970, unit 227, Working Committee, Historical Fund, Visual Arts Serie, Venice, Historical Archive of Contemporary Arts, from now on simply FS, AV, ASAC.

30. Meeting of foreign commissioners for the organisation of the 1970 Art Biennale, tape recording of text, fully transcribed, unit 225, Foreign pavilions conference, FS, AV, ASAC.

31. *Ibid.* Sweden wondered if the Biennale had paid any attention to the proposals for a radical change presented at the round table conference organised by *Metro*.

The theme could not be mandatory for those pavilions that were completely autonomous in terms of selection. In 1972, some countries adhered to the theme presented by the Biennale with interesting results, thus proving how it could be possible to overcome the disjointed structure of the exhibition. Austria presented work by Hans Hollein, Belgium a homage to the Cobra group and a performance by the Mass Moving group, France exhibited Le Gac and Boltanski and Germany Gerard Richter. Japan adhered to the theme while Holland presented Jan Dibbets. Finally, the U.S. showed many artists, among which Diane Arbus.

32. 36th International Art Exhibition, Subcommittee meeting, summary minutes, 15 November 1972, unit 273, Italian Subcommittee, FS, AV, ASAC.

33. The general title of the 5th edition of documenta was "Questioning Reality - Images of Worlds Today". For an in-depth study of the curatorial issue related to large-scale international perennial exhibitions, please refer to Martini Federica, Martini Vittoria,

Questions of authorship in Biennial Curating, Filipovic E., Van Hal M., Ovstebo S. eds., *The Biennial Reader: An Anthology on Large-scale Perennial Exhibitions of Contemporary Art*, Ostfildern, Hatje Cantz 2010.

34. The terms relates to the title of Lucy Lippard's famous book *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object*, published in 1973.

35. According to the British critic, the 1972 Biennale was like entering Borges' Library of Babel, where everyone could follow their own itinerary by choosing random books on the shelves, without being given a direction, Martin, Henry, "Venice 1972: The Show of the Shows", *Art International*, Summer 1972, p. 91.

36. Law 26, July 1973, no. 438. New Regulation for the Autonomous Body 'la Biennale di Venezia'.

37. Remark by Vittorio Gregotti, IX Board of Directors' meeting, 26th July, 1974, ASAC.

38. Remark by Vittorio Gregotti, Meeting at the "Saloni" 28<sup>th</sup>-29<sup>th</sup> October, Cinema City Vanguard Seminar, unit 288, October -November 1974, FS, AV, ASAC.

39. Remark by Vittorio Gregotti in the interview "La Biennale dei partiti", Bolaffiarte, October 1974.

40. IX Board of Directors' meeting, op. cit., p. 4.

41. Visual arts and Architecture manifestations, Biennale di Venezia. Yearbook 1975 Events 1974, Venice, La Biennale di Venezia 1975, p. 259.

42. "Delle arti", *Spettacoli&Società*, September 1975.

43. "General rules", *Catalogue XXXIV Esposizione Biennale internazionale d'arte*, pp. LXIV-LXV.

44. General notes, unit 291, 30 October

1974, FS, AV, ASAC.

In 1974, for example, the traditional organisational mechanism of International participations had triggered off automatically. Despite not receiving an official invitation from the Italian ministry, some countries nominated their commissioners and some even chose their artists. The Biennale had to ask the Italian Ministry for Foreign Affairs to communicate that the 1974 exhibition could not go ahead because of the issue of organisational precariousness that the recent reform had generated.

45. Article No. 10 of Law of 26 July 1973, no.438, New Regulations for the Autonomous Body 'La Biennale di Venezia'. "The participation to the events organised by the autonomous body 'la Biennale di Venezia' is conditioned by the direct and personal invitation addressed to the authors of the board of directors". Article no. 10 will be amended on 13th June 1977, with law 13 June 1977, no. 324, Amendments to the law 26 July 1973, no. 438 regarding the 'New regulations for the autonomous body La Biennale di Venezia'.

46. Meeting of foreign commissioners to organize the 1970 Biennale, unit 225, Foreign Pavillions Conference, FS, AV, ASAC.

47. 4-year general plan of activities and events (1974-1977), Biennale di Venezia. 1975 Yearbook cit., p. 62.

48. Proposal from Norway, unit 294, Laboratory Code, FS, AV, ASAC.

Alla Biennale di Parigi era stipulato un accordo tra le nazioni partecipanti le quali finanziavano fino a una certa cifra la partecipazione degli artisti connazionali scelti dal comitato.

49. Meeting of Foreign Commissioners 30 October 1974, unit 292,

Commissioners Meeting, FS, AV, ASAC.

50. 1st Meeting of the foreign pavilion representatives at the Giardini on 31 July 1974, unit 290, 31 July 1974, FS, AV, ASAC. The lawyer, Mr Ghidini, an expert of administrative law attending the meeting, pointed out that "the term 'moral public domain' is ideological and not technical; it should therefore not be taken literally in relation to the word property, which instead brings to mind the concept of expropriation". From the very first meeting, the director's explicit intent was to find "a way out" of the limit imposed by Article 10 of the law "which was shared by everybody". The aim of the Biennale was to reach an "authentically international expression".

51. Ibid.

Law 13th July 1977, no. 324. Amendments to law 26 July 1973, no. 438, decreed that "Participation to the events (...) occurs by invitation only, addressed to the authors of the Board of Directors. Should the latter consider it appropriate, they will agree with the competent bodies of the foreign countries on the type of cooperation to be adopted both regarding programmes and regulations".

52. IX Board of Directors' meeting , 26 July 1974, ASAC.

53. 1st Meeting of the Representatives of the Pavilions at the Giardini held on 31st July 1974, unit 290, 31st July 1974, FS, AV, ASAC.

