

## THE INTERNATIONAL BIENNALE, AS A PLACE OF ENCOUNTER

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Just before coming away, I saw a message from the newly appointed Director of the Institute of International Visual Arts (inIVA), in London – himself of Ghanaian extraction, I believe – which seemed to say something important about the new situation of global interdependence with which we all have to grapple:

*“Internationally, there is a burgeoning of biennales (Venice, Istanbul, São Paulo and Havana, to name but a few), and we’re beginning to see our UK national museums opening up their boundaries: the British Museum’s Africa strategy to create curatorial exchanges with African museums, and the Tate in exploring relationships with Chinese artists and galleries. Western Modernism and Post-Modernism are gradually being effaced by an interest in globalised or truly internationalist agendas.*

*Running alongside a greater interest in and profiling of international artists, there has at last been a recognition that the demographics of the UK, and most particularly London, have shifted. We are now living in the knowledge that London, by the year 2010, will have a population where 40 % will be BME (British Minority Ethnic). The [arts] sector is beginning to accept that it will be hugely important to make the arts relevant to this changing demographic.”<sup>1</sup>*

The point that is being made here, I think, is that the unitary structures of western societies have broken down under the impact of migration, and inherited notions of national identity have collapsed. Globalisation is a two-way, or rather, a rhizomatic process: 10,000 artists living within a square mile of Hackney, in central London, are just as likely to feel they belong to the periphery of the “artworld”, to which they aspire as the visitors to the Havana Biennial are likely to feel at the centre of it, for the duration of a few weeks, and biennales and large-scale events are an effective means of bringing together the extremes of centre and periphery, at one remove from the distorting factors of markets and money. They disrupt the established trade routes, and complicate and enrich the patterns of cultural exchange.

Globalisation is no new phenomenon, of course, and national politics, patriotism, mercantilism and cultural tourism have all played their part in big international art manifestations, since at least as far back as the inception of the Venice Biennale, in 1895. What is new, perhaps, is the sense of a possibility that everything can happen anywhere, for much of the time. A new dynamics has come into play, and there is a new belief in multiple identities and communication possibilities.

The immediate antecedents for the Venice Biennale are, of course, to be sought in the World Fairs, such as the Great Exhibition in London, in 1851, which embodied the ideals of democracy and material progress and have continued to be held, with seemingly undiminished popularity, down to the present time. A still older tradition links Venice to the mediaeval fairs, feast days, carnivals and popular events and the “monstrances” containing relics of saints or fragments of the “True Cross”, which flaunted the “scandal” of their display. <sup>2</sup> Hence, the classic form of Biennale may be seen to embody elements of two conflicting traditions of enlightenment and enchantment. On top of this came elements of political propaganda and commercial gain, so the pattern was established at the very beginning, whereby biennales were regarded as emblems of modernity, which strove to combine commerce with improvement, spectacle with surprise.

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<sup>1</sup> Augustus (“Gus”) Casely-Hayford, n.d. (April 2006).

<sup>2</sup> See Stephen Bann, “Exhibitions reflecting the Art and Spirit of the Age”, in *Stopping the Process. Contemporary Views on Art and Exhibitions*, Helsinki, the Nordic Institute for Contemporary Art, 1998, pp. 76-91

The immediate pretext for the Venice Biennale had been provided by the city's wish to participate in the celebrations of the silver anniversary of the marriage of King Umberto I and Queen Margherita of Savoy. But there was an element of regional rivalry, too, in that other cities, such as Florence, Naples, Rome and Turin, had already staged exhibitions of their own, in the wake of national unification, with the aim of consecrating the achievements of a new "national school" of contemporary Italian art.<sup>3</sup> In other words, the initiative was political and patriotic, before else, and then, no doubt mercantile and cultural-touristic.

The nationalist and cultural imperialist elements increased rapidly in the early years, especially with the construction of national pavilions in Venice, from 1907 onwards, and audiences beginning with 225,000 in the first year, and peaking with the almost unbeaten total of 456,000 visitors in 1909, for 1750 works, of which 1,200, or roughly two thirds, were sold. So sales, at the time, were also an important means of financing the Biennale, and the sales office was only disbanded after 1968. On average, 15 countries participated in the first eleven Biennales<sup>4</sup>, compared to 30 countries with pavilions of their own and 83 countries exhibiting non-territorially at the latest (2003) Biennale.

