Biennials Within The Contemporary Composition

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Anthony Gardener and Charles Green, Biennials, Triennials, and Documentas :The Exhibitions that created Contemporary Art, Wiley-Blackwell, 2016. Bookcover.

How might we understand biennial exhibitions within contemporary conditions? To answer this question, I will confine my remarks to the visual arts, because the biennial form is so central to them, even though it appears in architecture (at Venice especially, where the biennials act as the major international barometer of the practice), and occasionally, in music worlds (such as the NY PHIL BIENNIAL, presented by the New York Philharmonic, which began in 2014, billing itself as '11 days, 21 concerts, A musical playground of the here and now' and continued in 2016).[1] I will focus on biennials within visual art worlds, but will constantly reference their relationships to the broader social, economic and political situations from which they emerged and in which they continue to be embedded.

Charles Green and Anthony Gardner's *Biennials, Triennials, and Documentas: The Exhibitions that created Contemporary Art* (2016), gives us a nuanced understanding of the historical unfolding of the form.[2] In successive waves these 'recurrent mega-exhibitions' have proliferated globally, becoming what seem to be indispensible nodes within a dense field of mobility between artists, curators, gallerists, critics, collectors and visitors that is – especially on an international level – unprecedented in its quantity, scope and variety. Green and Gardner make the bold claim that these 'regularly recurring exhibitions have, since the early 1990s, come to define contemporary art'.[3] A little hyperbolic, perhaps, given the forces generated by the art itself, the media savvy of certain artists, the museum boom, the stratospheric market, art fairs, the ubiquity of curating, and the discursive storms around contemporary art, to name only some of the more obvious the factors that usually arise when we name the features that distinguish contemporary art. There is, however, no doubt that biennials are, today, an essential component of any such definition, and are likely to remain so for some time to come.

Green and Gardner identify a widespread belief about the benefits and deficits of this now ubiquitous exhibitionary form:

Biennials have drawn local practitioners into ostensibly globalized networks of art-world attention and financial support, publicized regions or cities previously deemed 'peripheral' to the metropolitan centers of London and New York. However, on another level, all this equally suggests that these exhibitions may also have served as mirrors, even handmaidens, to the spread of transnational capital and

imperialist politics associated with globalized neoliberalism.[4]

Fortunately, the careful historical survey that they provide suggests a more nuanced response than this 'on the one hand but on the other' vacillation. They point to the late nineteenth-century origins of the biennial and its slow growth during the twentieth century; the important but relatively neglected 'second wave' (from the 1951 Bienal de São Paulo to the Third Bienal de la Habana in 1989) and the 'biennial boom' in the 1990s that even now shows little sign of abating, although various divergent currents may be observed operating within it. The aim of their book is locate 'the cultural geography of biennials during this transition to contemporaneity: in the world at large, not inside one of its zones, looking out.'[5] Their response to the vacillation mentioned above is this:

We replace the usual, reductive, and immobilizing question – do biennials promote or subvert globalization? – with the far more interesting question that others have also raised: are they the artistic playgrounds of neoliberal capitalism or do they enable the forging and testing of alternative, critical, even subtly subversive perspectives? We show that each biennial's success was completely dependent on real and pressing contingencies, but also on understanding that neoliberalism and criticality were not mutually exclusive pathways. And from that, we show that biennials would still face a further question that artists themselves knew was far from trivial and which would remain unresolved: would biennials serve, lead, or be passive spectators to the new 'world orders' around them?[6]

I strongly endorse the value of a historical approach to these questions, and believe that Green and Gardner's account is the best that has been offered to date. It reinforces several more general points about the distinctive characteristics of biennials as a definitively contemporary exhibitionary form. What are those characteristics?

The most obvious is that the biennial has become as structural to what is usually called 'the artworld' in any particular location as every other element of that world. Likewise, biennials have become essential to contemporary art's evidently international character, many would say its 'globality', although I will argue more specifically that they have been the primary platform of the transnational transitionality that has shifted the core locus of art making, distributing and valuing from what used to be called the West, moved it South and then East, within regions of the these regions, and thus, now, everywhere. It is this in-transit energy that drives much contemporary art today, throughout the world and in most of the traditional and modern centres. Thirdly, in so far as biennials have become structural to art worlds in most cities around the globe, and to contemporary art's very contemporaneity, they too are subject to the larger changes effecting communicative exchange everywhere, including network culture's mediatisation of the social. Finally, to return to Green and Gardner's question cited above, there is the most important matter of the worldlinessnecessary to our contemporary composition: are biennials still the platform on which contemporary art does most of its world-making work?

Let me begin from basic descriptions of biennials as an exhibitionary form, then work up to consideration of these still open questions. It will become evident that biennials slowly established a set of distinctive protocols and formalised them during the 1990s, which enabled their rapid replication throughout the world. It is also evident that, today, these distinctive characteristics of the biennial form are everywhere being exceeded, as they, like every other component of the artworld activity, fall subject to the frenzy of code-switching.



Distribution of biennials - map of Europe. Courtesy of BIENNIAL FOUNDATION. The image above is a captures of a continuously updated map applet which can be found at the BF's Directory of Biennials page.

1. *Biennials have become structural within the contemporary visual arts exhibitionary complex.* Biennials share with all exhibitionary formats the fundamental purpose of holding something out for inspection, of showing items – as the definition of the word 'exhibition' (in English dictionaries, at least) tells us – *publicly, for entertainment, instruction, or in a competition.* In modern societies, these purposes characterize distinct kinds of displays, which are usually held in specialised venues: for example, music halls, public museums or sporting fields. In practice, however, while one of the three will be emphasised, the other two will be drawn upon to supplement the main purpose. A circus will aim to entertain above all, but will at times pretend to educational seriousness, and often include competitive components. Didactic displays in science or natural-history-museum exhibitions routinely use entertainment-oriented interfaces to attract and sustain less focused visitors. Annual artist society exhibitions, since their origins in France and England during the seventeenth century, have emphasised contestation between artists, attitudes and genres as manifest in freshly made works of art: competition to gain entry to the academy, competition for prizes, then competition for sales. Since Venice in 1895, and Pittsburgh's Carnegie International from 1896, recurrent exhibitions all over the world have sought to fulfill all three purposes at once.

