Biennial Topology

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Stuart Ringhold, The Trekers, 2011. Performance at the 54th Venice Biennale as part of the ACCA Pop-Up Program: Venice (2011). Courtesy the artist and ACCA Archive.

People speak of the 'biennial model', but in truth there is no such thing. The 'biennial' is an occurrence, and as is now the case, a chain of occurrences that over time have reformed, deformed and reformed – each time in another episode – in one of the longest-running sagas in which art, aesthetics, ideology and commerce collide – sometimes wonderfully, occasionally explosively.

There are, however, topologies of the biennial occurrence. The Aperto of the 1990 Venice Biennale, for instance, presented in the newly conserved shabby grandeur of the Arsenale, inaugurated both the need and the opportunity for a RAW, un-institutionalised, apparently 'open', borderless, more maverick space in which a curatorial voice or set of voices could attempt to eliminate the apparent nationalistic representations that had become a rejected burden in the Giardini. The RAW topology offered the opportunity to investigate a 'theme' or 'tendency' or 'selection'. Today, the RAW space for a biennale is a 'given', a commonplace, a must-have, a searched-for archaeology of the ever-metabolising city and an essential part of the urban-discovery narrative.

We should not underestimate the importance of the Aperto and Arsenale topology and its emergence as part of our case study into the 'episodic' and the 'contemporaneous' condition.

In 1990, as visitors and arts-policy wonks, wandered up and down the vast and impressive new (old) space of the Arsenale (mostly in search of Koons' *Made in Heaven*, like a lot of the Venetian sailors that year … boosting the biennale numbers) it became immediately apparent that you did not need a major museum building or set of national pavilions to mount a Biennale, you could space-invade a city and squat in empty and transforming spaces. Such a notion was a boon for cities who bought into the whole culture/regeneration narrative emerging in places such as Liverpool, led by urbanists like Graeme Evans and Susan Carmichael, and taken up by a variety of cities, enthusiastically embracing, not long afterwards, the Richard Florida concept of Creative Cities. The inhabitants and visitors in such places, and in the highly lucrative cultural tourism category, were not, Florida suggested, especially interested in cultural institutions in the form of high-profile art galleries, operas and such, but preferred to meander about in urban districts characterised by warehouses and the hole-in-the-wall operations of the nascent pop-up

culture – cafés, start-up galleries – which themselves bred the next gen of outlets – bookshops, grass roots and recycle boutiques etc.

This NEO (NEW ECONOMIC ORDER) tribe of cultural consumers were and still are, although this is waning, due to political unrest, happy to combine many different forms of cultural experiences in a lifestyle engagement – discovery, food, travel, been there first, off-piste, see and tell … oh, and art.

The RAW topology provided them with a sense of authenticity and an unconventional underground encounter that rang their bells. It also bred and coincided with the NEO audience, who were financially able to consume contemporary works avidly, fulfilling their consumerist desire for icons even whilst the Old Masters were out of reach.

A sub-tendency of the RAW topology was the creep of the art-fair crowd across to the Biennale experience, and of course the boom in art fairs themselves, as the new rich felt enfranchised, and were actively recruited as audience, patrons and, of course, consumers by increasingly aggressive marketing campaigns and incentivisations like dinners, parties and special VIP tours and discounts.

It might be said that the slew of infant flagship biennales, some that are now adolescents, such as Berlin, Liverpool, Istanbul, Lyon, Taipei, Gwangju, Sharjah etc. and those that came and went – Johannesburg, Melbourne, and others – were bred of this RAW/culture/regeneration narrative topology.

The financial, civic and urban planning ducks were lined up and art was a modus operandi, not really an end in itself for many, but an outcome, of course. 'Real life', or contemporaneous events enhanced this RAW topology. Contemporary art and its emergence as a cultural-regeneration and city-tourism tactic, was stimulated by and coincided with the slump in developers' confidence and liquidity in the post-1987 crash, which bred, as a consequence, a vast number of black-hole urban spaces. The notion that art was a quick and inexpensive fixer-upper was compelling, and the attendance figures emerging from the newly minted, reclaimed-space biennales were compelling too.