The São Paulo Bienal, founded in 1951 by an Italian immigrant (as was the Sydney Biennale, founded in 1973) was closely modelled on Venice and has always aimed to provide an alternative attraction to new audiences in the Americas, and beyond. Like Venice, it was founded at a time of nationalist fervour, and its (largely unfulfilled) ambition, like that of Documenta, was to expand beyond the visual arts, into something resembling an all-round cultural festival. It was also aimed at – and achieved – very large audiences. The São Paulo Bienal signalled the regional capital's act of defiance to the then Brazilian capital, Rio de Janeiro and, beyond that, amounted to an assertion of Brazil's proud independence from US political and economic domination. Like almost all other Biennales ever since, it was an aggressive statement of a commitment to modernity, symbolised by its adoption, in 1957, of the pavilion built for international trade fairs by Oscar Niemeyer, the celebrated architect of the country's new capital, Brasilia. This brought together all nations under one roof, though in practice, until 1980, half the entire space was given over to Brazilian artists.

During the decade of military dictatorship in the 1980s, the São Paulo Bienal went into decline, but the change of government in 1979 and reform of the Bienal itself marked the beginning of a revival in its fortunes, heralded by the introduction of a complicated system of thematic "nuclei", including works of historical significance, which by-passed the stale competition between national sections and effectively replaced the Venice model with a partially modified version of the system employed at Documenta, to which I shall come shortly. The range of work exhibited in São Paulo, in the 1980s, increased hugely (there was even a section on "Art and Videotext" in 1981), as did the approach to documentation and scholarly research. Necessity, as well as an aversion to government intervention, has meant that, through much of its subsequent existence, the Bienal has had to rely on the vagaries of sponsorship and private funding.

Documenta, which, with some 800,000 visitors, is historically the best visited international art event, on a regular basis (though we have to note an astonishing 1.3 million visitors to the first Gwangju Biennale, in 1996) has an altogether different historical background, which is reflected in its organisation and development. The fact is often overlooked that *Documenta 1* was initially set up, as a challenge to the increasing popularity of the quadrennial "Great Dresden Exhibition", one hundred, or so, kilometres away, on the other side of the inter-German border. The figures of 130,000 visitors to *Documenta 1*, in 1955, compared to the estimated 200,000 visitors to the Dresden event two years before<sup>5</sup> shows that the outcome of the ideological struggle

<sup>3</sup> Shearer West, "National Desires and Regional Realities in the Venice Biennale, 1895-1914", in *Art History*, Vol. 18, No. 3, September 1995, pp. 404-434.

<sup>4</sup> Lawrence Alloway, *The Venice Biennale 1895-1968: From Salon to Goldfish Bowl*. London, Faber and Faber, 1968, p. 37.

<sup>5</sup> See Bernd Linder, "Kunstrezeption in der DDR", in *Kunstdokumentation 1945-1990, Aufsätze, Berichte, Materialien*, ed. Günter Feist and others, Berlin, 1996, pp. 62-93 and *Documenta. Idee und Institution. Tendenzen. Konzepte. Materialien*, ed. Manfred Schneckenburger, Munich, Bruckmann, 1983, p. 46

