



### **The Novelty Is Gone, and That's the Perfect Place to Begin.**

Biennials have lost their novelty. Does that mean Bergen shouldn't host one? On the contrary, this is perhaps the perfect time to set a biennial in motion. As the 53<sup>rd</sup> Venice Biennale rolls into action, it has spawned a legion of other biennials. São Paulo, Bucharest, Istanbul, Athens, Florence, Liverpool, Havana, Sydney, Tokyo, Brussels, Gwangju, Johannesburg and so many other host cities too numerous to list, illustrate how ubiquitous the biennial has become. It is in many respects the exhibition model of our time. Both local and global, it is network driven and rhizomatic in nature. However, despite its strong and ever-growing presence in the international art scene, the biennial as an established exhibition model has only recently garnered critical and discursive attention.

May 2009, the festival arte Contemporanea in Italy launched its first edition of panel discussions under the title, *On Biennials*. With artists and curators representing the who's who within the biennial world, the aim of the event was to understand the impact of the genre, if not the workings of the biennial industry as a whole. Spring 2009 the Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art in Rotterdam organized a three-day symposium called *The Curators*, which included a panel framed by the question, *When is a biennial a success?*. (1) And most recently, *Open*, a Dutch magazine on art and the public domain, dedicated its anniversary issue to the subject. The edition, entitled *The Art Biennial as a Global Phenomenon: Strategies in Neo-Political Times*, contains critical essays by Thierry de Duve, Michael Hardt, Irit Rogoff and Simon Sheikh amongst others. Where in the past, biennials have been critiqued on the basis of works exhibited or in relation to specific curatorial approaches, critical attention has turned towards the exhibition form itself. In other words, now having become convention, the biennial is under scrutiny.

Why is this significant? After all, aren't exhibitions essentially about the work of artists and curatorial intentions? Well, yes and no. In *Exhibition Rhetorics*, an essay written in

the mid-nineties, Bruce Ferguson tries to think through the exhibition as a medium and rhetorical form. Exploring various mechanisms and interests at work, he notes:

Exhibitions are publicly sanctioned representations of identity, principally, but not exclusively, of the institutions which present them. They are narratives which use art objects as elements in institutionalized stories that are promoted to an audience. (2)

While Ferguson is speaking about exhibitions in general, it's interesting to consider what this might mean in relation to the rhetorics of biennials and *publicly sanctioned representations of identity*. Next to displaying curatorial intentions and individual art works, biennials have always reflected on the nation-state, host city and facilitating art institutions which promote and house them. Through them, the local and international are brought into juxtaposition. Perhaps the most classic example is the Venice Biennale with its interface much like that of a grand world fair. Borders are reinstated by jewel-like pavilions housing each country's selected artist or artists. However, most contemporary biennials with relatively new infrastructures are less explicitly zoned. Much like today's complex geopolitics, lines between the local and global are more subtle and blurred, but nonetheless distinct identities are asserted. To understand how a biennial functions as a rhetorical form, it's key to acknowledge the stakeholders and the stories about identity which they wish to tell. Of course not all agendas are conscious, but by entering into an open debate and attempting to unmask and map various motives in advance, counter-images and narratives might be given space to emerge.

It is also crucial that regional artists take an active role in staging themselves within that narrative. During *Manifesta 1* which took place in the Netherlands, Rotterdam artists organized a project called *NEStWORK*. (3) Playing on the mix between nest and network, the project embraced and expanded upon the role of the host and notions of hospitality. Under the rubric numerous initiatives happened over a three month period. *NEStWORK* ran a small information center where people could pick up maps marked with cultural and subcultural points of interest. Visitors could look at documentation from artists and artist foundations in the city. They programmed a variety of readings, performances and debates. Next to these activities, artists from Foundation B.a.d developed a project called *My House: Your Home*. (4) Using their foundation as a base, they invited several foreign artists participating in *Manifesta* to come to their studios/homes as guests. All of these activities created an embedded sense of engagement and reciprocity that lasted well beyond *Manifesta*'s duration and spawned other initiatives. (5)

Thinking through strategies of legacy building is another aspect of hosting a biennial. Not in the pompous sense of the word, but rather what will be left after the international parties have gone home. Again returning to Ferguson's essay he writes:

Exhibitions leave traces in discourses as various as contemporary art history, journalistic and academic criticism, and forms of cultural anthropology, as well as in the active interests of collectors, artists and arts bureaucrats. (6)

These traces can be unexpected, incidental or planned. In terms of planning, it's useful to think about how a biennial, or rather its participants and organizers, might learn from the

preceding biennial. (7) Too often the art world emulates traditional market values and dynamics when it comes to exhibition making. One year it's this curator with that theme, and the next, it's another theme with another curator. Under the auspices of originality and novelty, trends dictate that the old must make way for the new. Just as markets are now rethinking the viability of a disposable culture, it's high time for the art world to consider sustainable practices too. This doesn't mean there is no space for radical breaks, to the contrary divergent approaches should be encouraged. But even in rebellion, those developments should be informed by previous experiences.

