

**Rethinking the Biennial**  
**MPhil By Project by Marieke van Hal**

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Marieke van Hal.

“A twenty first century biennial will utilize calculated uncertainty and conscious incompleteness to produce a catalyst for invigorating change whilst always producing the harvest of the quiet eye.” Cedric Price

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Reader for Lecturers  
Bergen Biennial Conference Program  
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## 1. Introduction

The *biennialization* process, much talked about in the international curatorial field, hasn't been really critically assessed. Many cities think about establishing contemporary art biennials, but knowledge is lacking about the manifold artistic, theoretical, political ambitions and implications of such large-scale perennial exhibitions. The Shakespearian question "to biennial or not to biennial" is usually addressed by a mix of professionals from different fields, in most cases from the cultural and political (finance providing) field. The biennial is a tool in their hands, which requires consideration and examination every time anew.<sup>1</sup>

What however *is* a biennial? For optimists the biennial is a critical site of experimentation in exhibition making, offering artists, curators, and spectators a vital alternative to museums and other similar institutions, whose institutional inertias do not allow them to respond with immediacy and flexibility to contemporary art's developments. Some even see the biennial form as being full of redemptive and even utopian possibility, or as a testament to a paradigm shift: a platform—like perhaps no other art institution before it—for grappling with such issues as politics, race, ethics, identity, globalization, and post-colonialism in art-making and -showing. For sceptics, however, the word biennial has come to signify nothing more than an overblown symptom of spectacular event culture, the result of some of the most specious transformations of the world in the age of late capitalism; in short, a Western typology whose proliferation has infiltrated the most far reaching parts of the world where such events would be little more than entertaining or commercially driven showcases designed to feed an ever-expanding tourist industry. While being emphatically also an exhibition (at least it has been mostly and traditionally thus far), most biennial's analysts often understand the biennial as being "neither exclusively nor even primarily a space of spectacular display."<sup>2</sup> And between most contradictory positions of either cynicism or critical embrace lie also questions about what a biennial *can* or *should* be.

Over the years, the biennial has been used to refer to a vast landscape of different exhibition

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this thesis, as a matter of practicality and consistency, the English spelling "biennial" is used to refer to each of the biennials discussed regardless of their linguistic differences or official or semiofficial spellings.

<sup>2</sup> Hoskote, Ranjit. "Biennials of Resistance, Reflections on the Seventh Gwangju Biennale." In *The Biennial Reader, An Anthology on Large-Scale Perennial Exhibitions of Contemporary Art*, edited by Elena Filipovic, Marieke van Hal, and Solveig Øvstebø, Bergen and Ostfildern: Bergen Kunsthall and Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2010: 308.

projects, with no source agreeing on their total number (currently thought to be somewhere between one hundred and two hundred around the world).<sup>3</sup> Often grandiose in scale, sometimes dispersed across several locations in a city, at times locally embedded through site-specific commissions while being global in ambition, and often including discursive components such as symposia, extensive publications, or even accompanying journals alongside a group show featuring, for the most part, a panoramic view of a new generation of artists, the term “the biennial” has become shorthand for many wildly different recurring exhibitions of contemporary art, including triennials and even the quinquennial Documenta.<sup>4</sup>

Each new biennial institution gains inspiration by existing biennial models and types but every newly established biennial rethinks the exact format in relation to the particularities and distinctiveness of its site. To locate the potential value and significance of biennials, it is important to look at the histories and exhibitionary precedents that made them possible. Yet these exhibition origins are still topic of discussion. Do they lie in the Crystal Palace, that commercial and architectural feat of 1851? Is the Venice Biennial (itself a product of the nineteenth-century *exposition universelle*) indeed the true “mother” of the genre, and, as Caroline A. Jones wrote, a model of nation-building and display of cultural patrimony that undergird the biennial’s genealogy?<sup>5</sup> Or is the Havana Biennial, the first fully international, globally concerned, discursively backed biennial that was launched in 1984, the model for the proliferation of biennials that would follow in its wake?<sup>6</sup> Another exhibition, which arguably changed the parameters of biennials around the world, is *Les Magiciens de la Terre* curated by Jean-Hubert

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<sup>3</sup> It is difficult (if not impossible) to determine the exact number of biennials as several of them terminate to exist and new biennials are being established all the time around the world. See: <http://www.biennialfoundaton.org>.

<sup>4</sup> Technically speaking, Documenta would seem to have little reason for being in the category “biennial”, but while doing research many essays, reviews, and many professionals regularly seem to use the term ‘biennial’ to refer to Documenta. The same is done in this thesis, not so much to perpetuate inaccuracy, but to signal a cultural fact and further examine the kinship between various large-scale perennial exhibitions.

<sup>5</sup> Jones, Caroline A. “Biennial Culture: A Longer History” In *The Biennial Reader, An Anthology on Large-Scale Perennial Exhibitions of Contemporary Art*, edited by Elena Filipovic, Marieke van Hal, and Solveig Øvstebø, Bergen and Ostfildern: Bergen Kunsthall and Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2010: 66-87.

<sup>6</sup> Niemojewski, Rafal. “Venice or Havana: A Polemic on the Genesis of the Contemporary Biennial” In *The Biennial Reader, An Anthology on Large-Scale Perennial Exhibitions of Contemporary Art*, edited by Elena Filipovic, Marieke van Hal, and Solveig Øvstebø, Bergen and Ostfildern, Bergen Kunsthall and Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2010: 88.

Martin in 1989.<sup>7</sup> The different perspectives that exist not only articulate a multiplicity of possible precedents for the biennial, but also reveal the stakes of such myths of origin.

And can one even speak of a singular origin or history of “the biennial” when the various types and models that seem to fit the term are spread all over the world and the cultural, financial, and ideological differences between them are so vast? The fact is that many individual biennial founding stories can be told, because, despite their emphatically internationalist ambitions, most large-scale recurrent exhibitions were made possible, or even necessary and urgent because of decisive *local* events and issues. These can vary from cultural, political, ecological or alternative needs, each of which differently impacts the tenor or scope of the resulting biennial project. By researching the origins of a wide range of biennials one gains insight in how each individual biennial—and indeed the biennial, as an overarching genre or type—might still be coming to terms with its own historical development.

The history of exhibitions is one of the most vital and yet, paradoxically, most neglected narratives of our cultural history. And given the important role of biennials and other recurrent exhibitions of contemporary art in contemporary culture, it is necessary to look at their evolution and status today. In this thesis, which is providing an up to date analysis of the critical debate on biennials, the question relevant to many cities and art professionals “to biennial or not to biennial” is being addressed. In a context of growing criticality towards the biennial as exhibition model since the millennium, discursive and research oriented curatorial forms have appeared in exhibition practice, reflecting a shift of focus from the exclusive presentation of concrete and autonomous art objects towards the engagement of the audience in listening, reading, participating and writing. The Bergen Biennial Conference and *The Biennial Reader*, the project parts of this thesis, represent the convergence of this phenomenon. They are the result of the critical re-thinking about biennials today.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> *Les Magiciens de la Terre* was conceived as a replacement of the format of the traditional Paris Biennial, and spread between the Musée National d'Art Moderne (Centre Georges Pompidou) and the Grande Halle of Parc de la Villette in Paris. The show attempted to confront the ethnocentric, colonialist mentality largely perpetuated in exhibition-making, and proposed a fully international art exhibition that included one hundred artists from around the world, fifty from the so-called centers of the world (the U.S. and Western Europe) and fifty from the “margins” (Africa, Latin America, Asia, and Australia), and displayed them without hierarchy. Although the resulting exhibition incited widespread debate and is still considered problematic, it has nevertheless come to be seen as a landmark in the history of exhibitions and as a model according to which many biennials explicitly or implicitly responded.

<sup>8</sup> The Bergen Biennial Conference, which was held September 17–20, 2009, in Bergen, Norway, was one of the largest international conferences on biennials ever organized. The event was supplemented by *The Biennial Reader: An Anthology on Large-Scale Perennial Exhibition of*

## 2. The Biennial Debate: Discussion on the Pros and Cons.

In his article “The Unstable Institution” in *Manifesta Journal*, the curator and art critic Carlos Basualdo indicated that whereas a profuse bibliography on museums exists, not a single publication seems to be solely devoted to the subject of large-scale exhibitions.<sup>9</sup> Basualdo gave a condensed outline of the multi-faceted connotations within which the recurring contemporary art biennial can be contextualized. He argued that a lack of a theoretical frame of reference to help interpret the biennial events is becoming more evident, especially as its development, i.e. the enormous expansion of the biennial landscape worldwide since the 1990s, is getting more urgent. Basualdo wrote this in the same year that Charlotte Bydler was completing her dissertation at the Uppsala University, one of the most valuable in-depth up to date studies analyzing the homogenizing and diversifying characteristics related to the development of a global contemporary art world.<sup>10</sup> By looking into a number of international biennials, such as Venice, Havana, Istanbul, Gwangju, and Manifesta, Bydler focused her research on the question of whether speaking about contemporary art as a global phenomenon is justified.

Another significant publication on the subject has been “The Manifesta Decade,” an anthology of debates on contemporary art exhibitions and biennials in post-Wall Europe, discussing the function and purpose of recurring international art exhibitions today.<sup>11</sup> Paul O’Neill’s publication “Curating Subjects” was equally insightful, attempting to critically respond to the considerable gap in historical knowledge on the radical shifts that have taken place in curating at the turn of the twentieth century.<sup>12</sup> And most recent, Bruce Altshuler’s first volume of his book

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*Contemporary Art*, edited by Elena Filipovic, Marieke van Hal, and Solveig Øvstebø, and published by Hatje Cantz Verlag and Bergen Kunsthall (Sept, 2010).

<sup>9</sup> See: Basualdo, Carlos. “The Unstable Institution.” In *Questions of Practice: What Makes a Great Exhibition?* edited by Paula Marincola. Philadelphia: Philadelphia Exhibitions Initiative, 2006. Reprinted in: Hal, Marieke van, Viktor Misiano, and Igor Zabel, eds. “Biennials,” special issue, *MJ–Manifesta Journal 2* (Winter 2003 -Spring 2004).

<sup>10</sup> Bydler’s dissertation (an abridged version of which is included in the main volume of *The Biennial Reader*) contextualized the biennial precisely in relation to the dissemination of information and increased access to travel, and the shifts in power that globalization prompted to create the polyphony of centers in which we are living today. See: Bydler, Charlotte. *The Global Art World, Inc.: On the Globalization of Contemporary Art*. Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis, 2004.

<sup>11</sup> Vanderlinden, Barbara, and Elena Filipovic, eds. *The Manifesta Decade: Debates on Contemporary Art Exhibitions and Biennials in Post-Wall Europe*. Brussels and Cambridge, MA: Roomade and MIT Press, 2005.

<sup>12</sup> O’Neill, Paul, ed. *Curating Subjects*. Amsterdam and London: De Appel and Open Editions, 2007.

“Salon to Biennial” has contributed to the field.<sup>13</sup>

Critical writing and theory on exhibition histories have only just become part of the contemporary art discourse.<sup>14</sup> Most articles and texts to date have spoken of a notable shift in contemporary art discourses as well as curatorial practices from the nineties onwards. Undoubtedly, this shift has been closely connected to the radical political changes that took place internationally such as the end of communism and the Cold War, the abolition of Apartheid, Europe’s expansion to the East and the socio-economic transformation of BRIC countries Brazil, Russia, India and China, as well as drastic technological changes like the use of Internet, and cheaper air-travel generating greater mobility. This has increased access to and dissemination of information in a new globalized environment, instigating shifts in existing places of power, geographically and institutionally, and creating a polyphony of centers.

