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**Nora Sternfeld**

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## Assembling and Disassembling. Biennials between boycott and counter-hegemony in the second decade of the 21st century

### Montagem e desmontagem. Bienais entre boicote e contra-hegemonia na segunda década do século XXI

Nora Sternfeld\*

#### Abstract

"Towards the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century", as Anthony Gardner and Charles Green propose, "biennials became self-conscious." Increasingly they are reflecting on themselves as "hegemonic machines" (Oliver Marchart), and for this very reason also understand themselves as places of intervention. We have to come to terms with the fact that biennials today are both: "Brands and Sites of Resistance", "Spaces of Capital and Hope" (Panos Kompatsiaris). The article follows withdrawals and protests as well as interventions and strategies of appropriation of biennials in the second decade of the 21st century. Protests in St. Petersburg, Sydney and New York shape the biennials they boycott. In Kochi, Athens, Dhaka, and Kassel we encounter curatorial projects that challenge the apparatus of value coding. The relationship between bottom up and top down often becomes blurred. In Prague, Warsaw, Kiev, and Budapest it is even reversed. Here biennials are used as a means of counter-hegemony and institutional survival.

#### Keywords

Biennials as assemblies. Boycott. Hegemonic machines. Biennial History. Counter-hegemony.

#### Resumo

"Perto do final da primeira década do século XXI", como propõem Anthony Gardner e Charles Green, "as bienais tornaram-se autoconscientes". Cada vez mais pensam a si mesmas como "máquinas hegemônicas" (Oliver Marchart), e por isso mesmo também se entendem como lugares de intervenção. Temos que aceitar que as bienais hoje são: "Marcas e Sítios de Resistência", "Espaços de Capital e Esperança" (Panos Kompatsiaris). O artigo segue cancelamentos e protestos, bem como intervenções e estratégias de apropriação de bienais na segunda década do século XXI. Protestos em São Petersburgo, Sydney e Nova York moldam as bienais que eles boicotam. Em Kochi, Atenas, Dhaka e Kassel, encontramos projetos curatoriais que desafiam o aparato da codificação de valores. A relação entre emergente e descendente frequentemente torna-se confusa. Em Praga, Varsóvia, Kiev e Budapeste ela é até invertida. Aqui, as bienais são usadas como meio de contra-hegemonia e sobrevivência institucional.

#### Palavras-chave

Bienais como assembleias. Boicote. Máquinas hegemônicas. História da Bienal. Contra-hegemonia.

“An important shift happened towards the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century,” claim Anthony Gardner and Charles Green: “biennials became self-conscious” (Gardner; Green, 2014: 28). As a result, biennials now address their own character as “hegemonic machines,” as political theorist Oliver Marchart has called them (Marchart, 2014: 2), discussing their political and economic entanglements, but also their scope for action within these structures. Biennials today thus understand and describe themselves as sites of intervention in neoliberal conditions of which they themselves are part, addressing these conditions in critical terms while also fueling and fostering them. This faces us with a paradoxical phenomenon of neoliberalism and to an extent we must accept that biennials today are both brands and sites of resistance – or, as Panos Kompatsiaris puts it, both “spaces of capital” and “spaces of hope” (Kompatsiaris, 2014: 78).

Such is the backdrop against which this essay deals with biennials as contested spaces. After a brief overview of the history of biennials – that were never purely Western, reflecting the transnational politics of its time – several case studies address disengagement and protest, as well as interventions and strategies of appropriation used by biennials in the second decade of the 21st century. Protests in St. Petersburg, Sydney, and New York impact on the biennials they boycott. With exhibitions in Kochi, Athens, Dhaka, and Kassel, we encounter curatorial projects that challenge the apparatus of encoding values. In some cases, the relationship between bottom-up and top-down is blurred. In Kiev and Budapest it is even inverted, with biennials deployed as tools of counter-hegemony and institutional survival.

