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One Biennale, Many Biennials¹

Federica Martini

Metaphorai and Condensation Zones

In the chapter “Spatial Stories” from *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel de Certeau points out a specificity of the modern Greek language, where means of transportation are called *metaphorai*.² Vehicles, just like narratives, continue de Certeau, traverse and organize places every day; they differentiate and connect them, giving life to phrases, stories, itineraries, and routes. Metaphors also traverse the contemporary art system and connect places that are drawn nearer by the notion of globalization.³ Among them, the most widespread is the notion of a large-scale exhibition, often defined “biennial” regardless of its periodicity, in honor of the Venice Biennale that started in 1895, amidst the early nineteenth-century national debates.⁴ The Venice show is therefore considered the oldest perennial exhibition, as well as the one that defines the interplay between the international and local art scenes as an institutional feature of biennials.

Since the beginning, large-scale periodical exhibitions aimed at showcasing the art of the present in conjunction with narratives about the places and cultural contexts where the works were produced. The biennial exhibition context condenses places and works of art, as well as diverse ideas about nations and cultural identity, and seems to follow the romantic ambition of Jules Verne’s fictional character Phileas Fogg to compress the complexity of the world and the spirit of a time, in an 80-day journey. This nineteenth-century matrix informs the Biennale’s custom of bringing together artists from a wide range of geographical regions and cultural positions that are documented through a local and international “exploration journey.” There is a formal inherent vice in this approach, which Claude Lévi-Strauss uncovers when he defines research journeys not as the means “to discover unknown facts after long and thorough study, but in covering a considerable number of kilometres while collecting fixed and animated images, preferably in colour.”⁵ 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.”⁶

The criticality and sensationalism attached to journeys and displacements that prepare the exhibition raise several questions for both World Fairs and biennials. This criticality appears mainly in the light of the 1990s’ increased visibility of large-scale exhibitions both in art histories and the media, and the consequent consolidation of the biennials’ institutional role to support cultural creation in an international context.⁷ What is their status in the exhibition process? “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? Furthermore, the spectacular nature of contemporary art biennials reveals their vocation to produce exhibitions and conceptual representations. As Timothy Mitchell points out, 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.”⁸ This system of objects, resulting from the classifying eagerness of the World Fairs, introduces into Western city centers “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.”⁹

Along these lines, in the transition from World Fairs to the present-day, large-scale exhibitions seem to “reflect” a globalized construction of the art system while they feed into the construction of the art scene of which they are part.¹⁰ In addition to producing exhibitions, they generate concepts and question theoretical positions concerning geographies and ideas of national and transnational space, confronting the dialectics of center/margin and inclusion/exclusion.¹¹ The problem of such a polarized cultural system, writes Russell Ferguson, lies in its binary articulation of the center/periphery vision.¹² In other words, on what basis (with respect to whom/to what) do art scenes get represented in biennials, and how are they designed as subordinate or central? How is invisibility produced, and what is the institutions’ role in this?

At the time of its inception in 1895, the Venice Biennale provided a privileged site for debate on regionalism and the recent unification of Italy. In its spatial and conceptual organization, the detailed articulation of the Northern Italian art scenes and the merging of all Southern production in a shared room bore witness to the ongoing internal colonialism. Within this context, the Venice Biennale also provided an extremely fertile situation for producing the new national symbols (paintings, sculptures) that would later feed public art collections across the country. Parallel to that, the Venice Biennale immediately presented the ambition of bringing together contemporary artworks and artists from different nations for the benefit of a broad audience. Later, in 1968, the desire to recount a “world [that] was shrinking” while “cosmopolitan sensibility expanded” was still an essential element in the exotism implied in the Venice show: “A big exhibition is a compressed journey, writes Lawrence Alloway, the journey to the Orient or Africa, taken by the exhibition visitor in a day.”¹³

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, it 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, in the beginning, the aim was to represent the world through art, throughout the twentieth-century biennials gradually became the seats for critical reflection on how artists address contemporary reality in a globalized context. Along these lines, more and more frequently large-scale exhibitions participated in performing, more or less voluntarily, crucial elements of contemporary culture, of the construction of difference and off-center 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 may 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 kind of writing, born from a mixture of different traditions and literary models.¹⁴ Similarly to novels, biennials also join and condense different exhibition models and concepts. Historically, large-scale exhibitions kept track of the experiences of World Fairs and the Germanic Secessions; they encompassed elements and metaphors of contemporary exhibitions like fairs, cultural festivals, and the notion of the laboratory museum while remaining open to curatorial experimentation. As the role of curators evolved, different metaphors of exhibitions intertwined.