After more than twenty years of biennial expansion, it is relevant to analyze some of the changes in the field of curating and look at the various aspects and implications. It is within this history of contemporary art practices that a dynamic growth of independent curatorial activity has been observed in the backdrop of a series of decentralization and reorientation processes taking place internationally, reflecting a transition of the *art situ*, which is bypassing the traditional Euro-American hegemony. The emergence of the independent travelling curator and the numerical growth of recurring, ephemeral, large-scale contemporary art exhibitions have dispersed the art forums and discourses globally and have repositioned their stage. Most innovative and alternative artistic and curatorial practices today take place in what would be anachronistically called the periphery. Also, critical thinking and writing on these types of practices is mostly scattered and can only be followed more concretely in the records of discursive platforms such as conferences and symposia programmed during biennials, exhibitions and art fairs in places like Havana, Moscow, New Delhi, Taipei, São Paulo or Singapore, in other words, all over the world.

Since the 1990s we have witnessed an astonishing spread and proliferation of the contemporary art biennial phenomenon.<sup>15</sup> In this same time period, various art colleges and institutions started to

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<sup>13</sup> Altshuler, Bruce. *Salon to Biennial: Exhibitions that Made Art History, Volume I: 1863–1959*. London: Phaidon Press, 2008.

<sup>14</sup> There have been only a few publications that focus on biennials, which include Barbara Vanderlinden and Elena Filipovic’s edited volume entitled *The Manifesta Decade: Debates on Contemporary Art Exhibitions and Biennials in Post-Wall Europe* (Cambridge [MA], 2005) and special issues of journals devoted to the subject, such as: Jorinde Seijdel and Liesbeth Melis (eds.), “The Art Biennial as a Global Phenomenon: Strategies in Neo-Political Times,” special issue, *Open* 16 (March 2009); and Marieke van Hal, Viktor Misiano, and Igor Zabel (eds.), “Biennials,” special issue, *MJ–Manifesta Journal* 2 (Winter 2003–Spring 2004).



assemble curatorial courses, seeking to devise a specific theoretical and practical framework for independent curating, and in effect articulating the profession of the curator.<sup>16</sup>

The phenomenon of the mega-exhibition expansion has animated the biennial debate, which can be generally divided between sceptical and optimistic points of view.<sup>17</sup> Some have regarded biennials as cultural products from the West imported by many countries striving to reproduce and simulate the popular model as a token for a recognized cultural status. Others have contextualized the expansion of biennials all over the world as signs of a democratized, globalized or *glocalized* cultural world. New occurrences in the culture industry also need to be viewed within the orbit of mainstream politics. Art is a significant and promotional instrument to support a cultural and or national entity. Biennials nowadays have also come to be regarded as economic goods and municipal or national assets.

The biennial optimists have a belief in the transient, flexible and versatile character of the biennial model, which has offered a new alternative site for artistic production. René Block, curator of several international biennials, talked about the “workshop character” of the biennial, especially related to those biennials that have distinguished themselves from the Venice and São Paulo model which are functioning on national representations. He connected the characteristic of a workshop to what he called “curator biennials”, such as Sydney, Istanbul, Johannesburg, Lyon, Berlin, Gwangju, Taipei, Shanghai and Yokohama. For Block it is the specific local situation and resonance that is of primary interest to the curators and invited artists participating in biennials. He designated it as an important task of the curator creating a kind of *Gesamtkunstwerk* together with the artists in the biennial location.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> To give a somewhat schematic impression of the evolution of the art world in the nineteen nineties, here is a list of some of the world’s biennials and when they were launched: 1991: Lyon Biennial; 1992: Dak’Art Biennial; 1993: Asia-Pacific Triennial, Sharjah Biennial, and Vento Sul Biennial; 1994: Shanghai Biennial; 1995: Gwangju Biennial, Johannesburg Biennial, São Tomé e Príncipe Biennial, and SITE Santa Fe Biennial; 1996: Manifesta (European Biennial of Contemporary Art); 1997: Mercosul Biennial and Periferic; 1998: Berlin Biennial, Busan Biennial, Momentum (Nordic Biennial), Montreal Biennial, and Taipei Biennial; 1999: Caribbean Biennial, Fukuoka Asian Art Triennial, and Liverpool Biennial; 2000: Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennial and Scape Biennial; 2001: Auckland Triennial, Göteborg Biennial, Tirana Biennial, Valencia Biennial, and Yokohama Triennial.

<sup>16</sup> Some of the most well-known in the West include: Le Magasin, Grenoble (established in 1987); Royal College of Art, London (1992); De Appel, Amsterdam (1994); Bard College, New York (1994); and Goldsmiths College, London (1996).

<sup>17</sup> It should be noted here that most art professionals working in the field seem to be aware of, and share, both sides of the argument.

<sup>18</sup> Heinrich, Barbara, ed. *Das Lied von der Erde / The Song of the Earth*. Exh. cat. Kassel, Museum Fridericianum, 2000: 4.

The advantage of the biennial as an exhibition platform in relation to other, more traditional and fixed exhibition venues such as the museum and the art institution lies in the opportunity it provides to experiment, free from the concern of collection and conservation issues, a public demand of a year-round program of activity, and visibility.<sup>19</sup> A biennial of contemporary art is more easily and quickly established than a museum of contemporary art, which usually takes up years of planning and construction, and more frequently than not faces delays due to changing politics or underestimated costs. Still, a biennial can have an equally stimulating impact and encouraging effect on the arts activity and discourse in the city. Istanbul and Athens can be given as examples here. At the time of the first Istanbul Biennial in 1987 and the first Athens Biennial in 2007 both cities were lacking the basic cultural infrastructure necessary for the advancement of contemporary arts: no museum of contemporary art, hardly any non-profit art institutions, just a few commercial galleries for contemporary art, no fundamental state support system for contemporary artists and a rather traditional art education system. With its successive editions, the Istanbul Biennial, organized by the private Istanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts, has contributed significantly to the vitalization of the contemporary art scene in Turkey and it has put the city on the international cultural map. In Athens, there have been discussions about building a museum for contemporary art but changing governments and lack of agreement has stymied progress. In reaction, three art professionals founded a private non-profit organization and established a biennial of contemporary art with all its archetypal characteristics: the national and international, the critical and the spectacle, the universal and the relative, the specific and generic, the temporary and continuous, etcetera.<sup>20</sup>

In an art historical context it seems that the enthusiasm for the biennial model as an alternative platform for the display of contemporary art coincided with a renaissance of *institutional critique* in the early 1990s. Biennials such as Manifesta, the Istanbul Biennial, the Gwangju Biennial and the Sharjah Biennial have placed particular emphasis on flexibility, experimentation and innovation, as well as a focus on site-specificity. Elena Filipovic questioned the distinction between the biennial exhibition and the traditional museum show even though. Biennials, she argued, fervently insist on a radical distinction from the idea of the museum, but at the same time they show art works in specially constructed settings that replicate the rigid geometries, white

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<sup>19</sup> Meyric Hughes, Henry. "The International Biennale, as a Place of Encounter." In *Art, Criticism and Globalization*, a seminar organized by the Brazilian Association of Art Critics, ABCA, in São Paulo, Brazil, September 2004.

<sup>20</sup> The Athens Biennial was founded in 2005. The first edition *Destroy Athens* (2007) was curated by Augustine Zenakos, Xenia Kalpaktsoglou, and Poka-Yio, and directed by Marieke van Hal.

partitions, and windowless spaces of classical museum exhibitions. With some exceptions such as the 4<sup>th</sup> Gwangju Biennial in 2002 curated by Hou Hanru and Charles Esche, most biennials haven't really altered the formalistic settings of the traditional—read: white cube—exhibition space, she wrote.<sup>21</sup>

The ubiquity of the biennial has had an effect on the form and content of contemporary art and curatorial practice, expressing an engagement with specific geo-political, social and cultural realities of a biennial city or region. However, no in-depth research has been done on the notion of “biennial art.”<sup>22</sup> Many biennials have revolved around topics and themes related to the urban conditions of the (biennial) location and as such have affected the outcome of the art production. Some examples come in mind: Ute Meta Bauer's 3<sup>rd</sup> Berlin Biennial, curatorially set in a context of structural changes the city of Berlin has experienced since the end of the East-West conflict; Prospect New Orleans designed to invigorate the city following the human, civic and economic devastation left by Katrina; the 1<sup>st</sup> Athens Biennial *Destroy Athens* intended to discuss and challenge the stereotypical connotations connected to the city and its antiquity; the 9<sup>th</sup> Istanbul Biennial entitled *Istanbul* that served as a metaphor and referred to the imaginative charge the city represents to the world; and the Riwaq Biennial in Palestine that has been inviting international cultural actors to work with the issues of social and territorial fragmentation caused by the Israeli occupation.

Biennials have stimulated the local-global dialogue, caused by the introduction of formerly unfamiliar artists and artistic practices into a broader international circulation. In fact, this extends to some curators and their work being brought into a wider international field. Again, not much statistical research has been done on the effects of participation in a biennial for an artist.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Filipovic, Elena. “The Global White Cube.” In *The Manifesta Decade: Debates on Contemporary Art Exhibitions and Biennials in Post-Wall Europe*, edited by Barbara Vanderlinden and Elena Filipovic. Brussels and Cambridge, MA: Roomade and MIT Press, 2005: 63-84.

<sup>22</sup> An exception is Caroline A. Jones who has described biennials as “salons for installation and video art.” See: Jones, Caroline A. “Biennial Culture: A Longer History.” In *The Biennial Reader, An Anthology on Large-Scale Perennial Exhibitions of Contemporary Art*, edited by Elena Filipovic, Marieke van Hal, and Solveig Øvstebø, Bergen and Ostfildern: Bergen Kunsthall and Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2010: 66-87. Another exception is Jan Verwoert who was commissioned to write on this topic for *The Biennial Reader*: Verwoert, Jan. “The Curious Case of Biennial Art.” In *The Biennial Reader, An Anthology on Large-Scale Perennial Exhibitions of Contemporary Art*, edited by Elena Filipovic, Marieke van Hal, and Solveig Øvstebø, Bergen and Ostfildern: Bergen Kunsthall and Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2010: 184-197.

<sup>23</sup> In a panel discussion that was published in *Artforum* curator Francesco Bonami remarked that

Consider artists like Anri Sala, Vangelis Vlahos, Luchezar Boyadjev, Hüseyin Alptekin, Ibon Aranberri, Jeppe Hein and Carlos Bunga who have been selected to participate in biennials in their early/mid-careers, which has had an impact on their consequent work internationally. At a talk at Iniva in London, organized in relation to the exhibition *States of Exchange: Artists from Cuba* curated by Gerardo Mosquera, one of the artists was asked what the participation in the Havana Biennial meant for him? He answered that it had a “trampoline effect” and explained that participation in one biennial usually increased the chances of being invited to another.<sup>24</sup> Biennials in so-called marginal areas have enabled local artists to become part of a wider professional international circuit by showing in their own hometown and make their work visible to visiting curators, museum representatives, gallerists and other art *cognoscenti* which have invited them to exhibit abroad afterwards.