So, as the first fundamental but not unique characteristic of a visual arts biennial exhibition, we can establish this proposition: that it offers, in one place, a display of the contemporary art of the world in ways that are entertaining, instructive and competitive, all at the same time. Doing all these things at once begins to distinguish them from exhibitions in art museums. Biennials are, crucially, exhibitionary *events*, as distinct from displays of the kind exemplified most clearly in the permanent collection rooms of a modern art museum (where continuity over time is emphasised, and change is understood as a

modification or eruption within the evolutionary narrative of art's history), and from temporary exhibitions in such museums (which usually explore in more detail and depth aspects of the history of art that are exemplified in a more general way in the collection display rooms – including the rooms that show the recent past as an opening towards an unspecified present). Being events, rather than primarily an assembly of art objects on display, is what makes biennials contemporary.

The logic and dynamic of the biennial differs from the core logic and dynamic of the modern art museum. Such museums alternate between relatively static displays of their permanent collections and a programme of temporary exhibitions of artworks that usually, yet not always nor entirely, come from somewhere else, often from another museum or a private collection. Within this framework, the biennial occurs as an alternative to both the collection and the temporary exhibition, while at the same time having some features of both. (Some museums – notably the Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh, host to the Carnegie International, and the Queensland Gallery of Modern Art, host to the Asia Pacific Triennial – acquire works from biennials, often the prize-winning works, thus continually reshaping their collections.) During the boom years of the 1990s and 2000s, the controlled dynamic between collection and temporary exhibitions that previously prevailed at the modern museum was disrupted by the biennial, which regularly offered different models of what both the collection rooms and temporary exhibitions programme might become. This is still an important effect of biennials in most cities in most parts of the world, an effect that is still unfolding. In contrast, in some cities, such as Sydney, which has mounted a biennale since 1973, the local museums that regularly host biennials (the Art Gallery of New South Wales, and the Museum of Contemporary Art) have worked hard to absorb them into their programming, framing them as if they were temporary exhibitions that happen to be recurrent. My instinct is that, in such cases, we are seeing the modern museum working with, but also struggling against, the artworld expectation that today all art should be open to being experienced as contemporary. More broadly, museums and galleries of all kinds are widely expected to be spaces in which art can be experienced in ways continuous with the socially mediated prosumption of images that today is spreading across all exhibitionary platforms, actual and virtual.[7]

2. *Condensed contemporaneity, every two years*. The simple fact of its occurrence *every two years* has become the most widely adopted characteristic of a biennial. It is often forgotten that the Venice International Exhibition only became a biennial some years after 1895 (indeed, its organisation was made systematic during the 1920s and 1930, the fascist years in Italy). Why has this rather mechanical, pragmatic aspect of staging large-scale exhibitions become so definitive? I suggest that it is because, while they occur every two years, and are in that sense repetitions, biennials offer difference each time. They must do this, because they are usually committed to showing contemporary art, or recent and past art in so far as it is relevant to contemporary circumstances. Contemporary art, by its own constant redefinition, is an art of becoming, of happenings, occurrences and occasions. While its content may include material from any time, it is precisely because it typically engages with more than a single temporality at the same time that contemporary art requires the event as its form of appearance. When contemporary art is slowed down – for example, as part of a chronological history of art display in a museum, it ceases to be contemporary, although it maintains the distinctive character of having been contemporary within the contemporaneity that we still share with it. Artworks shown in biennials may be subsequently shown at art fairs, and may be acquired by museums, but, unlike most other exhibitionary venues, neither commerce nor historical valiance is their primary purpose or source of value. Rather, it is to show a purposeful selection from, or as wide a range as possible of, the art being made in the world right now. This is why biennials have – overwhelmingly, and, until recently, almost entirely – shown new, or at least recent work, and have favoured work made for the occasion, and specifically for the site. It is this impulse that underlies the preponderance of new media, videos and installations of various kinds, as well as their openness to research-based, archival and 'social practice' work that is less readily shown in museums and for-profit

venues.

In these ways, biennials typically concentrate contemporary energy in one place, or a related set of places, for a specified time. They are a double-sided form: reliable in their recurrence, but open-ended in their actualization. We do not know what art will be like two years from now, but we can expect that it will be different. Therefore, biennials can be counted on to build anticipation beforehand, and to surprise us when they happen. A regularly timetabled openness to contemporaneity – to art to come, whatever it may be – is the second most distinctive feature of biennials.

3. *Local, regional, international.* The first Venice International Exhibition and the first Carnegie International introduced another key innovation, one that has persisted to this day: biennials are forms of cultural exchange between nations, enacted at a regional center; specifically, they encourage negotiation between local and international artworlds, conducted at distances within both. I will devote some time to this rather complex quality, since it is a source of much that is positively distinctive – indeed, world-changing – about biennials, as well as of much of the confusion, over-hyping and sense of failed expectation that they also seem to engender.

At Venice every two years there is a precinct, the Giardini – and, indeed, an entire, citywide proliferation of venues, expanding every time – organised mostly according to national pavilions. Very few other biennials follow this nineteenth-century model of the international exposition, or trade fair, so closely. But all biennials import into a local artworld or a national art space contemporary artworks from a variety of other cities, nations or regions; works chosen as exemplary, representative or the best available from these other places. As well, they often position certain local practices within this larger framework. During the Symposium at the 2013 Busan Biennial, Paul Domela remarked that the original, utopian desire driving the biennial was to exceed local constraints.[8] The flip side is a strong desire to constrain international difference, to leave space for local agency and choice. All biennials strive for a balance between the two. None achieve it to the satisfaction of all concerned.

