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## FOREWORD

This publication has its origins in the Bergen City Council's interest in establishing a biennial of contemporary art in Bergen, Norway. Well aware of both the rewards and the problematic realities of founding a new biennial, the City of Bergen agreed, at the encouragement of the Bergen Kunsthall, to begin the planning process with a careful reflection on the biennial phenomenon and its implications. It was thanks to this exceptional open-mindedness that the City of Bergen, rather than immediately succumbing to the seductive power this exhibition format can have, gave the Bergen Kunsthall the task of organizing the Bergen Biennial Conference of 2009. This international conference and think tank's study and discussion of the status of the biennial as an exhibition model offered an ideal context for debate about the plans for a Bergen Biennial.

To conceive this conference, which developed into one of the most extensive discussions about biennials to date, I solicited the collaboration of Elena Filipovic and Marieke van Hal, both scholars and professionals in the field of biennial research. Together, we wanted to create a platform where crucial aspects of the phenomenon of the perennial exhibition could be discussed. Thirty-three professionals from all over the world, as well as an audience that was both local and international, thus came together with a shared purpose: to take an uncompromising look at the potentials and problems of the production and presentation of contemporary art with the large-scale exhibition format. The incredible debate that ensued prompted intense and vivid exchanges among the leading historians, curators, critics, scholars, and artists involved in biennial-making today.

For this occasion we were also fortunate to have the possibility of exhibiting the Arquivo Histórico Wanda Svevo (Wanda Svevo Historical Archive) on international biennials that was conceived as part of the twenty-eighth São Paulo Biennial and constitutes the world's most comprehensive documentary resource on biennials. Making this archive available for consultation during the conference was an important part of our approach to this project, which saw research as a crucial starting point. We can say the same about the international "Call for Biennial Knowledge" issued prior to the conference, which provided us with valuable source material to draw upon in the process of conceiving both the conference and what later became this book, *The Biennial Reader*. Our research and the "Call for Biennial Knowledge" also confirmed what at first seemed quite unimaginable: that there were virtually no extensive publications devoted to the history and theorization of the perennial exhibition phenomenon.

The City of Bergen's plan included producing a publication, which was initially envisioned as a printed version of the conference proceedings. However, the research carried out in preparation for the conference revealed that there was a lamentable paucity of material on biennials, and this convinced us all of the need for a more profound publication about the biennial phenomenon, one that would serve not only the City of Bergen, but also the broader international art world. In the light of this, the City of Bergen showed incredible determination, flexibility, and courage in letting us develop our project one step further with the publication of *The Biennial Reader*. The book is an anthology that pays homage to some of the best essays written on the subject of biennials, ones that have shaped scholarship and curating and have opened up the possibility for continued debate today, but also incorporates

new contributions, some of which are derived from lectures given at the Bergen Biennial Conference. *The Biennial Reader* is also supplemented by a booklet presenting reviews of the various sessions of the conference.

Although it is still uncertain if Bergen will one day host a biennial of its own, the knowledge gleaned from the conference's three-day symposium and from this publication, which we hope will serve as an inspiration for further research, will surely stimulate future artistic and curatorial development in the city.

I would like to thank all of the authors who contributed to this publication and all of those who participated in the 2009 conference for their important contributions to this project. I would also like to express my thanks to the staff of the Bergen Kunsthall, which has demonstrated remarkable know-how and dedication during the organization of the Bergen Biennial Conference and the preparation of *The Biennial Reader*.

Last but not least, I would like to thank my fellow editors, Marieke van Hal and Elena Filipovic, for an enriching collaboration and the City of Bergen for making this publication possible.