The potential of fostering civic feelings and urban regeneration potencies related to the biennial has also been frequently talked about. In 1997, during one of the first main conferences on the developing field of international contemporary art exhibitions in Bellagio, Italy, fifteen prominent curators from Africa, Asia, Australia, Latin America, Europe and the United States were invited by the Rockefeller Foundation to discuss the challenges posed by the biennial development and understand the nature of it. One spoke of the “healing” power of biennials, with Paolo Herkenhoff asserting at the time that the São Paulo Biennial had the ability to give its city a “soul.”<sup>25</sup> Declan McGonagle, Chair of Trustees of the Liverpool Biennial wrote in the foreword of one of the biennial catalogues: “If, in a place such as Liverpool the impulse for regeneration is to construct a new story, a new narrative for the nature of the city as place and quality of life of its citizens and communities, then the model of engagement adopted by Liverpool Biennial—extensive collaboration with local partnerships and new commissioning of international artists—can contribute significantly to larger civic ambitions.”<sup>26</sup>

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whereas in the old days artists were invited to the Venice Biennial or to Documenta after a solid gallery career, nowadays most artists arrive at galleries after a career in the international biennial system. See: Griffin, Tim, James Meyer, Francesco Bonami, Catherine David, Okwui Enwezor, Hans Ulrich Obrist, Martha Rosler, and Yinka Shonibare. “Global Tendencies: Globalism and the Large-Scale Exhibition.” *Artforum* 42, no. 3 (November 2003): 152–63, 206, 212.

<sup>24</sup> The talk with curator Gerardo Mosquera and the Cuban artists participating in the exhibition *States of Exchange: Artists from Cuba* at Iniva was organized by Jean Fisher for the MA students of the Curating Contemporary Art Department at the Royal College of Art in London. The exhibition took place from 23.01-22.03 2008.

<sup>25</sup> Brenson, Michael. “The Curator’s Moment: Trends in the Field of International Contemporary Art Exhibitions.” *Art Journal* 57, no. 4 (Winter 1998): 16–27.

<sup>26</sup> McGonagle, Declan, “Foreword: A Model of Engagement.” In *Liverpool Biennial International*. Exh. cat. Liverpool, Liverpool Biennial, 2006: 7.

The initiative for a second international conference for experts in the biennial world was taken in 2000 by René Block, a committed advocate of the biennial concept who was at that time director of the Museum Fridericianum in Kassel. The “Biennials in Dialogue” conference took place in relation with the exhibition *Das Lied von der Erde / The Song of the Earth*, staged in Kassel, the hometown of Documenta. In the exhibition publication many aspects of the biennial debate were articulated. One can read about the origins of the Johannesburg Biennial (now defunct) and the Gwangju Biennial, each mirroring historical moments of democratization processes in both respective countries South - Africa and South Korea. The first *Africus* Johannesburg Biennial took place one year after the first 1994 democratic elections in South - Africa, and the origins of the Gwangju Biennial in 1995 relate back to the 1980 citizens’ demonstrations in Gwangju against the military dictatorship, which ended in a bloody massacre. After democratization of the country the politicians in Gwangju preferred a vibrant political memorial in the format of a biennial instead of erecting a central monument. The memory of the victims is traditionally evoked during the opening ceremonies.<sup>27</sup> Even though the Johannesburg Biennial didn’t survive, mainly due to the juxtaposition of local versus global concerns as well as financial problems, both biennials were initiated in the spirit of progression, openness and political change, marking constructive transition periods towards a more democratic society.

Discussing the expansion of biennials, both in number, scope and geographical diversity, one cannot overlook the post-colonial discourse in which it is inhabited. Most active in this context has been curator and theorist Okwui Enwezor who wrote extensively on the healthy counter-discourse to colonial modernity that has been effectuated by the burgeoning of biennials and the related shift in the contemporary art world as a consequence. “Biennials, especially those occurring outside Europe and North America, such as the influential and unabashedly ideological Havana Biennial, confronted and attacked the premise of the earlier modernist dichotomy that divided the world into civilizations: between enlightened cultural centers and inferior deculturalized peripheries; between progressive, avant-garde mainstreams and atomized, stagnated margins, between modern artists and ethnic *bricoleurs*.”<sup>28</sup> Enwezor and other intellectuals engaged in this debate have strongly supported the decentralizing impact that biennials have had in the arts, in the sense that they have tackled existing power structures and

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<sup>27</sup> Heinrich, Barbara, ed. *Das Lied von der Erde / The Song of the Earth*. Exh. cat. Kassel, Museum Fridericianum, 2000: 5.

<sup>28</sup> Enwezor, Okwui. “Place-making or In the “Wrong Place”: Contemporary Art and the Postcolonial Condition” In *The History of A Decade That Has Not Been Named Yet*, Lyon, JPR/Ringier, 2007: 216.

institutions that have conservatively and dominantly existed in the West. Even though exhibitions such as *Les Magiciens de la Terre*, 1989 in Paris; *The Other Story* 1989, in London; *The Decade Show*, 1990 in New York were among the first shows in the West aiming to counteract ethnocentric practices within the contemporary art world and have tried to develop crucial discourses around the notion of the “Western gaze” and the need for power shifts, it is most probably the biennials taking place outside the Western centers that have been most successful in giving a direct voice to the “periphery.”<sup>29</sup>

Criticism towards biennials as exhibition platforms exists on the other side of the river and has brought forth many equally valid arguments. For example, the French writer Édouard Glissant has argued that the homogenizing forces of globalization and the proliferation of biennials has led to a disappearance of *difference* especially in the approach of international curators.<sup>30</sup> Partly, this argument is inherent to the concept of globalization itself, described as a process by which the world and its people are unified into a single society and function together on economic, technological, socio-cultural and political grounds. The role and approach of international travelling curators is an important issue, as their professional development is in many ways related to the development of the biennial. Whereas the first independent curators started operating between the 1960s and 1970s, thinking about seminal figures such as Harald Szeemann, Seth Siegelaub, Pontus Hultén and Kasper König, it wasn't until the 1990s that the notion and profession of the curator came to maturity and recognition.<sup>31</sup> In the same timeframe and accelerated pace, both the biennial and the professional curator moved themselves away from the traditional, established museum institution. Some well-known international art professionals like Hans-Ulrich Obrist, Okwui Enwezor, Hou Hanru, and Rosa Martinez, amongst other, evolved into the circuit of *flying curators* Glissant likely talks about. Invitations by numerous biennials worldwide, willingly or not, have placed specific curators in essential roles in the two-fold process of both expansion/pluralization and contraction/homogenization of the world of contemporary art.

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<sup>29</sup> “One risk for peripheral biennials is not to develop into shop window for critics and curators from the centers scouting for Third World artistic talents,” stated curator Gerardo Mosquera. See: Heinrich, Barbara, ed. *Das Lied von der Erde / The Song of the Earth*. Exh. cat. Kassel, Museum Fridericianum, 2000: 15.

<sup>30</sup> See Lyon Biennial: <http://www.biennale-de-lyon.org/bac2007/angl/>

<sup>31</sup> The International Foundation Manifesta was one of the first organizations taking the initiative to publish a series of publications dedicated to issues of contemporary curating titled *Manifesta Journal* (2003-2005). Issue nr. 4, on “Teaching Curatorship,” Autumn/Winter 2004, included many essays on the rising figure of the contemporary art curator and the educational system that developed since the 1990s.

Another negative reaction towards the *biennialization* process has been the argument shared by many art theorists and writers who are critiquing biennials as epiphenomena of mass culture and cultural tourism. Both concepts have a strong negative connotation amongst most art elites worldwide. Here biennials have been understood to be closely tied with diplomacy, politics, and commerce, or, as others have stated, products of city marketing. An illustration here could be the current development of a biennial park in Abu Dhabi. Apart from the construction of a series of museums, including a Guggenheim and a Louvre Museum, the Abu Dhabi Tourism Authority has commissioned the creation of a huge-scale biennial-park including pavilions to be constructed by established international architects. Instead of reflecting a socio-political transition period, the concept of the biennial has been openly applied to attract foreign tourists and create new sources of income.

The moment yet another city announces a new biennial the sceptics are always ready to question: “Do we really need another one?” This question, in fact, was posed by Manifesta’s Advisory Board with regards to its very first edition: “biennials don’t work, so why start another?”<sup>32</sup> According to some critics the biennial has become obsolete. In a way this attitude seems rather strange and it surely never occurred when cities opted to construct museums of contemporary art. “To complain about other countries or cities developing their own cultural devices to fight the static arrogance of the West seems to me both illogical and laughable”, stated Francesco Bonami.<sup>33</sup> Almost every new biennial that has been initiated in the twenty-first century after the big biennial boom seems to anticipate a critical reaction though and is ready to defend its position and purpose through its public communication. New biennials continue to emerge in new cities and regions around the world, and the debate continues to expand.

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<sup>32</sup> Winkel, Camiel van. “The Rhetorics of Manifesta,” In Vanderlinden, Barbara, and Elena Filipovic, eds. *The Manifesta Decade: Debates on Contemporary Art Exhibitions and Biennials in Post-Wall Europe*. Brussels and Cambridge, MA: Roomade and MIT Press, 2005: 219.

<sup>33</sup> Bonami, Francesco. “Debate: Biennials.” *Frieze*, no. 92 (July–September 2005): 104–5.

### 3. Biennial Origins, a Range of Types

“The situation of the biennial is complex. When we try to work out how to deal with this complexity, it is important not to reduce our reflections to one single model, but to study several different ones, both historical and contemporary, which take an experimental approach to this complexity. At this moment of intense innovation within the field of contemporary art, a moment during which this very field has entered the public consciousness as arguably never before, it is vital that biennials proceed intelligently and that we act not only with an awareness of what our contemporaries within the field of art are undertaking, but also with an understanding of what has come before.”<sup>34</sup>

Many biennials carry similar aspects and ambitions appearing at their roots. However, it is difficult to speak of “the biennial origins” as the various models and types that are spread all over the world and the cultural, geo-political, and ideological differences between them are vast. Art historian Vittoria Martini posed the question “if there is such a thing as a history of biennials that is more than a story of particular biennials?”<sup>35</sup> Indeed, there are many individual biennial-founding stories that can be told. To better understand the biennial and the biennial landscape, creating typologies and categorizations are helpful. It is impossible to categorize all biennials as most fit in more than one category and have a mix of origins, but in order to understand the wide diversity it is useful to select some (historically) relevant initiatives and explore their establishments and characteristics.

The biennial as an event, as most art historians have referred to, can be traced back to international industrial fairs and world expositions such as *The Great Exhibition* of 1851 at the Crystal Palace in London, which was a spectacular, historic public event that included aspects of tourism. Even though visual art was not the main concern in the world fairs that took place in the West, they inspired a great number of similar spectacles.<sup>36</sup> The Venice Biennial, initiated in 1895, became widely regarded as “the mother” of all following biennials and embodied a lot of elements and characteristics of a world fair, reflected in the manifestation of modernity, the concept of contributing countries, the national representations and pavilions, an internationalist

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<sup>34</sup> Obrist, Hans Ulrich. “Biennial Manifesto.” *Flash Art*, no. 268 (October 2009): 42.

<sup>35</sup> Martini, Vittoria. “The Era of the Histories of Biennials has Begun.” In *The Biennial Reader, The Bergen Biennial Conference* edited by Elena Filipovic, Marieke van Hal, and Solveig Øvstebø, Bergen and Ostfildern: Bergen Kunsthall and Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2010: 9-13.