This dynamic can generate some strange paradoxes. For example, Venice has for decades been an exception to its own rule, as few artists actually live and work in the city.[9] And Italian artists figure infrequently, especially since the main pavilion in the Giardini lost its title as 'the Italian Pavilion'. Feeling the pressure of this eclipse, in 2009 the Italian government rebranded a pavilion in the Arsenale, overseen by the Ministry for Cultural Affairs. It has been poorly curated ever since. In 2013, a populist, nationalistic agenda shaped artistic choices; to international visitors, this came across as a reactionary parochialism. In 2015, a more subtle, although only marginally more successful, 'rejection of the present' was attempted. It housed installations by international and Italian artists devoted to the archiving of memories.[10]

Biennials did not invent the conception of the 'international' or the 'regional' in art contexts, but they have certainly institutionalised these modes of internal world-picturing among artists, curators, art writers and art's many publics, more thoroughly than any other exhibitionary platform. 'International' is not a single synonym for 'global'; nor is it a straightforward antonym to 'local'. Within the biennial dynamic, 'international' usually means *everywhere else*; it means connectedness occurring at scales beyond the immediate reach of the local agents – that is, beyond my art world, and those nearby, beyond my 'region'. It is a concept that has a kind of default inequality built into it, but also the potential that unequal distributions of power may be overcome by assiduous activity, and by making better, more interesting and more transformatory art *right here*. It recognises the fact that art worlds everywhere else are also local, with regions around them, and ringed with other art worlds at both practical and ideological distances. Internationality stakes its agency on effective mobility across this circuitry, as distinct from falling subject to the logic of provincialism, of centre-periphery dominance. It acknowledges provincialism as a fact of cultural power, but it holds out the promise of being a vehicle that might assist in overcoming it.[11] This kind of internationalism is not globalism; it will not occur as a result of any top-down, 'beneficent' spread of economic and political globalisation. It must be won, precisely, *against* neoliberal globalisation. By

working in steps, from locality to region, from my locality to another, relevant one, outside my region.

While artists everywhere have always been alert to art being made elsewhere that might be important to their practice, in recent decades biennials have intensified this sense of global connectedness and comparison. It is true that, beginning with Venice, many biennials were founded by lord mayors, city leaders, or civic-minded patrons. Yet these people were usually prompted by groups of local artists who wished to exceed the limits of their location, and few have survived without the support of at least some local artists (while being reliably opposed by others). So, we can say that the biennial offers local artists the sharp shock of competition; it educates local audiences about art being made outside of their community; it tests local critics, inspires local collectors and challenges local art administrators to provide the relevant infrastructure so that art of this kind can be made locally and circulated throughout the world. In sum, biennials have become the major means through which local artworlds regionalise and internationalise themselves. (Other methods include travel, magazines, overseas residencies, trading exhibitions and cultural exchanges.)

Looked at from worldly perspectives, local-international exchange is built into the biennial form. Thus the biennial has suited Western institutions that wish to sample art from everywhere else, yet not necessarily collect it. Venice, São Paulo, Sydney and to a degree Berlin are examples. In mirror reversal, the biennial form suits artists from elsewhere who wish to sample art from the West, but not necessarily reproduce it. Havana, beginning in 1984, remains the leading instance of this (unaligned, third world) perspective. Biennials also demonstrate international exhibitionary standards for art-producing locales that wish to build and maintain permanent cultural infrastructure. This is their main role in South East and Northern Asia. In many cities in this region (Shanghai, for example) the biennial substitutes for the mega-exhibition of contemporary art in cities that do not wish, or cannot, present them as a matter of course. In Busan, the Biennale runs the risk of substituting for the creation of local visual arts infrastructure.[12]

Of course, international cultural exchanges have never been equitable. They are often oriented towards spreading a nation's influence and values, now known as 'soft power'. Yet, on balance, the global proliferation of biennials has challenged the predominance of certain EuroAmerican art centres, such as Paris and New York – not as markets, but as art-producing localities. Biennials have done so because, since the 1990s, they have been ideal disseminative vehicles for what I have identified as the one of the major currents in contemporary art. Some characterise this current as 'postcolonial' or 'global' art, but I call it the art of *transnational transitionality*.[13] Along with a number of path-finding travelling exhibitions that surveyed the art of various continents and regions (*Magiciens de la terre* of 1989 being the paradigm), the proliferation of biennials, especially since the 1990s, has enabled artists from previously colonised countries to show their work in venues in their regions and around the world. A network that is no longer dependent on the metropolitan centres has emerged. Unlike the situation for artists throughout the twentieth century, who were obliged to expatriate themselves to metropolitan centres for long periods in order to pursue sustainable careers (or, less materially, make the best art of which they were capable), it is this network that is sustaining many of the most ambitious and inventive artists. They may participate in it from bases anywhere in the world (although, of course, enterprising regional, that is, so-called 'second tier' global cities, such as Berlin, compete to attract artists by offering them affordable access to precisely such bases).

In these ways, the overall impact of biennials has, I believe, been of value for contemporary art in the world as a whole. International experience has been crucial to the maturation of the work of a number of contemporary artists from previously colonised countries and those who are members of postcolonial diasporas. El Anatsui, William Kentridge, Tania Bruguera, Wangechi Mutu and Pedro Lasch are some obvious examples. On the other hand, it is rare for a local art world – even those as close to concentrations of enormous wealth as New York and London – to contain all the resources necessary to challenge an artist of the strongest ambition in a sustained way across the course of a career. I think of Isaac Julian, John

Akomfrah or Steve McQueen, to take some based in London, or artists such as Tacita Dean or Olafur Eliasson, who shifted their studios to the relative periphery of Berlin. Whatever their origins or bases, however, artists today must negotiate contexts and challenges that are – at the same time – local, regional, global and connected. Being artists, they are sensitive to the fact that these complex relationships are not given, like rules in a game, or settled, as in traditional cultures. They are volatile, and are characterised above all by the contemporaneity of different kinds of difference.