### 1. The past and the future: biennials as contested spaces

Today, those writing the history of biennials agree that this phenomenon – beginning in Venice in 1895, with a second wave founded in the 1950s in São Paulo, Alexandria, and Kassel – cannot be understood from a purely Western perspective (Jones, 2016; Gardner, Green, 2013: 442-455). The world performatively asserted by each world’s art fair is disputed and contested, operating amid national and transnational orders, representing nations and acting out their relations and rivalries within evolving political conditions. And we can immediately imagine that this world is portrayed differently in 1951 in São Paulo, in 1955 at the Biennale for Mediterranean Countries in Alexandria, or at documenta in Kassel, each following different worldviews, different notions of past and future, of modernity. In the context of the Cold War’s “competition of systems”, rival worlds increasingly faced one another down. And at the time, there were at least three such asserted worlds. Anthony Gardner and Charles Green show that biennials played an important part in the Third World movement, which they call a “transversal community of so-called ‘non-aligned’ nations” (Gardner; Green, 2013: 446). In the 1950s and ‘60s, against this historical backdrop, many biennials were founded: the Alexandria biennial in 1955; the Biennale Grafike in Ljubljana, also in 1955; the Muzički Biennale in Zagreb in 1961; the Bienal de Coltejer in Colombia in 1968; and, also in 1968, Triennale India in Delhi. The extent of the hopes pinned on these biennials by the different worldviews is shown by the words of well-wishing printed in the catalogue for Triennale India. Writer and art critic John Berger, for example, wrote:

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 upon the concept of a visual work of art as property. (...) I wish you clear-sightedness, strength and courage in your struggle (*apud* Adajania, 2013: 171).

As this shows, biennials as spaces of political contention and transnational alliances are not a recent development. Many other examples from before 1989 could be named, showing that biennials played an important role not only for the West, but also for transnational formations running counter to the West's definitions of the world (formations that always saw themselves as more than just "the rest"). In this context, Oliver Marchart (2014) speaks of "biennials of resistance". But unlike Marchart, I would call the Havana Biennale (whose early editions in the 1980s he discusses in detail) not the first global biennial, but rather the last of the Third World biennials.

Since 1989, however, there has certainly been no shortage of global biennials. And as this phenomenon shows, biennials are not only "hegemonic machines" for resistance, also performing a function within and for neoliberal "globalization" after the end of the Cold War. As mentioned above, the ambivalence of this situation remains. In the 2000s, curator Okwui Enwezor also described recurring mega-events on the global periphery as contested spaces, as exemplary places of "cultural translation and transnational encounter". In the biennial phenomenon, he identified the possibility of a paradigm shift "in which spectators are able to encounter many experimental cultures without wholly possessing them" (Enwezor, 2008: 170).

And today? After the boom of the 1990s, there are now more than 300 biennials worldwide, with new ones continually springing up (Kolb; Patel, 2018: 16). Their spread also gives rise to new art discourses, which in turn critique the biennial phenomenon – to which they owe their existence. At the same time, biennialization is part of the economization of cities, which increasingly view themselves as brands as land is privatized and the public sphere subjected to the dictates of profit. In his book *Hegemonie im Kunstfeld*, Marchart speaks (alluding to Tony Bennett's "exhibitionary complex") of a "biennial complex" (Marchart, 2008: 27) and shows that exhibitions belong to a disputed terrain: power relations are underpinned here, but also called into question.

In the course of 2000s, and against the backdrop of a broader reflexive turn in the exhibition field, the debates around biennials and the discourses conducted by biennials themselves became critical and reflexive. In this vein, the 500-page *Biennial Reader* published in 2010 in connection with discussions about founding a recurring exhibition in Bergen, Norway, contains many critical texts addressing the question "to Biennial or not to Biennial?" (Filipovic et al., 2010). In the phenomenon of biennialization, then, economization and politicization go hand in hand. They drive the capitalization of locations and the related processes of gentrification, they have functions of political soft power, they stand for radical chic and tokenism, hollowing out political discourses and symbols in order to defuse and devalue them. But they are also places where shifts occur in what is visible, sayable, showable, doable<sup>1</sup>. In the following, these contradictory dimensions become tangible as we turn to specific case studies of biennials as contested spaces in the second decade of the 21st century – beginning with examples of withdrawals, boycotts, and occupations that discuss biennials critically and address them in political terms.

