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Jérôme Glicenstein

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Abstract

The Biennale of Paris was created in 1959, at the beginning of André Malraux's tenure as Minister of Culture. It was intended as a way of promoting France's interests on the global art scene and its main difference with other such events had to do with its emphasis on the emerging artists. The first editions of the Biennale were organized by Raymond Cogniat and Jacques Lassaigne who were both civil servants and whose career had started at a time when Paris' role was supposed to be central in the art world. By the end of the 1960s when this was obviously no longer the case, Paris' Biennale evolved in another direction, that of an event of a more experimental and political nature, and even more so after the art critic Georges Boudaille replaced Lassaigne in 1971. After the creation of the Centre Pompidou in 1977 and the arrival of Jack Lang as the new Minister of Culture in the early 1980s, the Biennale entered a major identity crisis that eventually caused its disappearance in 1985, after having tried to expand on a larger scale for its last edition.

Keywords

Biennale. Exhibition. Contemporary Art. Cultural diplomacy. Art criticism.

Resumo

A Bienal de Paris foi criada em 1959, no início da gestão de André Malraux como Ministro da Cultura. Pretendia ser uma maneira de promover os interesses da França no cenário artístico global e sua principal diferença para com outros eventos desse tipo era sua ênfase nos artistas emergentes. As primeiras edições da Bienal foram organizadas por Raymond Cogniat e Jacques Lassaigne, ambos funcionários públicos e cuja carreira começou em uma época em que o papel de Paris era considerado central no mundo da arte. No final da década de 1960, quando obviamente não era mais o caso, a Bienal de Paris evoluiu para outra direção, a de um evento de natureza mais experimental e política, sobretudo depois que o crítico de arte Georges Boudaille substituiu Lassaigne em 1971. Após a criação do Centro Pompidou, em 1977, e a chegada de Jack Lang como o novo Ministro da Cultura no início dos anos 1980, a Bienal entrou em uma grande crise de identidade que acabou levando ao seu encerramento em 1985, após a tentativa de expansão em sua última edição.

Palavras-chave

Bienal. Exposição. Arte Contemporânea. Diplomacia Cultural. Crítica de Arte.

Between the end of 17th century and first half of 20th century, Parisian Salons had exhibited established artists, while allowing younger ones to make themselves known. These principles could be found again within the first international biennials and in particular with Venice's Biennale, which for a long time reflected this influence¹. The Venetian event experienced several successive orientations and after having been, until World War II, a place for the consecration of academic values, it became that of the recognition of modern art's pioneers – in particular those linked to the School of Paris. However, the post-war situation was no longer so favorable to the French scene: the art market had deserted Paris for some time and collectors were becoming scarce. In this context, experienced as a moment of crisis by the actors of the art scene, the return of the General de Gaulle to power (in 1958) was seen as the ideal opportunity to reaffirm France's status in the world, both geopolitically and culturally². One of the first initiatives of the new Minister of Cultural Affairs, André Malraux, was to give substance to a project that had been in the works for several years: the Paris Biennale. This biennale was to be the spearhead of the new French policy on contemporary art, transposing France's multipolar diplomacy into the field of culture³.

1959, 1st edition of the Paris Biennale

In the first few editions, Paris Biennale took place at the Museum of Modern Art of the City of Paris (MAMVP). Forty countries responded to the call for the first edition and a number of Parisian galleries and museums joined in, including the Rodin Museum. In addition, an "off" section was devoted to "the youth of the masters", which allowed to show some works from previous generations (Monnier, 1995: 347-350). The Paris Biennale was nevertheless reserved primarily for artists under 35 years of age, which was in contrast to the Venice and São Paulo Biennales or Kassel's Documenta, which were still at that time places of consecration for artists at the end of their careers. From this perspective of affirmed support for emerging creation, the choice of the first General Delegate, Raymond Cogniat, may seem curious, all the more so since he had not been particularly partisan of the latest artistic innovations, having been rather familiar with the art scene of the 1930s⁴. Cogniat was nevertheless an expert in the promotion of French art, since in the post-war period he contributed, in his various functions, to the institutional recognition of most of the artists of the First School of Paris in Venice and São Paulo⁵: indeed from 1948 to 1962, Braque, Chagall, Matisse, Zadkine, Dufy, Arp, Villon, Fautrier and Hartung each received awards in Venice, and Chastel, Laurens, Pignon, Richier, Manessier and Léger each received an award in São Paulo⁶.