**Solveig Øvstebø**

Director  
Bergen Kunsthall

# BIENNIALOLOGY

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Elena Filipovic, Marieke van Hal and Solveig Øvstebø

For some skeptics the word biennial has come to signify nothing more than an overblown symptom of spectacular event culture, the result of some of the most specious transformations of the world in the age of late capitalism—in short, a Western typology whose proliferation has infiltrated even the most far-reaching parts of the world, where such events are little more than entertaining or commercially driven showcases designed to feed an ever-expanding tourist industry (in other words, something not far removed from the art fair or Disneyland). Pernicious not only in its imported form, the biennial is taken to be equally dangerous to the development of serious art, which can hardly be made to thrive in what Peter Schjeldahl famously and damningly reduced to “festivalism.”<sup>1</sup> For others, the biennial is a critical site of experimentation in exhibition-making, offering artists, curators, and spectators a vital alternative to museums and other similar institutions whose institutional inertias do not allow them to respond with immediacy and flexibility to contemporary art’s developments. Some even see the biennial form as being full of redemptive and even utopian possibility, or as a testament to a paradigm shift: a platform—like perhaps no other art institution before it—for grappling with such issues as politics, race, ethics, identity, globalization, and postcolonialism in art-making and -showing today. And while being emphatically *also* an exhibition (at least it has been thus far), the biennial’s supporters often understand it as being “neither exclusively nor even primarily a space of spectacular display,” as curator and writer Ranjit Hoskote posits in his essay in this volume, but rather as “a discursive environment: a theater that allows for the staging of arguments, speculations, and investigations concerning the nature of our shared, diversely veined, and demanding contemporary condition.”<sup>2</sup> And between the contradictory positions of either malaise or rapture, cynicism or critical embrace lie questions about what a biennial *can* or *should be*.

What, however, *is* a biennial? Over the years, the term has been used to refer to a vast landscape of different exhibition projects, with no source agreeing on their total number (currently thought to be somewhere between one hundred and two hundred around the world). The first to carry the title was the Venice Biennial, begun in 1895, but it wasn’t until a half century later, when the São Paulo Biennial was founded in 1951, that the term “biennial” was used again to label such an art event.<sup>3</sup> The now-defunct Paris Biennial followed in 1959, with the Sydney Biennial formed more than a decade later in 1973.<sup>4</sup> Others were established in the decades that followed, but the “proliferation” we now attribute to the biennial was slow and, in many ways, mirrored the transformations of the art world at large (the rise of the art fair, the vast

increase in the number of art journals, the creation of curating courses, and more widespread general interest in contemporary art, etc.). The Havana Biennial and Istanbul Biennial, for instance, both particularly remarkable for the catalyzing effect they had in sparking debate about the so-called periphery, were founded in 1984 and 1987 respectively. And it would take until the nineteen-nineties, when an exponential expansion of the genre occurred with the launching of more than a dozen new biennials, for the term to become the household name with which we are now familiar.<sup>5</sup> Moscow, Liverpool, Taipei, Bucharest, Lyon, Johannesburg, Sharjah, Berlin: these are just some of the many cities that have appended “Biennial” to their names over the years to announce their own versions of a contemporary art event that generally recurs every two years (though not always, as financial, political, or other practical circumstances and local desires sometimes got in the way of this).<sup>6</sup> Other related events, such as Manifesta (European Biennial of Contemporary Art), the Mercosul Biennial, or the Biennial of the End of the World, have paired the term with more evocative descriptions of their regional or other focuses.<sup>7</sup> And for many, “biennial” refers less to a specific periodicity (namely, an art event produced biannually, as its etymology suggests) than to a type or model of large-scale, perennial, international manifestation that has become so common in the landscape of exhibition-making today. Often grandiose in scale, sometimes dispersed across several locations in a city, at times locally embedded through site-specific commissions while being global in ambition, and often involving discursive components such as symposia, extensive publications, or even accompanying journals alongside a group show featuring, for the most part, a panoramic view of a new generation of artists, “the biennial” has become shorthand for many wildly different recurring exhibitions of contemporary art, including triennials and even Documenta, which occurs every five years.<sup>8</sup>