Of course as mentioned earlier not all traces can be planned, which is why it's crucial to create spaces or zones for the unforeseen to happen. Think of *Utopia Station* curated by Molly Nesbit, Hans Ulrich Obrist and Rirkrit Tiravanija which temporarily alighted on the 50<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennial. (8) Having gained content and momentum from previous stations, it became a nexus of activity which the organizers could have never anticipated or scripted. And although it was a part of *documenta X*, which is not technically a biennial, a similar dynamic occurred with the *Hybrid Workspace* many years earlier. (9) Operating over the 100 Days, it functioned as a lab bringing together activists, artists and writers. These projects were generative and solicited responses on the fly. They also disseminated a multitude of debates virally across the web. Much like *NEStWORK*, they capitalized on formal and informal networks, bridged the local and global and set other initiatives into motion long after the exhibitions had closed.

With these issues and examples in mind, should Bergen host a biennial? That's impossible for an outsider to answer. But if the city chooses to do so, with carefully considered planning, a biennial can operate as a conduit and catalyst with resonances that reach beyond the duration of the exhibition and its geographical location. With the blinding hype gone, now institutions, curators and artists can engage more critically, asking themselves who is being represented, for what purposes and by whom. And this issue cannot be left up to curators alone. Bergen's artists and art initiatives must also take charge of how they want the biennial to engage with the city's cultural community. Next to this, by resisting trends and seeing the two year exhibition cycle as a learning process, each biennial can build on another to develop a deeper conceptual richness. While a *yes* or *no* answer is difficult to give, it is possible to say that the timing could be right. As a medium, the biennial has matured, the novelty is gone, and that's the perfect place to begin.

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Endnotes:

- (1) While I cannot fully address this point given the brevity of this essay, to my mind biennials have played a pivotal role in establishing the curator as author. Where curators were once custodians of museum collections, currently through highly publicized, temporary and large-scale exhibitions, curators have gained prominence. Often the announcement of a newly appointed curator heralds the inaugural moment of a biennial. Functioning like a form of branding, the curator

- gives the exhibition an identity even before the list of artists has been envisioned or confirmed.
- (2) Ferguson, Bruce, *Exhibition Rhetorics*, from *Thinking About Exhibitions*, ed. Reesa Greenberg, Bruce W Ferguson, Sandy Nairne, Routledge, New York, 1996 p. 175
  - (3) As a part of Manifesta 1, NEsTWORK took place in 1996. The project involved members from Foundation B.a.d. (Stichting B.a.d.) and was initiated by Karin Arink, Wapke Feenstra, Jeanne van Heeswijk, Edwin Janssen, Menna Laura Meijer, Kamiel Verschuren and Ruud Welten.
  - (4) More information on *My House: Your Home* can be found directly on the Foundation B.a.d. website: <http://www.stichtingbad.nl/BadProjects/1996>
  - (5) While biennials eventually bring income, preparations are costly. Robbing Peter to pay for Paul is what civic governments do in a crunch, especially when it comes to limited cultural funding. So the question is not whether local artists and arts organizations will feel the financial pinch, because they will. But it's rather how that siphoning of funds might be repaid in other ways. Network building, which is what NEsTWORK did, is one non-monetary gain which has a tremendous impact on the sustainability of artists' practices.
  - (6) Ferguson, Bruce, *Exhibition Rhetorics*, from *Thinking About Exhibitions*, ed. Reesa Greenberg, Bruce W Ferguson, Sandy Nairne, Routledge, New York, 1996 p. 180
  - (7) Having a pre-biennial conference to weigh the pros and cons is an already admirably strong step in this direction.
  - (8) For more on *Utopia Station* see:  
<http://www.e-flux.com/projects/utopia/about.html>
  - (9) Although its residues are spread across the web, the official *Hybrid Workspace Archive* can be found here:  
<http://www.medialounge.net/lounge/workspace/index.html>

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