
BETWEEN PARADOXES : DECONSTRUCTING BIENNALE CULTURE

The term 'Biennial' is derived from the Latin word *biennium*, associated with a period of two years. In the domain of Contemporary Art, these refer to large-scale International art shows held every two years. Triennials take place once every three years while quadrennials reoccur every four years.¹ There are also the less frequent 'quinquennial', which occur every five years. These extensive exhibitions are often orchestrated to act as a device for globalising art. For this essay, the word 'biennale' is used as an umbrella term that aims to address the underlying, common formats to the reappearing fairs.

From its beginning in the '90s, the '*biennale boom*' brought with it transcultural exchanges. Today biennales are growing excessively popular, with more than 150 exhaustive events around the world.² They are becoming channels for generating, assimilating and, disseminating art.³ They are grounds to ferment local pride, for both the host and the nations chosen to participate. Not only do they stir tourism, in and around the vicinity, they also incur an income by generating cultural capital.⁴ These perennial fairs are considered emblems for exhibition-making due to their expansive scope. But it is this width, fuelled by individuals with high 'capital' — financial, cultural, and/or celebrity,⁵ which makes these visual art events inaccessible at instances.⁶ Therefore making it, quasi-elitist. For instance, an important aspect of Manifesta 1 (1996, Rotterdam), was its Open and Closed house meetings. These were forums, organised with the help of the Manifesta curators at ten different venues. Specific meetings deemed 'Closed', induces an isolation factor in the biennale

¹ A Patel, Manghani and E. D'Souza, 2018

² Sassatelli, n.d

³ Sassatelli, n.d

⁴ Venice Biennale coincides with Art Basel every other year, drawing huge art-hungry crowds from all over the world. Therefore, fuelling the European tourism industry.

⁵ Bethwaite and Kangas, 2020

Biennales have grande opening parties, filled with magnetism, for the visual art exhibition to gather publicity. The Venice Biennale calls it the *vernissage*. In 2007 at the opening of the *Ruin Russia* exhibition, which was subsidiary to the Venice Biennale, there was party hosted at the luxury hotels, the Hotel Cipriani. This party was attended by some of the most extravagant celebrities from within and outside of the art world.

⁶ Since those with low cultural capital are excluded by 'biennale culture'

system.⁷ Several professionals and enthusiasts were restricted from attending certain meetings. Moreover, Manifesta 1 was a ‘nomadic biennale’, signifying it was a travelling art show. This indicates Manifesta 1 to be a relatively expensive biennale, demanding for an elaborate infrastructure to be deconstructed and reconstructed several times, for different sites. The decision to conduct the ‘Open and Closed meetings’ over ten different sites, also equates to a travel cost, of additional money and time, both of which are restraining to individuals with limited capital. In addition, its cohesion, efficiency, and sustainability in terms of self-generation and its ramifications on the environment, are questioned.



Manifesta 11, Zurich 2016

Source : curatingthecontemporary, 2016

Comparably, for the ‘preparation’ of the Kassel-based Documenta 11, there were three different topics staged at the cities of New Delhi, St. Lucia, and Lagos.⁸ These were cities based in three physically and culturally distant countries, situated in three different continents. Enwezor’s idea for Documenta 11 was “*to release documenta from its spatial confinement*”,⁹ but in fact at the very initial stages, the disparate venues of Documenta 11 reinforced the rigidity of geographies. The politics of biennales are ingrained with paradoxes — of money, power, and scale.¹⁰ Some of its

⁷ Which forums are announced as restricted/Closed? What are their topics of discussion? What’s their choice of location? Who is allowed to attend them? Who decides on the invitees? — Questions such as these are crucial to pose, when it comes to the nomadic Manifesta 1 in order to understand the depth of power-play which may exist within the biennial systems. Regardless, the sheer concept of an Open and Closed meeting, inherently proves the elitist quality of these large-scale exhibitions.

