Symbolic Production in the Art Biennale: Making Worlds

Biennials – periodic, independent and international major exhibitions surveying trends in contemporary, cutting-edge art – have proliferated with startling speed since the 1990s, becoming a key context of how we encounter contemporary art. Increasingly, biennials dictate the agenda of what is contemporary art and how one is to understand, appreciate and experience it. Whilst diverse, biennials share not just a name but also a common lineage, at the basis of their common self-representation and global networking. Their lineage stems from the independent art and trade exhibitions that emerged in Europe in the 19th century and crystallized in the encyclopaedic World Exhibition as orderly, representative microcosms. Biennials are much more than curated displays, they constitute 'festival-exhibitions' working as 'a public model and a shifting backdrop against which the meanings of contemporary art are constructed, maintained and sometimes irrevocably altered' (Ferguson et al., 2005: 48). To this day, they present themselves as a 'diagnostic toolbox' (Enwezor, 2002: 55), striving to 'tak[e] the pulse of an ever-changing, "global" contemporary art scene' (Smith, 2007: 260).

Yet, biennials are also increasingly gigantic arrays of competing selections and representations that attract media attention as well as popular participation, but often seem to leave public and critics alike confused rather than enlightened or entertained. Faced with their proliferation, the art world struggles with what it has started to call a process of *biennalization* (Marchart, 2008). What some argue is a truly global phenomenon opening up spaces for reflection and cross-fertilisation in settings that promote innovation in art and self-reflexivity in cultural display, others regard as the ultimate proof of the standardizing and banalizing effect of a culture industry intensified by neoliberal globalization and forfeiting culture's partial autonomy to rampant economic expediency. Biennials are seen either as a 'cultural elaboration of the new economic and political powers' (Stallabrass, 2004: 37), or as spaces of resistance and diversity. This binary logic rehearses old dilemmas in the critique of culture (industry), commodification *vs* resistance/emancipation in particular. It reinforces the idea of the biennial eventually overcome by its own success and gigantism, generating 'biennial fatigue' (Van Hal, Biennial Foundation director, cited in Oren, 2014: 281). Recent major forums, conferences and biennials themselves have debated its 'crisis and opportunities' (Bauer and Hanru, 2013: 10-13). This has produced a lively internal discussion, in line with the acknowledged discursive turn in exhibition making (O'Neill, [2007] 2010) and in parallel with the consolidation of networking organisations such as the Biennial Foundation and the International Biennial Association. However that debate has been broadly

inconclusive, its terms framed as either caveats or horizons of utopian possibility (Oren, 2014: 277-282).

This article focuses on one key case through which we can trace biennials' rise and transformations, namely the Venice Biennale where, arguably, it all started.[1] It aims to develop a cultural analysis addressing the problem of how to interpret biennials' exponential growth and significance for cultural life. This requires a theoretical shift that does not take received internal definitions and debate as given but thematises them as part of its object of analysis. That means, first of all, to challenge a key distinction between cultural production and consumption, and its attendant theoretical and methodological dichotomies, conceivably behind the scarce attention given to art festivals in much academic research.[2] Biennials' significance straddles that distinction: a biennial is indeed not (primarily) a site of art's material production and its publics are changing and scattered, not well suited to provide sustained reliable evidence on reception. Biennials have become, however, key sites of both the production of art's discourse and where that discourse translates into practices of display and contexts of appreciation. Biennials thus mediate between the constitution of aesthetic dispositions and the legitimation of regimes of meaning and value: to address their specific cultural significance, this article argues, means to focus on this role they play in the symbolic production of art.

Symbolic production is conceived here not as a generic synonym for cultural production but as that specific, 'final' moment or position in the field that reaches out and includes reception. Under the guidance of specialized professionals such as critics and curators, but only activated by public response able to connect to the interpretive frameworks being used, and given the experiential conditions of encounter with artworks, symbolic production seals art's material, physical manufacture by producing its meaning. This is, partly, what Bourdieu's study of the literary field calls symbolic value: both the specific currency that makes that field go round, and a channel of communication beyond the field of restricted production (Bourdieu, 1993). Symbolic production then is what makes a work, an artist, or even a genre visible and relevant. It is, ultimately, how 'the value of works of art and belief in that value are continuously generated' (Ibid.: 78) in the field of production as a whole, as 'a vast operation of *social alchemy* jointly conducted' (Ibid.: 81). In Bourdieu's critical sociology this is instrumental to his exposing the artists as mere 'apparent producers' (Ibid.: 76) and stresses the ideological opposition of symbolic and economic value as the generative principle of legitimate art.

However, contrary to this emphasis, I take symbolic production more literally and yet without the same intent to debunk the agency of the artist, the public or indeed the artwork. I aim to expand what Bourdieu barely suggests: not just added value to a

finished work, different but ultimately assimilated to economic value, but the emerging of a work's meaning through anchoring it to aesthetic dispositions in a space of 'contextual resonances' (Gell, 1996: 36). That is, symbolic production – for a cultural object, as constitutive as material production itself – refers to the space, social and experiential, of the emerging of a work's *sense* in a context of shared aesthetic dispositions and thus expectations (Swidler, 2010). Whilst symbolic production is potentially everywhere, biennials are today key *loci* for it, 'symptomatic institutions', magnifying crises and opportunities, and condensing the 'particular problematic to be examined' (Born, 2010: 190). A focus on symbolic production can help to interpret, retrospectively so to speak, dominant classifications and available cultural resonances. Observing the shifts and struggles in symbolic production offers a novel key by which to interpret the public imaginary of biennials and vice versa, to explore how a phenomenon like the biennial contributes to giving expression and form to public culture and its regimes of value and representation.[3]

This perspective also extracts biennials from the linear story of commodification within which the phenomenon is often explained away. Although applied in many guises in different disciplines and from different theoretical standpoints, the notion of commodification ultimately derives from a lineage presupposing the irreconcilability of economic value on the one hand and aesthetic, artistic or critical on the other, so that any process merging the two equates to a degenerative, alienating loss of art's own logic. According to Velthuis (2005) in his study of the symbolic meaning of art prices, this 'hostile worlds' model is certainly more sophisticated than the alternative, reductive 'nothing-but' model that simply flattens all values to economic value. However, even in the highly sophisticated version of Bourdieu, a flattening occurs because the worlds are seen as qualitatively different and yet in direct competition on a single plane, so that they are in a zero-sum-game against each other. What disappears in this antagonistic, all-encompassing model is precisely the co-existence – symbiotic, parasitic or even indifferent as well as directly and intentionally competitive – of different regimes of value, institutional logics or 'spheres'. The language of competition and capital seals the reduction to the economic logic, and wipes off interest in the specificity of symbolic production.