<sup>36</sup> Bydler, Charlotte. *The Global Art World, Inc.: On the Globalization of Contemporary Art*. Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis, 2004: 96.



rhetoric, obvious political agendas, the local-global discourse and projected economic benefits, to name most apparent similarities.<sup>37</sup>

Other important biennials that followed chronologically, like the São Paulo Biennial in 1951, the Paris Biennial in 1959 (now defunct) and the Sydney Biennial in 1973 were closely modelled on Venice's format.<sup>38</sup> Even though other older major biennials and recurring large-scale exhibitions such as Pittsburgh International in 1950, Documenta in 1955, the India-Triennale in 1968, the Havana Biennial in 1984, the Cairo Biennial in 1984 as well as the Istanbul Biennial in 1987 didn't literally copy the idea of national representations from Venice, financially and organizationally they operated similarly and carried common features.<sup>39</sup> Like almost all biennials that followed in the nineties they habitually have shown a mix of national and international artists from numerous countries, and have counted on support from international funding bodies such as Ministries of Culture and international grants institutions as well as local foreign embassies and institutes for the realization of their shows.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> The centrality of the Venice Biennial as mother of all biennials in the discussions surrounding the proliferation of biennials is commonplace among most art historians, critics, and curators. However, some scholars have disputed this notion amongst which Rafal Niemojewski, who has asserted that the contemporary art biennial has its origins in the first Havana Biennial of 1984. See: Niemojewski, Rafal. "Venice or Havana: A Polemic on the Genesis of the Contemporary Biennial." In *The Biennial Reader, An Anthology on Large-Scale Perennial Exhibitions of Contemporary Art*, edited by Elena Filipovic, Marieke van Hal, and Solveig Øvstebø, Bergen and Ostfildern, Bergen Kunsthall and Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2010: 88-103.

<sup>38</sup> Both the São Paulo Biennial in 1951 and the Sydney Biennial in 1973 were conceived and initiated by emigrated Italian industrialists who based the ideas for their biennial on the successful formula in Venice in their home country, i.e. Franco Belgiorno-Nettis in Sydney and Francisco Ciccillo Matarazzo Sobrinho in São Paulo. The Whitney Biennial was founded in 1932, although initially it took on the term to mean not the frequency of the opening of the exhibition but the pervuew of the art it represented. In 1932 it was as annual exhibition, which featured a panorama of the production of art in America over the previous preceding two years. Much later, it became a properly biannual event and in recent years, an international one.

<sup>39</sup> The Carnegie International, founded in 1896 in Pittsburgh as a yearly survey exhibition, became a biennial event renamed the Pittsburgh International in 1950 and then a triennial event in 1955, only to return finally to its original name and more anthological format in 1982, with shows opening occurring approximately every three years; Documenta, founded in 1955 in Kassel, began as a one-off major survey show lasting a hundred days, but then it went on to recur every four years between 1955 and 1972, with only one exception, and then finally took on its current quinquennial or once-every-five-years format after Harald Szeemann's 1972 edition, retaining the hundred day format; The India-Triennale, founded in 1968 in New Delhi was from the start imagined as an event that would recur every three years.

<sup>40</sup> Grants organizations such as the British Council, IFA - Institute for Foreign Cultural Relations in Germany, OCA - Office for Contemporary Art in Norway, IASPIS in Sweden, the Mondriaan

So far only a few typology attempts have been made. Charlotte Bydler broadly defined three groups, in general differentiated by the time period of their initiation. Firstly, she identified capitalist-philanthropic enterprises from the end of the nineteenth century up to the mid-twentieth century, mostly initiated by strong-headed patrons such as was the case in the Venice Biennial, the Carnegie International, the São Paulo Biennial and the Sydney Biennial. Secondly, she classified a group of post-World War II events, marked by bloc politic or reaction against such alignment (Documenta, the post-War Venice Biennial, the Havana Biennial, Dak'Art in Senegal, and the international biennials of graphic arts in Cracow, Ljubljana, or Buenos Aires). And thirdly, she characterized the flexible production- and event-oriented variety of the 1990s and 2000s, amongst which the Istanbul Biennial, the Gwangju Biennial, Manifesta and the Sharjah Biennial.<sup>41</sup> Other efforts to group biennials have been made by René Block, who suggested a biennial typology based on organisation, Aomi Okabe, and John Clark.<sup>42</sup>

As a rule, contemporary art biennials have their foundations embedded in political, cultural, social and economic grounds. There can be more emphasis on one or another, but generally all four aspects traditionally appear at the roots of each contemporary art biennial anywhere around the world. Some of the main objectives of the average biennial of contemporary art are: (1) to create a new platform for dialogue and exchange of artistic practices, hence stimulating the local or regional cultural infrastructure; (2) to gain a better image and visibility by integrating a peripheral city or remote region in a globalizing world and culture, formulating a new geography for international art; (3) to foster the local, global dialogue by internationalizing the local artistic

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Foundation in The Netherlands, Pro Helvetia in Switzerland, SEACEX in Spain, the Gulbenkian Foundation in Portugal, CulturesFrance, the Danish Arts Council, the Scottish Arts Council, the Japan Foundation and FRAME - Finnish Fund for Art Exchange amongst other, and local institutes such as the German Goethe Institutes, the Spanish Cervantes Institutes, the French Institutes and the Swiss Institutes when they have a branch in the city or country where the biennial takes place.

<sup>41</sup> Bydler, Charlotte. *The Global Art World, Inc.: On the Globalization of Contemporary Art*. Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis, 2004: 151.

<sup>42</sup> René Block made a distinction amongst biennials in the exhibition catalogue *Das Lied von der Erde / The Song of the Earth*. Heinrich, Barbara, ed. Kassel, Museum Fridericianum, 2000. He suggested: (1) the Venice model, a grand world exhibition with national representation; (2) the Sydney model, representing smaller scale biennials organized around a curatorial theme, where invited artists depend on external financial support; (3) the Gwangju model, referring to biennials that select artists independent from represented countries; and finally (4) Manifesta, which represented a model for a shifting location as well as curatorial team. Prof. John Clark listed all categorizations existing today, including his own, in his forthcoming book *Biennales and Contemporary Asian Art: Histories of the Asian 'New'*, 2010.

circuit as well as the wider realm of related groups; and (4) to articulate or boost an international art economy, stimulate cultural tourism and potentially aim for urban gentrification or renovation. The historiography of biennials has only just begun and the best way to start analyzing biennials is commence identifying their specificity. Biennials can be differentiated according to a number of different criteria, for instance their historical positions, *raison d'être* and initial incentives, their organizational and funding structures, their functions within political and economic contexts, methods of selection, or their mode of operation at the intersection of forces contributing to the construction and deconstruction of curatorial forms and ideals.<sup>43</sup> Biennials can equally well be categorized according to their discipline. For example, we can distinguish design biennials, biennials for photography, sculpture, architecture, and new media. Any attempt to classify biennials is limited as biennial exhibition models are very heterogeneous, and it is exactly this diversity that complicates any categorization of a group of exhibitions, established in different places around the world over more than a century. Biennials can change character, their identity can shift over time, and biennials can move away from their original drives and purposes. The categorization I have made is based on origins, broadly dividing the biennial landscape into culturally, politically and ecologically embedded biennials as well as defining a group of state or municipal initiatives, and alternative biennial events. Biennials with cultural historical origins are by far the biggest group and in this group a distinction can be made between three different categories: biennials that are established by the art scene, biennials that incorporate a reaction to the West, and institutional biennials.<sup>44</sup> Examples of each category will be discussed.

Vittoria Martini wrote: “Each biennial has a *founding narrative* that demands an archaeology of historical specificities that is crucial to finally being able to define *one* history through an exploration of difference.” The type of categorization I have made—a classification based on *biennial genesis*—is one approach to the study of the biennial, aspiring to be a catalyst in the further examination.

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<sup>43</sup> Blom. Ina. “On Biennial Practice: The Global Megacity and Biennial Memory.” In *The Biennial Reader, The Bergen Biennial Conference* edited by Elena Filipovic, Marieke van Hal, and Solveig Øvstebø, Bergen and Ostfildern: Bergen Kunsthall and Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2010: 24.

<sup>44</sup> The discussions at the Bergen Biennial Conference made clear that varied points of view exist on the history of biennials. Art historian Vittoria Martini wrote that the historiography of biennials should be constructed upon specific case studies. She stated (and I share her opinion) that it is the work of an art historian to select events and discuss them on the basis of their relevance. Given the amount of research that needs to be done in the biennial field, this seems, at this stage, the best way to contribute to the advancement of knowledge. See: Martini, Vittoria. “The Era of the Histories of Biennials Has Begun.” In *The Biennial Reader, The Bergen Biennial Conference* edited by Elena Filipovic, Marieke van Hal, and Solveig Øvstebø, Bergen and Ostfildern: Bergen Kunsthall and Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2010: 9-13.

## Art Scene Initiatives

The biennial can fill a gap in the artistic community by offering a new or alternative platform for the dissemination of artistic practices. *Periferic*, the Athens Biennial, and the Luanda Triennial are all initiatives that were originated in local art scenes. *Periferic* in Iasi, North-East Romania, is a self-organized grass roots biennial initiative that started in 1997 by artist Matei Bejenaru, who developed the event from a small-scale performance festival into a well-esteemed and internationally recognized biennial of contemporary art since 2001. After the fall of communism in 1989, Bejenaru saw that while Romanian artists started travelling and exhibiting abroad the local and national cultural infrastructure in Romania remained underdeveloped. The inception of this biennial was based on his efforts to invigorate cultural activity in the city, not through the construction of monumental cultural institutions, but by the vision to turn the local cultural life into a more dynamic one: via a biennial.<sup>45</sup> In Athens, the biennial created a new flexible platform for contemporary visual art, initiated by three local art professionals and aimed at strengthening and stimulating the local cultural infrastructure and artistic discourse. The creation of the Athens Biennial in 2007 was an evident response to the lack or delay of state and municipal initiatives to develop public art institutions such as a museum of contemporary art, for which the city has been waiting for many years.<sup>46</sup> The first Triennial in the Angolan capital Luanda in 2006-2007 was the result of years of preparatory work and development, described by the triennial itself as “the cultural movement,” expressing an ambition to reach all of southern Africa and make Angola a

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<sup>45</sup> The website *Periferic* states: “Situated in the eastern edge of Romania, six hours from Bucharest and 25 minutes from the border of the Republic of Moldova (formerly part of the Soviet Union), without an international airport, and long avoided by western strategic investors, the city of Iasi leads an isolated existence as a geographic and economic peripheral zone, a fact which, among other things, has also affected the local cultural context which continues to be dominated by an academic traditionalism and an unproductive and retrogressive archaism. Although Iasi can be a delightful place to live, despite the anachronisms, it is difficult to make contemporary art in a city which lacks the professional infrastructure to support it.” See: [http://www.periferic.org/periferic3\\_en.html](http://www.periferic.org/periferic3_en.html)

<sup>46</sup> A pattern can be discerned amongst many biennials in their initial stage facing a first phase of hostility, mostly amongst the local art scene. This was the case in Athens and in the first Manifesta in Rotterdam, where local artists started organizing themselves vis-à-vis the biennial, a formation that was called *Network*. The Istanbul Biennial went through a similar phase, as well as more recent the Brussels Biennial, initiated by curator Barbara Vanderlinden. The first Brussels Biennial (2008) saw itself not only confronted with adversity amongst the majority of the local art institutions and art professionals, also the foreign curators and institutions that participated in the biennial such as BAK, the Van Abbe Museum and Witte de With, all from the neighboring country the Netherlands, were antagonistic.

point of cultural interaction, identifying a paradigm focus as the mutation of society itself.<sup>47</sup> The cultural movement included the renovation of art spaces and institutions whereas the triennial itself aimed at the cultural enrichment and empowerment of the population of Luanda, slowly recovering from years of war. The Luanda Triennial is an initiative by visual artist Fernando Alvim, the brainchild behind this event.