The project of *The Biennial Reader* is based on the premise that this potentially contradictory thing called “the biennial” must not remain unexamined, all the more so precisely because its relevance and critical currency is so profoundly contested. However, instead of being a collection of cursory arguments for or against its use, or perceiving its proliferation as a problem in itself, which merely shuts down discussion, this publication brings together a wide range of opinionated texts that, although coming from different generational, cultural, and historical positions, seriously tackle the concept of the biennial as cultural object. The essays gathered here are written by curators, artists, critics, and scholars, both established and emerging, who critically examine the biennial’s conceptual, institutional, aesthetic, and politi-

cal reasons for being, its way of speaking to us over time, and its potential for continued relevance, if relevance there is to be. For to dismiss the biennial because of its shortcomings would be to fail to take into account a platform that has undeniably given rise to some of the most engaged debates and thought-provoking artworks of our time. For instance, Hans Haacke’s *Germania*, composed of the shattered interior of the German Pavilion at the 1993 Venice Biennial (fig 1), is but one of example of how an artwork commissioned for and seen in a “mega-exhibition” left us with an indelible experience and prompted widespread critical reflection on issues such as nation, history, politics, and memory. And there are others: Tania Bruguera’s *The Burden of Guilt* produced for the 1997 Havana Biennial, Steve McQueen’s *Western Deep* for Documenta 11 in 2002, Song Dong’s *Waste Not* at the 2005 Gwangju Biennial, and Mladen Stilinovic’s “poor” paintings at the 2009 Istanbul Biennial, to name just a few. And in addition to the experience of encountering individual artworks, in these exhibitions there is also the experience of the way a particular staging of works of art in space and time creates relationships between viewers and objects, between one object and another, and between all of these elements and space, architecture, cultural and institutional history—all of which has made us look and think differently. Indeed, as art critic Thomas McEvilley once posited so beautifully, “A sensitive exhibition defines a certain moment, embodying attitudes and, often, changes of attitude that reveal, if only by the anxieties they create, the direction in which culture is moving.”<sup>9</sup> To attempt to understand biennials, then, is to attempt to understand something crucial about our culture today.

If it can be said that for more than a century museum and gallery exhibitions have largely been “*the* medium through which most art becomes known,”<sup>10</sup> then it is the *biennial exhibition* that has arguably since proved to be *the* medium through which most contemporary art comes to be known. And this is undeniably the case, no matter what one’s position on or opinion about it may be. Indeed, biennials have become, in the span of just a few decades, one of the most vital and visible sites for the production, distribution, and generation of public discourse around contemporary art. This shift demands a revision of how we think about not only the way in which art is being conceived and received today, but also the way in which its history can be written. Art history has long been built on an analysis of individual, autonomous artworks (open any art history book and you will see this), yet, as scholars have recognized in recent years, the writing of that history should also involve the analysis of the site or context in which the artwork first gains public visibility.<sup>11</sup> It can also be argued that

the history of contemporary art must be written through, with, and alongside an understanding of the biennial *in particular*, because to take into account the armatures for art's presentation today means, increasingly, to attend to the history and specificity of the large-scale, perennial exhibitions of our contemporary period.<sup>12</sup>

What might provocatively be called a “biennialogy” is thus called for. The suffix “ology” usually connotes the study of something in a systematic, rigorous way in order to generate a body of knowledge. A “biennialogy,” we thought, would argue for the possibilities—indeed the necessity—of treating this contemporary phenomenon as a serious subject of study. Doing this felt necessary, because despite the number of symposia, lectures, and debates that biennials have inspired, little sustained critical assessment of the phenomenon—in all its specificities and implications—has yet been carried out. Already in 2003, curator Carlos Basualdo pointed out that while a rather profuse bibliography on the museum existed by then, not a single publication had been devoted to the subject of large-scale exhibitions. Shortly after, art historian Charlotte Bydler published her doctoral dissertation, *The Global Art World, Inc.*, the first in-depth study analyzing the development of biennials in relation to globalization.<sup>13</sup> However, the broad expansion of the biennial landscape worldwide has still, surprisingly, hardly changed the situation since. Apart from a number of now-seminal essays scattered across various journals and books (many of which are collected and republished in the present volume), publications that have actually focused on the biennial in a sustained way remain rare.<sup>14</sup> It is within this context that this anthology aims to critically locate, historicize, and even trouble and reformulate “the biennial,” and, in the process, be able to critically assess its past, its potential for continued relevance, and its future.