To question such consolidated understandings, this article first traces the genealogy of the Venice Biennale from 19th century World Fairs as providing an important interpretative key (section 1). On that basis, the article then considers the alleged current *biennalization* of art worlds. The shifting panorama of contemporary biennials provides rich material to observe how interpretive frames change and are promoted, raising, but also displacing, issues of cultural politics and value legitimation that dominate analyses of cultural displays (section 2). Finally, I consider

how the issues that emerge are practically 'solved' in the actual festivals put together, as manifested in the unfolding topographic and thematic map of the Biennale in recent years (section 3). From their roots in the panoramic exhibitions based on inter*national* representation, biennials have become sites that experiment with alternative forms of cultural representation and territoriality, challenging earlier classifications of cultural influence and diffusion and providing an illustrative context for many pressing questions of cultural life, in particular as regards notions of globalization and commodification. I argue that the shifting ways in which biennials strive to provide orientation in the otherwise rather cryptic sphere of contemporary high art, the tone and stakes of their critical and public reception, provide a privileged case and an unusual perspective on what is often termed global culture, but is rarely empirically studied in clearly defined contexts, especially beyond affirmation or negations of its measurable impact (Quemin, 2006; Buchholz and Wuggenig, 2005).

The article draws on material from collaborative research on festivals and public culture in Europe; it reports on the case study conducted by the author on the Venice Biennale as a multidisciplinary urban festival.[4] However, this article focuses on the theoretical and methodological issue of what are indeed useful heuristic tools to understand a phenomenon like the biennials as a symptomatic institution, taking into consideration its historical development as well as the current representation in public culture. I extrapolate an approach aimed at unpacking the cultural significance of the Biennale in its specificity and as progenitor of biennials, reaching out also to other urban festivals and festival-exhibitions, hopefully illuminating new vistas on contemporary society and public culture (Giorgi et al., 2011).

1. The Biennale's world

The Biennale is today a well-recognised brand. As the 53rd edition of the art exhibition was due to open in 2009, the *Sunday Times* dubbed it the 'Olympics of art and its World Cup, with the Cannes festival thrown in. Anyone with the tiniest interest in modern art has to see it'.[5] Ironically, the Biennale actually pre-dates all the mega-events cited as models (and Cannes in particular is the arch-rival of the older Venetian *Mostra del Cinema*, the film branch of the Biennale). Founded in 1895, the Biennale is recognised in art history as the first of the genre, coining the term and the format. To this day, many biennials around the world still mark the Venetian lineage evocatively using the Italian original, *biennale*.

When it first opened its doors, the biennial Exhibition of International Art in Venice, soon abridged simply to *Biennale*, was well rooted, in content as well as

organizational style, in the 19th century that saw the emergence of large-scale recurrent events. If for certain curatorial aspects, such as the role and composition of the selection committee and artists' selection procedures, Venice took inspiration from the Secession exhibitions in Munich (Di Martino, 2013), the World Fair, or Expo, provided a more encompassing and ambitious rationale. The Expo, the prototype of mega-events with global ambitions, which started in London in 1851 in the purpose-built Crystal Palace, had struck the public imaginary, creating a genre embraced across the world as part of the Western 'civilizing' expansion (Roche, 2000; Rydell, 2006). For this it also became an exemplary critical target, from Dostoewski to Sloterdijk, as an 'emblem for the final ambitions of modernity' (Sloterdijk, 2013: 176). Ambition to impact on a rapidly changing society and culture is a feature of the self-representation of all these events. It ranges from the promotion of 'Olympism' by the International Olympic Committee established in 1894, to the Biennale's opening declaration that 'The City Council of Venice has taken on the initiative [of the Exhibition], since it is convinced that art as one of the most valuable elements of civilization offers both an unbiased development of the intellect and the fraternal association of all peoples' (Riccardo Selvatico, Mayor of Venice, cit. in Vogel, 2010: 14).

As this grand statement shows, the framework of individual exhibitions presented and financed by participating nations, with commissioners and curators nominated through diplomatic channels, and characterising the Biennale from its inception, is directly inspired (if on a much smaller scale) by the universal exhibitions. Both the Expos and the Biennale had indeed universal ambitions, upholding and illustrating the idea of humanity's progress. They materialized the representational model characterizing Western modernity: world exhibitions made sense, because in this exhibitionary order the world could be apprehended as an exhibition (Harvey, 1996: 1-19; Bennett, 1995). Both expanded from a central exhibition palace in the first few editions to a park including several *national pavilions*, a striking architectural innovation consolidating the nation state as the organizing unit in this miniaturised world tour, supposedly able to convey a transparent and exhaustive image of the world.

To this day, the Biennale continues by statute to aspire, in the words of its current General Director, to be a 'reference point at the global level for research in the arts' (A.D.M.), still evoking the Expo's ambition to produce 'an unprecedented effect of order and certainty' (Mitchell, 1992: 290). Fast forward from the opening speech of 1895, the 2013 Art Biennale was themed *The Encyclopaedic Palace*: revealing both because it boldly recalls the Expo's lineage, and because it does so ironically and reflexively. Distance is cleverly taken from those encyclopaedic ambitions, presented

as the phantasms of the self-taught artist Giovanni Auriti, an Italian émigré in New York, whose lifetime work, *Palazzo enciclopedico* (1955), a painstaking architectural model of a never realised 136 floor palace representing mankind's great discoveries and inventions, was used as inspiration. As the curator Massimiliano Gioni explains, he wanted 'to explore the idea of knowledge and the quest for an absolute knowledge that eventually becomes a kind of delirium of the imagination' (Fanelli, 2013: n.n.). This contemporary ironic attitude to 'universal representation' is a measure of the cultural and practical shifts in the history of the Biennale. Producing and communicating representative reviews of the state of contemporary art, has progressively become both a redundant and a questionable rationale for a biennial (Altshuler, 2013). Not only have other competing means of art communication and diffusion emerged, but also since the 1960s in particular, the intellectual premises of such an operation have been challenged.

