

Transnational Circulations and the Emergence of  
Contemporary Art: The Critical Challenges of Art  
Biennials in a Global World

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# TRANSNATIONAL CIRCULATIONS AND THE EMERGENCE OF CONTEMPORARY ART: THE CRITICAL CHALLENGES OF ART BIENNIALS IN A GLOBAL WORLD

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## *Abstract*

While the proliferation of art biennials appeared to offer a platform for critical resistance and representation formulated in local terms in an increasingly networked world, their conjunction with (and inseparability from) the global flows of capital and the contemporary experiential culture led to an intensified critical scrutiny in the last decade. This article questions the assumption of the critical agency of low-budget biennials set up in formerly peripheral regions of the world as opposed to the historical ones based on the principles of national representation. Taking into account the micro-histories of cultural exchanges taking place between countries in the former East across the Iron Curtain, it claims that, far from formulating a convincing critique of dominant capitalism or truly challenging the dominant art historical canon, most biennials in the formerly peripheral regions tend to contribute to the replication of global capital, enhancing its trans-national fluidity. The most successful ones in this respect, I would argue, tend to invent new localities and contribute to the critical process through innovative aesthetic formats which become politically sharp discourses.

**Keywords:** *globalization, cultural exchanges, circulations, decoloniality, post-socialism.*

The year 1989 witnessed not only major political changes such as the fall of the Berlin Wall or the inauguration of the post-Apartheid era in South Africa after the result of the last race-based parliamentary elections, but also the setting up of influential exhibitions in challenging the hegemony of Western-based art such as *Les Magiciens de la Terre* curated

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by Jean-Hubert Martin at the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris or the third edition of the Biennial of Havana. Many of the former cultural margins have since destabilized the spatial distinctions formerly dividing the art historical imaginary. New processes of decolonization challenged dominant narratives and established power relations, while questioning stable notions of cultural identity. Martin's exhibition ensured visibility to artists originating in what were formerly considered peripheral regions. The subsequent rise of the art biennial as a global phenomenon is one of the intriguing aspects of world art history that, while intensively studied, is far from being interpreted in a definitive key.

On a modest scale, this text proposes such a comparative study of large scale exhibitions in today's unstable global condition. From a perspective inspired by postcolonial critical theory, it investigates the extent to which art biennials in formerly peripheral areas such as Latin America and the Caribbean, Asia, South and Central Africa may have contributed significantly not only to the construction of a local artistic identity, but also to the spread of modernism as a Western product. At the same time, it questions their double-faceted agency, regarded both as emancipatory cultural practices, advocating hybridization and reconstructing local and regional cultural identities, and as agents of a new capitalist colonization and exploitation of language, bodies and time.

From a methodological perspective, such a research lies at the intersection between, on the one hand, curatorial and exhibition studies, and on the other hand, spatial art history and postcolonial studies. From this particular perspective, the text attempts to by-pass the dominant interpretive frameworks and modes of contextualization, which, grounded in elements of critical theory, question, in a binary logic, the locally emancipatory functions of marginal art biennials against their wider ideological premises advocating Western cultural values. It attempts to map out the new geographies of art these phenomena suggest, and assess their impact on the already contested term "globalization". Nevertheless, as I would try to point out, the function of the art biennial as a cultural mediator and site of exchange was already in place not only in the rare eccentric biennials emerging after 1960 and intensified after 1989, but also in the more established ones which preserved the hegemony of Western art under the guise of the "neo-avant-garde". The

study of cultural exchanges between the former socialist bloc and the capitalist West before 1989 may complexify this unchallenged narrative of political discontinuity which revolves around the global 1990s, revealing the often multidirectional and ambivalent character of some sites of power associated with North American or Western European cultural imperialism. On the other hand, I suggest that the critical task of the contemporary of the art biennial lies less in its power to produce cultural translation, but rather in rethinking its complicity with the global capital that is mobilized in and through this translation.