between the two halves of Germany was far from certain, and the main players – the US and the USSR – were, of course, off-stage, in the wings! Set in the ruinous aftermath of the Second World War, Documenta had deep roots in history and politics, and from Harald Szeemann's celebrated fifth edition, in 1972, devoted to the "Questioning of Reality" ["Befragung der Realität"] onwards, it has usually also directly engaged with the social questions of the day. Each edition of Documenta has been developed by a single curator or a team of curators who enjoyed the maximum protection from political, bureaucratic or financial interference of any kind. In the words of its founding director, Arnold Bode: "*The significance of Documenta lies in the fact that it does not exist, as an established institution! Every four years it crops up again in the programme, and is there! The idea of documenta has to be reformulated each time afresh, both in its programme and in its form.*"<sup>6</sup> – a remark which proved inspirational to the founders of Manifesta, in the 1990s, and which was echoed, perhaps, by Roger Buergel, Director of Documenta 12, in a recent interview: "*The nice thing with Documenta is that I can do practically anything: I can sit on the beach and do some watercolours and exhibit them*".<sup>7</sup> Generous public support was given to the private initiative of a few individuals, "... in the democratic awareness that institutions and public administration alone cannot substitute for the exercise of a free spirit in a free society".<sup>8</sup> The flexibility of the spaces used by Documenta – increasingly, including outdoor spaces and buildings in other parts of the city – means that they are transformed each time to express different needs, and national groupings are rejected, in favour of thematic shows favouring the demonstration of affinities between individual personalities.

One of the key roles biennales have been able to play is in opening up contemporary art to a new, and wider, public, as well as, of course, introducing unfamiliar artists and artistic practices into broad circulation. They have been an agent for modernity, though not, necessarily, an instrument of homogenisation. Whereas Venice had originally aimed simply to bring the latest news from the art metropolises of the time – Paris, Munich and Vienna – a much more recent generation of recurrent exhibitions has set itself up in opposition to domination by the "Centre" or to a purely Eurocentric vision of art. A pioneer, in its intentions, at least, was the Indian Triennale, though it was organised along the, by now, rather conventional lines of Venice or São Paulo. For the inaugural edition, in 1968, the British critic and writer, John Berger, posted the following message in the catalogue:

*"I send my greetings to the first Triennale of Contemporary World Art to be held in India. It would suggest the possibility of escaping from or even overthrowing the hegemony of Europe and North America in these matters. This hegemony is disastrous because, whatever the personal feelings or ideas of individual artists or teachers may be, it is based on the concept of a visual work of art as property. The historical usefulness of such a concern has long past: it stands as a barrier to further development".*<sup>9</sup>

Berger's hopes for the Indian Triennale were, perhaps, first effectively translated into reality by the Havana Biennale, which marked a new departure, in that it was created, in the words of its founding Director, "*as an answer to the need for a place where a dialogue among Third World artists could be held*".<sup>10</sup> It began, in 1984, with Latin America and the Caribbean, but soon expanded to embrace other poor countries and marginalised artists in the rich, 'developed' world, and specifically addressed the issues of post-colonialism (migration, marginalisation, appropriation, etc.). In many respects (abolition of prizes, emphasis on workshops and collective activity), it anticipated the principal characteristics of Manifesta, in the 1990s.

Anyone looking at the sudden burgeoning of biennales in number, scope and geographical diversity in the 1980s, and especially the 1990s onwards, when they have become the characteristic platform for a new generation of artists, is bound to conclude that this was a

<sup>6</sup> Trans. from Arnold Bode, *Documentadocumenta (documenta-4-Band 1)*, ex. cat., Kassel 1968, quoted in Manfred Schneckenburger, op. cit., p. 101.

<sup>7</sup> *NU-E magazine*, update of 6.9.04.

<sup>8</sup> Trans. from Werner Haftmann, "Einführung", *Documenta-3-Katalog: Malerei, Skulptur*, Kassel, quoted in Manfred Schneckenburger, op. cit., p. 74

<sup>9</sup> John Berger, "Foreword", ex. cat., *First Indian Triennale*, New Delhi, 1968, p.1

<sup>10</sup> Lillian Llanes, "Die Biennale von Havanna / The Havana Biennial", in *Das Lied von der Erde / The Song of the Earth*, ex. cat., Kassel, Museum Fridericianum, 2000, p.12

reaction, both to the atrophy of the traditional museums system and to the over-dominance of the Western-orientated art market. (There were also powerful cultural, political and technological forces at work). The 1970s represented a period of uncertainty for established institutions, including biennales such as Venice and São Paulo, both of which were subjected to intensive outside political and economic pressure and intense pressures from the artworld itself. Something similar may be said of the museums, whose espousal of a modernist agenda (the “White Cube syndrome”, if you like) had increasingly isolated them from a wider social and cultural context.