The Biennale entered the scene at a time when the panoramic order just recalled was already reaching a turning point, not least by the sheer contrast between the ideal of universal representation with its aseptic gaze on the world-as-picture and the reality of the exhibition as social, experiential setting. That was also the era of the breakdown, expansion and transformation of what had been the classic European Grand Tour (with Venice always a main destination) into a more socially, geographically and culturally differentiated set of practices, linked to equally dramatic transformations of society as it was becoming and presenting itself as modern and democratic (Urry, 1991). Over the years, both the panoramic gaze of the Expo with its *hubris* of encyclopaedic representation and the romantic gaze of the Grand Tour with its elitist ideal of aesthetic contemplation, arguably face at the same time apotheosis and disintegration, as they implode with a much more entertainment-oriented *collective gaze* and are confronted with the paradoxes of universal representation. Critics have long remarked how the Expo's 'panoptic/panoramic order collapsed in the very spectacle that was meant to be its apotheosis; how the rhetorics of progress were visualized in the world exhibitions, and how this aesthetic of utopia […] was replaced by the aesthetics of illusion and entertainment' (De Cauter, 1993: 1-2). De Cauter, develops this point by applying Baudrillard's idea of the disappearance of a coherent representational system. In the Expos, it is argued, this is illustrated by a shift from the panoramic gaze to 'synergic pleasure', from 'representation to fragmented distraction' (Ibid.: 21) as a degenerative process ultimately leading to disintegration of experience, a major theme in the critique of modernity. If biennials, like World Fairs, are tools for disseminating the ideals of the Enlightenment (in the words of art historian Susan Vogel, 2010: 9), not surprisingly both are caught in the critique of its dialectics.

However, this 'disintegration of experience' might appear both less pronounced and less ominous if we take into consideration the limits that those encyclopaedic aspirations always faced. From this perspective, the narrative of degeneration informing those critiques appears less ineluctable, redirecting attention to shifts in modalities of symbolic production as an experiential moment or space. Exhibitions, as actual social spaces where narratives are (or not) performed in practice, are particularly interesting in this respect, questioning assumptions of exclusively textual approaches. It is indeed questionable the extent to which exhibitions, universal or artistic, *ever* achieved those goals, both in principle and in particular in the modalities of their actual reception and significance in public culture. Consider for instance how the historian of the Biennale Shearer West sums up the reactions to its first two decades, strongly marked by a nationalist agenda: '[t]he art exhibition is consumed in the public, not the private, space, where discontinuities cannot be ignored. The Biennale was a real space where real people interacted, rather than an "imagined community" held together by a common culture and language. The nationalist agenda that underlay the selection and display at the Biennale was invisible to a heterogeneous group of Europeans whose only shared culture was their status as tourists' (West, 1995: 421-22). Volker Barth's reconstruction of the visitor experience at the 1897 Paris *Exposition Universelle* has also challenged the common interpretation of these events relying exclusively on organizers' rationales and rhetorics. The goals of the organisers are not reflected in the visitors' expectations and behaviours, thus the orderly representation of the world is lost too. The nature of the crowd's experience of the exhibition turned out to be uncontrollable, especially given the 'lack of a concept of exhibitionary mise-en-scene, lack of information displays and the failure sufficiently to distinguish between exhibit and aesthetic ornament' (Barth, 2008: 28). These are traits that haunt large displays more generally and that require us to reflect not so much on a misplaced distinction between the 'real' and 'imagined' space of the exhibition's interpretation, but on the specificity of symbolic production as it emerges out of the 'imaginative experiential world of the exhibition park' (Ibid).

Rather than asking whether biennials have become hegemonic or irrelevant, sites of resistance or commodification, a more tenable, but ultimately more probing perspective, sees them as sites where the available range of possibilities for both is displayed and crystallised under the spotlight, but also in part challenged and given new directions. This is perhaps best shown in a different context by historian Mona Ozouf's study of the public festivals of the French Revolution, established as a means to create a new common culture. Whilst Ozouf agrees that they often failed in their objectives, she proves that for cultural analysis the success or failure in a festival's

objective are equally relevant as indicators of an epoch's culture. These festivals provide a unique way to understand the French revolution's attempt to reframe time, space and ultimately public culture – and to gauge failure too. 'The Revolutionary mania for festivals is the story of an immense disillusionment […]. If the Revolutionary festival found it so difficult to turn its dreams into reality, it was perhaps less because it contradicted utopia than because it made evident precisely what the very coherence of the utopian project concealed' (Ozouf, 1988: 11). A similar case can be made for biennials. The holding together of inherent and unresolved contradictions and the ultimate prevalence of the festival-exhibitions as a public space and experience with multiple valences may then be a more useful analytic tool than the idea of the demise and corruption of an original, golden age of authentic representation.

2. A world of biennials

A unique case in many respects, the Biennale also shows recurrent features and trends found in urban mixed arts festivals: it manifests the difficult balance of the different genres and creation of a coherent identity, the circular relationship with the host city and the local art scene, charismatic founders and rapid institutionalization characterised by a plurality of agendas. Born as an art exhibition, the Biennale is today a multidisciplinary complex comprised of six main components dedicated to different art forms. Initially contained in a single exhibition, today the Biennale expands across the Venetian archipelago in a wide typology of sites and, as a brand, globally. A city council initiative, the Biennale was nationalised during the Fascist regime, reformed in the 1970s, to become an independent not-for profit foundation in 2004. However, it still maintains strong links, financial and otherwise, with State and other public institutions, a feature common to the majority of newer biennials regardless of their heterogeneity, as is the initiating role of local authorities and charismatic individuals (Tang, 2007; Vogel, 2010).[6]

Already in its influential history of the Biennale from its inception to the 1960s, art critic and curator Lawrence Alloway (a key figure in the consecration of pop art, whose introduction to a wide European public is attributed to the 1964 Venice Biennale) advances the narrative of an expansion progressively hollowing out the original function of exhaustive survey. This is seen as giving way to entertaining formats, from curatorial control to consumer anarchy. For Alloway, the Biennale is a prism that reflects 'unsettled problems of art in society' (1969: 14). Its defining feature, both promising and problematic, is internationalization. So he carefully traces

the expanding reach of national participations, also illustrated by the building of several national pavilions in the exhibition park for the most prominent countries (Mulazzani, 2004). The Fascist period marked an era of retrenched nationalism and contraction of participating countries (see also Stone, 1998). But after World War II, Biennales averaged 30 foreign participations: 'such a coverage in the ten years after the end of World War II is clear evidence of the existence of a new, solid, cosmopolitan art world', wrote Alloway (1969: 139).