#### Reaction to the West

The second category is the one that reflects a reaction to the West. Cuba's Havana Biennial started in 1984 as one of the most important activities on the artistic program of the Wifredo Lam Center. The center opened and aimed to offer an active, integrated space to study and promote the contemporary art of the Third World with the purpose of asserting its identity in the face of an international culture seeking to establish its hegemony.<sup>48</sup> The Havana Biennial was created as an answer to the need for a place where a dialogue among Third World artists could be held.<sup>49</sup> The biennial was meant to facilitate the promotion of artists from Latin America, The Caribbean, Asia and Africa, as well as encourage a critical discourse related to these areas of the world. It was regarded as a communal endeavour, a sociological and cultural event with the largest amount of Cuban artists participating, in a total of eight hundred thirty five. The Havana Biennial became typified as a Third World biennial, a reaction or counter-weight to the First World Venice Biennial, and its instigation was rooted in a need for self-initiated cultural development outside the dominant euro-centric realm.

The Istanbul Biennial, which was not founded as an antithesis to the West, but as an effort to create synthesis with it, steadily developed itself into an internationally recognized and respected bi-annual cultural event, both within its local arts community as well as abroad.<sup>50</sup> The first edition presented one hundred and seven artists, sixty of which were of Turkish origin, reflecting aspirations for both national cultural developments as well as international status. Both the Havana Biennial and the Istanbul Biennial were forerunners of the so-called peripheral biennials: non-Western biennials that conceptually positioned themselves as alternatives to the international

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<sup>47</sup> See the website of the Luanda Triennial: <http://www.trienal-de-luanda.net/2007/?cat=5>

<sup>48</sup> Llanes, Lillian. "La Bienal de la Habana," In *Third Text*, no 20, Autumn 1992: 7.

<sup>49</sup> Llanes, Lillian. "Die Biennale von Havana / The Havana Biennial." In *Das Lied von der Erde / The Song of the Earth*, Exh. cat, Druckerei Schanze GmbH, Kassel, 2000: 12.

<sup>50</sup> Its first edition (1987) was curated and coordinated by Beral Madra, an Istanbul native gallerist who was concerned with the limited contacts of the Turkish art world with the international scene at the time. The Istanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts- IKSU, the organizing body behind the biennial, commissioned Beral Madra to coordinate and curate the first two editions.

circuit “through a focus on their locality and legitimizing themselves within contemporary art’s global system of validation and hierarchic differentiation,” in Matei Bejenaru’s words.<sup>51</sup> In the case of the Istanbul Biennial, its creation should also be understood in Turkey’s modernization process.

The São Paulo Biennial in 1951 and the Sydney Biennial in 1973 were inspired by the success of Venice and founded by emigrated Italian industrialists that had made a fortune in their new homelands. The Sydney Biennial in Australia used the biennial as a means to bridge its isolated status with regards to the international. “When the Biennale of Sydney was established in the early 1970s, little was known about Australian art and there were few opportunities for local artists to exhibit outside this country. Similarly, both artists and the public had little opportunity to be exposed to pioneering art from other parts of the world unless they left Australia to seek it out for themselves.”<sup>52</sup> In this environment Franco Belgiorno-Nettis, the Founding Governor, established and sponsored the Sydney Biennial. The initiation of the São Paulo Biennial signalled not only an act towards the then capital of Brazil, Rio de Janeiro, but also a statement towards the political and economic dominance of the United States. The initial aims of the São Paulo Biennial were primarily to make Western contemporary art known in Brazil, establish São Paulo itself as a city for the arts and bring Brazilian art closer to foreign guests.

The last example in this category is the Moscow Biennial. This biennial, initiated in 2005, declared its intention to be “not only a particular powerful event, but a new institutional project that will strengthen relationships between curators, art historians, managers, federal authorities, sponsors and trustees, mass media and public opinion on contemporary art both in and outside Russia itself.”<sup>53</sup> For Moscow, the biennial has been a tool for stimulating and developing international relations, after years of communist regime. One of the consequences of Russia’s political and economic stabilization in the post-communist time has been the growing interest of Russian society in contemporary culture, and more precisely contemporary art. A new Russian art infrastructure emerged through art fairs, galleries, non-profit exhibition spaces, festivals and conferences, and the Moscow Biennial has marked another step in the process of communicating and reintegrating contemporary Russian art into the international art world.

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<sup>51</sup> Ferguson, Bruce W. and Hoegsberg Milena M. “Talking and Thinking about Biennials: The Potential of Discursivity.” In *The Biennial Reader, An Anthology on Large-Scale Perennial Exhibitions of Contemporary Art*, edited by Elena Filipovic, Marieke van Hal, and Solveig Øvstebø, Bergen and Ostfildern: Bergen Kunsthall and Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2010: 366.

<sup>52</sup> Latos-Valier, Paula. “Preface.” In *Zones of Contact*, Exh. cat. Sydney Biennial, Sydney, 2006: 7.

<sup>53</sup> See: [http://www.shanghart.com/texts/1\\_moscow\\_biennale\\_of\\_contemporar.htm](http://www.shanghart.com/texts/1_moscow_biennale_of_contemporar.htm)

### Institutional Initiatives

Under the third category are institutional initiatives of which there are many and likely more to come. Institutional biennials are initiated and organized by art museums and art centers that started biennials as signature, recurring blockbuster exhibitions that are part of their regular institutional artistic programs. Carnegie International at the Carnegie Museum of Art in Pittsburgh is one of the oldest of these exhibitions, and the Whitney Biennial, existing since 1932 at the Whitney Museum of American Art, is another, providing a survey on the state of American contemporary art every two years in New York. The Montreal Biennial is an institutional biennial that was launched in 1998 by the Centre International d'Art Contemporain de Montréal. And Tate Modern started its triennial in London since 2000, appointing international guest curators to develop its shows. The Berlin Biennial could also be classified as an institutional biennial, an initiative by KW-KunstWerke Institute. The idea for the Berlin Biennial was inspired by the demise of *Aperto* in the Venice Biennial of 1995, a forum for young contemporary art staged in the Arsenale outside the Giardini and the national pavilions. The aim of the first edition was to organize a representative, international exhibition of contemporary art promoting less established and younger artists.<sup>54</sup> To mention a few other institutional biennials: the Turin Triennial, collaboratively organized by three art institutions, Castello di Rivoli, Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo and Palazzina della Società della Promotrice delle Belle Arti; the Taipei Biennial, existing since 1992 and organized by the Taipei Fine Arts Museum and regarded as its most important contemporary art exhibition; the Guangzhou Triennial an initiative in 2002 by the Guangdong Museum of Art in Guangzhou, China, where extensive research has led to critical and in-depth survey exhibitions, and finally the Shanghai Biennial, developed by the Shanghai Art Museum since 1996.

### Political Historical Origins

There's a group of important biennials and recurring large-scale exhibitions that were primarily initiated as a reaction or response to significant political events. Documenta, initiated in 1955 after the Nazi dictatorship, was intended to reconcile the German public life with international modernity. The first Documenta focused on what the Nazi's called *Entartete Kunst*, mostly

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<sup>54</sup> Since 1998, the Berlin Biennial has developed into a high point of the city's art life. Mitte was the first, former East German area in Berlin to develop rapidly after the fall of the wall, initially with artistic initiatives like KW-Kunstwerke and galleries moving there, and afterwards also commercially. Apart from this specific area, Berlin as a city has grown in the last ten years into the capital for artists in Europe, welcoming thousands of new foreign artists every year who are finding cheap studio space and a relatively moderate cost of living there.

abstract painting of the twenties and thirties. The exhibition was not so much focused on the actual state of contemporary art, but on the descent of the contemporary, tracing and documenting the formal transformations undergone by modern art in the dramatic years before. Documenta was a weapon in the cold war and was positioned as such by its organizers.”<sup>55</sup>

Manifesta, the itinerant European Biennial, whose name is linguistically related to Documenta, bases its history and instigation on the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989 and the subsequent redrawing of Europe’s geographical and political map.<sup>56</sup> For the first Manifesta Biennial in Rotterdam in 1996, Manifesta sent out its international curators mainly to East European countries for curatorial research, an area that was scarcely explored by the West at that time. Contrary to Documenta, which was, as Roger Buergel wrote a “weapon” during the Cold War, Manifesta could be regarded as a handshake after the Cold War: Western Europe reaching out to East-European countries. As a biennial, Manifesta did not only react to the drastic political changes in 1989 in Europe, but ever since the beginning, it has consistently been preoccupied with incorporating geo-political elements into its programme by constantly placing its contemporary art exhibitions in new locations that are, in some context, socially or politically charged.

Both the Johannesburg Biennial and the Gwangju Biennial started in a context of probing their countries’ political histories and treating their wounds.<sup>57</sup> The Johannesburg Biennial, which existed for only two editions, was instigated as a response to changes in the national political situation. The first Johannesburg Biennial in 1995 took place one year after the first non-racial democratic elections in South Africa and as such inaugurated the start of a new post-apartheid regime, as well as the end of a cultural boycott towards South African artists. Started in the most hopeful times in South African’s history and with a clear idealistic drive, the Johannesburg

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<sup>55</sup> Roger M. Buergel went back to the origins of Documenta in the preparations for Documenta 12. He wrote: “The political capacity of this exhibition, which conceived itself as a medium, was a response to the historical situation, which is to say, that peculiar, very German mix of post-war trauma and restorative building. At the same time, it was imbedded in this historical situation, in the self-image of the young Federal Republic of West Germany as part of the free West.” See: Buergel, Roger M. “The Origins.” *Documenta Magazine Reader*, nos. 1–3 (2007): 31.

<sup>56</sup> Manifesta is derived from the Latin word *manifestus*, which means “clear or palpable.” It also resonates with *movere*, or “to move.” Additionally it is associated with the notion of an art event as a manifest (statement) or manifesto.

<sup>57</sup> Yongwoo Lee, the founding director of the Gwangju Biennial wrote: “The arts’ ability to deal with historical events, which was long forgotten in the wave of modernism, must be recovered and utilized as a tool to review not just realism, but the functions of the arts. Especially the spirit of the May 18th Gwangju Pro-democracy Movement will present an opportunity for the arts to function as the witness of history.” See: Lee, Yongwoo. “Remapping the Borders.” In *Beyond the Borders*, Exh. cat. Gwangju Biennale Foundation, Gwangju, 1995:18.



Biennial regrettably encountered many problems and critiques in its relatively short existence.<sup>58</sup> The Gwangju Biennial, which started in the same year, had a more successful start up. Gwangju was the hotbed of student protests throughout the Japanese colonization and is known for the 1980 massacre, a mass demonstration and protest against the authoritarian regime that ended with deadly consequences.<sup>59</sup> The city has been very important in the history of South Korea's pro-democracy and human-rights movements. After democratization of the country the politicians in Gwangju preferred a vibrant political memorial in the format of a biennial instead of erecting a central monument. Consequently, the first Gwangju Biennial took place in 1995.<sup>60</sup> The inaugural biennial exhibition in 1995 was presented to more than a million visitors, who while visiting the biennial commemorated the citizens of the city that resisted against the military junta in the past. Up to date, the biennial functions in tandem with promoting the city as a site of human rights and civil society.