The preface to the catalog of the first edition of Paris Biennale can thus be read as a manifesto:

The great international confrontations are multiplying. Venice and São Paulo serve as an example and proliferate. France, which occupies a place of choice in the arts, could not remain outside a movement of this nature, that allows ample information and extends intellectual exchanges. Alongside the prestigious exhibitions in Venice and São Paulo, which pay tribute to artists who have already been able to assert their personality and whose influence marks the art of their time, we have chosen to make of Paris Biennale a place of encounter and experience for young people, a place open to uncertainties and hopes. Reserved for artists under thirty-five years of age, this event, like other exhibitions, cannot shine with the brilliance of its stars. It wants to be a working instrument put at the service of those who seek and seek themselves (Cogniat, 1959: VII).

The selection of French artists was made by three bodies: a jury of art critics; a jury of artists under 35 years of age; and a jury of members of the Fine Arts administration. As an indication of the duration of social and artistic recognition, it should be noted that the artists most remembered today are those

selected by the critics: Yves Klein, Robert Rauschenberg, Jean Tinguely, Yaacov Agam, etc. For the remainder, there were very few women or provincial artists at this first edition.

Raymond Hains, François Dufrière and Jacques Villeglé exhibited in the auditorium of the Museum of Modern Art of the City of Paris a set of torn posters taken from the street, entitled *Palissade avec emplacements réservés*, which caused a scandal among some critics and members of the public. On October 3, the day following the inauguration, the academic painter Bernard Lorjou published the leaflet manifesto "From nausea to anger", in which he denounced the transformation of museums into "palisade dumps" (Bernard Lorjou *apud* Bellet, 1996: 347). One of the most noted artwork was *Métamatic No. 17*, a "painting machine" presented by Jean Tinguely on the forecourt of the museum. This work produced abstract drawings on a large scale (more than 40,000 in all) making a characteristic noise while diffusing a pleasant lily-of-the-valley scent through an integrated spray bottle. The public was amused and the work helped to spread an image of accessibility of the Biennale to the general public.

It can be said that this first Paris Biennale also marks the end of the stranglehold of gestural or informal abstraction on the Parisian art scene. This explains some virulent reactions, such as that of Jeanne Facchetti, wife of an abstract painting dealer, who wrote that the Paris Biennale is a "biennale for young old people (...) who believe that one can reject painting without knowing it. (...) one expects to find works in an international exhibition, yet the young Paris Biennale presents us with sinister 'experiences'" (Villemur; Pietrzak, 2004: 120).

The first Paris Biennales (1959-1967)

The first five Biennales (1959, 1961, 1963, 1965, 1967) were marked by the idea of an internationalization of the art scene in the form of a competition between national representations, where, following the model of the Venice Biennale, each country would send its best young artists to confront them with the rest of the world. The "correspondents" from the participating countries chose the artists who represented them and these were exhibited separately, following the model of the Venice Biennale. A jury coordinated the whole, under the chairmanship of the General Delegate, who was the representative of the organizing country but did not intend to take part in the discussions.

In 1959 and 1961, abstract painters, particularly those related to the Informal and Action Painting dominated the presentations. A few representatives of the New Realists took part (Arman, Raysse, Hains, Villeglé), this movement being at the heart of the Parisian scene at the time. Among the foreign participants in 1961 were David Hockney and Jasper Johns. The state of mind that presided over the organization of the first Paris Biennales is fairly well summarized in Raymond Cogniat's first assessment of the Biennale on the occasion of its 3rd edition (1963):

In a short time, this exhibition took its place among the major international events. (...) Let's content ourselves with summarizing the road traveled. (...) The third Paris Biennale will be the logical extension of the previous ones, since its very success leads it to extend each time a little beyond the limits reached by the previous event. It involves the participation of nearly sixty nations. This figure speaks for itself and confirms our upward march. We are pleased because it proves that our intentions have been understood and approved by more and more countries. All of them, regardless of their social ideology, have considered our manifestation appropriate and corresponding to a useful and effective action (Cogniat, 1963, pages not numbered).