## **2. I can't work like this: boycott, occupation, resistance**

In 2017, a reader was published under the title *I Can't Work Like This* that deals with boycotts of biennials, edited by curator Joanna Warsza in cooperation with participants from her seminar at the Salzburg International Summer Academy (Warsza, 2017). Using four case studies and many interviews with people involved in biennials, the book inquires into boycotting as a political tool and into the related possibilities and limitations. Specifically, the reader deals with the 13th Istanbul Biennial (2013), Manifesta 10 (2014), the 31st Bienal de São Paulo, and the 19th Biennale of Sydney (both also 2014), with timelines offering insights into sometimes turbulent events at the interface between macro- and

micro-politics. The reader examines biennials as spaces of concrete action within political conflicts, asking why they became spaces of protest and taking a differentiated look at the role of biennial protagonists in relation to the protests. Because if we assume that the public realm does not simply exist somewhere outside, but that it is something that can take place between us (Arendt, 2018) or something that arises precisely in moments of conflict (Marchart, 2007), then this raises the question of how curators respond, how they might act when such a public situation comes about. As Warsza writes in her introduction: “we were mostly interested in how one can act in such turmoil rather than telling the history of the conflict” (Warsza, 2017: 12).

A brief note on the specific contexts:

The first example is the Istanbul Biennial of 2013, three years before Erdoğan confiscated the passports of his critics under the pretext of an attempted coup, followed by waves of sackings and incarcerations. On the day before the press opening of the Istanbul Biennial, on September 14, 2013, an activist was killed in Antakya during protests that broke out across Turkey after the suppression of the anti-capitalist occupation of Gezi Park. The activist’s death sparked new protests in Istanbul that were put down with teargas. In the midst of this political situation, the art biennial opened with the ownership of public space as its main focus, thus sharing its themes and concerns with the protests against the turbo-capitalist gentrification of Istanbul that had begun with the occupation of Gezi Park. “Rarely have art and reality been so close to one another as at this year’s Istanbul Biennial,” wrote the cultural program of German public broadcaster ARD on September 22, 2013<sup>2</sup>. But however political the event’s concept may have been, the Istanbul Biennial, planned to coincide with a new art fair, was itself more entangled in the rapid economization of the city than it was involved in the protests. As a result, there were numerous conflicts between activists and those involved in the biennial, related to their demands and forms of expression. In the middle of planning the event in the summer of 2013, under the conditions of an awakening social movement that had not yet been put down, curator Fulya Erdemci decided to change her concept and switch from public space into the white cube. What she referred to during her curator’s tour as a “strategic withdrawal”, to avoid coopting the protests, led to the total impossibility of a public realm emerging around the biennial – because all public events and discussions and all works in public spaces were cancelled.

Warsza was directly involved in her second example, Manifesta 10 in St. Petersburg in 2014. Just when the European biennial curated by Kaspar König was planned to take place at the Hermitage in St. Petersburg, the Putin-led Duma passed a homophobic law, known as the “anti-gay law”, which criminalizes the representation of homosexuality and public distribution of material on “non-traditional sexual relations”. The Irish painter and curator Noel Kelly called for a boycott of the biennial. Those responsible responded by remarking, not inaccurately, that a withdrawal of Western artists from St. Petersburg would hardly be difficult insofar as they had, for the longest time, shown little interest in the city’s plight. And while the art world was discussing this question of a boycott, Russia annexed the Crimean Peninsula, adding urgency to the question of the possibility or necessity for those involved in Manifesta to adopt a political position. Whereas most believed they could remain “neutral”, as the biennial’s curator of public programming Warsza wanted to make a stand. “I felt that the show must go on”, she concluded, “but it should not go on undisturbed”<sup>3</sup>. She planned a clearly positioned public program that addressed the situation itself.