However, this is immediately dismissed as a sort of consumer cosmopolitanism, the Biennale becoming an event overcome by *laissez faire* and with the shop-window quality of a *goldfish bowl*, where selection and intelligibility are diluted. Alloway concludes that the trajectory of the Biennale illustrates shifts in what a biennial can mean for its public and for public culture. 'The problem facing the Biennale, and other giant shows, is to preserve its function against other channels of communication [...] to work out a control system to replace *laissez faire*, without losing cooperation of the thirtyseven nations that participated in 1966' (Ibid.: 153). Moreover, if the expansion of the Biennale to other artistic disciplines, which occurred in the 1930s, is seen as a natural development of a successful initiative, it is also a reminder of its increasing economic base in tourism and the metamorphosis this might imply: 'In the nineteenth century the exhibition became a medium [...] in the twentieth century, a city itself could become a medium, compounded of famous architecture, recurrent festivals, and tourist industries. Venice is itself a communicative pattern, a geo-temporal work of art' (Ibid.: 114). We find laid out here a motif that will inform later critiques, becoming a common trope of contemporary cultural analysis (Chaney, 2002): if the review and classificatory function is lost, what is left is seen as a mere culture of consumption, that instrumentalises art, and whole cities, for tourism and prestige. Or, to say it differently, that sacrifices the specificity of the cultural field to heterogeneous rationales, to national or regional promotion and, ultimately, to a new economic 'expediency of culture' paradigm where nothing escapes instrumental economic rationality (Yudice, 2003).

Whilst expediency is clearly a key factor not only in the expansion of the Biennale but in the rise of biennials across the globe, there is both a theoretical and a historical fallacy in this line of thought. Theoretically, as shown in the introduction, it does not grant a space for the specificity of symbolic production, which even within (relatively) autonomous cultural fields is in tension and co-existing with other, heteronomous rationales rather than in direct competition within a single spectrum, notwithstanding the ideology of art's disinterestedness (McGuigan 2009, Ch. 2). This also helps making sense of the fact that, historically, tourism and prestige played a key role since the start of the Biennale, as much reasons for its creation as 'fraternal

association of all peoples'. That the Biennale was also a fix for a city struggling to reconcile its glorious past with a difficult present (much as regeneration via culture is a typical strategy today for post-industrial hubs) became particularly obvious when the Cinema section was established in the 1930s. With a view to prolong and salvage the seaside holiday season of the Venice Lido, local hotel magnate and President of the Biennale, Count Giuseppe Volpi di Misurata, had the idea and clearly the right types of capital to make it happen. Moreover, from the very beginning the creation of a market for contemporary art was as much an aim of the Biennale as more explicit cultural diplomacy objectives to place then newly unified Italy on the cultural map; indeed, it was part of the latter as well. With a statement that sounds like that of a contemporary city marketing consultant, the then city councillor for education Pompeo Molmenti thus measured the success of the first exhibition in 1895: 'A more profitable turnover than at the traditional Parisian Salon, than at the Berlin exhibition backed by an august patronage, than at the Secession in Munich which was conceived with objectives similar to ours' cit. in Roddolo, 2003: 13). He also added an ante-litteram arts-led regeneration argument: 'this sizeable sum appears even more valuable and meaningful in these years of economic distress when life's multiplying difficulties are thinning our assets' (Ibid.). As many like to forget to mention, the Biennale was initially also what today we would call an art fair, with a sales office taking commissions, in this too continuing the honoured tradition of other art exhibitions it took as model, as the comparisons above show. Ironically, it is only in the period after Alloway's account that the Biennale ceased its commercial role and the sales office was closed. This is generally presented as a direct result of the 1968 upheaval and its reformation and democratisation attempts to contrast increasing commercialisation – and yet, many notice the on-going synergy with major art fairs, in particular with Art Basel which overlaps with the Biennale every other year (Tang, 2011).

Considering the wider context, in Venice and beyond, culture-led regeneration has become the overarching explicit rationale of urban cultural policies in recent decades, more or less coinciding with the proliferation of biennials. However, as expediency was not absent before, equally it is not an exhaustive paradigm to interpret the current situation. This malleable format has been reproduced at a pace and in directions that are not only consonant with the expediency rationale, but also revealing of the temporal and spatial transformation of 'the global', the problematization of territorial notions of culture and its representation. Globalization has problematized the use of culture as national expedient, promoting this new emphasis on legitimation via economic utility (Yudice, 2003: 11-12). The 'old' Biennale model of international representation illustrates the national expedient; the

Cold War even fuelled a use of art as cultural diplomacy weapon (for a case study of the Biennale in the 1950s, see Jachec 2005). At the end of the Cold War, the proliferation of biennials has proven the 'new' economic expediency much more flexible and reproducible. Indeed, some analysts classify biennials in phases of development linked to these epochal shifts. Typically three phases have been singled out, from the 'capitalist-philantropic entreprise' of the first few examples through to post-World War II 'bloc-politic' intervention, to the explosion of 'flexible production- and event-oriented variety of the 1990s and 2000s' (Bydler 2004: 388). This periodization is useful to navigate an increasingly complex scenario, with the proviso that it merges disparate dimensions on one single scale, downplaying their co-existence in tension and taking ideological discontinuities at face value.