54. International Conference on the New Biennale, 30-31st May 1975, unit 296, Conference transcript, FS, AV, ASAC, p. 32. On that occasion Gregotti said, "we realize that a single theme is the best we can obtain from an exhibition that will deal with a sole common theme from different viewpoints and presenting

different contributions".

55. Ibid., p. 17.

56. Contribution by Vittorio Gregotti, International Conference of the Representatives of the Countries Participating in the Biennale, 9-10 January 1976, unit 337, Preparatory Conference 37 Biennale, FS, AV, ASAC.

57. Literature presented by Germano Celant to the Board of Directors 5-7th December 1975, unit 303, 1975 Meeting of the Visual Arts and Architecture committees, FS, AV, ASAC.

58. To read about the history of the central pavilion, the historical seat of the Biennale at the Giardini, please refer to Romanelli, G. D., *Il Padiglione 'Italia' ai Giardini di Castello (già Palazzo dell'Esposizione)*, Biennale di Venezia. 1975 Yearbook cit., p. 645 and Martini Vittoria, "A brief history of how an exhibition took shape", *Starting from Venice: Studies on the Biennale*, Ricci C. ed, Milano, et.al 2010.

59. "Arte Povera IM Spazio and Ambiente Arte", conference held by Germano Celant on 2 November 2009, within The History of Exhibitions: Beyond the Ideology of the White Cube, Barcelona, Museu d'art contemporanei.

60. "The organisers, however, rather intent on sealing the 'temple of the arts' with unambiguous enunciations (and as a temple, nothing more than a Greek, Apollonian one)", Romanelli, op.cit . p 650.

61. Visual Arts, unit 303, Meeting of Visual Arts and Architecture Commissioners 8 November 1975, FS, AV, ASAC. In the course of this meeting, the project Ambient/Art is agreed to. On 30 January, Celant had written up the precise project of the exhibition, arranging "two months of work in situ"

for setting it up. Art in/as Ambient curated by Germano Celant, unit 324, Environment, FS, AV, ASAC.

62. According to the official records, the 1976 edition of the Biennale totalled a record of 692,000 visitors, cf. Di Martino, Enzo, *La Biennale di Venezia 1895-1995. Cento anni di arte e cultura*, Milan, Mondadori 1995, p. 86. In the moral and political review on the 1976 events, the director writes of the “mass of people visiting the events (...), which is possible to estimate at over a million (...) from 20 July to the end of October”, *Ibid.*, page 126. ASAC does not possess any calculation, or specific statistics on the influx of visitors to the Biennale, therefore it is impossible to know whether, for example like in documenta, the majority of visitors came from the surrounding areas.

63. Gregotti Vittorio, “Report by the director of the Visual Arts and Architecture section”, unit 356 Literature from the international conference, 3-4 June 1977, FS, AV, ASAC.

64. Here I’m referring to the most evident example of a perfectly functioning original thematic formula, that is the 43rd edition of the 1993 Venice Biennale curated by Achille Bonito Oliva, *Cardinal points of art*.

65. Ministry for Arts and Culture and Environment Heritage, Central Office, decree of obligation 19 September 1998, Venice Superintendency.

## A Conversation with Thomas Hirschhorn

*In your reply to our invitation to discuss biennials and international exhibition practices, you wrote, “I doubt I have anything to say because I am not interested in the subject and especially in ‘Biennials and International Art Practices’. I - THE ARTIST - am only interested in my work, I - THE ARTIST - occupy myself exclusively with doing my work, and I - THE ARTIST- am interested in exhibiting my work”. How do you see your participation in the Venice Biennale, in the Swiss pavilion, located in an exhibition space that is not neutral, but rather linked to international cultural policies and diplomatic relations?*

Your questions have given me the chance to clarify certain things, things that have been clear to me for a while and constitute the basis of my work. I have never produced an artwork especially for a context. I am not interested in contexts, since I believe in the autonomy of Art. Art is autonomous and such autonomy is what gives it beauty and makes it absolute. I believe in Art. I believe that Art - because it *is* Art - can create the conditions for engagement that transcends everything, going beyond the issues of countries, nations, or states. The cultural policies of this or that nation do not interest me, nor do the diplomatic relations among states. For me - as an artist - it is normal, and also necessary, to be interested first and foremost in my own work, to be interested in producing my own artwork, and to be interested simply in Art; art, which is beauty and absolute. In any case, what interests me is Art and its power of transformation - because it *is* Art. Yes, I believe that art can transform a human being, any human being.

This is my challenge in Venice, like elsewhere: to produce work that has the power to transform. Participating in an event like the Venice Biennale



is a wonderful chance to show your work; show it to the general public for a long time, six months. It is an opportunity to produce a new coherent piece and to try to answer - through that artwork - questions like, where do I place myself? What do I want? Moreover, how do I take a stand? How do I give a form to such a position - the essential problem in art - and how can this form create a truth that transcends cultural, aesthetical, and political practices? How can it create a universal truth? Other words can replace universality: justice, equality, others, and a one and only world. I cannot create universal truth through critical discourse; I must give it a form. I want to give it a form - one that must be precise and exaggerated at the same time - in order to establish a contact with a "non-exclusive audience". The "non-exclusive audience" are the viewers for my work in Venice, like elsewhere. All this is offered to me with the possibility of exhibiting my work at the Venice Biennale, which increasingly entails having a space to conquer through my notion of Art, and a space to conceive in order to establish a Critical Body.