The 19th Biennale of Sidney in 2014 also faced weeks of controversy over the links to its founding sponsor Transfield, an Australian multinational: in January 2014, Transfield secured contracts worth 1.22 billion dollars for an internment camp on the island of Nauru, where refugees attempting to reach

Australia by boat were to be held. Under Australian law, any asylum-seeker entering the country without a visa may be imprisoned indefinitely, a violation of the UN Refugee Convention of 1951. On February 19, forty-six participating artists published an open letter in which they called on the board of the Biennale of Sydney to act “in the interests of the asylum-seekers” and demanded that “the Biennale withdraw from the current sponsoring arrangements with Transfield”<sup>4</sup>. The board’s answer was negative: “Without Transfield,” it said, “the Biennale of Sydney would no longer exist”. As a result, five artists withdrew from the biennial on February 26. On March 5, the boycott was joined by four more artists, as well as members of the installation team. By then, further main sponsors, including the City of Sydney, had begun to question the Biennale’s links to Transfield. Possibly on account of the ongoing controversy, Transfield shares dropped 9 percent that week, having initially risen 21 percent when news of the contracts broke. On March 7, just two weeks before the opening, Luca Belgiorno-Nettis decided to resign as chairman of the Biennale (a post he had held for more than fourteen years). The board announced that it was ending its 42-year-old relationship with Transfield, the company that had funded the Biennale since its founding in 1973. Once their demand had been fulfilled, seven of the nine artists who had withdrawn from the event returned.

Another biennial that experienced protest and withdrawals was the 2019 Whitney Biennial, discussed in a case study by Shirin Graf as a “platform for protest”<sup>5</sup>. Here, discourses of the public collided with political moments in which a public realm really was generated, shedding a harsh light on the growing disconnect between critical discourse and the economic reality of exhibitions in the 21st century. It also led to many conflicts, since what was expected of curators and mediators by the institution and the media, by sponsors and the art market, was highly contradictory: on the one hand, curatorial concepts that address conflicts are now considered “edgy”, while on the other there is an expectation that such conflicts will be moderated, or perhaps even avoided. In this complicated and contradictory role, Warsza sees not just a problem but also a political-aesthetic opportunity. In her view, curating public programs necessarily involves facing conflicts. And so she asks: “How to be prepared for the possibility that conflict might happen? How to concede that it is not necessarily a bad thing, and finally how not to suppress it?” (Warsza, 2017: 12).

### **3. Biennials as spaces of assembly**

In the second decade of the 21st century, then, biennials not only became reflexive, they also increasingly saw themselves as contested. As part of the same process, they reconfigured their orientation, presenting themselves as places of assembly whose public programs aim to generate scope for action and “emerging communities”. Their programs were given titles like academy, school, agora, assembly, parliament, etc. At this time, then, biennials seemed to radiate a new democratic promise. New contexts and curatorial collectives came into being that appropriated the biennial format – in a period when the public sector and the universities were being increasingly modularized, privatized, and disciplined – to generate intellectual spaces, to formulate questions, foster transnational cooperation, and to experiment with new formats between art and theory.

One early example of such an appropriation of the biennial format is the Athens Biennale, founded in November 2005 by three young figures from the Greek art field. It understood itself as an intervention in both the local and international art scenes with the aim of bringing the two together. According to the organizers, the Biennale was originally founded as a “farce” whose inauguration was initially announced as a baseless claim. For the three founders, it was about playing with the biennial format from a critical and rebellious position. And in the world of biennialization and the biennialization of the world, this fell on fertile neoliberal ground; for its first edition, the Athens Biennale quickly found many international

sponsors, including Deutsche Bank. The “farce” became an actual biennial that, while Greece was descending into crisis, channeled international funds into the cultural sector while leaving its organizers in their former precariousness. They were proud that their biennial remained an independent project that aimed to subvert conventional structures, that was not a real institution, and that was constantly in search of new financing. They worked to the point of exhaustion, until they had to ask themselves why they were doing it. Panos Kompatsiaris was certainly thinking of the Athens Biennale, of which he has made an in-depth analysis, when he wrote about biennials as spaces both of capital and of hope.