⁸ *documenta 11, 2020*

⁹ *documenta 11, 2020*

¹⁰ *Bethwaite and Kangas, 2020*

incongruity adds to the glitz and glamour of the festivals, while the rest of the paradoxicality leads to disturbances.



'Magicienne de la Terre' by Yinka Shonibare at Documenta 11

Source : Documenta 11, 2021

Art is expected to be autonomous, governing its quality by dismissing manipulations by external economics. Theoretically, art must have immunity to resist being seen as a market commodity, or else it is subject to degradation.¹¹ In contrast, pragmatically, art and its making tend to transform into a marionette at the mercy of capitalist pursuit, especially in the biennale framework. There is an obvious tension between art and the market.¹² From the initial stages of enrolling, a brawny neoliberal structure unveils itself. The biennale economy requires artists to pay a participation fee, rather than paying the artist for invested time and labour.¹³ “*The Venice Biennale for most of the artists invited is a do-it-on-your-own kind of process,*” stresses artist Michael Elmgreen.¹⁴ There is barely a source of support for the participants throughout their biennale journey. Kenyan artist, Jimmy Ogonga, in an interview with *The National*, expresses the sheer frustration at the Venice

¹¹ Bethwaite and Kangas, 2020

¹² Bethwaite and Kangas, 2020

¹³ The participation fee for each biennale varies depending on their status and administrative strategies. For instance - artists must pay approximately \$2700-\$4000 in the case of Florence Biennale, 6,000 GBP (scaling upwards depending on the size) to be on show at the London design biennale, and €15,000-20,000 for participating in the Venice Biennale.

¹⁴ Brown and Pes, 2019

biennale which drove him towards the point of 'self-destruction'.¹⁵ Accessibility to finances determine the stakeholders involved, the venue and range of these multi-faceted exhibitions as well as the potential artists on show. An example would be the controversial Kenyan Pavilion at the 56th Venice Biennale (2015), where all the participants were Chinese, curated by Italians.¹⁶ This unfortunate choice, which later led to the withdrawal of the Kenyan representation, was driven by private interests, specifically the sponsors for the pavilion in 2015.¹⁷ Time and again the impact of raging capitalistic spirit is witnessed when art is put on the biennale stage. Despite of the ban on sales in 1968 from the prestigious Venice Biennale, the fabric of these large-scale exhibitions is far from disconnected from the clout of funds. The debar of trading art gestures high symbolic merit, therefore increasing its monetary value.¹⁸ Furthermore, there are biennales, such as the Florence Biennale, which encourage artists to accept inquiries from collectors and *aficionados* while on show. Hence, making it an entrepreneurial platform entwined with the market.

Due to their comprehensive nature, biennales are perceived as a democratising cultural power.¹⁹ They are seen as inclusive, inviting local and international art practitioners to promote an osmotic barter of creativity. The paradox of power (in this case the power associated with whose voice is projected to the biennale audience) comes into play when the trade-off is disproportionate i.e when there is an imbalance in the ratio of local versus international artists. When there is a high number of local artists in the foreground, there is a loss of the inherent hybridity of biennales. Their transcultural character fades. Whereas when international artists over-weigh the local cultural representatives, there is minimal scope for internal resonance. Therefore paradoxically, by some, biennales are also recognised as 'hegemonic and a means to recolonise'.²⁰ For instance, in the case of the 2nd Johannesburg Biennale (1997), the heart of the exhibition was technophilic. It accommodated talents of the American, European, Latin, and Asian invitees, but swallowed the space for more traditionally-skilled African artists.²¹ There was an internationalist focus on the event, portraying the biennale as imperialistic as it subdued the visibility of regionally based artists.²² Alternatively, a novice, trying to squeeze its way into biennale culture, tends to face a significant disadvantage when pitted opposite countries exhibiting since the initial days of the biennale.²³ At the Venice Biennale, Lina Lazaar, the curator behind Tunisia's 2017 pavilion