*Do you believe that the Venice Biennale can be a productive location for artists and for building critical discourse about a system based on national representations?*

As I have already tried to answer above, I do not see why or how critical discourse on the system of national representations should interest me. Having discussions, in general, does not interest me. What I want to do with my work is to define a limit - a new limit for Art. This is my artistic ambition. This is my mission! I wouldn't be tempted with sterile, and especially narcissistic "critical discourse", under any circumstances. This is why I do not want to feed any narcissistic illusions nor dreams, just like I do not want to fall into distant and pragmatic cynicism. What I want to do is to establish a Critical Body and not engage in "critical discourse". What I want is to believe in art and prove it. Believe that Art - because it *is* Art - can create conditions of involvement, dialogue, and one-to-one confrontation. I refuse to hold a complacent discussion when faced with a complex and chaotic world in conflict. This does not interest me, nor has it ever interested me. This famous critical discourse is fed to the artist just like a bone - often already chewed - is given to a dog. I will not bite it, although the participants of the universe of facts, opinions, and comments dislike my conduct. I am not interested, nor have I ever been interested in these particular problems. The only thing that I am overwhelmed with is the universal, which seems acceptable not only for an artist, but for any human being. It is an extraordinary challenge to figure out how to produce work that looks beyond the historical facts, how to produce work that clashes with the history in which I live, and how to

produce work, today, that will become an ahistorical piece. I do not know of any artist who can seriously imagine basing his or her work on this type of problem in particular. Art is universal - simply because it *is* Art.

*Having produced Swiss-Swiss Democracy in 2004, how do you view your participation as an artist who will represent Switzerland in the 2011 Venice Biennale in the national pavilion?*

There is no artistic or "political" contradiction in the work I produce. There aren't even any contradictions in the way I fight to keep my position and my art form. There is, on the contrary, coherence and a will that I want to affirm, increase and enlarge every day, for the sake of my work. I am forced to say this in such a direct way because I am under the impression that I am being understood increasingly less. I ought to say, on this occasion, that what I did with *Swiss-Swiss Democracy* is of evident clarity and transparency. I kept up my boycott not to exhibit in Switzerland during the period in which an extreme right wing Federal Councillor was in office. I totally kept it going. I maintained it because I had stated precisely that I would not exhibit in Switzerland - in fact, *Swiss-Swiss Democracy* was produced in Paris, France. If you boycott something, you need to find ways to maintain it - and that is what I did. You need to keep your word - and I did. I never claimed that I would give up being Swiss or that I would never work with the Swiss - I said I would no longer exhibit in Switzerland. In any case, as an artist, exhibiting is the thing I pay more dearly for. Declaring a boycott must primarily cost you something. Otherwise, it is not a boycott. None of my galleries exhibited my work for four years; therefore, none of my work sold - except for one piece at Art Basel, in Switzerland. I ask you to take my word for it, nothing more, nothing less. I'd like to be taken at my word. I was successful because my boycott was a successful one - just like all boycotts that are maintained. After four years, the extreme right-wing Swiss federal Councillor was never re-elected. He was never re-elected, much to everyone's surprise, and I can say that it is thanks to my boycott! This boycott was successful. Since then, I have been able to exhibit in Switzerland once more, and this makes me happy! Regarding my famous contradictions, they are part of human nature: I am in favour of peace among people. I really would like everyone to lend each other a hand, though when I say this I imagine the artist as a warrior. We all must be passionate warriors! When I say this, I mean that I am in favour of the weak and of helping the weak, of working with and for the weak - although weakness, as such, is one of the things I hate the most! I admire those artists that do "nothing". And although I love my work, I have never done enough. Yet I actually am a true workaholic.

## An Exhibition Like Any Other?

*Federica Martini and Vittoria Martini*

### AN UNSTABLE INSTITUTION FOUNDED UPON RUINS

The history of the Venice Biennale was founded, and is rooted, upon the ruins of the furthest part of the Castello quarter, a densely populated area full of some of the oldest gardens, convents, and churches in the city. In 1797 Napoleon ordered the destruction of this zone in order to create a park, as was the fashion at the time in most large European capitals. In 1895 that same park, by then considered the most modern and fashionable area of the city, became the seat of the Biennale<sup>1</sup>.

In a 1962 conference, Rodolfo Pallucchini, the post war Secretary General of the Venice Biennale, outlined the framework of the Venetian cultural context in which the Biennale was founded: “A culture which not only produced literature, art, and theatre but one fully committed to historical inquiry, that is to real problems which, when capable of resurrecting the greatness of the past, also anticipated new social and political needs”<sup>2</sup>.

The Venice Biennale was born and nourished by its deep embedment in the recesses of historical inquiry which, naturally, led to a need for openness towards international culture. Promptly, the Biennale revealed the weakness of the Italian national exhibitions of the time, which were still entrapped in an analysis of regional art. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Venice opened itself to the world while still retaining its tradition of an ancient cosmopolitan Republic. The cultural message of the Biennale found its functional context in the city of Venice, and its ideal seat in the Napoleonic gardens, the only neutral area of the city where history had been erased. Venice, with its rich past, but lack of industrial development, strove for internationality, and once again became the centre not of politics and commerce, but of art and culture.

In 1955, the same mission was entrusted to the first documenta of Kassel,

a city which, as a strategic military city-centre of Nazi Germany, found itself in a marginal position in the aftermath of the war<sup>3</sup>. Documenta was also founded upon ruins, those of one of the oldest European museums, and in a city needful of rediscovering its role, so as to reinsert itself on the “modern cultural map” and begin to “represent the singularity of its own history”<sup>4</sup>. Rising out of a seemingly neutral territory, documenta, in 1955, was far from the centres of art and from Berlin, the symbolic capital of the history of German art.