Meanwhile, new movements, such as Fluxus, and developments such as land art, performance art, mail art and multiples, discovered ways of connecting with a wider public outside the museums and galleries system, and tendencies such as Minimalism, conceptual art and Arte Povera offered a conscious critique of the Museum itself, as an instrument of validation.

The newly revitalised biennales were characteristic of a general movement to bring art into closer contact with everyday life or “substitute the human presence”, as Michelangelo Pistoletto would have it.<sup>11</sup> Art history became supplemented (or replaced) by the new “cultural studies” and pioneering institutions, such as the German Kunsthallen, made a determined effort to combine an interdisciplinary approach with an appeal to a broader, and more youthful, public than the educated middle classes [“Bildungsbürgertum”]. To the extent that they were not still, in part, dominated by the system of national representation, periodic exhibitions such as Venice and São Paulo, also became more open to experiment and change than the majority of fixed institutions that were tied to collections and a year-round programme of activities. They were also, theoretically at least, in a position to resist blatant market pressures, though it became increasingly evident that economic factors played a decisive role, in determining what was, or was not, included in official selections, such as the innovative *Aperto* (“Open”), for young artists, established at the 1980 Venice Biennale by Achille Bonito Oliva and Harald Szeemann (the vaunted “openness”, seeming only to extend to artists with representation in a commercial gallery).

What really caused an earthquake was the fall of the Berlin Wall, in November 1989 and the related political changes, on a global scale, together with a host of new commercial and technological developments:

1. The end of the Cold War brought an end to the major ideological confrontations of the twentieth century and, arguably, to ideology itself (this was the so-called “end of history”, in the Hegelian sense).

2. The introduction of the personal computer, the invention of the internet and the deregulation of airspace enormously increased the mobility and exchange of people and ideas, as well as contributing to the destabilisation of traditional structures, such as the nation state and its inherited institutions.

3. We moved out of the world of “post-“ – that of “post-colonialism”, “post-modernism”, and so on – into a world of the continuous present and of the unbroken surface, in which time and space would appear to have been flattened and elided, in which the Grand Narratives (Lyotard) have been abolished, and the artistic canons rejected, or revised.

By the early 1990s, there was a widespread critique not only of the production and distribution systems of contemporary art but of all forms of institution, and, in other words, of the existing structures for the validation of works of the creative imagination. None of this was entirely new, and the artists of the 1960s already dreamt of the “dematerialisation” of art and a break with the capitalist market.

Indeed, the new artistic tendencies and movements to emerge in the 1990s have mostly been about people and communication with a public. Visual artists are among the first to register the groundswell of social and political change, since they situate their work (whether consciously or not) in an oblique, critical, but ultimately dependent relationship to society. Post Duchamp, post Beuys, we have learnt that the artist is, first and foremost, a more or less imperfect citizen of the world and aspires to a condition of creative uncertainty, with which we can all, in varying

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<sup>11</sup> “Costituire la presenza umana”. Michelangelo Pistoletto, in relation to his “Ogetti in meno” (1966).

degrees, identify. The restructuring of the human psyche and of human societies is a dynamic process, and we are having to learn to do without the myths of Enlightenment, of progress and perfectibility, and of Utopia and redemption. The barriers have fallen between the artist, the critic, the curator and the audience, and we are having to adjust to the idea of multiple individual identities and multiple social, political, ethnic or religious affiliations. One of the principal problems we face is that of matching the shape and functions of our institutions to this changing reality.

The changes to which I refer have been rationalised, post hoc, by the French theoretician, Nicolas Bourriaud, in his publications, "Relational Aesthetics" and "Post Production"<sup>12</sup>. The new aesthetics takes into account the massive intrusion of the media, as a new form of objective reality, into our everyday lives, it dissolves the conventional hierarchies of taste and meaning, and it promotes new forms of artistic activity (the interactive, the interrelational and the user-friendly), in order to generate meaning. The source of creativity is now to be sought, not in individual inspiration, so much as in the "post productive" reshaping, re-presentation and recontextualisation of given material, as a response to the multiple viewpoints of the individual viewer-participant. In the words of the Scottish artist, Martin Creed: "the whole world + the work = the whole world".<sup>13</sup>