¹⁵ Gronlund, 2019

¹⁶ Warner, 2015

¹⁷ Warner, 2015

¹⁸ Bethwaite and Kangas, 2020

¹⁹ Sassatelli, n.d

²⁰ Sassatelli, n.d

²¹ Diawara, 1998

²² Diawara, 1998

²³ Venice Biennale, since its beginning, has accommodated for European counties such as Belgium, Hungary, Germany, Great Britain, France and Russia. Therefore, their feet are well sunk in, having well grounded funding and infrastructure. Counties, specially those that classify as third-world, have negligible chances of being considered while awarding the best pavilion. Counties such as India, Nigeria, Uganda, Tanzania, Ghana and Pakistan are at rampant loss; many a times unable to exhibit at the biennale for lengthy spans of time.

explains, “Countries new to the Venice Biennale are confronted with ‘dinosaur pavilions’ that are simply unshakeable, with the security of 120 years of history. The rest of the world is trying to squeeze into the Arsenale.”²⁴ This is a case of cultural hegemony and neocolonialism, deep-seated into the foundation of the Venice Biennale.



Documenta 11, Zurich 2016, Manifesta Copyright

Source : O. Kelly, 2017

Biennales are a source of honour for the nations hosting the international fest, as well as for the countries invited to stage shows. And the artists are national, cultural ambassadors.²⁵ But it is this ‘nation’ or rather, its governing bodies which when criticised, give art its mnemonic value.²⁶ With cultural diplomacy at the crux of the biennale, governments are important stakeholders. They hold an authoritative stance, patrolling biennale mechanisms, taking up the role of sponsors for these wide-reaching events. Nations that are unfortunate to have governments uninclined towards the arts, do not have an opportunity to serve as a venue, or exhibit at International biennales. Many third-world countries (and South Africa) struggle to manifest their presence due to the lack of interest and funding. The country of Lebanon, for example, had a well-sized pavilion supported by private

²⁴ Cornwell, 2019

²⁵ Bethwaite and Kangas, 2020

²⁶ Bethwaite and Kangas, 2020

The article ‘*The Paradoxes of Biennales*’ highlights a case of the Russian Pavilion at the 55th Venice Biennale (2013). Artist Vadim Zakharov's *Danaë* used utilitarian objects and architectural settings to unpack underlying prevailing Russian, patriarchal constructs. The article states how this performance handed power to the state, despite its criticism, by citing the 2015 follow-up protest against the Russian invasion of Crimea.

sponsors, the Boghossian Family Foundation in the 57th Venice Biennale (2017). But in its 2019 edition, Lebanon's newly elected government had no intention of considering participation in this event. Art was not a priority for the Lebanese government. Similarly, it was only in 2019, Ghana and Pakistan had the chance to debut at the Venice Biennial. Mechanics of biennales pass through several prescribed bureaucratic hoops to reach fruition. For the active government, biennales are a source to accelerate national image-building.²⁷ They reap cultural and economic benefits since they tend to attract corporate partnerships between businesses and the arts.²⁸ In the case of the 2006 Singapore Biennale, almost half of the total budget i.e \$5 million came from private sponsorship.²⁹ Therefore, escalating the country's overall GDP. Governments understand the systematic utilisation of 'cultural capital' encourages the long-term strategy of transforming a county's 'creative economy'.³⁰ Therefore for host countries, the governments hold a special interest in the stakes of successful *biennialization*.³¹ Oftentimes, it is the governments that initiate local biennales, holding autonomy over the choice of the administration board. The control kept over biennales can be examined at the first Tirana Biennale in Albania (2000). Edi Muka, hired by the at-the-time mayor of Tirana, Edi Rama, was dismissed from his post as head curator. This was solely due to political reasons. In an interview with Geert Lovink, Muka quotes the three reasons for his lay off — First, was the Prime Minister's will to favour Muka's replacement.³² Secondly, Muka was seen as 'the black sheep' by the new minister of culture, and lastly, Edi Rama's dormancy towards the dismissal.³³ According to Muka, there was no protection nor, an attempt to reason the curator's expulsion.³⁴ This incident shows a glimpse of the capacity at which governments can alter the configuration of a biennale. In times when Star-Curators are discerned as the face of the show, state bureaucracies have the liberty to tamper with the existing state of affairs, in a biennale context. Another case would be that of the 3rd Shanghai Biennale (2000). It was curated by Hou Hanru, Toshio Shimizu, Li Xu, and Zhang Qing at the Shanghai Art Museum.³⁵ It was denounced for having a conservative approach towards exhibition-making, as it failed to address the prevailing social and political issues of the time, including China's unbridled globalisation spree.³⁶ The 'power paradox' here lies in the role of the curator as well. Biennale curators have to face dialectic tensions. They are pressed to show their creative allegiance to a global community as well as strike a balance