The mission of the first documenta was to represent twentieth-century European art. Arnold Bode explained his position by referring to two historical exhibitions: the Armory show, of 1913, which marked the first large-scale presentation of European modern art in the United States; and the exhibition *Entartete Kunst*, of 1937, which marked a point of rupture between German avant-garde and the official history of art<sup>5</sup>. In the introduction to the catalogue of documenta 1955, Werner Haftmann wrote, “It is impossible not to be reminded once again of the painful and recent past, when Germany separated itself from the European spirit...and refused, with iconoclastic behaviour, the results of joint intellectual efforts...This element put the notion of history, of continuity, and of documentary at stake”<sup>6</sup>.

It is interesting to note how at the very beginning of the first documenta, the international art system’s repositioning on the map and its inscription into art history overlapped, so much so that by the second half of the 1960s it was hard to make a distinction between the two events. During its third edition, in 1965, documenta focused on the art of the last five years. Hence, if the 1955 exhibition intended, according to its mission statement, to mend the trauma and to fill the post-war emptiness in an attempt to rewrite the recent history of European art, then in the 1960s the temporality of the exhibition, and its 5-year cyclic nature, aimed at creating an alternative to the traditional art-historical perspective presented by museums<sup>7</sup>. History, therefore, was no longer presented as informative and linear, abreast of the major movements of the first half of the twentieth century, as is the case of the post-war Venice Biennials which historicized Impressionism, Metaphysical Painting, Cubism, and Der Blaue Reiter. Instead there existed a will to create a context in which history could manifest itself in the present<sup>8</sup>.

Up until the end of the 1950s, contemporary art biennials often adhered to the traditional structure put forth as movements, disciplines and tendencies by museums and art history textbooks themselves. To that effect, biennials are *time-* and *site-specific* in that they combine a geographical approach to contemporary art with the desire to fill an emptiness in the museum-based historiography of contemporary art.

By posing the question “where is art contemporary today?”, biennials with a national representation structure counter the chronological approach of museums that attempts to define “how art changes over time”<sup>9</sup>. This new point of view produces a system for the writing the art history that is quicker than that employed by museums<sup>10</sup>. Indeed, Bode’s idea for documenta was

to build an institution that would run faster than the traditional museum: a temporary yet perennial exhibition, lasting one hundred days and “reinvented” every five years<sup>11</sup>. Questions such as “How does art position itself today?” or “How do we position ourselves today?” are at the very core of Bode’s research<sup>12</sup>.

This predisposition to the *hic et nunc* (here and now) saw a turning point in 1972, when documenta was presented as a *live* project by Harald Szeemann: not a temporary museum but a 100-day long event<sup>13</sup>. As Mary Ann Cawles has pointed out in her reference to the art manifesto, the question, at a latent level, is already present in the historiography of contemporary art<sup>14</sup>. According to the American art critic, the manifest has a dual purpose: on one hand, as a document or commemorative record of a past event; on the other, the proclamation of the manifesto is in itself an event. An event that can per se become the subject of history, or the lens through which history is read.

Similarly, large biennials can also act as the lenses through which contemporary art history can be read, or they become historical subjects in themselves. It is no accident that between the years 1968 and 1972, in an period of momentous cultural and social transformation, the first two reviews on the history of the Venice Biennale and on documenta were published: *The Venice Biennale 1895-1968: From Salon to Goldfish*, by Lawrence Alloway, and *documenta-Dokumente 1955 bis 1968: Texte und Fotografien*, by Dieter Westecker<sup>15</sup>. During this period the biennials entered into what Walter Grasskamp defines as the moment of “historical consciousness”; the moment when the various biennials begin to question their possible transformation into institutions that produce, or compete to write, history of art in the making<sup>16</sup>.

With the 1972 documenta, curated by Harald Szeemann, the role of the curator became paramount, carrying the biennials into the contemporary era. The curator as author, and his/her visibility, helped to define the three distinct types of history that still operate within biennials today<sup>17</sup>. The first history arises from the presentation of contemporary art practices and is irrespective of any reference to periods or generations. The second is the history produced by the exhibition as it exists as an institution over time, one that ultimately joins with that produced by each curator’s unique biography and experience. This latter history is perforce tied to the geographic, cultural, and political context relevant to the exhibition, precisely because it is narrated in the context of that specific biennial.

In this context, the curator’s narration of history becomes part of the history of that same biennial, as in a manifesto: record of the past as well as event in itself. It is amidst this ambivalence that the passage from “cultural event” to “culture as event” – as cultural theorist Akbar Abbas has defined it – can be placed. This corresponds to the idea that culture is not located elsewhere, but rather found “everywhere it is located”<sup>18</sup>.

Biennials, prior to the 1980s, with their mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion of nations, reflected the changes in the art system following the Second World War. Art critic Serge Guilbaut comments on this period as one in which New York stole from Paris the idea of modern art<sup>19</sup>. As a result of trying to reach compromises in cultural and geopolitical policies, these changes in the art system's geography show the biennials in the dual role of agent and sign of the time. A good example is the Biennale de Paris, founded in 1959 as an antidote to the French capital losing ground internationally, following the emergence of American Abstract Expressionism.

The biennials maintained their most profitable relationships with the contemporary art fair, founded at the end of the 1960s, also in virtue of their programmatic disposition to making it easier for marginal entities to enter the international art market. The fairs, which were created to stimulate the art market, shared common aspects with biennials: an intent to keep the public adjourned, a periodical recurrence, involvement in renewing the cultural tourism of the host city, and maintaining their international exhibition proportion<sup>20</sup>.