### **The biennial exhibition as a political arena**

To advance a provisional definition of the art biennial, one may begin with its non-permanent status, which, according to Carlos Basualdo, transforms it into an “unstable institution” (Basualdo 2010). Trying to distinguish it from other powerful institutions such as the museum, Basualdo noticed that the art biennial is not linked to a certain collection and thus, to a certain extent, promotes a flexible cultural identity. However, just like the art museum, art biennials influence the writing of art history and the discursive regimes responsible for a global politics of inclusion and visibility. Advancing a more cohesive tentative definition, Paul O’Neil claims that “the term biennial has come to signify a large scale, international group exhibition that recurs every two to five years (...).” (O’Neil 2012, 52). Interpreted in material terms, a biennial exhibition may be regarded as a “blockbuster” type of exhibition, “typified by the propensity for a large number of works, an ample budget, and an ambition to be part of an international art world nexus” (O’Neil 2012, 52). According to O’Neil, they serve as *interfaces* between local people, art the wider art public, as well as between local support and internationally renowned curators.

In terms of their discursive strategies, contemporary art biennials can hardly be reduced to a single denomination. Nevertheless, as John Miller has pointed out (Miller 1996), they may be considered as essentially ideological endeavors that objectifies the relations between audience and producers, staging and materializing spaces of sociability, dialogue and conflict, as well as new regimes of visibility and aesthetic

technologies meant to influence the formation of subjectivity. Thus, internationalism and trans-national (and lately, trans-cultural) exchanges is one of the key issues of biennial exhibitions. Therefore, one may argue that art biennials were a central factor in the circulation of ideas, people and art objects in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. They function to “developmentally tie a city or region to an international level” (Clark 2010, 165), and thus, are platforms for enhancing artistic visibility and, at the same time, gaining economic opportunities.

Besides the historical biennales such as the Venice or Sao Paolo biennale, where questions of national representation were and still remain relevant today, after 1989, most of the newly formed biennials in the former West such as Berlin, Lyon, Melbourne, Liverpool, but also those in the South and (Middle or Far) East like Istanbul, Tirana, Dakar, Gwangju, Fukoka, Taipei or Johannesburg, were advancing locality and questioning glocalization. Locality may be defined both in the material terms of local specialties, touristic sites and cultural products and in the discursive terms of indigenous or regional cultural representations. These institutions of exhibiting were questioning the Eurocentric premises of the Western art world, often seeking for a more inclusive representation of difference and transcultural modernisms. However, due to the increasing power of the international curator and the accumulation of symbolic capital, contemporary art biennials often functioned, as John Clark (2010, 166) has argued, in a prescriptive manner in relation to local, regional and national culture, indicating a direction to be followed, but also in relation to the formation of a canon of international art. Most often, in any international biennial exhibition, selection and legitimation went hand in hand. Due to their prescriptive character, contemporary art biennials after 1989 “attempt to define what contemporary art is and/or how it should be articulated by their selection of sites, works, artists and curators” (Clark 2010, 167). As such, the “contemporary” tends to become a new designation for art that becomes almost synonymous with “universally valuable”, by-passing the local (national) and regional hierarchical scales. The global tends to become a periodizing concept, which designates the end of internationalism as we knew it (Alberro 2008).

### **The Paradigm of National Representation: Venice, Sao Paulo and Whitney**

How did this formation of contemporaneity occur? In order to understand the changes in the function and structure of the art biennial exhibitions, one should go back to the three major institutionalized sites for the exhibition of art. Established in 1895, Venice Biennale is the oldest biennial (and perhaps, the best known in the world), being coeval with the age of the Universal exhibitions and featuring, in its early stage, similar concerns regarding the constituency of an emancipated spectator on the premises of (competing) cultural values framed in national terms. Featuring national pavilions, Venice has often been considered the model (to emulate and to challenge alike) for the biennial exhibition, whose spectacle industry is still unprecedented today among the strictly biennial events. The Sao Paulo biennial, established in 1951, replicated its model, but displaced it towards the periphery. In between them, the Whitney Biennial focused solely on (North) American art, advanced locality by attempting to construct a national art historical narrative and cultural identity.