In his contribution to the 2014 Aarhus conference on Contemporaneity and Contemporary Art, and subsequently in a lecture to the World Biennial Forum, delivered in São Paulo, Peter Osborne claimed that 'Art today lives – can there still be doubt? –in "the age of the biennial".'[14] He argued that the dominance of biennials as an exhibitionary form has shifted the exhibitionary complex from its roots in museums to a more disruptive and dispersed kind of temporality dictated by the multiplicity of biennials. To him, this is the 'expression' in 'art spaces' of 'the tendential global extension' of capitalist accumulation, that is to say, of neoliberal globalisation.[15] As I have been outlining, he is right on both counts. But a little more precision is needed. As I will show in a moment, museums in the main centres are pushing back against their 'biennialisation'. And at the level of geopolitics, decolonisation names a set of forces that are of at least equal, if not of greater, transformatory relevance than the globalisation imposed by contemporary capitalism.

The decolonisation of key sectors of the world, and the modernisation of regions outside of the West, is a global process that has been going on now for over fifty years.[16] Such geopolitical changes have shifted the balance of global cultural power (if we may put it this way) – one hopes, forever (although there is considerable push back coming from those sensing that globalisation has left them behind, and that national capitalisms were not so bad after all). We experience the warring between these huge counter changes and recursions as if we were on the cusp of a tectonic plate, as it shifts the earth's surface, slowly but inexorably. Artists, curators, collectors, administrators in Western centres are now as aware of art being made elsewhere in the world as they are of that made, and presented, in their local artworlds. This applies not only to artistic trafficking *between* regions and nations, but also *within* them. Of course, this has economic, even financial dimensions. In South-East Asia and the Middle East, there is intense competition for cultural dollars between cities that are located in close proximity to each other. In China, there is a fierce competition between cities all over the country that are building museums in the expectation that they will be able to fill them with exhibitions. Many nations, including South Korea, have more than one biennial, as different cities use the exhibitions to demonstrate the distinctiveness of their local cultures. The Fukuoka Art Museum has been staging surveys of Asian art since 1979, and, since 1999, has been presenting the Asian Triennale, showing work from twnety-one countries. In 1993, the Queensland Art Gallery launched the first of what are by now eight Asia Pacific Triennials. These examples demonstrate that biennials connect art and artists not only at international and local levels, but also at inter-regional and intra-national ones. The positive outcome is that biennials are the exhibitionary format within which these complex relationships have, in recent decades, been most effectively negotiated. On the negative side, their proliferation has promoted a competition for 'brand differentiation' among closely similar products: the language here alerts us to the fact that many of the desires driving the biennial have been subsumed within the framework of global tourism.

Too late. Within the past few years, another large-scale change has become evident at a world geopolitical level: globalisation as a hegemonic world-system may be beginning to fail. In 2008, the United States financial system was riven by its self-destructiveness, the European dream began to falter under its own vacuity, Third World countries began to resist outsourcing from the West, 'Second World' models emerged in the BRIC countries then quickly ran aground in most of them. Meanwhile, multinational corporations over-reached (for example, the spillage from BP oilrigs in the Gulf of Mexico), and governments worldwide struggle to respond to climate change. Peoples everywhere have, in response,

turned to local values and community building, and have developed a stronger, more critical alertness to the connectivities between localities and distant power, to the deleterious operations of power with a global reach. This response is as evident in art worlds as it is elsewhere in societies. These are not self-deluding fictions (although they certainly can take such a form when seized upon by agile politicians, witness the role of UKIP in Brexit, and the election of Donald Trump).

If the biennial began, in 1895, as an ideal form for internationalizing local art worlds(at least within the centres and peripheries of Europe), we could say that, now, it has become one among the many forms that are assisting to localise and regionalise the international. Like other changes in exhibition making, this is also a result of changes in art practice, which has for decades been leading curatorial practice. An example is the 2013–14 Carnegie International, which responded to this overall situation in a number of interesting ways. It introduced a range of local activities two years before the opening of the main exhibition. The curators also extended the exhibition into local playgrounds (Tezuka Architects), and supported such specific community initiatives as reviving the practice of local libraries checking out works of art as well as books (Tranformazium at the Carnegie Library, Braddock). In the museum-based aspects of the show, the work of artists concerned with questions of locality (Joel Sternfeld on utopian communes) was highlighted.[17]



Distribution of biennials - map of America. Courtesy of BIENNIAL FOUNDATION. The image above is a captures of a continuously updated map applet which can be found at the BF's Directory of Biennials page.

4. *The biennial as a distributed event*. Does the biennial have a distinctive spatial character? In most cities, the anchor of the biennial, or at least one of its sites, is the main art-historical survey museum, or the museum of contemporary art, or an equivalent venue or pairing of venues. Venice and São Paulo are exceptional in that they have dedicated sites for their biennales. Nowadays, while the main local museum

or contemporary art gallery might anchor the event, biennials increasingly occur across a number of sites in their host city. This happens most dramatically at Venice itself, with over 200 related venues outside the Giardini and the Arsenale, but is also characteristic of smaller biennials, such as Liverpool. Thus we can identify the fourth feature of biennials: they have become *distributed events.* They are cosmopolitan (of the city) in this basic sense; and in the broadest, international sense, that is, in linking what is, in effect, the art produced in a number of cities.