Speaking of real life, business contemporaneity, airfares started to descend around 1989, and they have been descending ever since, until about two years ago. The rise of the international fly-about biennale visitor was undoubtedly enabled by the emerging affordability of air travel. Airfares have dropped by a significant 50 per cent over the past thirty years, and one might note the correlation to increased numbers. In 1990 approximately 185,000 people attended the Venice Biennale (less than in the year it started, when 345,000 people visited). In 2015 the figure was put at approximately 505,000, while the 14th Biennale of Sydney achieved approximately 635,000 and Documenta 13 a whopping 800,000+. Aghhh… the footprint!

The mega found space, which quickly became a monolithic new version of the salon, a quasi-institutional repetition, bred a counter topology. The NOMADIC, scattered, distributed topology. This was more of a squatting strategy. Nimble, quixotic in nature, it fulfilled the same seek-and-discover desire of the now primed biennale visitor, intrepid and armed with a map, ready to go where no Jimmy Choo shoe had gone before.

Several biennales have now combined the NOMADIC space topology with the RAW and institutional 'home' (a regular gallery or museum venue). And 'home' provides a stable way to readjust when the development and business ducks don't line up, which of course frequently happens.

As an interesting side bar, the introduction of the RAW topology in Venice in 1990 also coincided with a few important pavilion one-up-man-ships that gave added thrust to the potential of the properly invested, no-holds-barred, fully installed and site-specifically designed national representation. Jenny Holzer's American pavilion, not only won the Lion that year, but its extravagant, beautiful and powerful installation, jettisoned forever the idea that pavilions were staid mini monuments and domestic vessels for polite encounters. Hans Haacke's 1993 ruinous *Germania* pavilion sealed the deal.

The emergence, too, of new technological display materials, such as LEDs, and of course the strong entry of data projections in the 1990s, also influenced a movement towards light-tight, less permeable

spaces. Once again, pavilions became useful because they could be contained and controlled, and the museum room and white cube once again reasserted itself as an ideal. And if you couldn't be in a pavilion or a museum surrogate space, then you could always rent a Palazzo! Also, great for a patron party.

Art is the contemporary contingency in this equation of the episodic and the contemporaneous. Art, and sometimes the curatorial determination. The natural episodic character of the biennale is durational – long and almost normalised by this temporal length and now global ubiquity, so that its shape-shifting and so-called modelling loses definition. So it is art and the curatorial direction that can either chime with the expectations of the audience, the contingent 'real life' (contemporaneous) forces, or the unexpected change of fate in real life that intervenes between conception and delivery.

I remember vividly the turn of events in 1999 when Ann Hamilton's American pavilion, itself a physical, aesthetic essay on the trauma and brutality of American history, became newly symbolic of the atrocities occurring in Kosovo. NATO bombing between 24 March 1999 and 10 June 1999 meant that the Venice Biennale opened amidst the sustained final bombardments, and with Venice a mere 90 kms away from the Italian airbase deploying the aircraft lifting NATO bombs, the proximity and contemporary condition cast a completely different interpretation on Hamilton's walls, which appeared excessively blood-streaked and visceral. Hamilton's interest in the temple form as an idealised image projected onto civic space led her to engage the neo-classical building of the American pavilion as both subject and object of the project. It was a meditation on aspects of American social history that are present and pervasive in effect, but which remain invisible or unspoken. Her self-given task, she said, 'was to make a place in which this absence could be palpably felt and to create a space simultaneously empty and full'. This may have been the original intention, but in the wake of the Kosovo trauma, her gesture of brail and saturating pigmentations, the almost grotesque opulence of the event, came to stand for everything that was suspect, imperial and decadent in the USA. There was a palpable sense of disgust. And in many ways this was great: people were speaking about the war, were questioning motives. But Hamilton's own project was dislodged by the real-life, contemporaneous situation. She took years to process this misunderstanding of her symbolism, and from the failure to some extent of her own aesthetics, which were let down by the over-zealous pouring of pigment powder. Nevertheless, her event 'ruptured' something that year.