The work that caused the most sensation in 1963 was an important environment made up of a series of rooms: *The Labyrinth*, proposed by the Groupe de Recherche d'Art Visuel (GRAV), a group of Parisian

kinetic artists, some of them of South American origin: Julio Le Parc, Joel Stein, Horacio Garcia Rossi, Francisco Sobrino, François Morellet and Jean-Pierre Yvaral. *The Labyrinth*, like the event *Une journée dans la rue* organized two years later, was a sensory and participatory environment where different visual or tactile experiences were proposed to visitors. For the rest, in 1963 and 1965, most of the presentations bore witness to the influence of New Realism, Pop Art or equivalent artist groups in other countries. There was also a section devoted to contemporary music with Pierre Schaeffer, Pierre Boulez and Iannis Xenakis.

In 1965, the Biennale de Paris confirmed the positions put forward in the previous edition, with once again artists linked to the New Realists or kinetic artists, to which were added German representatives of Group Zero (Gunther Uecker, Heinz Mack, Otto Piene) and unclassifiable personalities, such as Robert Malaval, Tetsumi Kudo, Peter Stämpfli or Jean-Pierre Raynaud. Among the young artists, appearing for the first time, were Christian Boltanski (21 years old at the time) and Daniel Buren (27 years old), the latter receiving a painting prize on this occasion.

A change of generation after the Paris Biennales of 1967 and 1969

In 1967, Jacques Lassaigne succeeded Raymond Cogniat as General Delegate of Paris Biennale⁷. The main event of this edition was the participation of the BMPT group (Daniel Buren, Olivier Mosset, Michel Parmentier, Niele Toroni). Their intervention consisted of hanging their paintings in the company of a slide show of banal photographs (animals, pin ups, the pope, etc.) and a synchronized recording giving a series of definitions: "Art is an illusion of disorientation, illusion of freedom, illusion of presence, illusion of the sacred, illusion of Nature (...). Not the painting of Buren Mosset Parmentier Toroni (...). Art is a distraction, art is false. Painting begins with Buren Mosset Parmentier Toroni"⁸.

The four artists presented themselves on posters reproducing their faces as photo booths' snapshots placed in front of their paintings. The idea was to show the banality of representations, and the fact that an artist's work can be reproduced ad infinitum "neither better nor worse than you and me" (Millet, 1987: 123)⁹.

The 1969 Biennale marks a more important turning point, reflecting both the development of international contemporary art and the consequences of the May 68's events of the previous year. Nationalist, anti-commercial, elitist principles, which had presided over the organization of the event from the outset, were challenged by artists who chose to organize themselves independently of their countries of origin, working together, participating in the same exhibitions, in the same contemporary art circuit, etc. The Biennale was to be a major event in the history of contemporary art. The organizers therefore believed that there was no longer any reason to divide the artists by country. In exchange, the emphasis was placed on "teamwork and collective works"¹⁰.

Therefore, following the indications of the organizers, Christian Boltanski, Jean Le Gac and Gina Pane carried out a joint project entitled *Concession in perpetuity*. The three artists each had an intervention in nature, the photographic documentation of which was later presented on the site of the Biennale, along with elements brought back. This kind of project corresponds quite well to what the official history of the Biennale de Paris chose to retain from the event¹¹.

However, this story overlooks all the forms of protest that accompanied the Paris Biennale from 1969 onwards. For example, one of the things that marked this edition were demonstrations by artists against it. One of them led to the ransacking of some of the Biennale's exhibition halls and to the creation of a

spontaneous workshop for making posters and banners, inside the Palais Galliera, one of the show's venues. Another event saw artists parade in disguise as South American generals and a large banner was hung on the façade of the Palais de Tokyo, with the following slogan: "Biennale de Paris = Biennale de Pourris"¹² (rotten biennale). Some of the most radical artists of the Jeune Peinture Collective even decided to organize a counter-biennial at the Cité Universitaire, under the title "Biennale internationale art et révolution", in order to wrest from the harmful influence of the Paris Biennale, a number of artists reputed to be progressive. In fact, for many politicized artists of the time, this exhibition represented a means used by the State to thwart any protest by instrumentalizing it and by building a clientele of artists accomplices¹³.