In being exceptional yet recurrent events in a particular city, yet deploying a form that is used in many cities, biennials take on some of the character of festivals: crowds of people gathered to have a good time, to be entertained by art, to participate in an occasion on which behaviour apart from the norm is expected, to be spectators at a carnival, yet secure in the promise that normal life will resume when the circus leaves town. *New Yorker* art critic Peter Schjeldahl accuses biennials of becoming subject to 'festivalism'.[18] Sometimes, merging the forms of the recurrent exhibition into those of the festival can be a good thing: the Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennale is a case in point. Since 2000, Fram Kitagawa has brought hundreds of artists from all over the world to work with local villagers to create around 900 pieces, of which 200 remain as site-specific works in locations throughout the region. But Schjeldahl was, rightly, targeting the tendency for artists to produce high-impact, low-quality works that stand out amid crowded displays, through which bemused crowds wander, mouths agape, minds emptying, feelings benumbed. This complaint was often heard during the 1990s and early 2000s: a small cohort of curators was regularly accused of sequestering opportunities for their signature cadres of artists, dominating what was perceived as a finite circuit, excluding other worthy artists, and boring audiences with repetitions and variations of the same kind of art. As biennials increase in number, size, range and kind – way beyond the capacity of any individual to monitor – this complaint is less often heard.

In recent comments, Steven Henry Madoff highlights another aspect of this drift towards spectacularisation: the overcrowding of exhibitions. Noting that the 2016 Istanbul Biennial boasted over1,500 artworks on show in fifty-four venues, he speaks of a 'visual elephantitis' that places 'the spectator under siege'. Sourcing it to the proliferation of art fairs and the booming market for contemporary art, he accuses curators of biennials of succumbing to this quantitative overload. For the spectator, unable to assimilate more than a part of such exhibitions, this leads to what he calls a 'trauma of numerousness'.[19] Of course, this disease is not confined to biennials and large-scale temporary venues; it is becoming true of 'institutional settings that have historical collections, modern and contemporary collections, stage temporary exhibitions, and commission performances and other works, other experiences – and do so more and more in keeping with the acquisitive propinquities of their boards, whose buying habits now regularly prefer contemporary art over historical works'. He concludes by asking: 'How do we as curators conspire or resist, implicitly state complicity or redress what can be seen as the loss of contemplative solemnity in solitude? Or has the true reign of the surface begun?'[20] This sounds like a lament for the experience of museum-going fifty years ago, an experience long since lost, and returns us to the clash between the values of the modern museum and those of the biennial as a contemporary form.

There are other challenges to the biennial that also need to be addressed. I list some of them, as questions, with short answers to each.

5. *Biennials blending with other exhibitionary forms.* Some recent biennials abjure their traditional obligation to survey as much as possible of contemporary art on a worldwide basis, and have put aside themes that imply a matching generalised socio-political statement about the world today, in favour of a museum-like exhibition about a certain kind of art. A striking recent example was Massilimiano Gioni's 2013 Venice Biennale. Has this tendency diminished the biennial's core purpose of offering a wide-ranging survey of international contemporary art to local audiences? On the other hand, art fairs such as Art Basel, Miami and Hong Kong, and Frieze London and New York, have taken up the model of the annual salon

presented by an artists' society, with the difference that selection is made by a jury of peers consisting of dealers rather than artists. Has the art fair replaced the biennial in offering annual surveys of contemporary art? Short answer: in places where the art fair is strong, developed and diverse in its formats (including, for example, paracuratorial activities), yes. Elsewhere, not so much. A longer answer would focus on the influence of art dealers on mega-exhibitions, both those in museums and in biennials. In 1972, Konrad Fischer was a vital figure within the curation of Documenta 5, but dealer input is a factor now widely perceived as having grown to become a somewhat distorting influence, especially on the 'production values' expected of displays at the leading biennials. It is entirely predictable that key collectors, whose impact on museums has been out there in recent years, will soon have a similar impact on biennials.

6. *Biennials as infrastructure builders.* When biennials mature to become leading cultural institutions in their locality, nation, or region, they may take on roles usually pursued by established art institutions – especially if these are relatively weak. In Liverpool, for example, the Biennale office remains active on a constant basis, offering between biennales a variety of local cultural services, including the commissioning of public art for the city, educational activities for all ages and levels, public fora on issues of concern and regular publications in print and online. On the other side of the coin, prominent biennials have taken on roles that extend well beyond the city in which they are located. During the 1930s and 1940s, when the Venice Biennale was one of Italy's most internationally visible cultural institutions, it actively staged exhibitions of Italian and other art elsewhere in Europe, the United States and Asia, and curated the participation of Italian artists in exhibitions abroad, including in other biennials, such as Alexandria and São Paulo. These activities continued until 1968, when the credibility of the Biennale came in for widespread questioning by a new generation, leading to artist boycotts and gestures of solidarity. In 1970, the Biennale abolished its Grand Prizes and its sales office, and staged thematic exhibitions instead of the usual celebratory and monographic exhibitions. In 1974, the entire edition was devoted to protesting the overthrow of democracy in Chile.[21]

7. *The impact of network culture.* Is the online experience of art calibrating how biennial visitors look at art in the same ways and to the same degree that it is affecting those who visit art museums? Is it introducing a temporality between viewers and artworks that is indifferent to the seasonal and schedule-driven character of museums and the commercial sector, galleries, fairs and auction houses? Does the ubiquity of online access to images of art being made everywhere today, and in every past everywhere, reduce the need to be shown a curated survey of contemporary art? Short answer to each of these questions: yes. Biennial recurrence is an artifact of the practicalities of staging a major physical exhibition in an institution or a city on a regular basis. It makes no sense within the time zones of the internet.

8. *Biennials as occasions of curatorial innovation*. It is true that, during the 1990s and 2000s, there was a repetitious narrowing of the number of artists who were regularly seen in these exhibitions, and a concentration on the efforts of a few curators. This has changed in the last few years, due to the sheer number of biennials, their global spread, the proliferation of curatorial styles, and the multiplicity of regional and local purposes that they now serve.