All these models were challenged after 1989 by the newly formed and world-wide spreading biennial exhibition complex. Nevertheless, according to Charles Green and Anthony Gardner (2016, 51), with the advent of Sao Paulo and of the Sidney Biennale (established in 1973), soon followed by the Biennial of Habana, art biennials already started to function as mediators between the local/provincial and the global/international, promoting “dialogue and collaboration in place of the image of a combative vanguard” as set up by the Venice Biennale model. They also advanced as early as the end of the 1970s a form of critical regionalism (Green and Gardner 2016, 93), which aspired to by-pass the by-partite division of the world – a task that much of the contemporary art after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the colonial world-system will tentatively embrace. Green and Gardner also claim that these regional concerns should be interpreted neither as a struggle for absolute autonomy, nor as a desire to be assimilated “within the cultural forms of the center”. “What these exhibition suggested instead was that the colonial-era format of the biennial could be transformed from within, redirected so as to regenerate local infrastructure, and used a

platform for debating the existing state of center-periphery exchange and developing new practices of international relations in their place.” (Green and Gardner 2016, 93).

The transnational exhibition paradigm brought by this biennial exhibition complex in the 1990s was irreversible. They still operates today as platforms for cultural translation, seeking for the formation of a cultural “third space”. As John Clark (2010, 173) has noticed, at least outside the dominant art historical narratives, contemporary art still tends to be separated on two levels: international, “hierarchically perceived as being superior or more important” and the national, perceived as being inferior, or of a more local interest. However, “since what we now tend loosely (...) to call the global appears to have dissolved the national, we may now associate artistic practice in terms of the producer or mediator unit with a kind of transnational level at which circulation occurs between like units or their embodied functions but no longer in a manner defined by the nation state” (Clark 2010, 177).

### **Art Biennials as Platforms for Disseminating Experimental Art across the Iron Curtain**

One way of dealing with the conundrum of critical agency in relation to the biennial as an agent of cultural imperialism is to remind the capacity of the established, conventional and Western-centric art biennials to instigate dialogical exchanges instead of one-directional routes of artistic influence. In Piotr Piotrowski’s terms, that would mean that art biennials could contribute to a more “horizontal” art history, by integrating Eastern European artists into the wider artistic circuit (Piotrowski 2009). Indeed, while critiques of the dominant recurrent exhibitions in the art system of the 1960s and 1970s, still based on the old paradigm of national representation, are indeed compelling from today’s transnational perspective, they may forget the role that some of these cultural events played in transgressing the same national boundaries and imposed political restrictions before the acceleration of global exchanges after the 1980s. I will only present three examples based on the case of experimental art produced in Romania during socialism and

which appear, today, as counter-cultural art practices in a context dominated by a conservative approach to artistic production. The first example is one of unilateral influence, classically stemming from the West to the East. It involves Romanian painter Ion Bitzan who, in 1964 at Venice Biennale, witnessed Robert Rauschenberg's paintings that incorporated elements of popular culture in a bewildering collage and montage. Bitzan seems to have been influenced by the rise of Pop Art and Nouveau Realisme, to the extent that he incorporated them into his formally unconventional versions of realist socialist paintings. The second case is more complex. In the 1971 edition of the Paris Biennial, Romanian conceptual and neo-constructivist artists Paul Neagu, Horia Bernea and Serban Epure participated in an international section called Interventions, being selected by Georges Boudaille, the commissioner of the biennale, and presented by France. Although in a period of relative cultural openness, the three artists were not proposed to represent Romania, who usually chose more conventional representations and eventually declined its participation. Like other gallery spaces such as Richard Demarco or Sigi Krauss, the biennial played a certain role in the construction a language of contemporary art that was not officially recognized by the state at that time, but was nevertheless tolerated. Through its curatorial selection, Paris Biennial thus acted as a mediator that gathered similar artistic formats and experimental art practices, concerned with the expansion of the definition and boundaries of art, and thus, contributed to the inauguration of a horizontal dialogue across the Iron Curtain, one which began, nevertheless, in the West. While absorbing the Romanian artists in the Western canon, it also expanded the understanding of such art practices and theories such as system aesthetics, cybernetic art, conceptual art and generative sculpture, among others. Perhaps an even better example of cultural ambivalence is represented by the encounter between Mihai Olos and Joseph Beuys at Documenta 6 in 1977, artists with different cultural backgrounds but equally interested in constructing social utopias and redefining sculpture as a medium starting from traditionally symbolic elements. While Documenta at that time included very few Eastern European artists, Olos's dialogue with Beuys allowed for a genuine transfer of contextually different artistic languages. However, the political effects of



these exchanges and circulations were limited. None of these artists (except for Paul Neagu) were absorbed by the Western art canon at that time, so, despite their power, did little to influence the narrative of contemporary art in the West. They served as legitimizers of the new artistic concerns that proved to stretch beyond the Western world, while, at their best, challenged the unilateral understanding of these artistic practices by presenting different artistic motivations grounded in specific cultural formations (often imbued by a mythical spirituality).