Until the 1980s, relevant biennials were just a handful and more or less directly modelled on the Venetian original, in particular the second one, still existing, in São Paulo in Brazil. Others, and certainly many of the more recent ones, emerged instead as counter-models, the forerunner of which is the Havana Biennial, founded in 1983 and explicitly claiming for itself the role of alternative, deliberately anti-western and representative of another modernity (Altshuler, 2013; for an account emphasizing a counter-narrative from a Southern perspective see Gardner and Green 2013). It is in the 1990s and 2000s that the proliferation became a phenomenon, with today over 150 biennials and derivatives listed by the recently founded Biennial Foundation and by the International Biennial Association,[7] in themselves signs of institutionalization and 'global' reach. Currently there are biennials in at least 50 countries, with particular concentration in Europe and Asia (Vogel, 2010). Most of them do not select and display work on the basis of nationality, but of a thematic focus. Making sense *of* them has itself become a challenge, and the perception, even among practitioners makes proliferation seem even more striking: 'In the early sixties… there were two biennials: the Venice Biennale and the Bienal de São Paulo – and every five years there was Documenta […] Since then, not even forty years have passed and today we are confronted with so many so-called biennials, triennials, and quadriennials that it's almost impossible to get an overall perspective on them', writes influential curator René Block (2013: 104). This is the context in which, as we have seen, biennalization has become a source of both awe and concern, exposing the old dichotomy of authenticity *vs* commodification, in which biennials either 'signify nothing more than an overblown symptom of spectacular event culture' or provide a 'critical site of experimentation in exhibition-making (Filipovic et al. 2010, 13).

In the proliferation of biennials, the illusion of an exhaustive representation of the (art) world has been exposed, the encyclopaedic task these major exhibitions traditionally had chosen for themselves is today rendered more difficult by their very

multiplication as well as by the multiplicity of curatorial voices hosted inside their complex structures. Its foundations appear to be shaken. In a harsh review of the 2009 Art Biennale, the Italian architect Vittorio Gregotti (himself a Biennale curator in the 1970s) blames the 'frenzy of innovation', the hypertrophy of the art world itself and the lack of a 'rigorous and excluding critical perspective' for the fact that the Biennale is now experienced as a soap opera or a funfair, an 'annoying entertainment' where 'everything stands only as factual representation of the inexplicable chaos of all things'[8]. When criteria are questioned and different biennials come up with very divergent reviews of the 'state of the art', the whole enterprise appears questionable. Or is it? If biennials really were all about representing and communicating the art world (à la Alloway), one would be enough and more would clash. Instead, competition is rarely vicious. Rather, they support each other, join networks and share debates, and even devise common marketing tools, such as the recent 'Grand Tour' promoted by Venice, Documenta and Sculpture Projects Münster as well as art fair Basel (Tang, 2007). Some argue that one effect has been new relational geographies inverting or questioning centre and periphery: Irit Rogoff speaks of biennials as one key site requiring a new language for our 'criticism of current states of domination, disenfranchisement or extra-territoriality' as they advance 'a host of new regional imaginations' (Rogoff 2009: 115). Indeed, today the Venice Biennale's global reputation arguably owes much to the others that have mushroomed around it, reinforcing the genealogical role of the original and elevating it to the status of coveted ancestor. But as the Biennale sheds (or loses) the survey function that informed it, what remains? How are issues of cultural politics – of whose art is presented, and what is instead excluded – still relevant if *representativity* as a criterion is challenged? What takes the place of the national principle? How is a new balance struck between the biennale's ideology that wants it disinterested and critical and its neoliberal conditions of possibility forcing it to be opportunistic ('opportunistic' as neutrally conceived as possible as an institutional, structural character, see Gielen, 2009)? Biennials do not create a 'sense of order and certainty', but today's expansion and proliferation within the Biennale's world as well as in the world of biennials is but an intensification of a tension that was there since the beginning. In order to gain insights on the cultural significance of the biennial as symptomatic institution we should then turn to the specific ways in which this tension manifests itself and finds concrete if precarious solutions.

3. Making (art) worlds

Amongst claims of contemporary biennials as an 'intimation of global culture' (Papastergiadis and Martin, 2011: 48), issues of how exhaustive and representative they are continue to divide. Measuring 'non-Western' artists participating in the celebrated Documenta quinquennial between 1968 and 2007 – including Okwui Enwezor's acclaimed 'post-colonial' *Documenta 11* in 2002 –, Chin Tao Wu found an art world with a persisting concentric and hierarchical structure. Until the late 1980s artists selected for Documenta are invariably either born in or migrated to the West (North America and Europe). Things start to improve slightly from the 1990s, and more markedly in the new century especially since Enwezor's input, at least in terms of nationality. However cultural flows, or the movement of artists from their place of birth to where they establish a career, still dramatically converge to the established Western hubs, with very few examples of counter-flows towards 'the rest'. Wu concludes with a critique which is not new, but perhaps for this even more pointed in a field seeking and claiming constant innovation: 'for the majority outside the magic circle real barriers still remain. The biennial has, despite its decolonizing and democratic claims, proved still to embody the traditional power structures of the contemporary Western art world' (Wu, 2009: 115).

In Venice, protests on the ground that dominant groups are still overrepresented at the Biennale are not new, but continue. Gender as well as national bias remains an issue, as shown by the famous installations at the 2005 Biennale by the Guerrilla Girls. One of their iconic posters lists depressing statistics: 'Percentage Of Women Artists In The First Biennale, 1895: 2.4% Percentage Of Women Artists A Century Later, 1995: 9%. More Countries Are Represented In The Biennale This Year Than Ever Before, But Except For Egypt And Morocco The Continent Of Africa Is M.I.A. (Missing In Art)' – and so on. The Guerrilla Girls collective is renowned for its anti-establishment poetics and works meant as interventions on the public space, as billboards or bus-stop posters (Smith, 2007). What happens to the protest once it enters, or is appropriated, at the very heart of the establishment? The contradiction or irony implied by the participation of the Guerrilla Girls and others at the Biennale exposes how unhelpful and inadequate is that dichotomization of the debate which grips the field: are biennials creating a 'critical site of experimentation' or are they instead an example and factor of the banalization and colonization of art? As in the case of the critiques of the instrumentalization of the Biennale for urban regeneration seen in the previous section, this frame can be misleading as it tends to be posed as an exhaustive dichotomy and explanation that flattens analysis on one single spectrum.