Globalisation and the new aesthetics contributed to the exponential growth in number of international biennales. Some people talk of as many as two hundred of them, but the number of recurring events of real significance is more likely to be in the region of from twenty to thirty. Charlotte Bydler, in her valuable study, "Global Art World"<sup>14</sup> – possibly, the only full-length publication devoted to this phenomenon – samples some 53 still extant biennials in 33 different countries, only 17 of which go back to before 1990, though the overall figure of 53 is itself very far from presenting the complete picture. A sign of the art world's increasing weariness with the boom in biennales, which increasingly threatens to dictate the patterns of their lives, is reflected in the programme which Maurizio Cattelan and Jens Hoffmann (an artist and a curator) set for the Vth International Caribbean Biennale (1999), for which they invited ten artists to spend a holiday on the island of St. Kitt's, with no obligation other than to reflect on a number of catchwords, such as Globalisation, Transnationalism, Migration and Nomadism.<sup>15</sup> Yet neither institutionalised irony nor dramatic blips in the advance of globalisation, such as the events of 11 September 2001, seem likely to deter the spread of biennales, which have come to represent the main path to international recognition for artists from peripheral areas and the principal means by which the so-called centre recharges its system. By now, biennales have become a more or less self-sustaining artistic eco-system, at one remove from the major established institutions and the geographically restricted commercial markets. For this reason, I believe we have to regard the biennale network, not as a temporary phenomenon, linked to a specific form of artistic exchange, but as an enduring expression of global readjustment, which both complements and rivals the established networks for the validation and distribution of contemporary art.

Whether we are justified in lumping together all contemporary biennales in a single category is open to question, but enough of them conform to certain basic requirements of periodicity (here I would also include triennials, quadrennials and the, currently, quinquennial Documenta, in Kassel); they are inter- or transnational (last year's second Tirana Biennial boasted over one hundred artists or art professionals from 42 countries, many of them with more than one passport or place of residence, from Afghanistan and Argentina to Ukraine, USA and Zimbabwe); they privilege work by young artists (itself a limitation, on occasion); they are often spectacular, entertaining and media-orientated; and they bear a more or less deliberate relationship to the political, social and urban context in which they are held. Above all, given that they tend to be held in peripheral centres without an art market or sustained institutional activity throughout the year, they tend to be allied to tourist initiatives and serve as instruments for leveraging funds

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<sup>12</sup> Nicolas Bourriaud, *Esthétique relationnelle*, 1998, trans. as *Relational Aesthetics*, Dijon, les Presses du réel, 2002 and *Postproduction. Culture as Screenplay: How Art Programs the World*, New York, 2002.

<sup>13</sup> The text of a temporary installation in blue neon, "Work No. 143", that Creed affixed to the façade of Tate Britain, in 2000.

<sup>14</sup> Charlotte Bydler, *The Global Art World Inc. On the Globalization of Contemporary Art*, Uppsala, 2004.

<sup>15</sup> Bydler, op. cit., pp. 291-2

out of government, for the improvement of the local cultural infrastructure. Almost always there is a more or less explicit tension between the organisers' aims, which are as likely as not geared to international art world expectations, and those of the public funders or sponsors, who may expect an event to contribute to a growth in tourism and view it as an extension of their existing social and cultural provision.

According to Bydler, the basic structural differences between the different types of biennale may be boiled down to the alternative models represented by Venice, São Paulo and Sydney, with their capitalist and philanthropic origins and emphasis on national representation and competition; Documenta, Havana and (though she does not say this) Dakar, with their political complexion and emphasis on the thematic, rather than geographical or chronological distribution of ideas; and the "flexible production and event-orientated variety of the 1990s and 2000s, such as Istanbul and Manifesta".<sup>16</sup>

It is to this third type of event and, specifically, the nomadic European Biennial, Manifesta (first held in Rotterdam, in 1996) that I now wish to devote a moment or two of attention, because the thinking that went into its creation reflected the shift in perceptions about the role of contemporary art and its relations to an audience – a shift that has also led to an increasing convergence in the strategies of the three different types of biennale outlined above.