Strikingly, in the same year, In the Austrian pavilion, Commissioner Peter Weibel formulated his programme as an open system; political, social, economic and ecological elements were consciously brought into the work. That which Weibel perceived as the commonly accepted 'differentiation between the higher sphere of art and lowly everyday life, between the artist and the consumer, between aesthetic communication and social activity' led him to invite the group WochenKlausur to realise a socio-politically relevant project. For seven months, WochenKlausur worked in the Austrian pavilion, using the opportunity to conduct an intervention that would make use of international attention and get the Biennale's approximately 200,000 visitors involved. A project was conceived to assist the huge number of refugees driven out of Kosovo and into Macedonia, Albania and Montenegro. Following intensive research on the scene and in cooperation with the Macedonian civil rights organization ADI (Association for Democratic Initiatives), a network of language schools for young people was developed in Macedonia and Kosovo. These lasted for some years after the Biennale and provided real and useful assistance to fleeing peoples. Whether the project made for great exhibition art is arguable, but its intention and actual outcome can be seen as significant. Its success, however, being displaced, meant its intervention in the Biennale was slight, except that it provocatively rubbed up against the installations of aesthetic shock, opulence and awe.

It is to Gaston Bachelard and his thoughts on duration and the instant that I turn to help frame this within a kind of philosophical proposition. In respect of its ubiquity, its recognisable set of typologies and tropes, as an entity that gathers ever more and dissolves ever more into itself, we can consider the biennial as an episodic, durational thing, demonstrating a kind of indestructible longitudinal unity. But if we think of

the real life and contemporaneous actualities that impinge from time to time on the Biennale and its cpntents then we sense a sudden mutation where the creative acts are occurring, and we can feel that a new era is opened up by abruptness.

Every evolution, if it is important, is punctured by creative instants, and these instants, I would suggest, are born of the punctum of 'real life' entering into and pricking the otherwise protective bubble that carries the biennale in its seemingly transparent shape ever onwards. These punctums are, of course, the ruptures that somehow rescue the 'art' from the biennale. And as a consequence, and somewhat paradoxically, make the 'biennale' seem relevant as a modus. I think my 19th Biennale of Sydney is a case in point.[1] It is a punctum symbiosis that cannot really be manufactured, as has been attempted when 'real life' has been curatorially imitated or 'illustrated', producing a weird simulacrum of, say, the Occupy Movement. It occurs when art struggles to hold its original conception against the prevailing force of a real life that has consequences and outcomes and has no bubble barrier.

During last year's Venice Biennale, unofficial Swiss artist Christoph Buchel, enabled by Iceland, commandeered a deconsecrated Venetian church and converted it into Venice's first mosque. A place for many of Venice's Muslim community to pray and meet, Büchel's project was greatly criticised by locals and others, and eventually, after protests and police intervention, closed down. Local curator Marco Baravalle, interviewed by journalist, Piero Bisello, said: 'Büchel used a cheap strategy to activate polarisations, to create a scandal and make a lot of noise in the media just for the moment when the project was shut down. Right now, nobody remembers that intervention and unfortunately the local Islamic community is not more likely to get a mosque than they were before the Biennale.'[2]

That may be so, although I don't agree, because *Mosque* was a punctum that effectively – and by that I mean problematically – comingled the real life with the artificial life of the art project in such a way as to cause maximum discomfort to spectators who found themselves strangely observing real worship as a kind of manipulated artefact. Its exploitation embraced everyone and as a result became metaphorically as well as actually powerful.

Real life is real life and it impinges in powerful ways with well-intended didactics. The anecdote, repeated by Roce Smith concerning Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev's alleged entry into Afghanistan as part of her research for Documenta 13 illustrates the point. According Smith, as related by Professor Amareswar Galla, Christov-Bakargiev entered unannounced into a meeting of UNESCO delegates in Kabul to inquire about the possibility of staging part of Documenta 13 in Afghanistan. Galla recounted his amazement about how unaware she was of the risk to injury to herself – recalling that members of the Taliban were meeting in a room adjoining the UNESCO board's conference room.

The delegates apparently then reminded her about the disconnects between the contemporary art world and museum patrons' understandings of hardship and the stark realities of life in Afghanistan. Galla it is reported asked her if she had anticipated the very real need for bulletproof vests for visitors should she go ahead with such a plan. He asked whether she had thought about the infrastructure of Afghanistan and its ability to sustain cultural tourism, as the biennale has come to construct it. He also asked whether she had truly thought about the place of art and how it interfaces with abject poverty, homelessness, hunger and war.[3]

For many contemporary artists and curators, and Christov-Bakargiev is one of many, there remains natural and genuine sympathy, empathy and sometimes rage concerning the politics and issues of our time and a great desire to be seen to be useful in bringing contemporary art together with the real life, even if this sometimes seems absurd and misplaced and a confusion between the power of metaphor and dangers of reality.