### **Globalization and the Proliferation of Art Biennials in Formerly Peripheral Regions: A Question of Critical Agency**

In relation to the spaces of the Third World, and in sharp contrast to the established biennials in the Western world, the newly established contemporary art biennials after 1989 have often presented themselves as genuine sites of dialogue and cultural exchange outside the centers of power, while consolidating the existing transnational cultural discourse. According to Charlotte Bydler (Bydler 2004), art biennials presented themselves as platforms for mediation between centers and peripheries, intermediary spaces meant to ensure visibility and negotiate a fragmentary world view. However, such a view was often met with critical skepticism. As Green and Gardner aptly summarize, "it was, after all, an art critic's commonplace to denounce the roster of curators, artists, and other arts professionals who frequent and stage biennials (...) as belonging to a transcultural class of global nomads" (Green and Gardner 2016, 147). In his account, Paul O'Neil also notices a homogenizing propensity of these biennial exhibitions, which may be regarded as obliterating the difference between center and periphery by absorbing the latter into the dominant discourse of the center and expanding an already existing world view (O'Neil 2012, 71-72). O'Neil also indicates a similar mode of operation at the core of all biennial exhibitions, based on "global integration, accelerated interdependence, consciousness raising of the global condition and inter-regional power relations" (O'Neil 2012, 62), which, in his view, "reflect globalization as a reality while adopting it as an idea or a theme". As many other critics noticed, the biennial as a

cultural phenomenon and art industry often embodies a rift, a cleavage between its discourse and its material predicaments, between the emancipatory politics it promises (or represents) and its hegemonic *realpolitik*, as well as between its imaginary conditions of discursive production and its concrete, social and political effects.

At the same time, post-Marxist interpretations of art biennials such as those advanced by Julian Stallabrass have questioned their spectacular appearance, promoting a mere image of equality and diversity on the postmodern agenda of the global free-market, while contributing to the promotion of cultural tourism and urban development due to their temporary nature and site-specific character of many of the artworks presented (Stallabrass 2004). From the perspective of their reception and the specificity of their publics and constituencies, art as entertainment appears as the major threat to the dialogical, pedagogical and emancipatory promises of such networked discourses and de-localized forms of presentation. Stallabrass's worries are echoed by Caroline A. Jones, who claims that the "codification of installation art in the nineteen-nineties came at the same cultural moment as the increase in global biennials and the problematization of national pavilions" (Jones 2010, 82). In this new exhibition form, art biennials foregrounded a culture of experience that ultimately failed to avoid the spectacular frame of the national (and ethnic) state against which they might have been predicated. According to Jones, the urban setting in which the biennial is contextualized still traps the contemporary art biennial in a framework similar to the age-old image of the universal exhibitions, albeit with different subjectivity positions offered to its consumers.

On a different set of premises, others have eventually questioned the flexible and multi-layered nature of artistic labor in the biennale format, as well as the imbalances that continue to exist between economic centers and peripheries, art from the margins becoming a supply line for the wealthy corporate industry of Western-based art galleries that continue to influence the shows (Alberro 2008). According to sociologist Pascal Gielen, the art biennial can also be defined as a "post-institution for immaterial labor", which mobilizes multitudes composed by curators, publics, artists and the like while contributing to

the exploitation of this type of workforce in conjunction with creative cities and industries (Gielen 2015, 36-37).

How may biennials still contribute today to subverting the regulations of cognitive and semantic labor through de-centralized networks that, according to Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, describe today's operations of *Empire*, or the new imperialism of global capital in motion? Can biennial exhibitions present and re-present artworks, understood as temporary articulations of emotions and ideas embodying new potentialities of sociability, beyond the homogenizing paradigm of the „global white cube“ as Elena Filipovic (2005) has called it, which reduces the function of the exhibition to a (fundamentally incomplete and fragmentary) representation of the world as a totality?