Besides Documenta, the Manifesta, Johannesburg and Gwangju Biennials that were initiated as direct responses to political changes or events, there are biennials that have political backgrounds but in a less immediate way. The Riwaq Biennial, in its inception, did not react to one specific political event but is a biennial initiated with an outlook to engage in an international dialogue about the political circumstances it is in, i.e. those of occupation and isolation. Stemming from its central aim of protecting and promoting its cultural heritage, Riwaq has intended to generate understanding and create new thought on the contemporary Palestinian condition. For its biennials it has opted for the most suitable model related to this, which has consisted of a series of site visits and curated conversations and interactions between Palestinian and international artists, architects, planners, curators, and theorists taking place in the West bank. Participants have been offered opportunities to implement their ideas and move them forward into a sustained two-year

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<sup>58</sup> "South Africa's challenge to emerge from its recent history, heal its wounds and play a role in the affairs of the world is one which is being taken up in all aspects of human endeavor. The visual arts are no exception and *Africus: Johannesburg Biennale* is the vehicle through which a start has been made to begin a process of reconstruction and development through artistic interchange and exploration." See: Till, Christopher. "Foreword." In *Africus: Johannesburg Biennale*, Exh. cat. Greater Johannesburg Transitional Metropolitan Council, 1995: 7.

<sup>59</sup> What the 1989 Tiananmen Square Massacre is to China might be the 1980 Gwangju Massacre to South Korea: more than a hundred civilians were killed by the army during the uprising and thousands were wounded or arrested.

<sup>60</sup> The declaration of the Gwangju Biennial stated: "To clarify misconceptions regarding the history of Gwangju, the Gwangju Biennial joins in the celebration of diverse cultures so that Gwangju can become a city of light that uses art to brighten the dark reality of Korean separation. Art must reflect conflict, confrontation and punishment and, instead, respect the spirit of nature based on humanity. This is the very strength that allows art to maintain a life on its own, enabling it to function as a spiritual counterbalance to the problems of industrial society."

biennial period in which their projects could evolve. By moving away from the ephemeral and spectacle character of most biennials and deciding for a more extended and thoughtful approach, the Riwaq Biennials have indirectly also commented to biennial culture generally.

### Ecological Biennials

The Gyumri Biennial, the Echigo-Tsumari Triennial and Prospect New Orleans are biennials that were instigated as reactions to ecological incidents. Once an important centre for culture and art in the Caucasus, the Armenian city of Gyumri was devastated by an earthquake in 1988, that took tens of thousands of lives and left many people homeless. Artists from Armenia, the Armenian Diaspora, France, Georgia, Germany, Russia, Syria and the USA, were asked to explore their relationship to the post-earthquake town of Gyumri for the first biennial in 1988. The Gyumri Biennial expressly aimed to overcome the trauma and chaos of the post earthquake situation as well as restore Gyumri to the influential cultural city it once was, while re-establishing itself as a regional contemporary art hub. The Niigata Prefecture in Japan equally suffered from natural disasters such an earthquake, floods, and heavy snowfall, creating serious hardships for the region. With the exodus of its young people to jobs in the cities and the increasing abandonment of agriculture as an enterprise, the Echigo-Tsumari area in The Niigata Prefecture suffered depopulation, aging, collapse of communities, and loss of identity. It is in this context of nature that the Echigo-Tsumari Triennial was set-up in 2000, to revitalize the local region, provide disaster recovery and improve the lives and spirits of the people in the region. Contrary to most international art biennials, the Echigo-Tsumari Triennial is being held at rural areas. Finally, Prospect New Orleans can be mentioned here, designed to help reinvigorate the city of New Orleans following the human, civic, and economic devastation left by hurricane Katrina in 2005.<sup>61</sup>

### State and Municipal Initiatives

There's a range of biennials that have sprung out of municipal or state initiatives: biennials that were not instigated by the art scene but from local or national governments. This type has flourished enormously since politicians have become well aware of the potentials of biennials as

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<sup>61</sup> Prospect New Orleans was founded and directed by curator Dan Cameron (2008) with the aspiration to revive the city and redesign it as a cultural destination. *Prospect.1* distributed various art selections over about thirty locations in New Orleans: museums and alternative spaces, as well as public buildings, old houses and empty lots that were stripped bare by the hurricane.

instruments for city promotion. The Liverpool Biennial, declaring itself a late-comer on the rushing train of international biennials accelerating in the late 1980's, attempted to learn from the problems of earlier biennials and created a model significant both to the city, its citizens, its art circle, and the international art world.<sup>62</sup> The city of Liverpool substantially invested in culture and has done so every decade with significant proceedings, starting with the opening of Tate Liverpool in 1988, the instigation of the Liverpool Biennial in 1999 and a successful bid to become European Cultural Capital in 2008. The Liverpool Biennial has become known for its focus on localization, context-sensitivity and community engagement. This focus has led to a strong tradition of site-specific works by international artists. The biennial has also played an important role in the process of urban regeneration.

Other examples of state initiated or instigated biennials are the Thessaloniki Biennial, the Singapore Biennial, and the Lyon Biennial. Thessaloniki started as an evident reaction by local politicians in the North towards the announcement of the Athens Biennial in the South of Greece. While in Athens the biennial was an arts' initiative, the Thessaloniki Biennial was a political statement.<sup>63</sup> In Singapore, the biennial was an initiative of the National Arts Council that was established in 1991 to spearhead the development of the arts in Singapore. The Singapore Biennial, started in 2006 with the aim to position Singapore as a cultural hub and a vibrant global city for the arts. The inauguration of the Lyon Biennial in 1991 was closely related to the now defunct Paris Biennial. The French Ministry of Culture, responsible for the regional funding to support contemporary art all over France, decided to "move" this biennial from Paris to Lyon in the framework of "artistic decentralization."<sup>64</sup>

Probably the most striking biennial institution with governmental origins can be found in Abu Dhabi. Abu Dhabi, the largest emirate and capital of the United Arab Emirates, has been investing in one of the most ambitious art infrastructures ever built: the Saadiyat Island is a twenty nine billion dollar resort project that incorporates a cultural district with five art museums amongst which a new Guggenheim museum and a Louvre branch, built by prominent architects such as Zaha Hadid, Jean Nouvel, Tadao Ando and Frank Gehry. Apart from these museum

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<sup>62</sup> Hsu, Manray. "The Liverpool Model: From Local Knowledge to Archipuncture." In: *Liverpool Biennial International 06*, Exh. cat. 2006:11.

<sup>63</sup> Both the Athens Biennial and the Thessaloniki Biennial opened with their first editions in the same year (2007), which created competition amongst them nationally.

<sup>64</sup> The Lyon Biennial has invited curators amongst which Harald Szeemann, Jean-Hubert Martin, Nicolas Bourriaud, Jérôme Sans, Hans-Ulrich Obrist, Stephanie Moisdon-Trembley, and Hou Hanru. Lyon has steadily put itself on the map and attracted attention as a city for the arts and culture.

structures a grand-scale biennial site is in construction by international architects with nineteen pavilions along an artificial canal.<sup>65</sup>

#### Alternative Events

Some biennials are unconventional events in the sense that they use the term “biennial”, but they differ substantially from their usual characteristics. Usually, they have questioned the biennial as a model for an international arts exhibition and can be seen as reactions to their popularity. The announcement of the sixth International Caribbean Biennial, an initiative by artist Maurizio Cattelan and curator Jens Hofmann in 2000 was meant as a critique to “traditional” biennials and designed as a parody of their customary language and features of globalization, art stardom and art colonialism. This project was a fictional biennial for which established artists such as Gabriel Orozco, Tobias Rehberger, Rirkrit Tiravanija, Vanessa Beecroft, Olafur Eliasson and Pipilotti Rist gathered for a week in the Dominican Republic without presenting art. From a more serious order has been the Emergency Biennial, conceived by independent curator Evelyne Joannou. Supported by the International Federation of Human Rights Leagues, the Emergency Biennial was a reaction to Joannou’s initial curatorial proposal for the first Moscow Biennial that incorporated a cultural plea against the destruction of the people in Chechnya, their culture and identity. This biennial project was born out of a need to draw attention to the plight of Chechnya, and more broadly to human and social emergencies in the context of what Joannou has called an “ambivalent globalization” process, in which the biennial industry also exists. The biennial started in 1995 and has been touring to various cities in the world, starting in Grozny and Paris and travelling to Brussels, Bolzano, Milan, Riga, Tallinn, Vancouver, Puebla, Istanbul, San Francisco, to finally return to Grozny. International artists have been requested to donate art works for this biennial that will constitute a collection, with the aim of becoming the foundation for a museum in Grozny.

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<sup>65</sup> Sharjah, the third largest emirate of the United Arab Emirates has been running the Sharjah Biennial since 1993, which has gained considerable international recognition since Sheikha Hoor Al Qasimi took charge as director in 2002.

#### **4. To Biennial or not to Biennial? The Bergen Biennial Conference and The Biennial Reader.**

Most new biennial institutions have gained inspiration by existing biennial models and types, and most new biennial organizations have reconsidered the exact format in relation to the particularities and distinctiveness of their location. In order to go beyond the arguments for or against the use of the biennial, and perceiving its proliferation as a problem in itself, it is important to regard the biennial as a cultural object, especially since its relevance and critical currency is being contested today. With the rapid proliferation of biennials across the world, the question “to biennial or not to biennial”, indicating an exhaustion or saturation of the biennial genre, has become more apparent. Just as the history and increase of biennials still requires a lot of research, also the growing doubts towards biennials needs understanding. At a moment when the biennial is doing better than it ever has, in terms of both numbers and cultural status, a criticality in the field of contemporary art and curating towards the biennial as exhibition model has come to the front, which has resulted in biennials with a more self-reflective, discursive curatorial character.

While the large-scale exhibition has been compared to such structures as the art-fair and even the Olympics, the one institutional body that it has most frequently been discussed in relation—or rather in contrast—to is the museum. The promise of the biennial was that while the museum was the place for collection, permanence, classification, and conservation, the biennial’s *raison d’être* was to be a site for experimentation, testing, and inquiry. As Ranjit Hoskote wrote: “The biennial could be seen within a conceptualist lineage of exhibition making: the show as a testing ground for artistic innovation, a laboratory in which to experiment with new ways of activating the relation between viewers and artworks, between artworks and their site, and between artworks and their architecture of display. Hoskote described the biennial as a discursive environment: a theatre that allows for the staging of arguments, speculations, and investigations concerning the nature of our shared, diversely veined, and demanding contemporary condition.”<sup>66</sup>

Regarding the biennial as a discursive environment connects to an observation by Bruce W. Ferguson and Milena M. Hoegsberg, who have asserted that a new kind of biennial emerged at a point of discontent about the enormous increase of biennials worldwide, and more importantly,

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<sup>66</sup> Hoskote, Ranjit. “Biennials of Resistance: Reflections on the Seventh Gwangju Biennial.” In *The Biennial Reader, An Anthology on Large-Scale Perennial Exhibitions of Contemporary Art*, edited by Elena Filipovic, Marieke van Hal, and Solveig Øvstebø, Bergen and Ostfildern: Bergen Kunsthall and Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2010: 306-321.