But we could also look at the Kochi-Muziris Biennale in South India, founded in 2012, which shows international artists in Kerala, where it makes a local impact. In 2014, it ran under the motto “It’s our Biennale!” Entrance to the exhibition is always free for all on Mondays, with a free education program so that many people from Kochi visit the biennial again and again – rickshaw drivers, local soup kitchen operators, and shop vendors – meet with international and local artists, curators, journalists, and tourists<sup>6</sup>. In 2014, Okwui Enwezor also visited the exhibition and stressed its importance as a platform for links between Asia and Africa. He said: “One of the powerful things, the potential of the Biennale is an important platform not only to connect Kochi to the Arabian peninsula, the Middle East and other parts of Asia, but the potential that Kochi presents as a vital link between Asia and Africa. This for me is very important because Kochi offers a new and important platform to rethink the relation between the South and the South”<sup>7</sup>. In this light, one can say that by the time documenta 14 set out in 2017 to learn from the South in Kassel and Athens, the South had already long since established and organized itself within the biennial world of the 21st century.

Biennials thus increasingly understand themselves not just as spaces of art, but also as spaces of debate and assembly. For all the ambivalence of their position, they do create new horizons and shift the boundaries of what can be seen, said, and shown. Some biennials are more than this, acting as means of survival for discourse and artistic expression in within increasingly authoritarian structures. These new “biennials of resistance”, as I would like to call them with reference to Oliver Marchart’s article, are the focus of the last part of this text.

#### **4. Can we work like this? New biennials of resistance in Eastern Europe**

Under highly precarious conditions, the call of “I can’t work like this” that marked the case studies above changes into a question – a question of survival: “Can we work like this?” (Somogyi, 2019). This is the title of a text in which Hajnalka Somogyi, curator, founder, and director of the OFF Biennale Budapest, presents the project and its situation. This last section looks at counter-hegemonic biennials in which the relation between bottom-up and top-down has been inverted. In Budapest and Kiev, biennials are understood and used as means of institutional survival – where the continued existence of cultural institutions is otherwise impossible.

Beginning in 2013, while the political situation in Hungary under the so-called “illiberal democracy” of Viktor Orbán was becoming increasingly authoritarian, with a centralized cultural sector and dwindling public potential for critical contemporary art, the OFF-Biennale in Budapest evolved from an independent civil society organization into a space for debate and imagination. The OFF-Biennale is self-organized, taking place thanks to the voluntary cooperation of artists, curators, gallerists, and collectors. The Biennale finds its spaces in private apartments, empty shops, industrial buildings, alternative theaters, and public squares. Its website declares: “It does not apply for Hungarian state funding, and stays away from state-run art institutions. It strives to take an active part in the social discourse on public issues and to enhance the culture of democracy by the means of art”. According to the OFF-Biennale, art is “a

laboratory for social change; it is bewildering, putting the familiar into new perspective, interrupting the routines of thought and action. As such, it contributes to new thoughts and ideas, to the dismantling of prejudice, to the discovery of individual and common opportunities previously unnoticed. Thus, the role independent contemporary art plays in a democratic society is essential”<sup>8</sup>.