The fairs of the 1970s and 80s which, albeit at different times, proposed a model – that of the pavilion as gallery – based on the juxtaposition of different exhibition units, reflect “the diversification of services” and the new role that private galleries assumed. As mere points of sale, these galleries were transformed into centres of information, exchange and production<sup>21</sup>. Even throughout the eighties the debate remained essentially bipolar by developing between Europe and the United States, without visibly or consciously involving other experiences. A good example was the Triennial of New Delhi, founded in 1948 and left basically invisible at an international level.

A clear turning point came in 1977 with the inauguration of the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris, conceived “not only as a place of contemplation but also of creation”. The exhibition programme was presented for the new centre by its director, Pontus Hultén, and was based on a concept of art history which, in order to be understood, must be placed in the context of an urban art scene and of the international network that such scene establishes<sup>22</sup>. Paris, above all, but also Berlin, Moscow, and New York were all celebrated at the Pompidou between 1977 and 1981<sup>23</sup>. The first biennials placed the city at the centre, whereas the museum –from the perspective of a culture of the event presenting a wide range of international art practices – considered the city as a situation of cultural production<sup>24</sup>. With this in mind, the history of art practices, and their classification by technique, is more precisely defined on a context-based level.

Five years after the controversial exhibition *Primitivism in the 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*, curated in 1984 by William Rubin, director of the MoMA at that time, and by Kirk Varnedoe, the exhibition

*Magiciens de la Terre* was organized in Paris, by Jean-Hubert Martin, as an occasion for renewing the biennial model<sup>25</sup>. *Primitivism* declared to focus upon “the affinities between certain tribal objects and modern taste”, without concern for the modernist custom of “appropriating or redeeming alterity and transforming non-western art to its image and likeness”<sup>26</sup>. The exclusive point of view on generically non-western tribal artefacts, introduced in Oceania, Africa, and South America, and emphasising the originality of western avant-garde, brought about heated debate. Who were the tellers and how were the histories of art and its on-going practices told? How could different points of view be included in representing a transnational art space?

On the basis that “in order to have centres, margins are needed, and vice versa”, Jean-Hubert Martin organized an exhibition where the works of fifty western artists were juxtaposed with those of artists from Africa, Asia, and South America. The modernist-inspired idea of an urban and international context, presented by Jean-Hubert Martin, opens the doors to analysis on inclusion and exclusion of peripheral art scenes in the art system.

*Magiciens de la Terre* problematized, for the first time, the representation of non-western art scenarios; however, due to the curator's conscious choice, it produced yet another Eurocentric narration. Irrespective of selection criteria and themes that joined artists together in the exhibition, Martin convoked, in Paris, the same number of western artists as non-western artists. Thus, he raised the question of a globalized art scene whose enlargement must also be reflected in the representations of international exhibitions. Okwui Enwezor stated, in a conversation with Paul O'Neill, that in his opinion the most productive element of *Magiciens de la Terre* was that it made “the visual incoherency” of these juxtapositions real, by emphasizing the problem of transnational space in curatorial practice. Today such elements as these are practically invisible, or taken for granted, due to the significant number of biennials<sup>27</sup>.

Jean-Hubert Martin's choice was ethnocentrism, an unavoidable trap, in his opinion, because the works on exhibit are chosen by a western curator whose background inevitably influences his/her aesthetic inclinations. The exhibition is, thus, like a mechanism that welcomes only certain types of works. Therefore, in this context, the only works that can be exhibited are those from societies who make a clear distinction between art and handicraft; in other words, works created within communities that present an idea of authorship consistent with that of the West.

*Magiciens de la Terre* metaphorically opened the era of the globalized exhibition. Based on these assumptions, the biennials of the 1990s find their specificity by reviewing their own function and becoming fundamental producers of microhistories<sup>28</sup>. The Biennale of Havana, and that of Johannesburg, are two such examples, which work towards the inclusion of presumably marginal art practices with the hope of inserting them into the array of present-day international research. In so doing, they strive to return

biennials to their primary mission, that of analyzing contemporary-day art from the viewpoint of a geographical place, or that of a curator. This is when the figure of the “Biennial curator”, specialised in organising and creating large-scale international exhibitions, was born. Such curators become vital connecting points between centres and peripheries of the global world.

In a recent essay, Okwui Enwezor points out the ability of the exhibitions to function as a “topography of critical practice”, capable of creating a construction site where the works of artists sharing a common critical vocation can be advanced. Such a “construction site” is framed by what the curator intellectually brings to it, which is, in its own right, “inscribed in a global geopolitical context from which emerge contemporary art practices”<sup>29</sup>.

Also more decentralized biennials operate in this way, prone to establishing a relationship of reciprocal influence with more central biennials. As Raymonde Moulin observes, these centres, seized by the “fever of the now”, have multiplied and extended beyond the western system by utilizing the international circuits of galleries and cultural institutions<sup>30</sup>.

The explosion of the biennial phenomenon in the 1990s rests within this framework<sup>31</sup>. The two circuits of fair and biennial gradually converge into an ever similar exhibition format, fuelled by thematic shows, lateral events, symposiums, and conferences. They come together more so in their function, however, than in their formula. Besides providing information, monthly-held fairs and biennials set a standardization of tastes in public and private collections and, in so doing, stake a claim on the definition of the social image of an artist’s work<sup>32</sup>.