about what biennials *did* and *did not* accomplish. In their survey of a cross section of biennial catalogues, Ferguson and Hoegsberg found a consistent and growing awareness that the promise of the contemporary art biennial, especially as a platform for true global interchange and as a departure from the museum, has not been fully realized. “The biennial has given rise to a new set of issues, including curatorial intellectual patterns, which are predictable and stagnant; a limited pantheon of artists whose forms of production and networks of distribution are traditionally hierarchical; the misuse of site-specificity as a practice, which has been transferred from the specifics of contextual intensity to an assimilatory aesthetics of style and *faux* social commitment; and the architectural mimicry of museums in the form of the modernist white box.”<sup>67</sup>

Since the new millennium, a focus on reflection and analysis in the biennial world has been taken place, especially amongst biennials with a longer history. The premise for the 28th São Paulo Biennial in 2008, curated by Ivo Mesquita and Ana Paula Cohen, was to rethink and reflect on successive editions of the biennial as well as systematize considerations on today’s biennials in general, in order to define a potentially new protagonistic role. The result was a biennial—nicknamed by some *the void*—that functioned without a conventional art exhibition and instead operated solely as a platform for discourse.<sup>68</sup> The 9th Istanbul Biennial in 2005 also showed an introspective character. Curated by Vasif Kortun and Charles Esche, it incorporated a museum exhibition on the history of the biennial at the Van Abbe Museum in Eindhoven, presenting a selection of key artworks drawn from all previous Istanbul Biennial exhibitions, and giving the biennial “a place to rest” and reflect on its own past. In the same year the itinerant European Biennial of Contemporary Art Manifesta was developing its sixth edition in Nicosia, Cyprus, for which the curators Anton Vidokle, Mai Abu Eldahab and Florian Waldvogel were selected by the International Foundation Manifesta upon their proposal to change the traditional biennial exhibition format and set up an experimental art school instead, mostly consisting of talks and workshops.<sup>69</sup> Other illustrations of discursive exhibitions in recent exhibition history can be

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<sup>67</sup> Ferguson, Bruce W. and Hoegsberg, Milena M. “Talking and Thinking about Biennials: The Potential of Discursivity.” In *The Biennial Reader, An Anthology on Large-Scale Perennial Exhibitions of Contemporary Art*, edited by Elena Filipovic, Marieke van Hal, and Solveig Øvstebø, Bergen and Ostfildern: Bergen Kunsthall and Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2010: 360-375. This essay on the topic of discursivity was especially commissioned for *The Biennial Reader*.

<sup>68</sup> The artistic concept for the 28th São Paulo Biennial edition was presumably related to financial and political problems within the São Paulo Biennial Foundation / the Fundação Bienal de São Paulo as well. It might, as such, also have been a practical solution by the curators Ivo Mesquita and Ana Paula Cohen.

given, such as: Catherine David's *100 Days-100 Guests* for Documenta 10 in 1997; Okwui Enwezor's five platforms consisting of lectures and discussions for Documenta 11 in 2002; the Riwaq Biennials consisting of curated visits, conversations and interactions, and Taipei Biennial 2010, curated by Hongjohn Lin and Tirdad Zolghadr, aiming to explore what you can do with a biennial that you cannot with anything else.<sup>70</sup> Apart from examples given of biennials fostering an analytical stance towards their own constitution, a big amount of international biennials have been organizing discussion panels and conferences in relation to their exhibitions with topics often focusing on the *biennialization* process in general.

The interest in presenting thinking and discussion rather than artefacts can also be contextualized in relation to the discourse-based artistic practices preceding the shift in exhibition-making, such as the late 1960s and early 1970s movement of conceptual art. Artists like Joseph Beuys, who regarded debate, discussion, and teaching as part of his expanded definition of art, and Joseph Kosuth, known for focusing on ideas at the fringe of art rather than on producing art *per se*, could be regarded as “forerunners” of the so-called discursive turn. Instead of the dematerialization of the art object in artistic practices at that time, we can speak about the dematerialization of the exhibition format in curating today. And we can look into the art practices of many more conceptual artists and collectives like Dan Graham, Art and Language, Group Material, Lawrence Weiner, Joseph Grigley, Andrea Fraser, as well as the work of artist Anton Vidokle more recently. For his *Night School* project—a year-long symposium focused on research and production in the New Museum—Vidokle organized seminars and workshops to shape a critically engaged public through art discourse.<sup>71</sup> The relation between discursive art practices and

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<sup>69</sup> The sixth edition of Manifesta, the European Biennial of Contemporary Art in the divided capital of Cyprus Nicosia/Lefkoshia never took place. The intention was to present a bi-communal contemporary art event in the format of an art school. The high sensitivity of the place, in the old town of the city split in half by a UN guarded Green Line, caused the biennial to be canceled by the Greek-Cypriot authorities prior to its opening. One of the curators, the artist Anton Vidokle, proceeded with his project for Manifesta 6 and launched it as *United Nations Plaza* in Berlin.

<sup>70</sup> The 28th São Paulo Biennial curated by Ivo Mesquita and Ana Paula Cohen in 2008 was totally devoted to the thinking of exhibitions. This radical curatorial gesture was confronted with a lot of criticism, both locally and internationally. The “non-show,” intended as a theoretical pause and a reconsideration of the biennial's original mission, became a space for discursive activities including conferences, talks and events.

<sup>71</sup> Sharing information and the resulting discourse around these ideas is at the core of Anton Vidokle's artistic work. *Night School* was the second in a series of art projects organized around a temporary school format. Vidokle initiated research into education as a site for artistic practice for Manifesta 6. In response to its cancellation, he set up *United Nations Plaza* in Berlin, a twelve-month project featuring numerous seminars, lectures, screenings, book presentations and projects, followed up by the *Night School* project in the New Museum in New York.

discursive exhibitions is an interesting area for more research.

“The increasingly popular discursive forms of curatorial activity reflect the critical approach to exhibition making, aiming at developing alternative forms of interaction between agents traditionally associated with art production, dissemination and reception (artist, curators, critics and publics) as well as those associated with the larger field of cultural production (cultural producers, theoreticians, policy makers etc). If taking place in a context of a museum, art centre or a gallery, discourse-based practices have usually taken the form of a substantial program accompanying the show or an independent program produced with similar amount of attention as exhibitions. When initiated by biennials, they often have adopted more radical shapes, and in the most extreme cases they have led to production of non-exhibitions; the suspension of exhibition in favour of an assortment of discursive formats such as symposia, gatherings, studio visits and various educational projects focusing on questioning, re-evaluating and programming the apparatus surrounding art production rather than the art production process itself.”<sup>72</sup> The deployment of discursive formats in the context of biennials is likely a sign of maturity of the contemporary art biennial entering a stage of development where the higher degree of self-reflexivity has become a necessity.

The city of Bergen wanted to establish a biennial, however the Bergen Kunsthall, Bergen’s main contemporary art institution—well aware of the potential political instrumentalization of the biennial as a tool for cultural tourism and city regeneration—decided to organize an in-depth research on the biennial instead, which resulted in the Bergen Biennial Conference in 2009, an international conference and think tank to study and discuss the status of the biennial as an exhibition model. By doing so, the city completely refrained from, at least for the moment, organizing a biennial exhibition.<sup>73</sup> The Bergen Biennial Conference brought together thirty-two international curators, critics, artists, and thinkers from around the globe to collectively reflect on the practice and potential of biennials as institutions. As one of the most extensive examinations of the biennial phenomenon to date, the conference aimed to identify and explore existing *biennial knowledge* from different regions of the world and consisted of three days of lectures as well as public dialogues and seminar-style workshops with leading professionals in the field.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Niemojewski, Rafal. *The Rise of the Contemporary Biennial 1984-2009* (draft text on discursive formats and new criticality) PhD thesis, Royal College of Art, London 2009.

<sup>73</sup> The idea for a Bergen Biennial was first announced in the City of Bergen’s Action Plan for Arts and Artists 1995–2005 (The Arts Plan). The Commissioner of Finance, Cultural Affairs and Sports in Bergen reintroduced the idea in 2007.

<sup>74</sup> The first big-scale conference on biennials took place in Bellagio, Italy, in 1997. Organized by the Rockefeller Foundation 15 curators from Africa, Asia, America, Europe and the United States



The conference was followed by *The Biennial Reader, An Anthology on Large-Scale Perennial Exhibitions of Contemporary Art*, published in 2010, and including seminal republished texts collected from around the world as well as newly commissioned contributions from the leading scholars, curators, critics, and thinkers of biennials today. Given the lamentable paucity of material on the history and theorization of the perennial exhibition format this anthology aimed to function as a vital resource and one of the first theoretical handbooks on the recurring large-scale exhibition. Tracing the genealogy of the perennial exhibition format, including biennials but also other recurrent exhibitions and examining some of the most emblematic examples of the twentieth and twenty-first century, from the Venice Biennial to the Johannesburg Biennial, the Havana Biennial, Documenta and the Asian biennials, this reader has explored the artistic, theoretical, political, and other ambitions of large-scale exhibition projects against the grain of their resulting exhibitions.

As a way to explore and identify scholarship and literature from different parts of the world, a “Call for Biennial Knowledge” was published via e-flux to which over a hundred fifty international scholars sent in texts. The aim of this call was to create an up to date insight in the critical thinking and writing on recurrent large-scale art exhibitions, their history, socio-political and economical contexts, and paradigmatic curatorial practice. The call requested for published and unpublished, recent and older essays in any language on the biennial as a format or phenomenon i.e. not reviews of any particular edition of a biennial but more comprehensive, researched texts on the larger biennial question, constituting a seminal reflection on the subject. The outcome showed that most theoretical essays still refer to singular biennials, their specific historical development, while not providing a more critical and analytical look at the biennial phenomenon and its implications at large. Three of the scholars who submitted texts were invited to the conference, and essays by them were included in the resulting publication.

Instead of exhibiting art, the entirety of the Arquivo Histórico Wanda Svevo (the Wanda Svevo Historical Archive) on international biennials that was conceived as part of the 28th São Paulo Biennial in 2008 constituting the most comprehensive documentation source on biennials

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met at the Foundation’s Conference and Study Center, to consider the rapidly developing field of international contemporary art exhibitions. Michael Brenson was commissioned to write a report titled “The Curator’s Moment: Trends in the Field of International Contemporary Art Exhibitions” in *Art Journal* 57, no 4, winter, 1998. After that the German Institute for Foreign Cultural Relations-IFA organized a series of relevant conferences, titled “Biennales in Dialogue” in Kassel, in collaboration with Museum Fridericianum (2000), Frankfurt (2002), Singapore (2006) and Shanghai (2008). The last “Biennales in Dialogue” conference took place in the Goethe Institute in Shanghai and was moderated by Rafal Niemojewski and Marieke van Hal.

anywhere in the world, was transported to Bergen and presented for consultation in Bergen Kunsthall. For the 28th São Paulo Biennial a special campaign was launched to collect publications from as many biennials and other periodical exhibitions as possible from all over the world. The idea behind was a wish to collect and show the public the vast range of biennials that exist today. Being aware that this archive was the most comprehensive and actual biennial reference resource, the Fundação Bienal de São Paulo was contacted and asked for a loan to display “The Biennial Archive” in Bergen Kunsthall during and after the conference. The archive consisted of publications of over two hundred contemporary art biennials, some of which no longer exist and are therefore only accessible through this kind of historical documentation. An invaluable resource, this first ever presentation of the archive in Europe underscored the ambitions to provide the best possible insight into the exhibition history of biennials.<sup>75</sup>

Prior to the conference, as a form of homework, a “Reader for Lecturers” was sent to all invited lecturers and reviewers.<sup>76</sup> This reader, a selection of twelve existing seminal texts, was intended to share with the speakers initial readings in the conceptualization of the conference, touching upon the most important issues in the critical and analytical discourse on biennials. The reader was a reference resource for all participants and created a preliminary theoretical context for the event's discursive format, made up of three days of lectures and seminar style workshops divided in three topics: history, practice, and the future.