The Paris Biennale in 1971

The Paris Biennale radically changed direction in 1971, when Jacques Lassaigne gave way to Georges Boudaille, a very politically committed art critic¹⁴. The new Delegate General declared:

It is not enough to give young people a voice; their voice only resonates if it is heard. It is therefore important that the impulses be channeled and coordinated so that the public, whatever its level of familiarity with contemporary art, can if possible appreciate and at least understand the motivations and possible repercussions of the approaches presented (Boudaille, 1971, non-paginated).

That year, the Biennale thus attempted to reconcile international contemporary art with strong oppositions to the role of the State in artistic creation. The 1971 Biennale tried to play on both sides: by exhibiting the international avant-garde, as it was increasingly defined by the New York art market (Conceptual Art, Land Art, Minimal Art, etc.) and by giving an important place to the actors of the French art world. Another change, which had the ambition of democratizing the Biennale, was to leave the Palais de Tokyo and organize it at the Parc Floral du Bois de Vincennes; with the idea that families would spend the day there, while visiting the greenhouses. The creation of an ephemeral structure, due to the young architect Jean Nouvel, included modular exhibition rooms, as well as documentation or conference rooms.

The exhibition was organized in four sections: the "concept of art", "photo realism", "interventions" and an unnamed section designed to present what did not fit into any of the other categories (including works from countries that still had traditional practices, such as oil painting¹⁵). An additional, informal section was dedicated to Mail Art.

In parallel to these sections, and in order to open the 1971 Biennale to protest forms, Georges Boudaille invited seven young art critics to put together their own program. After much discussion, five of these critics decided not to present their "little list of favorite artists", but to produce a common proposal following two principles: 1. refusal of all critical selection; 2. exclusion from the usual privilege of the institutional avant-garde. For these five critics, the idea was to invite any person or group of people (visual artists, filmmakers, theater people, architects, musicians of all kinds) to participate in the Biennale. In addition to the presentation of their work, the participants would have the opportunity to take the floor to explain their work to the public, if they wished to do so¹⁶. This proposal was eventually refused by Boudaille. The critics in question¹⁷ intended to question the very foundations of artistic choices as they were made, often for obscure reasons, in the field of institutional contemporary art (which was in the process of being established as such). The problem came from the difficulty to reconcile irreconcilable positions: between avant-garde and mass diffusion; between politicization of contents and institutionalization (and thus isolation) of the field of contemporary art. Among the most curious positions

is that of the French group Supports/Surfaces, which agreed to participate in Paris Biennale, but denounced in the catalogue the appropriation of art by a repressive and commercial system, and chose not to present artworks (Dampérat, 2000: 176-177). The critical accounts of this 1971 Biennale return at lengths to these contradictions¹⁸.

The Politicization of the Paris Biennale, 1973-1975

In 1973 the Paris Biennale was marked by major organizational problems: part of the selection committee, composed of art critics, decided to resign collectively, in order to express its refusal to make choices. The preparation was therefore complicated, torn between, on the one hand, the will to give a more important place to politicized artists and, on the other hand, the will to report on the evolution of international contemporary art. The previous year, Georges Boudaille had visited both Venice Biennale and the Documenta, and he was convinced that the latter heralded a paradigm shift for contemporary art (Boudaille, 1971, non-paginated). All this explains why in Paris there was a simultaneous presentation of politicized artists (from South America or communist countries) and a section on "Individual Mythologies" by Western artists. At the same time, the irruption of militant video, with the Telewissen Gruppe (making a videotape with the public, retransmitting and discussing it), responded to the idea of short-circuiting the old habits of the art world.