So, why might all this matter? This publication argues that exhibitions in general, and biennial exhibitions specifically and increasingly, are central sites for understanding the artwork today. If we are to believe Jacques Derrida, there is no “hors-texte,” no *outside* the text that is not also in some way *also the text*, which is to say that it is impossible to completely separate the words on a page from the fact that they are on a page, and that the page is published in a certain way, in a certain context, by a certain journal (for instance, with left or right leanings, etc.).<sup>15</sup> These conditions are integral to our understanding of that text, just as they are for our understanding of the artwork. Although one might consider the work of art an autonomous thing that articulates a meaning that unquestionably inheres in itself, it would be naïve

(and even dangerous) to ignore the ideological and aesthetic impact of the context, dramaturgy, and discursive armatures that bring an artwork into public view. This is because the frame around the artwork—geopolitical, institutional, discursive, and spatial—is never neutral, but instead administers readings and interpretations. This does not, however, suggest that the meaning of the artwork is the *result* of the exhibition, nor does it advocate (as some have) thinking of the curator as a co-author of the artwork.<sup>16</sup> It does not even plead for the consideration of the container as being more important than what is contained, but only that the container, too, should not be assumed to be negligible, innocent, or disinterested. Instead, artworks, at their best, define positions that can contribute to, as much as resolutely resist, the exhibition frames within which we place them. They can, quite simply, undo the very arguments or classificatory systems thought to contain them. For a work of art—and herein lies its incredible power and complexity—*can construct the exhibition as much as it can be constructed by it*. This is no less true of the way that artworks operate in relation to the increasing number of biennials, so that, following the global shifts of ideologies, power, and empire that have faced the world in the last few decades, the need to examine this prevalent exhibitionary site of the construction (and potential resistance) of aesthetic, political, and intellectual meaning presents itself with all the more urgency today.

This publication thus reads the claimed theoretical, political, and other ambitions of mega-exhibitions against the grain of the realities they actually generate. In the volume's attempt to bring together new research by both celebrated and emerging scholars as a means of addressing a major contemporary phenomenon, it also seemed important to gather preexisting texts written about biennials over the last five decades in order to acknowledge the slow but increasing development of the biennial as an object of study over time. These seminal essays range from the late critic and curator Lawrence Alloway's 1969 description of the radical transformations of the Venice Biennial in 1968 (just at the moment when so much in the world was changing) to artist Daniel Buren's 1972 “Exhibition of an Exhibition,” a critical response to Harald Szeemann's watershed Documenta 5 and its cult of the curator, and from founder of the Havana Biennial Gerardo Mosquera's 1992 denunciation of Eurocentrism and what he called the “Marco Polo Syndrome” to Michael Brenson's 1998 proclamation of the beginning of “The Curator's Moment.” These and the other historic essays reprinted in the present volume, many of which are now out of print or difficult to find, contribute to a broader understanding of what we call “the

biennial” today. Whether classic or newly written, all of the texts in this volume seek provisional answers to the questions haunting our contemporary moment, and we hope they will spark the kind of debate that can fuel further study.

To locate the potential significance of the biennial, we thought it was important to begin by speaking of the histories and exhibitionary precedents that made it possible, but even these origins are the subject of some dispute: Do they lie in the Crystal Palace, that commercial and architectural feat of 1851 so elegantly written about by Donald Preziosi and Marian Pastor Roces in 2001 and 2005, respectively? Is the Venice Biennial (itself a product of the nineteenth-century *exposition universelles*) indeed the true “mother” of the genre, as art historian Caroline A. Jones argues in her new essay in this volume? In her telling, a model of nation-building and the display of cultural patrimony undergird the biennial’s genealogy. Or is the Havana Biennial, the first fully international, globally concerned, and discursively backed biennial launched in 1984, the true model for the proliferation of biennials that would follow in its wake, as Rafal Niemojewski suggests in an essay in this book that emerges from his extensive doctoral research on the topic? Together, these texts not only articulate a multiplicity of possible precedents for the biennial, but also reveal the stakes of such myths of origin.