The commemoration of the past intersected the celebration of the present; the logic of the network was grafted, according to the epoch, onto the spatial organization of the map that the national pavilions in the Giardini of Castello evoked; the need for modernization 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, which 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 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, remnants from World Fairs play a significant role in fostering an Orientalist, Eurocentric vision of the art system. The assembling of these options lets us challenge how exhibitions contribute to producing the consciousness of an era, and to reflecting—writes Yves Michaud—the vision that an intellectual, economic, and ruling class of that period wishes to offer.¹⁵

Places of Memory: documenta, the Johannesburg Biennale, and the Gwangju Biennale

Artistic director Germano Celant titled the 1997 Venice Biennale *Past, Present, Future*. In biennials, the most visible of these three temporal dimensions is that of the present in contemporary art: the exhibition’s synchro-

nous approach that represents the globalized situation of the art system. Their global-scale presence transformed perennial exhibitions into a sort of “cyclical historical spectacle” that is affected by a feeling of experiencing a ubiquitous and simultaneous exhibition that is multi-sited.

From a chronological point of view, biennials regularly intersect with the histories of the countries organizing them. Through their periodicity and ritual of such events, biennials reveal a dual nature of both temporal maps and places where present creation intertwines with a celebration of national identity and the past. Indeed, many large-scale shows often emerge during transitional phases and mark as turning points in the national history of communities that host them. The silver wedding anniversary of the king and queen of Italy, Umberto and Margherita of Savoy, provided the official motive for the first Venice Biennale; the São Paulo Biennial anticipated by two years the celebration of the city’s 400th anniversary (1951); the Alexandria Biennale (1955) was inaugurated on the occasion of the third anniversary of the Egyptian national revolution.

Along with Mikhail Bakhtin, biennials 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.”¹⁶ 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 biennial a place in which time and different types of narratives meet. Pierre Nora defined as *lieux de mémoire* the places of collective memory born after the dissolution of common memories.¹⁷ 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 collective memory.

Such elements also appear in the design of periodical exhibitions like documenta in Kassel.¹⁸ 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 the 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 opportunity sparked the interest of landscape architect Hermann Mattern, Professor at the Kunstakademie Kassel, who launched the idea of hosting an exhibition in the center of Friedrichsplatz. His colleague, the 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 provided to its organizers “an ideal undertaking for portraying the idea of Europe through an art exhibition located thirty kilometres from the East German borders.”¹⁹ Bode believed that, on a symbolic level, Kassel was the ideal location for showing avant-garde art in Germany again, after the dramatic interruption provoked by the Nazi regime in 1937 with the Munich show *Entartete Kunst* (Degenerate Art).²⁰

In particular, often traumatic, times throughout history, biennials have taken possession of symbolic places, with a twofold objective of preserving their history and opening them up to the present through the organization 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 biennial 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.”²¹ In the 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.”²² Around this first edition of the Gwangju exhibition, entitled *Beyond the Borders*, sparked some collateral events including the show *Gwangju Memory of May*, dedicated to the generation of

1979-89, and the collective show *Art as Witness*, on the relationship between contemporary art and democracy.

The Johannesburg Biennale also occurs around a historical landmark, 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 decentralization of African contemporary art, in so far as biennials, said artist Kendell Geers, performed "a new form of cultural colonialism": "Although western curators are visiting 'marginal' regions in search of new talent—continues Geers—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."²³

Even though a triennial of contemporary art was organized in Cape Town in 1985, it was not until the early 1990s that an increasing number of periodical exhibitions and festivals across the African continent repositioned and networked local art scenes on an international level, including Doualart in Cameroon (1991), the Bamako Encounters of Photography in Mali (1994), and the Biennale de l'art africain, later known as Dakart, in Senegal (1989). More to the point, Dakart's conscious refocus on contemporary African art in 1996 established a clear conjunction with 1970s non-aligned countries' art events such as the Arab Art Biennale (Baghdad 1974 and Rabat 1976) and the Havana Biennial (founded in 1984) and their claim to produce an alternative to the consensual Western model of international art.