Two years later, video had become ubiquitous (among 28 of the 124 participants), but this time it came from artists from more traditional art forms (painting, sculpture, installation, performance¹⁹). In his presentation of the 1975 Biennale, Georges Boudaille links the presence of numerous artists expressing themselves through cinema and video with the participation of the Association of Peasant Artists of the Houhsien district, who were exhibiting for the first time outside People's Republic of China; but also with the presence of a significant number of female artists (25 out of 123 artists), which was reflected in an article by Lucy Lippard in the catalogue. The latter's position was to consider art as a reflection of society: as a conglomerate of diverse interests and communities, each with its own interests and trying to impose itself on others. There was no discussion of "class struggle" in the traditional European Marxist mode, but of its "micro-political" adaptation to questions of "differences" (class, sexual orientation, gender, race, etc²⁰). The objectives of the 1975 Paris Biennale were to succeed in building a place of resistance to the world of profit and to the unilateral domination of contemporary art in the "American" style. In the words of Georges Boudaille:

We want to ignore all segregations, religions, genders and geographical, cultural and political borders. (...) Among a whole set of criteria, artists are appreciated according to the general evolution of art on an international scale, but also according to their originality and personality, their previous work, their ability to resist influences and develop a new form of expression (Boudaille, 1975).

At the same time, with this observation of the geographic-political enlargement of the limits of artistic expression, Boudaille noted the development of forms of expression resulting from Conceptual Art, Process Art, forms using landscape, environments of extreme dimensions, "Primary Structures", handicraft forms of expression, new forms of realism, Sociological Art, Body Art, etc. His conclusion was quite interesting:

The survey we have carried out reveals, through the diversity of expressions, a phenomenon of internationalization that is not new (...). What we deplore is that this phenomenon of internationalization rejects in their isolation artists who pursue an approach linked to traditional or national modes of expression, hence the low representation of Latin American, African and Indian artists (*Ibidem*).

The 1977 Paris Biennale and the emergence of a postmodern artistic paradigm in France

The last words of the introduction to the catalogue of the 10th Biennale in 1977 show that the ambitions of the early days in terms of cultural policy had not completely disappeared:

We have no complexes about the Venice Biennale, despite its scale, nor about Documenta 6 in Kassel. Paris cannot carry out retrospective overviews of Venice, but concentrates on a "Recent tendencies" part to give a more lively, more current, urgent image of it. Documenta has lost some of the theoretical rigor and audacity that made it so powerful. In Paris, we are left with logic, clarity, and the power of improvisation. Paris is widely open to artists from everywhere and puts at their service the means in its possession, so they can express themselves in complete freedom (Boudaille, 1977: 16).

After having been the site of Malraux's version of French universalism, and then the site of the confrontation between third world cultures and international contemporary art, the Paris Biennale at the end of the 1970s became the site of the contestation of certainties stemming from modernity, and even a site for the affirmation of what was about to be termed "postmodernity". The signs of this transformation are very clear in the catalogue of the 1977 edition:

Today, the sometimes disconcerting evolution of art is a phenomenon common to countries that have reached technological age in a liberal economic system. A whole part of the world escapes this process or refuses it for various reasons. Faced with this situation, the Biennale wants to be more than a cultural expansion enterprise, it wants to be a place of reflection, fueled by a vast permanent investigation, through a particular and independent network of informants whose decisive role in the very conception of our exhibition must be underlined (*Ibidem*: 14)

English critic Gerald Forty's "Reflections on Today's Art in the Context of Paris Biennale", published in the catalogue, is quite enlightening on this point:

I see in today's arts a period of stagnation, of hesitation, without precise direction: a period in which potential exceeds realization (...). Yet this situation did not come about all at once; it is almost the inevitable fallout of the years of great creativity and confidence at the beginning of the century, and is linked to the questioning of scholars, philosophers, economists and intellectuals in general. Unlike our immediate predecessors, we are by no means certain that we have all the answers (...) (Forty, 1977: 17).

These questions were echoed by remarks by Catherine Millet, the editor-in-chief of *Artpress*, about globalization no longer seen solely as a sign of Anglo-Saxon hegemony, but as a standardization of practices: "What will happen when artists everywhere in the world will find only mirrors or copies of their own work?" (Millet, 1977: 23).