In *Thinking Contemporary Curating*, I make the point that, since around 2010, the biennial has been widely understood by many people in the international art world as being in a crisis of overproduction, of having become stale in form, and, as a result, in danger of being absorbed back into the traditional museum.[22] Asked whether she thought 'there is life left in the form yet' Juliana Engberg, director of the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne, replied:

Yes. I think it's funny, this whole rhetoric around the problem with biennales. I've just seen four in the past three weeks, each different, showing different work, going for a different idea. They are events that come around every two years, shaped by diverse curatorial approaches. The generate a great deal of discussion and debate and excitement and they are a clearly visible event for a public looking to be attracted by contemporary art in a different way from museums and small enterprises. And I wonder who

constructs this rhetoric. Nobody knows what a biennale should be, and that's its strength.[23]

Whatever one's opinion, there is no doubt that among the curatoriate there has recently arisen a competition as to who could reconceive the biennial in the most inventive and influential way. Critic Eleanor Hartney: 'Of late, it has become a cliché for curators to announce bravely that they are dispensing with the conventional biennial structure, a tendency so pervasive that one begins to wonder where, outside of Venice, a conventional biennial might be found today.'[24]

Yet to reinvent the biennial every time out, and do so for every iteration of the 150 plus being mounted today, is to take on the impossible. Many curators seem to have responded to this challenge by reverting to exhibitions that are scarcely distinguishable from collection displays in museums, or those of in-depth, historical temporary exhibitions on a specific theme. For example, the 2013 Venice Biennale was a museum-type historical survey of parallels, during the twentieth century, between the exploration of psychoanalytic themes by certain modern and contemporary artists and the obsessive pursuits of 'outsider' artists, many with certified mental illnesses. While finely done, and often fascinating, it puts to one side any concern about *contemporary* art per se. To me, this made it a contra-biennial, if it was one at all.[25] For Boris Groys, in our conversation in *Talking Contemporary Curating*, it was simply an example of subjective curating, which one either likes or not, on the same subjective grounds. Unlike the case of an exhibition that attempts an art-historical task (such as offering a survey of contemporary art) neither the curator nor the audience is in any way accountable.[26]

Some might argue that, being committed to contemporaneity, it goes against the nature of biennials to offer installments in a longer story of art's history, because, in contemporaneity, there is not one story, but many stories. More to the point, today's stories will not necessarily add up into a shared history – neither a Story of Art, nor a Story of the Human Being. The 2016 Liverpool Biennial aimed to tell a set of five stories, each shared across five venues. The issue of what counts as a 'story' in this context arises, as does the danger of these stories dissolving into a myriad of voices that initially talk to each other, then alongside each other, then in their own void.

9. *Biennials, triennials, and documentas*. At least since Catherine David's iteration in 1997, documentas have become, in my estimation, *meta-exhibitions*, that is to say, exhibitions that add to the fundamentals of repeating mega-exhibitions such as biennials and triennials a quality of overview and, by implication, commentary on these exhibitions. Their five-year cycle, and their huge budgets, permits this critical distancing. Of course, this distinction is as unstable as every other one that I have been making so far: we must anticipate a documenta that will retreat into the most conventional survey of world art format, just as we witnessed in 2015 Okwui Enwezor attempting to insert a documenta-type meta-exhibition into the main pavilions of the Venice Biennale.

10. The *institutionalisation of artistic-political-ideological orientations*. These are especially notable at established biennials, such as Venice, Sydney, Sao Paulo, as well as Documenta, that routinely swing from one side of the ideological compass to the other. Thus the president of the Venice Biennale, Paolo Baratta, announces blithely that after Okwui Enwezor's 2015 biennale, which, he says, 'centered on the many rifts and divisions of our contemporary world', for the next iteration in 2017 he has chosen a curator 'committed to emphasizing the important role artists play in inventing their own universes and in reverberating generous vitality towards the world we live in'.[27]

Those who would deny, or denigrate as insignificant, the political implication of biennials as a cultural form need to pay attention to statements such as these. Effective power brokers know that their work is most effective when it is done in plain sight, especially when you are trafficking in how to symbolise the present in the interests of the 1 per cent when most artists wish their work to serve those of the rest of us, especially interests that we do not yet know that we have.

Sometimes a biennial can judiciously operate at a tangent to the expectations of left and right. The 2016 Gwangju Biennale, curated by Maria Lind, by all reports seems to have done exactly that. Entitled *The*

Eighth Climate (What Does Art Do?), it opened with a recreation of the bookshop at which the uprising of 18 May 1980 was fermented, and which was greeted with the massacre of over 600 protestors by the military government. Reference to that uprising is a requirement of every edition of the Biennale. The exhibition continued through a suite of spaces that, according to reports of some sceptical visitors, judiciously mixed works that directly addressed current political concerns with those that invited quiet contemplation of abstract ideals. She also invited representatives of 70 small to mid-scale non-profit arts organizations from around the world to a workshop entitled *To All The Contributing Factors*.



Distribution of biennials - map of Asia. Courtesy of BIENNIAL FOUNDATION. The image above is a captures of a continuously updated map applet which can be found at the BF's Directory of Biennials page.

11. *The impingement of actual politics on the biennial's habitual politics of the symbolic.* As biennials become more and more like other elements within the exhibitionary complex, especially the slower, more institutionalised ones, they become less and less able to engage with the challenges thrown up by present and emerging realities. A case in point was the 19th Sydney Biennale, shown in many venues around the city between March and June 2014. Curated by Engberg, , its theme was 'You Imagine What You Desire'. In her own words:

You Imagine What You Desire is an evocation celebrating the artistic imagination as a spirited describing and exploration of the world through metaphor and poesis. It makes enquiries into contemporary aesthetic experience, and relates this to historical precedents and future opportunities to imagine possible worlds. It seeks to understand the need artists have today to create immersive and expanded environments, and locates this activity as part of an art historical trajectory, and as a pursuit into the issues of human consciousness, and their psychological, cognitive and corporeal imperatives.[28]

This statement typifies the aspirations of well-established biennials these days. It appeals to a

universal quality of art (poetic imagination), which is presumed to manifest itself today on a global scale. It highlights two new kinds of art (immersive and expanded environments), themselves regarded as the latest chapter in the history of art. In these senses, the statement is not very different from what we might read as the rationale for a large temporary exhibition, a survey of contemporary art of the world at a major art museum.