As far as the issue of territorial or national representation is concerned, critiques like those above remain important rejoinders to the often empty rhetoric of globalization, but also partially miss the point. Especially for actors in the field

leading a ‘global’ life and aspiring to a ‘global’ reputation, being qualified according to any local or personal specification rather than ‘artistic achievement’ is to be avoided. In particular, artists I interviewed were eager not to be recognised in function of their national affiliation: significantly one of the artists of the first Palestinian pavilion (officially a collateral event, not a national pavilion) said ‘I tried to do something that wouldn’t imply my Palestinianness, I tried to establish a world with its own logic’ (T.B.). Artists affiliations are also increasingly complex, as reflected in official publications: every catalogue now lists both birthplace and ‘lives and works in…’ for each artist, the latter often including more than one place. Even curators of national pavilions are weary of the tendency to be seen, by press and public, as ‘if you are a consulate’ (B.S., curator Turkish pavilion). These art professionals aspire to be fully integrated not so much in a national culture order within an international frame, but rather in a global contemporary art circuit whose building blocks are the competing, overlapping and networked biennials and other festival-exhibitions themselves. Here, art makes a point to question a territorial approach rather than being framed by it, questioning consolidated rationales of cultural display. In this new scenario, the persistence *and* permutation of the ambition to ‘map the evolution in the arts’ (G.B., Venice Biennale Historical Archives director), growing with them in global scale and (post-national, post-modern) complexity gives a privileged vantage point. It is possible to trace these shifts in the representation strategy of the Venice Biennale by stepping into its exhibition park for a detailed and diachronic tour.

Initially confined within a central exhibition space at the Giardini del Castello site, the Biennale started to overflow into dedicated national pavilions within the gated park as early as 1907: seven were ready before World War I (Belgium, United Kingdom, Germany, Hungary, France, Sweden, Russia). Until World War II and possibly the 1960s it was still possible to discern an order and intent, only partially realised, to recreate a miniaturised world. This was one where key players sat next to each other: Great Britain next to France, next to Germany. Israel built its pavilion in 1952, shortly after becoming a State, right next to the US pavilion, which had been the first non-European addition in 1930. Pavilions continued to multiply until the end of the century, the twenty-ninth and last pavilion to be built in the Giardini being Korea in 1995. Even today, the Giardini maintains a special fascination, so much so that ‘the way we come to Venice to play the game of seeing the show… remains largely determined by the quaint attraction of seeking out the national pavilions while promenading through the park grounds and palaces with the air of the global traveller and conqueror of the colonial age’ (Verwoert, 2007: n.n.).

The expansion of exhibition spaces marked however a more fundamental conceptual shift, under way since the 1970s and 1980s. New exhibition areas were

added to the main exhibition park and the show started to include also happenings, debates and performances, often held in yet other spaces around the city; this increasingly gave the Biennale a festival atmosphere and challenged the more formal and hierarchical traditional setting. In line with a wider turn to thematic exhibitions, as the Biennale diversified, the national organizing principle ceased to be the only one, its hegemonic position gradually usurped by a thematic approach. Since the 1970s, Biennales have had titles, and a thematic exhibition assembled by an invited external curator each time, juxtaposed to the pavilions. The titular exhibition is housed in what had been the original exhibition palace in the Giardini and, more recently, in the impressive Arsenale, the ancient ship building quarter, close to the Giardini park. This is a vast area initially only partially used for the fringe events of young artists *Aperto* in the 1980s, but gradually restored and then fully incorporated into the main event to host part of the thematic exhibition as well as yet more national pavilions, for which its cellular structure seems particularly suited (Italy reserved a prime spot here for its new pavilion, previously in the Giardini palace). Even if themes were partly introduced 'as a solution against the fragmented displays caused by national pavilions' (Martini and Martini, 2011), pavilions may or may not follow the thematic focus, as they are still independently curated via diplomatic, and very diverse, ways. Moreover, the Biennale started to welcome 'national participations' across town, hosted in historical palaces temporarily rented for the occasion. It also increasingly came to comprise other 'collateral events' independently organised by different organizations, but still officially branded as part of the Biennale and included in the catalogue. To give a sense of the scale, the 2015 Biennale comprised a thematic exhibition across the two main sites Giardini and Arsenale, 89 national participations (including the 29 established pavilions at the Giardini, 31 at the Arsenale and 29 around town), plus further 44 'collateral events' around town.

Subtle distinctions emerge: some countries are merely 'national participations' temporarily hosted in different spaces every year and assimilated to the growing array of free 'collateral events', others have the more prestigious national pavilions, housed within the permanent, paying sections of the exhibition at the Giardini and Arsenale. This creates an interesting tension with an increasing number of collateral events that are not officially national participations, but clearly imagine themselves as such. For instance, in 2009 among the collateral participations several used the term 'pavilion' or otherwise hinted at a national status: Foreign Affairs Artists from Taiwan, Wales at Venice, Scotland, Palestine c/oVenice, Urgency Pavilion Murcia, Venezia-Catalunya, Northern Ireland. The latter in the catalogue was listed as collateral event under the artist's name, *Remote Viewing by Susan McWilliam*. However its actual presentation on site was rather assimilated with a national participation, an effect augmented by the