There were far fewer politicized interventions at the 1977 Paris Biennale, than in 1973 or 1975. Moreover, some of the political proposals were not without ambiguities, such as those of the many South American artists (they had a special section reserved for them). The ambiguity for the South Americans stems from the fact that the selection was not made by European curators, nor even by dissident political refugees, but by the director of the Montevideo Museum of Fine Arts; thus by someone who could be suspected of being sympathetic with the regimes in place. There had even been a polemic on this subject, launched by Gabriel García Márquez, in an open letter published in *Opus International* (Anonymous, 1978: 77).

In retrospect, perhaps the most noteworthy point of the 1977 Biennale is the way in which symptoms of a return to painting and to Great Art could be discernible, as was the case with Gerhard Merz's works, inspired by Mondrian or Pollock. However, the artist who in 1977 was the most symptomatic of this trend

was Anselm Kiefer, who already quoted directly art history, with paintings inspired by Richard Wagner's operas.

The Paris Biennale in 1980 and a return to painting

1980 is an important date in the history of Paris Biennale, since for the first time since its inception in 1959 there was a "real debate" on how French participants should be chosen. Georges Boudaille decided to take a step back and let a committee choose the artists. This committee was composed of art critics of all tendencies, museum curators, artists and teachers²¹. Although the committee's debates were not public, some of the members chose to comment on them in a collective interview published by *Opus International*²². What emerges from the discussions is, first of all, the unanimously shared observation of the end of neo-avant-gardes. As art critic Jean-Luc Chalumeau said: "We are brought back to the idea that there is no longer an avant-garde and that this notion is decidedly outdated (...)". Another critic, Anne Tronche, added that the works the committee had in its hands showed more the "end of an era" ("a conclusion to a situation that has evolved over the last ten years") than to "signs of a change" to come. The committee reviewed nearly 600 applications, as that year artists were encouraged to submit an application; even art school graduates. The counterpart of this very large "opening" was, according to the members of the committee, the confrontation with a multitude of epigones of "stars of the art market of the time". At the end of the day, in spite of numerous (worried) statements on the return to painting in the catalogue, of the 25 French artists chosen by the committee of the 1980 Paris Biennale, there were very few painters: barely three or four²³.

The 1982 Biennale: a first crisis

The rise to power of the Socialists in France in 1981 had the opposite effect on Paris Biennale it had on other art institutions in France. In fact, from that moment on, the Biennale, which until then had been a central place for contemporary art in France, started being marginalized by the rise of all the state-supported institutions, with which it was in fact competing: the FRACs, art centers, public commissions, FIACRE, etc. Throughout its history, the success of Paris Biennale had been linked to its isolation and to the idea that it represented a space of freedom and resistance within society, and this was no longer the case.

In 1982 the Biennale was held on the premises of Paris' Museum of Modern Art, the *École des Beaux-Arts* and the Centre Pompidou. However, given the general trend of inflation in institutional initiatives and the number of places dedicated to contemporary art in the early 1980s, the Biennale had visibly lost its prestige and had to be content with the presentation of very young artists or art forms marginalized within institutions (video art, film, sound art, photography, etc.). As Georges Boudaille said diplomatically in his introduction to the catalogue: "The young artists that visitors to the Paris Biennale will discover this year are for the most part shown in Paris and nowhere else. Few are indeed presented in Venice and Kassel" (Boudaille, 1982: 16). This was a delicate way of acknowledging that none of the artists seen on the international contemporary art circuit, in Venice or Kassel, bothered to come to Paris. In the realm of contemporary art, this absence of stars nevertheless led to an extremely interesting and original initiative: a section devoted to the presentation of independent spaces, self-managed by artists (at the Centre Pompidou).