Can one even speak of a singular origin or history of “the biennial” when the various examples that would seem to fit the category are spread all over the world and when the cultural, financial, and ideological differences between them are so vast? The fact is that the founding stories of individual biennials must also be told, because despite their emphatically global ambitions, many large-scale recurrent exhibitions were made possible, or even necessary and urgent, because of decisive “local” events and issues. In the case of Documenta, it was Germany’s postwar reconstruction; for the Johannesburg Biennial, it was the end of apartheid; for Manifesta, the fall of the Berlin Wall was claimed as a conceptual point of reference; for the Havana Biennial, it was the crucially felt need to offer an alternative position to the Western/American domination of the art world; in the case of the Gwangju Biennial, South Korea’s turn to democracy after years of repressive military dictatorships was claimed as its reason for coming into being; for the Riwaq Biennial, the event’s motivation was to generate an international dialogue in Palestine about the political circumstances of occupation and isolation; Prospect, for its part, was an urban renewal project for New Orleans sparked by the need to respond to the devastation left behind by a

hurricane; and the Luanda Triennial was supposed to be about the cultural enrichment and empowerment of a population recovering from years of war . . . And the list could go on. Besides perceived social, political, economic, or even ecological needs (each of which differently impacts the tenor or scope of the resulting project), how much of what biennials have become, in the aspirations of many of them to represent cultures other than those of the West and to reflect a truly international art world, is the result of an entirely different kind of genealogy? For instance, might one instead trace them back to another exhibition, *Les Magiciens de la Terre*, which, however flawed, arguably changed the parameters of biennials around the world?<sup>17</sup> We thought it was important that this volume provide a sampling of these vexed histories and multiple genealogies (and for each one included there are several others that, sadly, had to be left out for reasons of space), because in them one understands how each individual biennial—and indeed “the biennial,” as an overarching genre or type—might still be coming to terms with its own historical development.

In a 2003 essay reprinted in this volume, Carlos Basualdo called the biennial a fundamentally “unstable institution” whose identity can perhaps best be defined, *ex negativo*, in contrast with the more established, self-possessed, permanently fixed, and symbolically weighty institution of the museum. Expanding on this notion of instability, Maria Hlavajova suggests in the new essay she contributed to this book that “the identity of the biennial must necessarily be unstable, always in flux, and difficult to articulate in terms of continuity or as something more than just the sum of its editions over time.” She then goes on to say that we should first “remind ourselves that speaking about ‘the biennial’ is an impossible task, as no single form representing this entire hybrid field of cultural endeavor exists.” This gives rise to a curious paradox: the biennial *cannot be fully defined* and, as we argue, *must* be studied; while it may evade easy definition, we nonetheless need to understand it in order to make sense of the conditions and development of contemporary art.

Complicating this paradox is perhaps yet another question that poses itself: after exploring what the biennial is and has been, how can we determine what the biennial *can yet be*? Again and again contributors to this volume counter prevailing doubts about *whether* “to biennial” at all (or any more) with an altogether different query: *how* and *what* should we biennial today?<sup>18</sup> In the process, different models of institutions are discussed. For while the large-scale exhibition has been compared to such structures as the art fair and even the Olympics, the one institutional body

it has most frequently been discussed in relation—or rather in contrast—to is the museum. The utopian promise of the biennial was that while the museum (the Enlightenment institution par excellence) was the place for authoritative pronouncements, classification, canonization, and preservation, the biennial’s *raison d’être* was to provide a site for experimentation, contingency, testing, ambiguity, and inquiry. So, did biennials live up to that potential? And if they did, in what context and in response to what impulses did they develop? For we must remember that the traditional art institution has long been understood as being conventional in form, slow in its workings, and endowed with monumentally stable architectures full of supposedly neutral spaces, all of which is burdened by inflexible systems of accountability (at least this was the idea of the museum against which many biennials originally positioned themselves); on the other side of this idea of the institution stands a rapacious market that answers to a consumptive logic of supply and demand connected to confirmed values. Challenging both, the examples of what was called a “new institutionalism” that emerged in the nineteen nineties (in response to many of the same forces with which biennials grappled) demonstrated not only that the art institution itself could change, but also that the biennial would have to as well in order to continue to be relevant.<sup>19</sup> Thus while biennials might have been, at certain points in recent history, the experimental cousins of more established art institutions, their seemingly more stable counterparts (not only museums, but also art centers, *Kunsthallen*, etc.) arguably—and unsurprisingly—evolved as well, thereby causing the distance between the two to shift at times.<sup>20</sup> And along the way, despite its institutional-critical pretensions, the biennial itself might have become one more bonafide institution of the art world just like any other.