Shortly before the exhibition was due to open, controversy arose when it became known that the main sponsor, the Transfield Foundation, was tainted by direct association with a company that executes the Australian government's egregious policy of mandatory detention and off-shore processing of refugees who risk their lives on the high seas of the Indian Ocean and the Timor Straits in order to reach the safety of Australian territory. A call to boycott the Biennale was issued by a number of the invited artists. Displaying unusual resolve, the board asked its chairman, Luca Belgiorno-Nettis, president of the Transfield company, to resign. He did so, withdrawing the company's sponsorship. Subsequently, all but two of the artists agreed that their work could be shown.[29]

Meanwhile, in St Petersburg, artists were called upon to boycott the 11th edition of Manifesta because the Russian state, having recently legislated against 'homosexual propaganda', was busily annexing Crimea, and advancing into Eastern Ukraine. Curator Kasper König appealed for an apolitical exhibition, condemning any policical action in this situation as a 'misuse'. Invited to write a catalogue essay on the 'political meaning of Russian contemporary art', critic Ekaterina Dergot instead wrote an essay entitled 'A Text That Should Never have Been Written?' I cite two passages:

Are things so bad that Manifesta 10 might be considered a positive, 'civilizational' event no matter what its content, by sheer dint of taking place in a country plummeting into the abyss of militarist aggression, obscurantism, and proto-fascist nationalism? Could it be that the fast-paced conservative revolution in Russia will save not just the reputation but also the very identity of contemporary art? Or is this simply untrue? Representations of contemporary art in authoritarian contexts have become more and more frequent since the 2000s. Perhaps they rather call into question the very foundations of the discipline at large. Slavoj Žižek has said again and again that the eternal marriage between capitalism and democracy has ended, but perhaps we must say the same of the supposedly eternal marriage between contemporary art and progressive thinking?

After a searching examination of the mountains of bad faith being generated by all involved, she concludes with this passage:

In a way, the Russian cultural authorities who suddenly became archaically and ridiculously anti-modernist and made Manifesta, no matter how it would appear, into a heroic deed, made things look simpler than they currently are. Since Vladimir Putin goes so far as forbidding state employees to ride foreign cars and to take their holidays abroad, why not just ban any foreign art outright? Under aesthetic censorship (that agrees to make some exceptions for 'export' situations), international contemporary art is a protest act by definition. But in a broader context it is not, and has not been for decades. The world we live in is more complex than that. There is no guarantee of emancipatory potential in contemporary art, and neither are there specific forms that would assure us of the correct political behavior of their creators, let alone their owners. Increasingly, we hear of such a thing as a left-wing rhetoric (and maybe not even just a rhetoric) of the right wing, and we see contemporary-looking (and maybe even contemporary-thinking) art that embraces nationalism and dictatorship. There will be such examples – from the Russian context – at Manifesta, although it seems through an oversight rather than programmatically. There are no rules anymore, and each case has to be taken separately; the relatively safe common ground of contemporary art is shifting. And this incredible complexity is the only hope left.[30]

12. *Biennials exceed their specific form in a converging artworld but a divisive social context.* This has been evident throughout these comments. For cities intent on establishing their own biennials, or improving the still developing one that they have, established biennials like the one in Sydney are

instances of international culture to be examined and adapted for local use. Implicitly, those planning to create a biennial ask: can my city create a visual arts infrastructure that will be sophisticated enough to sustain such an event for a number of years to come? But in places that have biennials similar to that in Sydney, and have had them for some time, the problem, today, is the opposite: can the biennial form, now past middle-age, be regenerated to capture the innovative energy and the inspiring impact that it had throughout the world during the 1990s, or will our biennial drift into the repetitions of institutionalisation, the taming of difference, and the merge with other artworld structures?

As biennials everywhere become more institutionalised, more integrated into the visual arts exhibitionary complex on the one hand, and, on the other, more subject to the subjectivism of independent curators, it might become necessary to invent a different exhibitionary structure, one that manifests more acutely the antinomies of our present situation: its multiplicity, its layered cotemporalities, its proliferation of differences, and its increasingly desperate reach for a revised contract with the planet. This is the direction in which, I believe, artists, curators and arts administrators are being asked to move if they wish to really engage themselves in exhibiting our contemporaneity, and in doing their part in creating our contemporary composition.

Keynote lecture for the symposium at Liverpool John Moores University curated by Joasia Krysa, *The Biennial Condition: Contemporaneity and the Episodic,* 7 and 8 October 2016, which presented work in progress from 'The Contemporary Condition' project, led by Jacob Lund and Geoff Cox of Aarhus University. Some ideas were first presented at the Busan Biennale Symposium 2013 on *Biennale Ecology in Contemporary Art*, held at the Museum of Art, Busan, Korea, on 30 November, 2013, and were published in Kwangsu Oh (ed.), *The Symposium 2013 Busan Biennale: Biennale Ecology in Contemporary Art* (Busan: Busan Biennale, 2014).

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[1] See http://nyphil.org/files/biennial/index.html.

[2] Charles Green and Anthony Gardner's *Biennials, Triennials, and Documentas: The Exhibitions that created Contemporary Art* (London: Wiley, 2016).

[3] Ibid., p.3.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Ibid., p.13.

[6] Ibid., pp.13–14.