With the exception of this section, what struck commentators most was not the committed character of the artists, nor the provocative, mysterious or incomprehensible nature of their practices, but rather their conformism: the "absence of critical radicalism being perhaps the most striking feature of the works exhibited"²⁴. One had to acknowledge the fact that "all young artists in France have received the same

artistic culture and have learned (...) that avant-gardes follow one another and take the opposite side of the one before (Francblin, 1982: 44). All this is not due to chance: the success of a few star artists²⁵ on the market and in a few major international exhibitions had the effect of encouraging a large number of younger artists to make "by-products" of these "stars". At the 1982 Biennale, for example, young German painters (like Stephan Dilleuth) "played" with the Neue Wilde, young Italians (like Pietro Manai) did the Transavanguardia, young French artists tried their hands at American-style Bad Painting, etc. As Catherine Millet said at the time, in a rather disillusioned tone:

What's the point of the Paris Youth Biennale, the biennial for those under 35, when the rush of museums means that one can have a retrospective at 30, when it is generally agreed that most recent 'audacities' have a little bit of déjà vu, when 'young people' are discovering a massive number of antique dealers' vocations, when the end of the avant-garde is proclaimed in all the circles hitherto devoted to research? (Millet, 1982: 13).

The problem is that throughout its history, Paris Biennale had the function of providing an alternative for young artists in the face of the hegemony of the art market. This system functioned perfectly well until the crisis created by the conjunction of the market boom, the return to painting and the inflation of the support systems for young artists created by the Lang Ministry.

The Paris Biennale of 1982 was the occasion of one of the first qualitative visitors' surveys in France. It gave the opportunity to note that the problems of this event were not limited to the choice of works presented, but extended into the composition of the public. The survey carried out showed that the public of Paris Biennale was mainly coming from the art, fashion, media and advertising worlds. Half of the visitors regularly read art magazines and about 95% of them visited an average of nine museums and fifteen galleries per year (knowing that the average museum attendance rate for the entire French population at the time was 0.9% [Moulin, 1992: 216]). Paris Biennale could easily be seen as a "ghetto of contemporary art" (and this is one of the arguments that led to its disappearance).

Whatever the case, the 1982 Biennale's financial outcome was negative enough for the General Delegate, Georges Boudaille, to propose the foundation of a "New Paris Biennale" with greater ambitions and more means or premises in order to avoid the "end-of-year art school exhibition" syndrome.

In 1985, a New Paris Biennale

The New Paris Biennale was initially planned for 1984 and was considered a Last Chance Biennial before disappearing. In order to give himself all the means to succeed, Boudaille decided to completely reform the rules (Boudaille, 1985: 9-10). First of all, there was no longer an age limit: the oldest artist was 90 years old; the change was such, indeed, that only a third of the participants were under 35 in 1985. Another change was the location. The State and the City of Paris, who were the main partners of the project, made the Grande Halle de la Villette available to the Biennale. There was therefore an immense space, to be occupied by a hundred or so artists. The work involved in renovating the Hall, as well as insurance, transport, production costs, etc. were obviously very important. But, to cover the considerable increase in costs, Boudaille obtained from his sponsors the possibility of multiplying the budget by 5 (from 5 million francs to 27 million²⁶).

In order to succeed in his goals, Boudaille also decided to question the artists' selection process. Indeed, until 1982, the Biennale de Paris was composed of a series of national committees, meeting on specific themes, often related to specific mediums (photography, video, film, dance, fine arts...). There were at least a dozen committees each time and therefore the choices were often quite "uneven" in quality.

Faced with this, the selection of artists and works in 1985 was made by a single committee composed of only five members whose skills were supposedly outstanding: Georges Boudaille, Alanna Heiss, Kasper König, Achille Bonito-Oliva and Gérald Gassiot-Talabot. And in fact, as could have been expected, the co-curators chose just about everything that could be seen in the “return to painting” blockbuster exhibitions of the early 1980s (Zeitgeist, Westkunst, 60-80, Avanguardia-Transavanguardia, A New Spirit in Painting, Von hier aus, etc.). With more space, money, curators and star artists, Paris Biennale intended to compete with such exhibitions.