The initiative for creating Manifesta was Dutch, and grew out of an impulse to fill the gap which had been left by the demise of the Paris Biennale des Jeunes (very important in the 1960s and '70s) and to square up to the political and economic reconfiguration of Europe in the 1990s, where the economic Europe with borders served to conceal the existence of a larger, cultural Europe without borders. From Documenta, Manifesta may be said to have taken the ideas of curatorial independence, combined with administrative continuity; and from Venice, the ideas of inclusiveness and, in a negative perspective, an antipathy to nationalism, competition and prizes. Manifesta aimed to make a fresh start with a new geography, a new generation of artists, and new approaches to curating art and communicating with the public. Administratively, it aimed to be lightweight and flexible, in response to the changing requirements of young artists and different social and political contexts. Its emphasis on providing a platform for minority cultures was coupled with its insistence on a high degree of responsiveness to local contingencies. This sometimes laid it open to the charge of political correctness, but it succeeded in establishing a platform for debate and an audience for artists and theorists in the cultural and geographical margins. Great emphasis was placed on transnational collaboration. This was reflected both in the composition of the Board and the multinational and, at times, interdisciplinary teams of curators working on individual projects. Artists, too, worked together on all manner of split-site, interactive and ephemeral events, placing the emphasis on process, rather than product, and idea, rather than artefact.

Manifesta was intended as a site for primary research. A substantial proportion of artists have made their first international appearance there, and many of these have found their way into larger-scale events, such as the Venice Biennale, and into the international contemporary art circuit.

Perhaps the most innovative – and certainly the most risky – aspect of Manifesta's existence was its nomadism, which is partly dictated by its ambitions to move between locations which might not necessarily be able to sustain a high level of activity for more than a limited period, and partly by the desire not to become too embroiled with any specific social or political situation for more than a limited period. This has enabled Manifesta to adapt to the different complexion of the regions in which it has set up camp and challenged successive teams of curators to match up to the challenge of their hosts' varying socio-political agendas – posing questions about historical identity, for instance, in Ljubljana (2000), on the eve of Slovenia's accession to the European Union or developing an effective cultural policy in tandem with tourism in San Sebastian (2004), as a tool for economic development, and a counter to terrorism.

Recent support from the European Commission has enabled Manifesta, crucially, to expand its outreach on the internet, digitalise its archive and make this accessible to the public, as a tool

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<sup>16</sup> Bydler, *op. cit.*, p.151

for research, organise a series of high-level debates, in conjunction with other partners, including AICA and, launch the quarterly *Manifesta Journal*, edited in Moscow and Ljubljana, which is the first of its kind to be devoted exclusively to problems of contemporary curating, and whose third issue is devoted to the theme of biennales!<sup>17</sup>

It is worth noting, in parenthesis, that both the Venice Biennale and Documenta have recently revised their objectives. The appointment of a black Nigerian-American Artistic Director of Documenta 11, in 2002, was a deliberate move by the selectors to aim for an “outsider view of Europe”<sup>18</sup>. And the liberalisation of the Venice Biennale, beginning with the revision of its statutes in 1998, has encouraged its organisers to conceive of the event as less of a spectacular set-piece than as an “atelier for training artists and producing new work” and an agent for “promoting the restoration and renewal of historic buildings within the city”.<sup>19</sup> In other words, Venice, in common with other established events, is now seeking to reinsert itself into the time - and process - based cultures of the 1990s and 2000s, and to redefine itself as “a place in which the public onlooker is the protagonist” and ‘a place of encounter between artist, work and spectator’.<sup>20</sup>