As now vital filters of the art system, something between a fair and a museum, present-day biennials have both preserved and broadened their event-like nature. By adapting to a society which is in constant need of reproducing itself, they create events centred on the present and imbued with themes of tradition and the past<sup>33</sup>. In this on-going production, biennials must become “normal exceptions”. They must avoid seriality by way of microscopic investigations, which fall within the general models but whose specificity produces history<sup>34</sup>. Today this cultural specificity is often confused and neutralised by the manifold roles entrusted to perennial exhibitions: an excess of responsibilities and functions that definitively shapes their cultural identity. In this way, the cyclic nature of biennials is less and less seen as a critical distancing, but more so as a consensual and repetitive stereotype that neutralises the potential of curatorial experimentation. Estranged from their original mission, the biennials will return to telling microhistories when they are simply able to be “just another exhibition”.

## notes

1. See ch. 2 of this book.
2. Pallucchini Rodolfo, “The meaning and worth of the ‘Biennale’ in Venetian and Italian artistic life”, Conference held at the Giorgio Cini Foundation in Venice, 28 June, 1961 and published in AA. VV., *Venezia nell’Unità d’Italia*, Sansoni, Florence, 1962, p. 160.
3. Cf. Martini, Federica, “One Biennale, many biennials”, in this book, p. 103.
4. Basualdo, Carlos, “The Unstable Institution”, *Manifesta Journal*, No. 2, autumn-winter 2003-2004, pp. 50-61.
5. See Glasmeier, Michael, ed. *50 Jahre/ Years Documenta 1955-2005: Archive in Motion*. Kassel - Steidl, Göttingen, Kunsthalle Fridericianum, 2005.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 172.
7. Grasskamp, Walter, “For Example, documenta, or, How Is Art History Produced?”, Greenberg Reesa, Ferguson Bruce, Nairne Sandy eds. *Thinking about Exhibitions*. London and New York, Routledge, 2004, p. 68.
8. In 1948 the Biennale was fifty years old and had spent twenty of those years under fascism. Upon regaining activity just after the war, the Biennale’s president, Giovanni Ponti, and general secretary, Rodolfo Pallucchini, decided that in order to restore the Venetian institution with its function and role, a return to its origins was necessary. The Biennale’s new aim was to document Italian art and promote retrospective exhibitions of movements less noted in Italy due to fascist censorship. For more on the Biennale during the fascist era, see Stone, Marla. *The Patron State: Culture & Politics in Fascist Italy*. Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1998.
9. See the conference “Where is Art Contemporary? The Global Challenge of Art Museums”, whose results can in part be found in the publication Belting, Hans, Buddensieg, Andrea eds. *The Global Art World: Audiences, Markets, and Museums*, Ostfildern, Hatje Cantz, 2009; and in “History in the Present”, *Manifesta Journal*, No. 9, 2009-2010.
10. In 1959 *La Biennale di Venezia. Rivista trimestrale dell’ente della Biennale (The Venice Biennale. A quarterly journal of the Biennale)* was founded. Instituted with the goal of involving the public to a greater extent through the on-going publication of information on the life of the Venetian institution and on “the happenings of its events, not only at the moment of their realization, but also during their planning and design”. In Ponti, Giovanni, “Editoriale”, *La Biennale di Venezia rivista trimestrale d’arte dell’ente della Biennale*, No.1, July 1950. In 1958, under the direction of Umbro Apollonio, the *Osservatorio* was born, a column entrusted to young critics writing about national and international art exhibitions, the cinema, theatre and contemporary music. The *Osservatorio*, as a column dedicated to the analysis of art and contemporary culture, was one of the first of its kind to help topple traditionally historical categories and hierarchies.
11. The term “reinvented” can be found in the official web site of documenta [[www.documenta.de](http://www.documenta.de)], with reference to describing what the exhibition is: “Every five years, a new director is chosen and the exhibition is reinvented”.
12. Glasmeier, *op.cit.*, p. 175.