Another example of such insistence on radical democratization under the most precarious conditions is the Kyiv Biennial. Vasyl Cherepanyn, who runs the Visual Culture Research Center in Kiev and organizes the Kyiv Biennial, makes clear that the biennial is a place for the imagination of political alternatives. The Biennial was founded in 2015, opening one year after the Manifesta in St. Petersburg, dealt with above. Cherepanyn describes the birth of the 2015 Biennial out of the Maidan Revolution: “The Maidan Revolution gave birth to the biennale in Kiev. It was a continuation of the revolutionary event in the direction which was missing in the revolution itself”<sup>9</sup>. Moreover, he continues, between the Maidan Revolution, the Russian invasion, and the process of neoliberal transformation (which he calls decommunization), it was a matter of developing a new narrative for the new Ukraine. In a situation offering little scope for action, then, the biennial served to render discursive alternatives to the official narrative conceivable, to develop and further them. In this spirit of creating different imaginaries, the first Kyiv Biennial was conceived as a school: as an educational project, as prefigurative politics. As well as the political, Cherepanyn also stresses the associated psychoanalytical dimension: moments of collective learning and invention as a means of working through what has been experienced.

In Budapest and Kiev, biennials became a format of political imagination in spite of everything and in the face of the existing options. In a translocal collaboration, they joined forces with biennials in Prague and Warsaw to form the “East Europe Biennale Alliance”<sup>10</sup>. Like the Third World biennials mentioned above, but without any state support, the aim here is to create spaces for thought and action that run counter to the existing options. The alliance’s stated aim thus consists both in suspending nationalistic discourse in the context of the biennials and in creating connections between semi-peripheries without having to operate via the West.

Neither naïve nor powerless, this is about thinking critique and praxis together. Those organizing these biennials know that in this world of exploitation and economization, they will be completely exploited and economized, but they do not want to be defined by this alone. Discussions and assemblies imagine other futures and by developing new collective practices and structures, by a practice of the commons, they want parts of these futures today.

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## Notas

\* Sternfeld is an educator and curator. She is a professor of art education at the University of Fine Arts Hamburg. E-mail: nora.sternfeld@hfbk-hamburg.de. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7965-2604>.

<sup>1</sup> In the spring of 2020, this politics of biennials was the subject of an online conference entitled *Contemporary Art Biennials – Our Hegemonic Machines in States of Emergency*, organized by Ronald Kolb and Dorothee Richter. This conference itself took place, unsurprisingly, as part of a biennial, the Bucharest Biennale, <https://www.curating.org/contemporary-art-biennials-our-hegemonic-machines-in-states-of-emergency/>. Accessed January 24, 2021.

<sup>2</sup> *Titel Thesen Temperamente*. September 22, 2013: [http://programm.ard.de/TV/one/ttt---titel-thesen-temperamente/eid\\_2872210719077616](http://programm.ard.de/TV/one/ttt---titel-thesen-temperamente/eid_2872210719077616). Accessed January 24, 2021.

<sup>3</sup> Curator Joanna Warsza introducing the public program, *Manifesta 10*, 2014: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HRPQM\\_22cs](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HRPQM_22cs). Accessed January 24, 2021.

<sup>4</sup> The activists made a video, *Transfield and the Sydney Biennale*, in which they call for a boycott: <https://vimeo.com/86482655>. Accessed January 24, 2021.

<sup>5</sup> See Shirin Graf, *Die Whitney Biennale von 2019 als Plattform für Protest*. BA dissertation (Kassel 2020) and the podcast *Assembling and Disassembling*, <https://postdocumenta.net/2020/12/13/assembling-and-disassembling/>. Accessed January 24, 2021.

<sup>6</sup> *It's Our Biennale!*, Kochi 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wzJ2CMNNLm8>. Accessed January 24, 2021.

<sup>7</sup> Okwui Enwezor speaks about the 2014 Kochi Biennale, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U4WlwMSPSEw>. Accessed January 24, 2021.

<sup>8</sup> Website of the OFF Biennale Budapest, <https://offbiennale.hu/en/about/budapest>. Accessed January 24, 2021.

<sup>9</sup> Vasyi Cherepanyn at the conference *Contemporary Art Biennials – Our Hegemonic Machines in States of Emergency*, June 27, 2020: <https://vimeo.com/437773184>. Accessed January 24, 2021.

<sup>10</sup> East Europe Biennale Alliance: <https://eeba.art/en>. Accessed January 24, 2021.

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