The first day of the conference created the foundations for subsequent discussions by focusing on the history and origins of biennials and other perennial international exhibitions, from early world's fairs and the Venice Biennial, as well as such others as the São Paulo, Havana Biennials and Documenta to the 1990's biennial boom that saw the rise of the Manifesta, Berlin, Istanbul, Gwangju, Mercosul, and Dak'Art Biennials, among many others. Discussions closely considered the historical events and socio-economic, geopolitical contexts that made these recurrent exhibitions possible or even necessary and urgent. This day addressed the ambitions and forms that these exhibitions and the art they show have taken over the years.

The second day, which focused on practice, delineated the different types and models of

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<sup>75</sup> The bibliography for the Fundação Bienal de São Paulo's International Biennial Archive was published on the Bergen Biennial Conference's website: <http://www.bbc2009.no>. The archive was presented in the Bergen Kunsthall according to its original installation in São Paulo.

<sup>76</sup> The “Reader for Lecturers” consisted of texts by Sara Arrhenius, Carlos Basualdo, Michael Brenson, Daniel Buren, Okwui Enwezor, Elena Filipovic, Pascal Gielen, Tim Griffin, Thomas McEvilly, Gerardo Mosquera, Marian Pastor Rocas, Simon Sheikh, Misko Suvakovic, and Jan Verwoert.

biennials, and looked at their functioning, developments and evolution over time. This day was dedicated to the collective reflection on the biennial as a historically new type of “art institution,” by encouraging a reading of the various benefits and limitations of such large-scale art events against the grain of their resulting exhibitions. Many questions were raised. For instance, do biennials foster different or more interesting art exhibitions and more inventive curatorial practice? And how does the biennial differentiate itself from and/or depend on other art world structures?

Taking up the query that some biennials themselves are asking about the potentials and limits of the format, the conference’s third day focused on the future. In a time when post-modernity has come to an end and an era of alter-modernity has been announced, would the perennial exhibition still be relevant? Along with reflection on the role and responsibility of the curator, the tendency towards discursive biennial models, as well as the consequences of these changing exhibition structures for artists, curators, and the public was discussed. On the last day, the discussions and thoughts of the previous days came together, and the possibilities for new curatorial paradigms as well as ideas about a biennial in Bergen were assessed.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Participants in the Bergen Biennial Conference were: Carlos Basualdo, Ute Meta Bauer, Ina Blom, Charlotte Bydler, John Clark, Ann Demeester, Chrissie Isles, Jonas Ekeberg, Ingar Dragset, Gridthiya Gawewong, Ranjit Hoskote, Maria Hlavajova, Carolina A. Jones, Yakouba Konaté, Sarat Maharaj, Vittoria Martini, Bruce W. Ferguson, Gerardo Mosquera, Paul O’Neill, Hans Ulrich Obrist, Tommy Olsson, Marit Paasche, Nikos Papastergiadis, Rafal Niemojewski, Anri Sala, Shuddhabrata Sengupta, Vinicius Spricigo, Monika Szewczyk, Per Gunnar Eeg-Tverbakk, Mahita El Bacha Urieta, Sabine B. Vogel, and Milena M. Hoegsberg. This list includes reviewers who were invited to critically report on what had been presented and discussed in all the lectures and talks. Their analyses have been collected in a volume that supplements *The Biennial Reader*.

## 5. Conclusion

If it can be said that for more than a century museum and gallery exhibitions have largely been “the medium through which most art becomes known,”<sup>78</sup> then it is the *biennial exhibition* that has arguably since proved to be the medium through which most contemporary art has come to be known. Exhibitions in general, and one could argue biennial exhibitions specifically and increasingly, have become central sites for understanding the artwork today. In the span of just a few decades the biennial has developed into one of the most vital and visible sites for the production, distribution, and public discourse around contemporary art. This shift demands a revision of how to think about not only the way in which art is being conceived and received today, but also the way its history is written.

Art history has long been built on an analysis of individual, autonomous artworks yet, as scholars have recognized in recent years, the writing of that history should also involve the analysis of the site or context in which the artwork first gains public visibility.<sup>79</sup> It can also be argued that the history of contemporary art must be written through, with, and alongside an understanding of the biennial *in particular*, because to take into account the armatures for art’s presentation today means, increasingly, to attend to the history and specificity of the large-scale, perennial

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<sup>78</sup> Ferguson, Bruce W., Reesa Greenberg, and Sandy Nairne. “Mapping International Exhibitions.” In *Thinking about Exhibitions*, edited by Reesa Greenberg, Bruce W. Ferguson, and Sandy Nairne. London and New York: Routledge, 1996: 2.

<sup>79</sup> Brian O’ Doherty’s essays, first published in *Artforum* in 1976 and then later collected in *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space* (Santa Monica, 1986), spoke about the exhibition as both a historical phenomenon and an ideological device. Other early publications on specific historical exhibitions include Bruce Altshuler’s *The Avant-Garde in Exhibition: New Art in the 20th Century* (New York, 1994) and Mary Anne Staniszewski’s *The Power of Display: A History of Exhibition Installation at the Museum of Modern Art* (Cambridge [MA], 1998). Even Ferguson, Greenberg, and Nairne’s *Thinking About Exhibitions* (London, 1996), now just over a decade old, remains a landmark for being a collection of essays dedicated not so much to an institution or site (for instance, the museum or *Wunderkammer*) but to the exhibition *as such*. More recently, Hans Ulrich Obrist has attempted to respond to the aporias concerning the history of exhibition-making with a series of interviews with groundbreaking curators in his *A Brief History of Curating* (Zurich, 2009). And, although it does not actually address the biennial, Bruce Altshuler’s *Salon to Biennial: Exhibitions that Made Art History, Volume I: 1863–1959* (London, 2008) suggests in its title alone that great exhibitions over the last century and a half might be responsible for “making” art history. As Maria Hlavajova pointed out in her contribution to *The Biennial Reader*, “the history of exhibitions as it stands in the theoretical discourse today is, in fact, relatively separate from that of biennials (or even “biennial exhibitions”), with only occasional points of intersection.”

exhibitions of our contemporary period.<sup>80</sup> The frame around the artwork—geo-political, institutional, discursive, and spatial—is never neutral, but instead administers readings and interpretations. And because the biennial is, at its core, a global phenomenon that has played a crucial role in the dissemination of art from all over the world, the suggestion that contemporary art history should be written alongside a consideration of the biennial thus necessarily also prompts the writing of a proper global art history.<sup>81</sup>

Carlos Basualdo called the biennial a fundamentally “unstable institution” whose identity can perhaps best be defined, *ex negativo*, in contrast with the more established, self-possessed, permanently fixed, and symbolically weighty institution that is the museum. Expanding on this notion of instability, Maria Hlavajova has suggested that “the identity of the biennial *must* necessarily be unstable, always in flux, and difficult to articulate in terms of continuity or as something more than just the sum of its editions over time.” According to Hlavajova we should first “remind ourselves that speaking about *the* biennial is an impossible task, as no single form representing this entire hybrid field of cultural endeavour exists.”<sup>82</sup> This complexity we encountered when trying to typify and categorize biennials. Also this gives rise to a curious paradox: the biennial *cannot* be fully defined, but as most scholars and professionals in the field agree, *must* be studied. Easy definition cannot be made and yet we need to understand the biennial to make sense of the conditions and development of contemporary art.

The biennial cannot be precisely or absolutely defined, yet its sheer numbers and impact on art and its institutions worldwide demands that it is being examined, all the while embracing the

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<sup>80</sup> Writing with regard to Documenta in 1992, Walter Grasskamp first called for recognition of the central place held by that particular mega-exhibition in the production of postwar art history. At the time, however, when exhibitions were not yet seriously considered valid objects of critical study, his call must have seemed like a polemical proposition. See Grasskamp, “For Example, *Documenta*, Or, How Is Art History Produced?” in Ferguson, Greenberg, and Nairne 1996 (see note 1), pp. 67–78.

<sup>81</sup> Art history has long been an emphatically Western affair, evident by looking through the most prominent publications on art history over time (which also happen to be the most relied upon in art history courses today), from H. W. Janson’s *History of Art: The Western Tradition* (its subtitle announcing art history itself as a “western tradition,” especially as there was no other tradition that was offered as an equal or parallel supplement to this one) first published by Harry Abrams in the 1962 and currently in its eighth edition, to the more recent but still resolutely Euro-American focused *Art Since 1900*, Rosalind Krauss, Hal Foster, et al (eds.) (London: Thames and Hudson, 2004).

<sup>82</sup> Hlavajova, Maria. “How to Biennial? The Biennial in Relation to the Art Institution.” In *The Biennial Reader, An Anthology on Large-Scale Perennial Exhibitions of Contemporary Art*, edited by Elena Filipovic, Marieke van Hal, and Solveig Øvstebø, Bergen and Ostfildern: Bergen Kunsthall and Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2010: 294.

possibility that it might remain something essentially amorphous, contradictory, and—as in recent years—contested even. We have seen that biennials have stood, at certain points in history as the experimental cousins to more established art institutions. The biennial positioned itself against the traditional Western art institution, which has long been understood as conventional in form, heavy in its workings, and endowed with monumentally stable architectures full of supposedly neutral spaces, all of it overburdened by inflexible systems of accountability. The utopian promise of the biennial was to be a site for experimentation, contingency, testing, ambiguity, and inquiry. However the more stable counterparts of the biennials (not only museums, but also art centers, *Kunsthallen*, etc.) have arguably and unsurprisingly evolved as well, causing the distance between the two to shift at times. And along the way, and despite its institutional-critical pretensions, the biennial itself might have become one more bonefide institution of the art world like the others.

To biennial or not to biennial: *that was the question*. By reflecting on the past, the promise, and the future of the biennial, and, in the process, on its impact on contemporary art, curating, and art institutions the Bergen Biennial Conference—that took the place of what would have otherwise been the first edition of the Bergen Biennial—and *The Biennial Reader* not only aimed to serve Bergen’s specific dilemma, but also the broader international art world, since Bergen’s local question is applicable to many cities globally today. Even though, as we have seen in the discussion on the pros and cons it is not self-evident that we *should* biennial, our current contemporary art practice and the ongoing rising amount of new biennial organizations around the globe teaches us that *we will biennial*.<sup>83</sup> So far, biennials have proven to function as new platforms for contemporary art and curatorial practice that have opened up the art world into a more pluralistic, international network of artists, art professionals and audiences.

Whether or not Bergen will eventually host a biennial exhibition is still an open question. The will, expertise and commitment to make these plans realistic are all present in the city. The local political and cultural professionals were open to a discursive format and healthy critical thought as to whether a biennial is what Bergen and the Norwegian art scene really needed, and if so, with what type of biennial the city would be best served. Existing doubts about whether or not to biennial today can likely best be surpassed by another query, proposed by Maria Hlavajova: “*how and what to biennial?*” This might be a good topic for new research.

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<sup>83</sup> Hlavajova, Maria. “How to Biennial? The Biennial in Relation to the Art Institution.” In *The Biennial Reader, An Anthology on Large-Scale Perennial Exhibitions of Contemporary Art*, edited by Elena Filipovic, Marieke van Hal, and Solveig Øvstebø, Bergen and Ostfildern: Bergen Kunsthall and Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2010: 293.

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