It is undeniable that the legacy and impact of the dematerialization of the art object in the nineteen-sixties in combination with the overwhelming transformations of the political, social, and aesthetic economy of our globalized, postcolonial, post-history millennium has in many ways led artists to produce artworks in a different way than they did half a century ago (when, for instance, the first biennial outside of Venice was being inaugurated). And while one could argue that the development of the biennial accompanied the historical shift in art-making from the “genius artist,” who made auratic and autonomous art (meant for the museum), to the altogether different ambitions that artists and art production pursue today (not to mention, simply, the changes in artists’ ways of working since as recently as the nineteen-nineties), the questions we might ask are: Did biennials in some way change the na-

ture or tenor of the art being made, or, conversely, are biennials the direct product and development of art?<sup>21</sup> And how can we assess the direction, causes, and merits of such developments? After grappling with these (admittedly potentially unanswerable) questions, we commissioned essays that ventured a variety of tentative responses, including curators Bruce W. Ferguson and Milena M. Hoegsberg’s exploration of how shifts in art practice may have impacted the turn towards discursivity in exhibition-making, Maria Hlavajova’s discussion of the way the cultural function of biennials and art institutions like museums and art centers impact one another and interrelate, and writer Jan Verwoert’s fable about “biennial art,” a term that essentially reflects the politics of the tendentious discourse that named it. Along with these newly commissioned texts, we have also reprinted a 2005 essay by Elena Filipovic, who argues that despite their critical ambitions, many biennials rely on an unspoken fidelity to some of the most doggedly traditional and Western display constructs—most notably, the museal “white cube.” Together, these essays propose that the very format of the biennial exhibition, even if it replicates known models or even if it is immaterial, has repercussions for the way art and other non-biennial exhibitions are made, shown, addressed, and discussed; in short, *the question of the biennial’s format matters*.

Invariably, from these considerations emerge questions concerning the figure who has moved, following the rapid transformations of the art world, from being a *faiseur d’expositions* (in French) or an *Ausstellungsmacher* (in German)—in other words, an “exhibition-maker” (part intellectual, part impresario, as opposed to a museum collection’s caretaker/civil servant)—in the nineteen-sixties to being the “curator” or even the “author” of the exhibition. The rise of the “independent curator,” for instance, cannot be separated from the proliferation of biennials, as several texts in this volume are quick to point out.<sup>22</sup> Expanding on their respective doctoral research on biennials, Federica Martini and Vittoria Martini look closely in their new collaborative essay on the evolution of the curator as auteur (the descendent of the ur-curator-auteur, Harald Szeemann, if ever there was one). For their part, the theorist-artist-curators of the Raqs Media Collective have written a new essay that reflects on the place of the biennial as a critical public sphere and the curatorial responsibility it thus requires. Alongside these, we have reprinted Paul O’Neill’s 2007 essay discussing the “curatorial turn” that has shifted the central role of the curator from “practice to discourse.” John Clark’s essay, excerpted from his forthcoming book on Asian biennials, takes a different tack, suggesting that biennials not only impact the de-



velopment of art, but also, paradoxically, are less a site privileging the presentation of those artworks than the locus “through which curators themselves are circulated and try to achieve their own further circulation.” If doubts linger about the biennial’s relationship to art itself, theorist Simon Sheikh reminds us in his 2009 essay that “biennials are not only part of the present, but also always . . . [also] an investment in the future: a statement about art.” Thus, if a direct investigation or interpretation of specific art objects (of the kind already found in art history) seems to be lacking in this volume, it is not because our interrogation of the biennial proposes a hierarchy of importance in which the biennial or the curator might surpass the artwork or the artist. Rather, it seemed to us that exposing the site of art’s public presentation and the motivations of its organizers might help us understand better if, how, and to what extent biennials impact the way we perceive, and ultimately historicize, art today.