Repositioning the art scenes on the global scale also forced responses from Western institutions, as it was the case of controversial exhibitions such as *Magiciens de la Terre* (1989) at the Centre Pompidou in Paris. The large group exhibition hosted over one hundred artists and aimed at broadening the view on global art practices with a "worldwide survey." As biennials do, the show created a platform for encounter and a theme-based approach. However, it did not manage to challenge the foundations of Western exoticism, and its vision of art/craft implied, from its very title, in the critical distinction between artists and magicians and in its consequent affinity with modernist myths of origins. Within this framework, the reading of a plural international art scene that *Magiciens* phrased through its curatorial statement did not manage to engage critical debate on the ways culture is produced or to escape colonial legacy.

Biennials, Maps, and Networks: The Venice Biennale and Manifesta

The dissemination of contemporary art biennials across the world 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. In Alfred Barr's MoMA, works of art were no longer presented "as documents of national history" but preferably displayed as documents of a history of style.²⁴ The need for such a change also applied to contemporary art biennials. Although the first large-scale exhibitions—in particular in Venice, São Paulo, and Alexandria—preserved the national "competitive origins" of the World Fairs, the Venetian traditional way of national representation sprang from the desire to shape taste and style in art.²⁵ Since the mid-1970s, this desire encounters the curatorial practice of disseminating art interventions outside the architecture of the exhibition space to expand across the city. Increasingly, throughout the 1980s and 1990s, periodical exhibitions have revealed their ability to exist as an international mapping experiment that unfurls over local space. By engaging notions of creolization and constellation, Okwui Enwezor's documenta in 2002 platforms managed to facilitate a simultaneous multi-site approach for large-scale exhibitions.

Without establishing a filiation between contemporary curatorial processes and early Venice Biennales, we may nonetheless highlight some resonances linking the building of national pavilions in the Giardini and following reflections on how national identities may be represented (or unrepresented) in perennial exhibitions. When in 1907 the Belgian Pavilion became the first national pavilion in the Giardini di Castello, the Biennale's main exhibition pavilion articulated itself in a Crystal Palace fashion, as a succession of rooms, each dedicated to a precise Italian regional area or a selection of countries.

Elke Krasny reminds that within the framework of World Fairs and biennials alike pavilions combine their original function as "garden architecture" toward the mission of representing national culture and identity.²⁶ This structure re-emerges in Venice, where the World Fair's principle of pavilion-nation specializes in the representation of national art. In this manner, the Giardini gradually acquired the twofold appearance of a basic map of European nation-states and a site for the spectacularization of art. Artist Hans Schabus' *The Last Land* for the Austrian Pavilion in 2005 brought into question this dual front. In the project, architect Joseph

Hoffmann's 1934 architecture is used as a means to read through the history of the Austrian participation in the Biennale. The research included the pavilion's architectural history as well as the critical relations between Venice and Austria, which explain why the peripheral position of the Austrian pavilion on Sant'Elena island. For his intervention, Schabus covered the pavilion with a wooden structure and created a temporary mountain against the background of the city of Venice. The work succeeded in implanting a temporary landscape element in the Giardini di Castello and affected the view of 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 located, 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 naturalize the myth of its origins, regularly resurfaces in the history of nationalism. Such an attempt may appear paradoxical considering that the idea of nation is a relatively recent invention. Connected with the "invention of tradition," a process leading to the creation of architectural symbols, monuments, and ceremonies, 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.²⁷ 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 calls the "many socio-cultural narrations based on geographic awareness."²⁸ Based on these narrations, the occupation of space unfolds at the interplay between subjective artistic interventions and power dynamics. Along these lines, the Giardini represent the material place where the exhibition's geographic, spatial, and geopolitical issues meet. When Curator Stefan Banz invited Gianni Motti to participate in the Swiss Pavilion group show in 2005, the artist's first proposal was related to the names on the facades of the national pavilions. Since the project stimulated little interest in Cultural Councils, Motti proposed renaming the street where the Swiss Pavilion is as "Viale Szeemann," thus influencing the topography (and the toponymy) of the Giardini rather than its international cartography. Motti's intervention shows that the map of the Giardini may be seen as

the result of reciprocal relationships among things and events that contribute to shaping its morphology.