fact that (the Republic of) Ireland was hosted in another wing of the same historic building. Taiwan is an even more complex case: the Asian island arrived at the Biennale in 1995 with a national pavilion in a prime spot on the Canal Grande. In 1999 however the Chinese government formally protested with Biennale organisers against a national participation of 'Taiwan, Republic of China'. Subsequent events apparently speak for themselves: by 2005 China had secured a massive hall in the Arsenale for its first official pavilion, and Taiwan had accepted a status as collateral event. And yet the content of Taiwan's exhibitions tells a more complicated story than its losing confrontation with China suggests. In 2013 Taiwan's participation was provocatively titled *This is Not a Taiwan Pavilion:* 'Taiwan now represents the art that reveals the nature of peripheralized existence in the era of globalization in a way that critiques national and cultural hegemonies and the boundaries they created' (Wei 2013, 481). Beyond both pessimistic and optimistic views, however, once again stands the observation that there are contradictory forces at play, that meaning derives less from a general grid and more from highly idiosyncratic positionings, whilst still not coinciding with those positionings. Irony, for instance, is not equally available or welcome. Taiwan's 2013 provocation was fiercely criticized at home for 'being hijacked by an imagined international trend' (Ibid.: 470). This also shows that debate over the critical leverage of art as simply contrasted to biennials' neoliberal conditions is too abstract and overgeneralized. It does not allow to grasp how artists and curators can often find themselves caught in the disjuncture between the rule of the game in the artistic 'global' avant-garde and national contexts that may not be attuned to it. This creates impasses that become particularly evident at the Biennale in the national participation of emerging economy countries, even heavy weights such as China itself. China's participation at the Biennale has generally received lukewarm international reviews at best, has been marred by protests of 'free Ai Weiwei' in 2011 whilst the Biennale website was blocked by cyber police at home, and faces a situation 'where the national brand appears to be at odds with the cultural brand of an art world narrative. Chinese artists find themselves stuck between the two discourses.' (Rodner and Preece 2015: 8).

National pavilions are now undermining the very representational system on which, in theory, they depend. Like biennials themselves, they grow exponentially precisely as their supposed function withers away. Their topography and design does not try to mirror an orderly and certain world, representable on the basis of a single principle (the nation), but is a multidimensional, constantly becoming affair. Together, they create more a topology, than a topography (Lury et al., 2012): their referents are not fixed points on a stable map that merely traces a space, but nodes of correspondences between the distant and incremental reality of biennials across time

and space (previous Biennales, other biennials). This can no longer be interpreted and assessed in terms of representations, but as 'an independent experiential world' (Barth, 2008: 25, referring to Expos). Themes and trends across B/biennales seem to engage in a dialogue (for experts) whilst at the same time, especially for non-experts, they become more and more elusive and fit-for-all. Often dismissed by critics themselves as either banal or abstruse, 'overgeneralized, innocuous, or cryptic' (Smith, 2007: 261), biennial themes more than as an effective mechanism of selection and organisation, are used as framing devices, as a sort of verbal logo of the exhibition that works, albeit with a much more substantial degree of variation and interpretation, as both organizing principle and as artistic concept.

In the Biennale, as themes are juxtaposed to a national or more broadly territorial criterion, this ultimately invalidates any pretence to an encompassing, excluding, 'encyclopaedic' order. So much so that in an interesting twist, the nation too now works as a theme whose meaningfulness resides in something other than representation, a contested idea for artistic explorations. In 2011 the title of the 54th Biennale was Illumi*nations*, playing with the idea of the 'nation', and its transformation rather than merely dismissing it. In 2003, for the 50th Biennale, the Spanish Pavilion was turned into an actual frontier, as the artist Santiago Sierra only allowed those displaying a Spanish passport to enter, from a back door, into an empty exhibition space. In 2009 debate was sparked by Germany being represented by an English artist; in 2013 France and Germany swapped pavilions. These are just a few examples of how being reflexive, *thematising* national pavilions is now the order of the day. The fact that especially newcomers, eager to fit in, are among the most aggressively reflexive – such as the UAE Pavilion at its first participation in 2009, which boldly recalled the world fairs lineage and also opted for an almost empty space – demonstrates that this is now the 'mainstream'. That year, the curator's theme was *Making Worlds*: again, one of those extremely capacious and perhaps obvious ones (as some of my interviewees remarked, especially among art professionals) but also hinting that what is at stake in these exhibitions is not so much, or any more, the representation of a world outside, but the creation of a new world and the search for new meaning able to ground art to a context. In the words of its Swedish curator: 'artists invited… do not represent their nations or linguistic communities but are responsible solely for their own visions. […] It is an exhibition driven by the aspirations to examine worlds around us as well as worlds ahead' (Birnbaum, 2009: n.n.). This changes the criteria of what is a successful Biennale: not its capacity to represent and measure art's advancement, but to create new, and indeed entertaining worlds. As artistic concepts, themes function as evocative platforms for (creative) juxtapositions. They do not produce systematic displays, but assemblages,

constituting nodes in this new topological constitution of biennials. As a format, themes favour the practical juxtaposition of different and divergent narratives and agendas that increasingly inform these festival-exhibitions, without proposing an ulterior synthesis. This may hardly work as that critical and revolutionary conscience that some artists and some optimistic catalogue rhetoric like to claim for art, but at the same time, to dismiss a priori any significance for public culture is equally simplistic and misleading, overlooking current and emerging ways of making sense of the (art) world.

Concluding remarks

As he was speaking to journalists and art professionals from around the world at the 2015 Biennale preview, curator Okwui Enwezor said that he hoped people would find their own way in the intentional 'cacophony of the exhibition', finding order and meaning from their point of view as observers: clearly making sense of art is no longer a matter of a representative order. The fate of national pavilions at the Biennale shows this well: the persistence and transformation of national pavilions as a principle of order and certainty in the Biennale is a good barometer of how 'global culture' and 'national culture' coexist and problematize each other, rather than the global substituting (and correcting, or worsening, mis- and under-representations within) the national. What is lost is the illusion of encyclopaedic order and exhaustive representation. What takes its place? Already in the 1960s, as we have seen, Alloway spoke of cosmopolitanism, seeing in it both an intimation of global culture but also what for him was the danger of loss of serious criteria and excessive responsibility for the audience's interpretation, which would lead to a form of mere global *consumer* culture. The sheer scale of the events – that as the curator Carlos Basualdo states ([2003] 2010, 126) 'are simply not designed to be seen in their totality' – and the multiplicity of curatorial and interpretive views makes it more and more difficult to individuate a clear meaning and narrative to the Biennale, and even more so in the world of biennials. Within a majority that critique 'festivalization', some see in the loss of the function of exhaustive review the possibility of becoming a "'symposium' – as a platform generating a critical dialogue about the contradictions of contemporary globalization', and 'initiating new ideas and developing critical social relations, a space of discursive sociability' (Papastergiadis and Martin, 2011: 51, 52). So what remains is still a social space, one where, as we have seen, the ideal of universal representation probably never went really far, as meaning emerged much more from the experiential world of the exhibition than from the grid of the exhibition park, conceptual and physical, that nobody can really see once in.