If I were to attempt to draw some brief conclusions from this somewhat abbreviated “tour d’horizon”, I would start with the assertion that the overarching structures that Venice, São Paulo and Kassel once provided, alongside the monolithic framework of the market and museums, has been replaced with a more diversified environment, in which the sheer number of biennales has increased exponentially, many more museums now devote far more space to contemporary art than ever before and the appetite of the public for information has been fuelled by cheap travel and the internet. The large biennales, which tend towards the spectacularisation of art and have to compete with modern values of entertainment, have begun, in turn, to feed off the smaller ones, and it has become the role of the latter to act as primary motors for visual art research, and laboratories, in which different models of artistic production and communication are tested and developed. Within the wider scheme of things, I believe that biennales have an enduring function, as vectors for new ideas, as laboratories of globalisation and, through their specific rootedness, as generators of resistance to that selfsame process. The new-style biennales, starting, perhaps, with Havana and leading direct to many of those of the 1990s, are no longer merely to be regarded, like Venice, as instruments for the displacement of centralised market activity or parade grounds for national competition, but as platforms for the exchange of ideas and information, which are capable of creating, in the words of one commentator, a “mobile and unforeseeable relationship between mass mediated events and migratory audiences”, such as “defines the core of the link between globalisation and the modern”.<sup>21</sup> Instead of regarding biennials as a transitory fashion, or a distraction from business as usual (let’s not forget that Venice is nowadays followed up by Basel!), we should consider, with Okwui Enwezor, the Director of Documenta 11, that they offer “the possibility of a paradigm shift in which we as spectators are able to encounter many experimental cultures, without wholly possessing them”.<sup>22</sup> They offer a voice to the periphery, that has “produced a new kind of space, a discourse of open contestations that spring not merely from resistance, but are rather built on an ethics of dissent”, at once and the same time introducing new audiences to notions of modernity and acting as agents for enabling historical transformation.<sup>23</sup> If we were cynical, we might suggest that they offer a kind of antechamber to acceptance into the market place or museum (a quick route to “Salonfähigkeit”, to adopt a German expression), but this would be to ignore the genuinely radical intentions of

<sup>17</sup> MJ – Manifesta Journal, No. 2, “Biennials”. Winter 2003 / Spring 2004.

<sup>18</sup> René Block, as reported in Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, Yve-Alain Bois, Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, *Art Since 1900*, London, 2004, p. 934.

<sup>19</sup> Press release, Biennale di Venezia, 50<sup>th</sup> International Art Exhibition, 2003.

<sup>20</sup> Harald Szeemann, “The Timeless, Grand Narrative of Human Existence in its Time”, in ex. cat., *49<sup>th</sup> International Art Exhibition*, Biennale di Venezia, Venice, 2001, p. xviii.

<sup>21</sup> Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: The Cultural Dimension of Globalization*, Minneapolis, 1996, p. 4, quoted in Okwui Enwezor, “Mega-Exhibitions and the Antinomies of a Transnational Global Form”, in *MJ* No. 2 (see note 17, above), p. 26.

<sup>22</sup> Okwui Enwezor, as in note 35, above, p. 27.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25.

many curators and of the artists themselves, and the growth of a new kind of biennale culture which favours the large-scale (on occasion), the ephemeral, the site - or audience - specific, the non-marketable and the resistant or “contestataire”. The biennale format has shown that it is capable of deploying a support system for artists, a forum for debate, training opportunities for young people and new audiences who no longer depend on the traditional validation system of critic, gallerist or collector. After all, it has demonstrated the capacity, enormously to expand the language of art and its geographical and demographic parameters.

In the words of one commentator, Nikos Papastergiadis: “Part of the problem is that the symbolic and political institutions that have a formative role in our preconditions of history, and which forge both concrete and abstract relationships to place, have yet to construct frameworks for either evaluating the “new” cultural identities based on hybridity or imagining the tensions of globality”.<sup>24</sup> This, I believe, is where biennales come in, and where they play an essential role, in exploring new relationships between “art” and “world”.

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Note: This text is based on a longer paper delivered the author at the international seminar on “Art, Criticism and Globalization”, organised by the Brazilian Association of Art Critics (ABCA) in São Paulo, in September 2004 and is included here by the kind permission of ABCA. The original text will be published in Portuguese, in *Arte Crítica e Mundialização* the Collection “Art Criticism”, directed by Lisbeth Rebollo Gonçalves, eds. ABCA and Imprensa Oficial do Estado de São Paulo, São Paulo, 2006.

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<sup>24</sup> Nikos Papastergiadis, “Back to Basics: British Art and the Problems of a Global Frame”, in *Pictura Britannica*, ex. cat., ed. Bernice Murphy, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, 1997, p. 144