13. Cf. Fowle, Kate, "Who Cares? Understanding the Role of the Curator Today", Rand Steven, Kouris Heather eds. *Cautionary Tales: Critical Curating*, New York, Apexart, 2007, p. 30.
14. Cawes, Mary Ann, *Manifestos: A Century of Isms*, University of Nebraska Press, p. XX.
15. Cf. Grasskamp, Walter, "To Be Continued: Periodic Exhibitions (documenta, For Example)", *Tate Papers*, No. 12, autumn 2009; Alloway, Lawrence, *The Venice Biennale 1895-1968...*, cit.; Westecker, Dieter, *documenta-Dokumente 1955 bis 1968: Texte und Fotografien*, Kassel, Georg Wenderoth Verlag, 1972.
16. Cf. Martini, Federica, Martini, Vittoria, "Questions of Authorship in Biennial Curating", Filipovic Elena, Van Hal Marieke, Ovstebo Solveig eds. *The Biennial Reader: An Anthology on Large-scale Perennial Exhibitions of Contemporary Art*, Ostfildern, Hatje Cantz, 2010, pp. 260-275.
17. For further discussion see also Haxthausen, Charles W. eds. *The Two Art Histories: The Museum and the University*. Yale University Press, 2002 and Obrist, Hans-Ulrich. *Breve storia della curatela*. Milan, Postmedia Books, 2011. Jean-Marc Poinot observes that between the second half of the 1970s, at about the time of the opening of the Centre Pompidou in Paris, and into the 1980s, different contemporary art museums and curators return to historicizing, with exhibitions that focus on "natural history" and "formalism". In this context the biennials can become a third entity, next to that of museums and universities, for the writing of art history. Poinot, Jean-Marc, "Large-Scale Exhibitions", Greenberg Reesa, Ferguson Bruce, Nairne Sandy eds. cit, pp. 41-7.
18. Cf. Abbas, Akbar. *Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance*. Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1997.
19. Cf. Guilbault, Serge. *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom and the Cold War*. Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1985.
20. This is the case of the Venice Biennale where the Venetian Ca' Pesaro and the Museum Rivoltella di Trieste acquire a large extent of the contemporary works belonging to their collections. In search of an alternative to the system of national representation offered by the Venice Biennale, in 1963 René Berger launched, in Lausanne, the Salon des Galeries Pilotes, a prototype of the contemporary art fair. From among the events influencing the art fair model, it is important to note, above all, the event organised at the Kunsthalle in Cologne, from which *ArtCologne; Prospect* was born in Düsseldorf, conceived by Konrad Fischer and Hans Strelow, and in 1970, *Art Basel* was started in Basel.
21. Cf. Cherix, Christophe, "Faires de l'art: miroir aux avant-gardes?", Aupetitallot Yves, Lepdor Catherine eds. *Inside the Sixties: gp 1.2.3. Le Salon national de galeries-pilotes à Lausanne 1963 1966 1970* Lausanne, Musée Cantonal des Beaux-Arts, and Zurich, JRP, 2002, p. 86.
22. Restany, Pierre, "Per il nuovo Centre Pompidou. Intervista a Pontus Hultén di Pierre Restany", *Domus*, May 1976, No. 558.
23. For the inauguration of the new Centre Pompidou, the first French museum of contemporary art and one of the first interdisciplinary centres for contemporary art in Europe, Hultén presented three large exhibitions. These exhibitions analysed the artistic and cultural exchange among important European cities: *Paris-New York 1908-1968* in 1977, *Paris-Berlin 1900-1933* in 1978, and *Paris-Moscow 1900-1930* in 1979. Hultén also organised *Paris-Paris 1937-1957* in 1981. For the relationship between the Biennale and the urban scene, see Martini, Federica, "Scattering, Spattering, Puddling and Pulverising: Thematic Exhibitions and Urban Spaces in Contemporary Art Biennials", Ricci Clarissa ed. *Starting from Venice: Studies on the Biennale*, Milan, et.al/edizioni, 2010.
24. The impact of this thinking on the biennials is analysed in Bradley, Jessica, "Internation Exhibitions: A Distribution System for a New Art World Order", *Beyond the Box: Diverging Curatorial Practices*, Toronto, Banff International Curatorial Institute, 2003.
25. Buchloh, Benjamin H.D., Martin, Jean-Hubert, "The Whole Earth Show", *Art in America*, No. 77, 1989, p. 150.
26. Clifford, James. *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art*. Harvard University Press, 1988, pp. 190-194.
27. O'Neill, Paul ed. *Curating Subjects*. London, De Appel, 2007. See also Albertazzi, Liliana, "The Magicians Convene in Paris", *Contemporanea*, Vol. 2, No. 5, 1989, pp. 54-61; Greenberg, Reesa, "Identity Exhibitions: From Magiciens de la Terre to Documenta XI", *Art Journal*, No. 64, spring 2005, pp. 90-94.
28. Buchloh, Martin, *op.cit.*, p. 152.
29. Enwezor, Okwui, "Topographies of Critical Practice: Exhibition as Place and Site", *The Exhibitionist*, No. 2, June 2010, pp. 47-52.
30. The historiographical change in methodology took place in the first half of the twentieth century with the Annales School, founded by Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre. The school was founded in protest to the "great narrations" of history, conventional periodization and hence, against historical relativism. Microhistory was well accepted in Italy during the second half of the twentieth century mainly due to the series of books "Microstorie", published by Einaudi and directed by Carlo Ginzburg and Giovanni Levi, as well as to "Quaderni storici" published by Il Mulino.
31. Cf. Moulin, Raymonde, *Le Marché de l'art: Mondialisation et nouvelles technologies*, Paris, Flammarion, 2009.
32. *Ibid.*, p. 47.
33. Pethes, Nicolas, Ruchatz, Jenz. *Dizionario della memoria e del ricordo*. Milan, Bruno Mondadori, 2002.
34. The term "normal exception" (it."eccezionale normale") was coined by Edoardo Grendi in "Microanalisi e storia sociale", *Quaderni storici*, 35, 1977, pp. 506-520.

## A Conversation with Alfredo Jaar

*Much debate was arisen around Magiciens de la Terre. What was your experience in this show?*

I received a letter from the curators inviting me. I assumed they had seen my work at the Venice Biennale in 1986 and in documenta the following year. They invited me to create a new work. At that time I had just begun to investigate the dumping of European toxic waste in Africa, so I proposed that this could be my starting point; they accepted. They funded my first trip to the continent – a research trip to Nigeria.

I had been interested in Africa for some time – focusing on the issue of media representation of Africa in the USA in particular – but I had never been able to afford a trip to the African continent. I had already started this methodology of traveling to a place, investigating a specific issue and then making work based on my research. For the Venice Biennale in 1986 I had visited the Brazilian Eastern Amazon, and transformed my reportage about gold mining into an installation. I had decided to develop these kinds of international investigations as a response to the provincialism I perceived in New York, where I had been living since 1982.

Because I came from Chile people expected me to make work about Chile and I have always fought against that. I wanted to be free to focus on anything I wanted, just as North American and European artists do.

I remember being afraid that the title of the exhibition, *Magiciens de la Terre*, was too exotic, that works would be read the wrong way. But when I saw the list of invited artists and realized that artists I greatly respected were going to participate, like Haacke, On Kawara, Boetti and Anselmo for example, then I felt it was safe to take part myself.