In the light of these roughly summarized ideas, it is apparent that the central/periphery, local/international question has already been displaced by the global, transnational contemporary art paradigm, in which questions of capital distribution or subversion becomes of utmost critical importance. The biennial format of large scale art exhibitions may still be regarded as one of the key advocates of hybridization and affirmation of local and regional cultural identities, creating new points of intersection. At the same time, far from being a benign cultural phenomenon, it may also be seen as a key factor in establishing new routes of cultural influence and modernist colonization in exchange for the old commercial ones. Recent publication, and conferences reviewed many of the conundrums of this type of exhibitions in connection to their origins, particular regimes of visibility and politicized practices, while leaving open questions concerning the functions, intersections, differences and contiguities between newly emerged cultural nexuses and emergent artistic networks.

## **Conclusion**

To exemplify how contemporary micro-biennials may evade the trap of local vs. global and national vs. international representation (and generally, the representational paradigm *per se*) would mean, first of all, to go back to the material distribution of goods, production of

immaterial labor and production and circulation of artistic representations in a global visual culture that is mobilized by an art biennial. Does the art biennial become a site for outsourcing and displacing capital (while preserving the exoticism of the local content as a still tradable merchandise), or does it attempt to circumvent the network of established art exchanges in favor of radically new political claims?

One such possible example is the newly founded Off-Biennale, which was generated in Budapest out of a grassroots civic self-organizing impulse in the section of the local art world connected with the international art scene. It was first intended as a counter-measure against the oppressive, conservative cultural policies of the political regime ruled by Victor Orban, with an explicit nationalist and often xenophobic agenda. The first edition of the biennale, organized in 2014, was realized with the support of artists, gallerists and a team of local curators that sometimes even used their own flats to exhibit (a former counter-cultural exhibition format used in the Soviet Union in the eighties to create an alternative to official art). Such a self-organized, non-state supported and anti-corporate gesture was radically avant-garde at that time, and still preserves until today the idea of a biennial as a political gesture that transgresses the binary of the locally emancipatory discourse advocated by other similar events and of the exoticization of locality by fostering site-specific production and constructing networks that stretch *across* the mainstream of the global art world. Such a definition of locality in terms of critical regionalism is still productive and may become, I hope, the ferment already replicated in other peripheral regions of the globe, where art exhibitions are used as arenas of critical social and political resistance by advancing, as Pascal Gielen argued, both intimacy and “slowness” against hypocritical cosmopolitanism and faster circulation of art (Gielen 2015). Moreover, if the political agency of the art biennial today is severely undermined by its existence as a “site of coded dissent” (Kompatsiaris 2017, 2) that remain aesthetic containers framing their discursively-defined program and agency, it seems that the critical agency of minor art-biennials can be reclaimed precisely by subverting the “distribution of the sensible”, as Rancière (2004) has put, that is, the articulation of the visible and invisible, of what can be said

and what can be done within the aesthetic regime and its material conditions they belong to.

A yet unwritten comparative study of (micro-)art biennials in a changing cultural landscape seems to be at the same time possible and necessary, promising further insight into their multiple functions which may help us rethink the creation of new artistic geographies and routes of cultural influence in a new and meaningful way. Of particular interest is not only the enlarged territories of spatial art history or the geo-history of art and the its new particular configurations, but also the way a comparative study of the relation between locality and globalization may redefine exhibitions as sites of critical resistance, exposing blind spots in the dialogical process of writing a world art history. To what extent the discourse of contemporary art history may be not only completed or sanctioned, but also challenged and partially reconfigured on the premises of such interrogation, combining discourse analysis, critical social theory of art and post-colonial inquiries? To what extent may in-depth case studies go beyond the inclusion/exclusion framework and reveal challenges to the common use of dominant critical concepts designating processes such as influence, relation, hybridization or translation, when approaching the relation between a diachronically oriented, multi-threaded, but still narrative-based understanding of art history, and its cartographic dimension? Are such interrogations able to destabilize, in the end, our received notions of “modernism” and “contemporariness” and dissociate modernization from the essentially colonial project of economic globalization?

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