Contemporary artworks, unless pursuing the perennial formalisms of modernism, are productions of our times. But again, the issue here is whether or not the art can hold its own in the face of such real-life pressure. I think at times it can. Ultimately, I prefer – and perhaps this is my own aesthetic – the more

potent poetic of, say, Tacita Dean's tragically majestic, utterly fragile blackboard drawings of the terrain of Afghanistan – itself out of reach, ungraspable, and so precarious – that she produced for Christov-Bakargiev's Documenta 13, to the blunter didactical works that illustrate the contemporaneous condition. Dean's backboards will never march into a room and take a stand, but they will linger long in the psyche and speak to the mystery and heart of darkness that lies at the root of millennia of conflict.

We started off by mentioning the RAW topology and its attachment to the real-life situation of the contemporary condition, especially as it related to the desires of a city to regenerate and metabolise its urban space and feral real estate. And we have seen how the RAW topology intermingled with the re-embraced museum or pavilion, official space, as technology demanded light-tight circumstances and quarantine from the porous curatorial gesture, and challenging installation set up. And we saw that the combination of a re-occurring 'main' venue with 'found' venues was desirable to counter the vagaries of the real-life market force and economic quixotics that could jeopardise the security of the biennale from time to time.

One final typology might be mentioned, and it is the infant of the RAW and the grandchild of the pavilion and the museum. Of late we have seen the emergence of the CHAPTER typology. One might even agree that this is an episodic gesture held within the biennale itself. As we, an audience, are moved from the RAW venue, to museum to pavilion, to found nook and cranny (palazzo, factory, warehouse, school, sewer, pump station, street, church, bank, railway etc.) a need has emerged to create an interlinking narrative that makes some sense of an ever-expanding, extending itinerary, sometimes navigating whole cities and far-flung islands. This air-filled typology lives in danger of losing its shape, blowing in the wind of its own freedoms, and of course brings with it massive financial burdens. Nevertheless, it is a front-runner for urban development and a logical extension of tourism. The 'blind school' chapter is the hipster bar of tomorrow; the defunct day-tripper island the next shabby-chic destination for a post-maxist flurry. In an effort to remain 'relevant' and continue to obtain investment from city councils and tourism commissions; to get buy-in from hotels and supporters, a narrative that includes, unfolds and develops the city provides the plot for the CHAPTER narrative. Cultural tourism has ascended. And in some ways, the pavilion, once a discredited national fortress, is the bulwark against the porous city and its artistic and urban leakage. Jeremy Deller's wonderful little Britain, 'English Magic', made the point fabulously in Venice in 2013.

The antedote: the fleeting, the rumour and the parallel shape

What might save art from the episodic and contemporaneous real life and these fixing, implicating typologies? Perhaps an answer is provided by the quixotic project of Stuart Ringholt – a project that I organised with my colleague Charlotte Day. Ringholt's 'trekkers' arrived into the hurly burly of the Venice Biennale vernissage in 2011, but never went near the Giardini, nor the Arsenale, nor any collateral positions. Instead, they travelled in their parallel universe, searched for the gaps in reality and fiction, the fourth dimension, carrying their sculptural talisman, a nod to Manzoni, and then disappeared. Ringholt's project lives now, and will always, only as a set of photos, a rumour, a glimpse and a re-telling. Detached from the burdens of any contemporary circumstances or long-term episodic encounters, it was an art project that held its original conception against the prevailing force of a real life and an episodic moment because it maintained its bubble shape: free-floating, ungraspable and prepared to evaporate.

[1] 19th Biennale of Sydney (2014).

[2] http://www.conceptualfinearts.com/cfa/2015/11/23/venice-biennale-the-day-after-how-all-the-worlds-futures-affect-local-future/

[3] Royce W. Smith: Too Big To Fail? Excess, Crisis, And The Contemporary Mega-Exhibition.

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