During the installation period Richard Long was working just across from my space in La Villette. I ran into Hans Haacke whom I had already met in New York. I knew well some of the South American artists such as Jose Bedia and Cildo Meireles. Cildo was someone that I admired and considered very important but he did not exist in the European contemporary art world of 1989. He had participated in the *Information* exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1970 but I believe *Magiciens* was one of his first shows outside our continent. Also close to my space was Huang Yong Ping and his washing machines, but there was no occasion to meet him. I met other artists only when I needed to borrow some tools. I was disappointed by the lack of social opportunities during the installation – it was very chaotic and there was no time. I certainly didn't have time to enjoy Paris – I didn't even see the second part of the exhibition at the Centre Pompidou! There were some incredibly smart juxtapositions at La Villette, for instance between works by Richard Long and Esther Mahlangu. Facing it, the obvious question was to ask yourself why do we see some practices as exotic, primitive, or craft and other work, which is comparably made, as conceptual?

I was puzzled by the negativity of the critical reception of the show. It was frustrating that critics attacked the exhibition almost automatically, sometimes without even having seen the show, and focusing exclusively on the obvious neo-colonial perspective; too few bothered to ask artists from former colonies what the show meant for them. I think critics were suspicious because the show was taking place in Paris, given France's very problematic colonial history – I am certain that if exactly the same show had taken place in New York at that time the reception would have been very different.

*Magiciens de la Terre* was without doubts an exhibition for its time; I really think it changed our small, pathetic, provincial art world. Finally the fraud had been exposed. Before, an international exhibition meant ten Americans and a couple of Germans. In 1989 there was a huge amount of resistance to artists from other countries and cultures; basically the doors were closed. After *Magiciens de la Terre* there could be no turning back; it was the first crack in the Western bunker of art.

*Magiciens de la Terre* started an irreversible process and it was the beginning of a very long and complex journey that will never end. The status quo today is definitely much better than in 1989, but the road ahead is still very long and difficult, as real change will happen only when structural transformations are made in the dominant institutions and media.

*Even though you have participated in several perennial exhibitions, your intervention was always contextualised in 'stateless' situations, such as documenta 2002 and, in Venice, Aperto 1986, the African Pavilion (2007) or the Fear Pavilion (2009).*

It is obvious to any observer that the Venice Biennial national pavilion system belongs to another century and should be abolished.

Why hasn't it changed? Because the art world is a perfect reflection of the geopolitical reality of our times, as simple as that. The increased focus on Chinese artists, for example, is nothing more and nothing less than the acknowledgement that China has become the second economy of the planet and that the art market axis is shifting towards Asia. The same explanation is valid for Indian artists. These are not new artists working on the scene, they simply were invisible until the economy of their respective countries became impossible to ignore.

As I wrote a few years ago, I am not advocating for the "art world" to correct the dire imbalances of the "real world," but I would like to suggest that every effort should be made not to replicate so perfectly those imbalances. We should perhaps all declare ourselves stateless. That would certainly trigger a major change in the system. In a way we are all stateless. There isn't a single country in the world with which I identify myself ideologically, artistically, culturally or intellectually. I do identify with certain individual minds, intellectuals who have enlightened me with their thinking, but not with a country.

I have encountered so many people that previously thought I was African, or Italian, or Brazilian, or Angolan. When I returned from witnessing the Rwandan genocide, I went to the Rwandan embassy and requested a Rwandan passport in symbolic solidarity with their suffering. They refused, of course. But today I am designing the Memorial for the victims of the genocide in Kigali. Concerned by the fact I am white and non-African, I demanded the unequivocal support of the most important survivors organizations for my design before proceeding. People do not expect an artist born in Chile to be concerned by what happens in any other country. I find it shockingly normal. This is what makes me human.

I identify with a little country called the Kalakuta Republic. It was created by Fela Anikulapo Kuti, one of the most extraordinary musicians of our time. I visited him at the Shrine in Lagos, Nigeria where he performed three nights per week. In the last concert I attended, he told us in the audience: "You Africans, listen to me as Africans. And you, non-Africans, listen to me with an open mind!"



## A Conversation with Stéphanie Moisdon

*The concept of the 2007 Lyon Biennial entitled History of a Decade that Has Not Yet Been Named opened with the following statement: "Our era has done with the movements and the ideological, national, stylistic, and generational rallyingings that structured the preceding decades". Indeed, these elements characterise traditional contemporary art biennials, which are often linked to greater or lesser limitations set by national (see Venice) or generational representations ("Younger than Jesus" Whitney Biennial), or by curatorial programmes. To what extent can these practices be used to write the history of contemporary art?*

The renewal of biennials and other great international exhibitions is due to events linked to globalisation and to a representational crisis in terms of identity, nationality, history, or geography. Not only are biennials a consequence of the above (which some choose to view as dramatic), but sometimes they follow the events with pretty theories that replace the ones that were previously enunciated by intellectuals and historians. When I was a child, art and its visual representations were used as a support to school textbooks; *Guernica* illustrated the Spanish war. Nowadays, it is history that works its way into exhibition catalogues, just like an illustration or a picture card. Art has become a vehicle for writing, expressing collective thoughts and producing reality; even the conflicting, fragmented, isolated realities of our life conditions and thought processes. Art expresses, better than any other practice, the loss of pivot points, hierarchies, and categories, systems of classification and order of forms and knowledge. It also says a lot about how forms are born, both free forms, and ones that are alike. Art has a lead over historical thoughts: it will not make do with the ruins of democracy. Starting from this point, the use of the theme or the pre-text of a biennial

(such as the Lyon Biennial, for example) as the source and structure of a historical novel provides a clear indication. When choosing between memory and anticipation, bearing in mind my firm belief that an artist, more than anybody else is essentially obsessed with the present, the most interesting dimension to represent always seems to be that of the immediate revolutions, those quiet and invisible ones. What is more, the art of criticism is about letting oneself be carried away by these revolutions.

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