²⁷ Tang, *n.d.*

²⁸ Tang, *n.d.*

²⁹ Tang, *n.d.*

³⁰ Tang, *n.d.*

³¹ Sassatelli, *n.d.*

Biennialization is defined as the standardisation of biennial exhibitions.

³² Lovink, 2001

³³ Lovink, 2001

³⁴ Lovink, 2001

³⁵ FORMER WEST – 3rd Shanghai Biennale, *n.d.*:

³⁶ FORMER WEST – 3rd Shanghai Biennale, *n.d.*:

with state-provided material and non-material conditions.³⁷ Hence, curators are on a flimsy tightrope, accountable to state actors and private actors, in addition to transnational actors which includes a diverse audience, expecting the curator to cut across margins of Contemporary Art.



10th Shanghai Biennale, 2014

Source : 2000 Shanghai Biennale, 2015

Biennale culture is defined by Westphalian imaginary, geographic divisions.³⁸ Each participant is a mode of nation branding. Biennales are thus, associated with the ‘Olympic Games of the Art World’, wherein a team of representatives are sent in from their respective countries, to establish a national pavilion. Whereas for the artists part-taking, these pavilions are merely national framings.³⁹ The pavilions present a half-baked narrative of a nation, tailored for the ‘western eye’.⁴⁰ At the Venice Biennale, the Russian Pavilion accommodated Moscow Conceptualism thrice in a row, defending it to be ‘a strong representative of Russia’.⁴¹ The aim of the curator of the pavilion was to distinctly be perceived for its ‘Russian-ness’.⁴² This isolates a single aesthetic, leading to a neglect of a wholesome, more precise mode of narration. Similarly, India after an eight-year hiatus,

³⁷ Molho, 2020

³⁸ Bethwaite and Kangas, 2020

³⁹ Bethwaite and Kangas, 2020

⁴⁰ Bethwaite and Kangas, 2020

⁴¹ Bethwaite and Kangas, 2020

⁴² Bethwaite and Kangas, 2020

presented at the 58th Venice Biennale (2019). The exhibition was manifested around the philosophies and legacy of the eminent Indian freedom fighter, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, better known to the world as Mahatma Gandhi. The nationalist figure may be one of the most recognisable facets of 'Indian-ness', if not the most. Although it is crucial to recognise it has been 75 years since the country's independence; consequently, rendering the pavilion's conceptual investigations as passé. The theme is attuned to suit its westbound spectators. In the main, national pavilions have the proclivity to be anachronistic.



India pavilion at the 2019 Venice Biennale. Photo: Enid Tsui

Source : Tsui, 2019

Another paradox of scale develops when the artists and curators are chosen. For instance, artist Armando Tanzini has repeatedly presented at the Venice Biennale representing Kenya.⁴³ He was selected for the 50th, 55th, and 56th editions of the biennale. This Italian national working in the African premise of Kenya had won multiple awards and was a well-known figure. Tanzini's art was at the same time 'Kenyan and non-Kenyan'. Here is another case where the brewing of a national pavilion succumbs to 'a universal view', where the paradox of scale is not to be 'too foreign'.⁴⁴ Similarly, Udo Kittelmann, a potential curator for the Russian pavilion at the 55th Venice Biennale

⁴³ Armando Tanzini was born in Livorno, Italy in 1943. He is an Italian artist who lives and works in Malindi, Kenya. His work is influenced by tribal art of East Africa and Etruscan art.