In the Venice Biennale Giardini, this map ensues from the ensemble of the pavilions and the temporary events of the different editions. Additional factors that contribute to shaping the Giardini maps are the in-between spaces that connect the pavilions—the streets, avenues, and micro-gardens that border the buildings. Many of these sites have been marked by temporary interventions. Some of these proposals suggested the absence of some nations in the gardens: in 1999, Rirkrit Tiravanija planted a teak tree to symbolize the absence of a Thai pavilion; in 2003, Sandi Hilal and Alessandro Petti conceived a scattered Palestinian pavilion of free-standing Palestinian passports in the park outside the Giardini; before officially representing Kosovo in the off-the-Giardini pavilion in 2005 and again in 2017, Sislej Xhafa performed in 1997 a clandestine and itinerant pavilion dressed as a footballer, with an Albanian flag hanging from his backpack.

As these unofficial artistic interventions show, the pavilions' proximity to one another in the Giardini emphasize a sharp geopolitical design: the prominent position of the Italian Pavilion; the triangulation of France, Great Britain, and Germany; the close vicinity of Holland and Belgium, or Denmark and Iceland; the gathering of Sweden, Norway, and Finland into the North Pavilion. The edges of the Giardini delimit an inside-outside dialectic: the pavilions located within the historical perimeter of the Venice Biennale are set apart from other national pavilions located in the city's historical buildings and from the "unofficial" participations.

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 and the gradual phasing-out of univocal notions of national identity.²⁹ Other forms of internationalism emerged in the 1960s and 1970s art scenes, whereas exhibitions such as documenta had already produced alternatives to the national representation system, though remaining confined within a Western art scene. The 1980s found a more radical alternative in the Havana Biennial. In 1984, the first edition centered on Latin-American and Caribbean art. 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 formalized in 1989, with *Tradition and*

Contemporaneity.³⁰ La Habana brings in an idea that site-specificity could be addressed in alternative transnational systems and multi-sited exhibition spaces. While the Venice Giardini and the city itself get gradually pavilionized as the show grows, other periodical exhibitions emerge in the international map of biennials. Among them, Manifesta, whose first edition took place in Rotterdam in 1996.

As the biennial exhibition format disseminated outside the traditional art capitals, Manifesta applied a decentered gaze to a post-Wall Europe and conceived an off-the-center itinerant model. While new biennials were opening in Lyon, Barcelona, Oslo, Valencia, Tirana, Liverpool, and Uppsala, Manifesta positioned itself as an heir of the post-1989 geopolitical agenda. The fall of the Berlin Wall had produced a moment of “euphoria” that made it possible to imagine a post-national representation scenario, where a network of European cities would, in turn, host the biennial. René Block recalls that the itinerant exhibition drew its inspiration from artist Robert Filliou’s *Towards an Art-of-Peace Biennale* in 1985, which was meant to start from Hamburg and eventually iterate across Europe.³¹

In the 1990s, the suspension of the national representation system drew many supporters. For the 1993 Venice Biennale, Achille 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 Biennial adopted the question of cultural identity as a theme—a powerful statement for a biennial that was founded in New York in 1932 and had specialized in American art. The Whitney Biennial belongs to what Paul Ardenne would define as a “national biennial” that enhances the local scene.⁴⁶ “Regional” periodical shows, such as the Buenos Aires Biennial and *Dakart*, reunite geographic realities and artists connected by common cultural and historical experiences. Such biennials have the dual task of giving visibility and strengthening networks of exchange among the different regional entities involved and the international scene. This is the case of the Alexandria and Cairo biennials, which were founded 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 Alexandria Biennale 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.³² Whereas the Alexandria Biennale looked at the Mediterranean region, the Cairo Biennale

specifically addressed art production from the Arab countries first in 1984 and eventually opened its doors to artists from non-Arab countries and involved forms of national representation through the support of Cultural Councils.

More recently, in 2006 the São Paulo Biennial also renounced a national representation system. In support of her proposal, curator Lisette Lagnado explained that, “In socio-political terms, the large migrations of the twentieth-century have diluted the notion of 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.”³³

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. In the same way, Lisette Lagnado’s *Bienal* 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 percent of its visitors came. The exhibition’s duration was extended through a program of workshops and conferences that preceded the opening by two years and that, again with reference to Oiticica’s work, aimed at abandoning the logic of “transnational novelty” in order “[to create] history from within our own position of relevance and not inventing it from the outside.”³⁴

Global Crystal Palaces

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.³⁵ 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, 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, still in 2009 the catalogue of the Istanbul Biennial shared specific

statistics on the “native countries” of participating artists.³⁶ The data showed that twenty-eight percent of the artists were originally from Western countries and seventy-two percent from non-Western countries. These results changed, however, when statistics on the countries where the artists lived and worked were examined: only fifty-five percent lived in non-Western countries.