As seen in the temporal and spatial development of the Biennale, as well as of biennalization, a focus on the physical and social context is a good starting point to keep the analysis grounded and problematizes encompassing unilinear narratives of decadence that simply see contemporary biennials and global culture in terms of what they lack compared to the good old times. This has sometimes been described as the falling from grace of a 'culture-debating' to a passive 'culture-consuming' public sphere (Chaney, 2002). But rather than the rational-critical debate usually associated with the term in its main, political instantiation, biennials participate in a specifically *cultural* public sphere that enables 'the articulation of politics, public and personal, as a contested terrain through affective – aesthetic and emotional – modes of communication' (McGuigan, 2005). That is, the meaning of the Biennale, and of biennials more generally, should not be read as exclusively cognitive, but as a medium for both understanding and affect, activating aesthetic dispositions. How this happens is a precious indicator of the means of symbolic production available today, be they dominant, oppositional or negotiated.

As this article shows, it is by attending to the specific modalities of symbolic production in a way that avoids flattening the analysis to the ideology-critique of commodification – as a focus on 'impact' and even debate on art *vs* market as hostile worlds ultimately lead to – that we can begin to address biennials' cultural significance in its specificity and complexity. This also points towards an aesthetic approach as a 'examination of how actors respond to the qualitative properties of experience' (Martin and Merriman 2016: 132) and do so along patterns of intersubjective concordance not based on reasoned debate but on experience itself. It is because they create contexts where actors respond to the qualitative properties of experiences that perhaps biennials do, as they claim, make worlds: worlds are only made if they are experienced or inhabited, not just 'understood'. Whilst the specificity of the aesthetic is often a stumbling block of cultural analysis and the object of recurrent attempts to overcome it by exclusion or, more recently, by integration (Olcese and Savage 2016), this tends to remain within a discussion of aesthetic *value*, inclined to be re-subsumed within an instrumentalist vision of the social. In the sense advanced here, symbolic production avoids reducing the discussion to a struggle between different forms of value as capital, showing that dichotomies reducing the 'field' to a linear exchange between production and reception – both at the micro level of single art works and at the macro level of cultural hegemonies – do not fully grasp what is at stake in the space, or world, of biennials.

The biennial format today favours a practical juxtaposition of different and divergent narratives and agendas, and this tends to favour attitudes that are at ease with cacophony rather than representation, opening up several ways of questioning

established exhibitionary orders and hinting at new ones, grounded in but not determined by the continuing relevance of power struggles. Taking into consideration the cultural public sphere and its specificity, biennials are not described by those dichotomies that haunt the debate, or perhaps they can be places and times where their diverging but coexisting rationales find an unstable yet dynamic equilibrium. Unstable and temporary, this solution is not however a missed 'real' solution, permanent and cognitively consistent, but one taking place at a different level and with different modes than rational argumentation and universal representation.

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[1] In this article I use the short form Biennale, with a capital B, to indicate the Venice Biennale. To refer to the category, the terms biennale and biennial are used interchangeably in the literature, but for the sake of clarity I only use biennial, whilst deriving *biennalization* from the Italian root, given the Venetian lineage. This lineage is contested (see in particular Niemojewski 2010); however even alternative histories tend to reinforce a discursive context in which Venice continues to wield the strongest gravitational pull and remains the origin myth, to emulate or criticise.

[2] Whilst there are a number of studies on single exhibitions, biennials have not attracted much specific attention as cultural institutions and festive events, especially in sociology and cultural studies. Existing literature focuses mainly on biennials as exhibitions within specific artistic genres and disciplines (art history, aesthetics and art criticism in particular) producing overviews and readers that have become key reference texts (Vanderlinden and Filipovic 2005; Filipovic et al., 2010; Vogel, 2010; Altshuler, 2013). The greatest proportion of material emerges from within the increasingly reflexive field of biennials (Bauer and Hanru 2013). See also the bibliographic review in Grandal Montero (2012).

[3] Whilst a substantive analysis of the aesthetic is beyond the scope of this article, part of its theoretical gain is in opening a door to the specificity of the aesthetic object and experience by avoiding both grounding them exclusively on the opposition with the economic and abstraction from wider and shifting socio-cultural conditions of possibility. For more on the theoretical openings required for a non-essentialist and non-reductive account of the aesthetic in theorizing cultural production, as well as for an invitation to reconnect this with much wider claims in social theory regarding an 'aesthetics of existence' and emergent 'aesthetic reflexivity', from Foucault to Lash, see again Born (2010). For useful remarks, within a sociology of culture, on a specifically aesthetic meaning as emerging from an experience predicated on the resonances of shared conventions, see again Swidler (2010).

[4] This involved fieldwork research, mainly undertaken between 2008 and 2010, gathering observations, a broad range of primary and secondary documents, informal conversations and formal interviews with curators, artists and audience. The latter have as well populated the selection of 21 expert interviews, which included also directors and permanent senior staff, policy makers, local experts (extracts from interviews are followed by initials of the interviewees). Details and full project reports are available at www.euro-festival.org (Project "Arts Festivals and the European Public Culture", 2008-2010, FP7 Grant No. 215747).

[5] *Sunday Times* 4/1/2009, p. 13.

[6] The Music branch was established in 1930 (58th festival in 2014), Cinema in 1932 (72st *Mostra* in 2015), Theatre in 1934 (43th festival in 2015), Architecture in 1980 (14th Biennale in 2014), Dance in 1999 (9th festival in 2014). The Historical Archives were established in 1928. Financially, until the 1990s, the Biennale relied on public funding for 90% of its budget. Since becoming a foundation its target, only partially achieved, is the economic model 'of the US cultural sector, in which 30% of the budget comes from private sponsorships and payments, 30% from its own earnings, 30% from public contributions and 10% from receipts from the increase in assets'. Cf. www.labiennale.org/it/biennale/fondazione. On the institutional history of the Biennale see Vecco (2002).

[7] Following colloquia organized by networks of established and emerging biennials (Bauer and Hanru 2013), the Biennial Foundation was created in 2009 (www.biennialfoundation.org) and the International Biennial Association in 2014 (www.biennialassociation.org).

[8] *Corriere della Sera*, 30/9/2009, p. 39.