Because the biennial is, at its core, a global phenomenon that has played a crucial role in the dissemination of art from all over the world, the suggestion that contemporary art history should be written alongside a consideration of the biennial thus necessarily also hopes to prompt the writing of a properly global art history.<sup>23</sup> In our research we were interested in gathering critical writing from as wide a cultural and geographic spectrum as possible, so that the discourse on biennials presented in this volume might reflect something of the truly expansive reach of the exhibitions themselves. To strive to achieve this, we translated a number of texts so as to highlight some of the analytical thinking on biennials emerging from beyond the literature available in English. As one example, we have included a translated excerpt from Yacouba Konaté’s book on the history of the Dak’Art Biennial and how it has functioned as a mechanism for creating an alternative history of art and Pan-Africanism. Vinicius Spricigo’s chapter from his doctoral dissertation on the São Paulo Biennial and the historical and conceptual underpinnings of its twenty-eighth edition—nicknamed by some “the void biennial”—is another. Oliver Marchart’s 2008 book about the last three editions of Documenta—which explores not only the inherent politics of any such large-scale perennial exhibition, but also the ways each edition of an event might respond to and build upon (or undo) the ideological or aesthetic positions of its predecessor—has also been included here in an abridged and translated form. Making these remarkable resources more widely available was one of our ways of attempting to confront the multiplicity of cultural positions that lies at the very heart of the biennial.

In this volume, discussions about specific biennials also appear, and they often also reveal a great deal about larger, shared issues in the genre. Through an in-depth discussion of the seventh Gwangju Biennial, Ranjit Hoskote describes a biennial typology he calls the “biennial of resistance,” one that has emerged from transitional societies and examples of which include the São Paulo Biennial, Triennial India, the Havana Biennial, the Asia Pacific Triennial, the Gwangju Biennial, the Johannesburg Biennial, and the never-realized Delhi Biennial. Two of these very examples are examined in greater detail in both art historian Sabine Marschall’s 1999 essay on the now-defunct Johannesburg Biennial and Gerardo Mosquera’s new discussion of the utopian idealism that underlay the founding of the Havana Biennial, whose mission was to be the first biennial platform for the “Third World.” Providing concrete examples, these essays also mark what Hoskote calls “a cumulative counterpoint to the Venice Biennial as the universal template for the biennial as form and medium” and reveal that there is “a substantial non- and perhaps even counter-Venetian history of the biennial form that has yet to be narrated.”

The promulgation of counter-narratives and experimentation with counter-models for exhibition making remains the utopian promise of the biennial in the age of globalization. But how should we understand the term “globalization” to which the biennial is said to be now intimately linked? Is the so-called globalization of the cultural sphere of the last few decades a development towards greater inclusivity of artistic practices beyond (Western) modernity or, on the contrary, does it represent the promotion of a (decidedly Western) hegemony for art, exhibition models, curators, and audiences? In other words, in the biennial’s celebration of globalization, does it prove to be a truly inclusive, transnational, multicultural, “counter-hegemonic” project, as Okwui Enwezor contends? Or is the biennial, as George Baker argues, a mere consolidation of dominant bourgeois culture that is both “archaically nationalistic and explicitly occidentalist,” especially in its championing of globalization, which shows itself, in fact, to be “a process of Westernization, not its critique”? Juxtaposing two compelling but dissenting positions on the claims of the biennial, we have reprinted Enwezor’s landmark essay “Mega-Exhibitions and the Antinomies of a Transnational Global Form” and Baker’s percussive response to it, “The Globalization of the False: A Response to Okwui Enwezor,” which takes up a position against Enwezor’s fundamental claims and those of many other advocates of the biennial.<sup>24</sup> Contributing to our understanding of the contested stakes of the biennial, these two texts as well as others in this volume underscore something we have tried

to bring together throughout the book: they highlight the dissenting opinions and as-yet-unanswered questions that haunt the biennial. They also testify to our desire that *The Biennial Reader* attempt to fill the lacunae in the history of large-scale exhibitions without effacing either side of the debate that still rages today about their significance to our contemporaneity.