⁴⁴ Bethwaite and Kangas, 2020

(2013), was repudiated since he was deemed ‘too radical’.⁴⁵ Instead, Boris Groys was chosen to curate the Biennale pavilion.⁴⁶ Groys is a Russian-born, New York-based curator, who served a higher refer-ability. In a tussle between presenting Russia authentically or increasing the pavilion’s international visibility, the former bore loss. Biennales, due to their ‘branding’ as international platforms with an extensive gauge, and a need to meet audience expectations, dilute the legitimacy of the art they aim to present.



Russian pavilion at the 55th Venice Biennale. Photo: Daniel Zacharov

Source : Mousse Magazine, n.d.

Francesco Bonami, while being questioned on his views of Documenta 11 explains the phenomenon by which a show of a colossal scale, like a biennale, transcends the limiting assessment of an exhibition, to consolidate as a ‘plurality of visions’.⁴⁷ Enwezor, very aptly as a response, sheds light on the loss of intimacy among art, its makers, and its engagement, where there is a danger of *totalisation* as the exhibition stretches beyond a certain range. The paradox of scale recognises this loss which occurs in any case while biennales are in consideration. Every biennale has a unique face attached to it, as it is represented by one ‘Star Curator’ who orchestrates the entirety of the show.

⁴⁵ Bethwaite and Kangas, 2020

⁴⁶ Bethwaite and Kangas, 2020

⁴⁷ Griffin, 2003

Bonami draws this ideology from the architect Rem Koolhaas who states, “a building is not a building anymore but something else, with a plurality of functions”. He calls this the idea of ‘bigness’

However, there are always multiple voices sitting in a lower pedestal of the hierarchy, which merge to form a singular symphony put out by the Star Curator. For example, Documenta 11 was curated by Okwui Enwezor *and* his team of six curators i.e Ute Meta Bauer, Carlos Basuald, Octavio Aya, Sarat Maharaj, Susanne Ghez, and Mark Nash.⁴⁸ This multiplicity married to the heft of theory and artworks leaves no space for an organic rapport between the plentiful information and its receiver. Documenta 11 had a cumbersome catalogue, criticised as an ‘unbridgeable gulf’ for the biennales attendees.⁴⁹

Bonami, also famously stated that “a 21st-century show must allow multiplicity, diversity, and contradiction to exist inside the structure of an exhibition”.⁵⁰ This is precisely the design configuration found in the biennale framework. Paradoxes are inevitable fragments of biennale culture. They must be acknowledged to study the politics of biennales.⁵¹ However, deconstructing them to criticise and improvise the framework of a biennale, is a necessity. In the contemporary, global circumstance the aim of the biennale should be to stray away from a narcissistic skeletal structure of the art world, which thrives on superficial gild. Rather, its objective must be to synthesise a composite form of artistic engagement, while challenging antecedent boundaries of the anatomy of biennales. Furthermore, in the near future it would be interesting to see how the rise of digital art impact the status of biennales. In the times of Manifesta 1 (1996), technology was used to update the happenings of the biennale. The world wide web was a means to archive. With a rapid rise in the production and consumption of NFTs, incorporation of Augmented and Virtual Reality to experience art and its exhibitions, curators would be expected to fabricate a novel, non-traditional methodology of curation.

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⁴⁹ GLOBAL TENDENCIES: GLOBALISM AND THE LARGE-SCALE EXHIBITION, 2003

⁵⁰ GLOBAL TENDENCIES: GLOBALISM AND THE LARGE-SCALE EXHIBITION, 2003

⁵¹ Bethwaite and Kangas, 2020

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