[7] See Terry Smith, *Thinking Contemporary Curating* (New York: Independent Curators International, 2012), chapter 2 'Shifting the Exhibitionary Complex.' Of course, biennials have not been the only precipitators of transformation in the modern art museum. The emergence of economies of experience brought about by globalised communicative connectivity, and the rise of global cities in particular, is a deeper and more pervasive causal factor. See B. Joseph Pine and James H. Gilmore, *The Experience Economy* (Harvard Business Review Press, 2011 updated edition), and Terry Smith, *What is Contemporary Art?* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), chapter 5, 'The Experience Museum' and chapter 6 'The Intensity Exhibit'. Since 2000, Tate Modern has led in showing its collections as regularly changing thematic exhibitions. In 2016, the Museum of Modern Art, New York, transformed its collection rooms into a sequence of historical and thematic shows, including one floor devoted to its holdings from the 1960s, one room per year.

[8] Paul Domela, 'What can a biennale do?', in Kwangsu Oh (ed.), *The Symposium 2013 Busan Biennale: Biennale Ecology in Contemporary Art* (Busan: Busan Biennale, 2014), pp.35–39.

[9] Indeed, as Salvatore Settis poignantly laments, very few Venetians *per se* live in the city, which has come to exist, precariously, almost entirely as a tourist fiction of itself. See Salvatore Settis, *If Venice Dies* (New York: New Vessel Press, 2016).

[10] See https://www.inexhibit.com/case-studies/stepping-rooms-memory-venice-art-biennale-2015-italy-pavilion/.

[11] See Terry Smith, 'The Provincialism Problem: Then and Now', *ARTMargins*, 6:1 (January, 2017).

[12] On the specific difficulties but also inventive freedoms of biennials outside of Europe and the United States, see Carolee Thea, *On Curating 2: Interviews with Fourteen Curators* (New York: D.A.P./Distributed Art Publishers, 2016).

[13] Terry Smith, *Contemporary Art: World Currents* (London: Laurence King; Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson/Prentice Hall, 2011), Part 2.

[14] Peter Osborne, 'Existential Urgency: Contemporaneity, Biennials, and Social Form', *The Nordic Journal of Aesthetics*, no. 49-50 (2015), p.175.

[15] Osborne, 'Existential Urgency: Contemporaneity, Biennials, and Social Form', p.176.

[16] Although Walter Mignolo traces its origins back to the twelfth century in the Americas before focusing on its resonances for today. See, for example, his *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

[17] Daniel Baumann, Dan Byers, Tina Kukielski, *2013 Carnegie International* (Pittsburgh: Carnegie Museum of Art, 2013).

[18] Peter Schjeldahl, 'The Art World: Festivalism', *The New Yorker* (5 July 1999),.p. 85.

[19] Steven Henry Madoff, 'Spectator Under Siege', panel presentation, CAA Conference, Washington, 6 February 2016, unpublished.

[20] Ibid. Claiming that the chaos of contemporary experience should be registered in mega-exhibitions, Francesco Bonami, artistic director of the 2003 Venice Biennale, convened eleven separate exhibitions, two of which he curated, and gave complete autonomy to the nine other curators or curatorial teams to do as they pleased, as well as encouraging 96 other exhibitions throughout the city. Entitling the whole *The Dictatorship of the Viewer*, he sought to open out what he saw as an 'outmoded structure of national pavilions and thematic exhibitions', to, in effect, display the chaos of contemporary art as it was happening. Green and Gardner offer a searching analysis of what they see as 'a purely rhetorical challenge to the mess and conflict of globalization signaled in the title and obvious to every viewer: this was, after all, the first Venice Biennale after the attacks of 9/11' (*Biennials, Triennials, and Documentas*, 231).

[21] See http://www.labiennale.org/en/art/history/abroad.html?back=true and http://www.labiennale.org/en/art/history/1970s.html?back=true.

[22] See Smith, *Thinking Contemporary Curating*, pp.92–99.

[23] Cited in Coline Millard et al., *The New Curator* (London: Laurence King, 2016), p.41.

[24] Eleanor Heartney, 'Gwangju Report: Image Surplus', *Art in America*, vol. 98, no. 11 (December 2010), p.78.

[25] The museum character of the exhibition was confirmed when Gioni curated a smaller version of it, with additional examples, in the exhibition, *The Keeper*, at the New Museum, New York, July–September 2016. This is puzzling, given Gioni's range as a curator, although perhaps it is his range that is being expressed, within and against the expectations of each exhibitionary format. His essay, 'In Defense of Biennials', in Alexander Dumbadze and Suzanne Hudson (ed.), *Contemporary Art: 1989 to the Present* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), is one of the best reflections on the subject.

[26] Terry Smith, *Talking Contemporary Curating* (New York: Independent Curators International, 2015), pp.71-74.

[27] Jane Morris, 'Venice Biennale director Christine Macel promises an artist-centered exhibition', The Art Newspaper,' 23 September 2016.

[28] See http://www.biennaleofsydney.com.au/19bos/exhibition/exhibition-overview/#sthash.9SJoYbTl.dpuf .

[29] The Sydney Biennale website explains that the Foundation was established as a joint venture by Transfield Holdings and Transfield Services, the last being the company managing the detention centres. On the controversy, see the 'Open Letter to the Board of the Sydney Biennale from Participating Artists,' 19 February 2014. Statement of withdrawal by five artists, 26 February 2014.

Media release by Biennale regarding resignation of chair. The controversy is discussed in detail in many articles in the June 2014 issue of *Contemporary Visual Art+Culture Broadsheet*, vol. 43, no 2 (June 2014), and on the website of the journal Discipline, with statements by Nikos Papastergiadis, Charles Esche and others. Juliana Engberg's comments may be found in the interview in Coline Millard et al., *The New Curator* (London: Laurence King, 2016), p.41.

[30] Ekaterina Dergot, 'A Text That Should Never have Been Written?'. See also *Art Newspaper*, #257, May 2014.

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