This essay began with a paradox: although the biennial cannot be precisely or absolutely defined, it nonetheless demands that we examine it. Throughout this essay and the anthology it introduces we have therefore argued for the importance of taking the biennial seriously, all the while embracing the possibility that the phenomenon would remain something essentially amorphous, contradictory, and even contested. And, as we have posited, nothing less than the future of art history depends on it. The entire thrust of this assemblage of texts is thus meant to invert the logic that proposes that either an artwork or an exhibition can be isolated from the larger pressures, contexts, frameworks, and constructs that perforce determine the ways in which they speak to their publics. For while the intellectual, aesthetic, and ideological object we call “the biennial” might well be considered inspiring or absurd, radical or retrograde in turns, it nevertheless matters as an instrument that helps us to make sense of our contemporary culture. As such, taking the biennial as a central subject of study generates a prism through which to look at the broader art world (if not the world as a whole), because what we can learn from biennials informs us about all the things that biennials depend upon, react to, and ineluctably impact: art, artists, audiences, curating, and art institutions, but also cultural policy, the market, the public sphere, specific locales, tourism, and city branding. And yet we would also like to suggest that there is no ultimate closure to be derived from the subject we set out to examine. Instead, the various readings of the biennial proffered here counter the notion that neat lineages can be drawn, or that unequivocal motivations or trajectories can be confirmed; thus, our call for the creation of a biennialogy, rather than being rigidly empirical and teleological, aims to prompt us not only to attempt to answer the questions we have already asked, but also to continue to ask new ones. In the end, we felt that the promise and greatest potential of biennials could lie in their capacity to be experimental forms whose contours are capable of continual change and which, in changing, can both question and reinvent both themselves and the histories they participate in writing. This book aspires to be a catalyst in this process. ●



1 Hans Haacke, *Germania*, Venice Biennial, 1993

1 Peter Schjeldahl, “Festivalism: Oceans of Fun at the Venice Biennale,” *The New Yorker* (July 5, 1999), pp. 85–86.

2 Confirming this, Maria Hlavajova states: “We now know that it is undeniable that the exhibition format is the primary vehicle on which biennials rest, but let’s acknowledge for the time being that the radically diverse projects that take place under this label, hand in hand with the expanded field of contemporary curating, involve not only production and display but also, and progressively even more importantly, the production of discourse and the distribution of knowledge. And who says that biennials need to be exhibitions at all?” See her essay in this volume.

3 One exception to this is the Whitney Biennial, founded in 1932, although initially it took on the term to mean not the frequency of the exhibition but the purview of the art it represented: in 1932 it was an annual exhibition that featured a panorama of the production of art in America over the preceding two years. In 1973, it became a properly biannual event and then, only in very recent years, an international one.

4 The founding of several other large-scale recurring contemporary art events, although not properly speaking biannual, could also help sketch a picture of the landscape in which the creation of new biennials emerged. Some of the most influential examples from the period before the wide proliferation of the biennial include: the Carnegie International, founded in 1896 in Pittsburgh as a yearly survey exhibition, became a biennial event renamed the Pittsburgh International in 1950 and then a triennial event in 1955, only to return finally to its original name and more anthological format in 1982, with shows occurring approximately every three years; Documenta, founded in 1955 in Kassel, began as a one-off major survey show lasting a hundred days, but then went on to recur, with only one exception, every four years between 1955 and 1972, finally taking on its current quinquennial or once-every-five-years format after Harald Szeemann’s 1972 edition and retaining the hundred-day format; and the Triennial India, founded in 1968 in New Delhi and from the start imagined as an event that would recur every three years.