Migrations toward art system “centers” rarely appear in the assessment of the biennials phenomenon, which is often presented as a single phenomenon, tied to the globalization of the art system. However, several attempts to classify large-scale shows have been produced since the beginning of the 2000s, when the biennialization of the art world became a prominent phenomenon for art history, curatorial studies, and exhibition history. Along these lines, René Block suggests differentiating them by the typology of organization. In this light, the Venice Biennale would, for example, be defined by its “worldwide” scale and cultural-diplomatic involvement.³⁷

In 2003, Okwui Enwezor described the different biennials through the perspective of their relationship with their host city and country, with their own exhibition history, and with geopolitics.³⁸ From this perspective, biennials may play out as an “expression of power and progress,” as is the case with the first Venice Biennales and Carnegie International. Other biennials begin in the aftermath of “post-traumatic” event and respond to a country’s desire to reposition itself in the international scene.

In 2004, Charlotte Bydler proposed a classification based on what biennials have wished to present to the public through their history and methods of communication. 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 Biennales from 1948 onwards, graphic art biennials, the Havana Biennial, and Dak’art are seen as expressions of the postwar international political climate, dominated by the logic of “blocks” and international alliances. Others still, such as Istanbul and Gwangju, which are tied to the cultural climate of the 1990s, prove wider “flexibility.”³⁹

All the biennial typologies and classifications mentioned above group large-scale exhibitions by their structure, the space they represent, or the image they produce. However, the intrinsic motivation that

underlies the biennial phenomenon is the constancy of its basic international principle. Although very capable of producing different metaphors and concepts, just like their nineteenth-century counterparts contemporary biennials variously combine international scope and promotion of the local scene. Similarly to Peter Sloterdijk’s “Crystal Palace exhibitions,” biennials metaphorically function as buildings with transparent facades that reflect and organize in their interiors a set of images and representations of the outside world.⁴⁰ Seen as such, biennials appear as a novel Frankenstein, with contemporary problems grafted onto a nineteenth-century body. This continuity shows in the persistent desire to reproduce the world on a small-scale, in the wish to convene different global voices in biennial-as-a-platform, all of which shows why the debate over national representation remains unresolved today at the Venice Biennale in particular, but also elsewhere.

The curatorial debate over biennials has generated new themes and metaphors. However, the basic conceptual structure of the exhibition, its scope, and its relationship with professional and broader audiences have remained virtually unchanged, whereas the exhibition formats have radically changed over time.⁴¹ Where periodicity initially provided the necessary distance for writing a history of present-day art, it is today blended in the proliferation of cultural events, biennials, fairs, and festivals, which take place simultaneously in different regions of the world. Perhaps we may begin by re-examining the biennial’s notion of time and its relationship to the local scenes, in order to reassess periodical exhibitions (and their scale) in a sustainable perspective.

Notes

1 A first version of this paper was published in Federica Martini, Vittoria Martini, *Just Another Exhibition: Stories and Politics of Biennials* (Milan: Postmediabooks, 2011). The text was updated in April 2020.

2 Michel de Certeau, *L’invention du quotidien, vol. I, L’art de faire* (Paris: Union générale d’éditions, 1974).

3 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), 110.

4 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 the 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.

5 Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques* (Paris: Librairie Plon, 1955), 53.

6 Ibid.

7 See Tim Griffin, "Global Tendencies: Globalism and the Large-Scale Exhibition," *Artforum* 42, no. 3 (November 2003): 152-163, 206, 212; and Claire Doherty, "Location, Location," *Art Monthly* 281 (November 2004): 12.

8 See Timothy Mitchell, "Orientalism and the Exhibitionary Order," in *The Visual Culture Reader*, ed. Nicholas Mirzoeff (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), 293.

9 Ibid.

10 Alexander Geppert, "Città brevi: storia, storiografia e teoria delle pratiche espositive europee, 1851-2000," *Memoria e ricerca. Rivista di storia contemporanea* 17 (September-December 2004): 8; Brian Wallis, "Selling Nations: International Exhibitions and Cultural Policies," *Art in America* 79 (September 1991): 84-91.

11 For the representation of alterity in contemporary art, see Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine, eds., *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Public Display* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991); and James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988).

12 Russell Ferguson et al., eds., *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures* (New York: The New Museum and Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990), 9.

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