Unfortunately, it was not that simple, since the gathering of star curators generated a confrontation of points of view that were often irreconcilable. For some (Kasper König and Alanna Heiss) the Biennale should have been an opportunity to commission new works from a small number of artists; works that would have taken into account the specificities of La Villette. For others, such as Achille Bonito-Oliva, it was very important to defend the autonomy of pictorial works by isolating them in closed boxes of the white cube type. On another level, some curators emphasized the need to keep up with current events, to present works that had recently appeared on the international scene, while others still saw this exhibition as an ideal opportunity to rehabilitate certain artists.

All these discussions led to compromises that satisfied no one. For example, it was decided to commission *in situ* interventions from specialists in the genre (Daniel Buren, Niele Toroni, Michelangelo Pistoletto, Mario Merz...), but on the other hand, more than three kilometers of picture railings were built to clearly delineate the painters' spaces. This distribution, the result of a compromise between irreconcilable positions, did not satisfy anyone. The best symptom of Boudaille's disarray is contained in a remark he made for *Artpress* magazine, in which he explained: "We wanted to make a free exhibition, without any commercial concerns; neither a big theoretical machine (like Documenta in 72), nor a themed exhibition, nor a fair, nor a tourist appointment" (Boudaille, 1985:7).

What is interesting is that all five Committee members said in interviews that they were not satisfied with the compromises they had made. In this regard, one need only read the assessment of the selection phase, written by Gérald Gassiot-Talabot:

There remains a small core of international artists, regularly found across borders, on whom consensus is almost monotonous. In their case, merit goes hand in hand with good management of their affairs, a sense of international contacts, and frequent contact with decision-makers. The French (and foreign residents in France) are slowly entering this game which has become a necessary component of modern strategies (Gassiot-Talabot, 1985: 12).

In the Biennale's catalogue, Alanna Heiss says the same thing. When asked how the Biennale de Paris stands in relation to other mega-exhibitions of the moment, she speaks of "show-biz", regretting the attitude of curators making a career out of organizing exhibitions, each one more ambitious than the next (Heiss, 1985: 30). And in fact, this is the impression given by Paris Biennale in 1985: an exhibition seeking to position itself (and through it the French art scene) within an International Contemporary Art System that was increasingly elusive and increasingly uncontrollable by anyone (Francblin, 1985: 6).

Whatever the reason for the uneasiness at the time of its conception, we cannot say that the operation was a success: as envisioned, the budget for the New Paris Biennale in 1985 reached 27 million francs. It was a considerable budget to which the State, the City of Paris, local authorities and some private partners contributed. This sum was comparable to the budget of all the art centers of France put together

at the time (Moulin, 1995: 231). The problem, of course, was that not only did the New Paris Biennale not break even, but it didn't even have a very large attendance (about 40,000 visitors), which was a big difference from the blockbuster exhibitions of the time, which all had more than 100,000 visitors (spending much less money). Not to mention the Documenta, which with a budget of the same order received 380,000 visitors (almost ten times more than the New Paris Biennale). Another aggravating factor was that the audience was not very different from that of previous Paris Biennales (i.e. it was largely made up of people from the art world or art students). Finally, critical reactions – including within the specialized art press – were more than mixed in the face of an event that looked far too much like a pale copy of most of the major international exhibitions of the early 1980s (without much novelty).

After the end of Paris Biennale

The idea of having a major biennial of contemporary art in France disappeared at that time, but it returned a little later, when the Ministry of Culture decided to use the provisioned funds for the promotion of other comparable events, but in the provinces, such as Lyons Biennale (whose first edition was inaugurated in 1991). The history of the Lyons Biennale is in fact linked to that of the Paris Biennale, but also to the evolution of the decentralization policy (set up with the socialist government from the early 1980s) and to the city of Lyons's desire to change its image in the 1980s and 1990s. Other biennials established in the provinces have been supported by the French government since the 1990s; in particular the Biennale d'art et de design de Saint-Étienne and more recently the Biennale de Rennes, whose theme concerns the work world.

In the early 2000s, the Ministry of Culture, under the presidency of Jacques Chirac, sought to revive the great and glorious history of the centrality of the Parisian art scene and created "La Force de l'art". This triennial event, which in the end had only three editions (2006-2009-2012) and never met with public success despite its presentation at the Grand Palais and at the Palais de Tokyo, provides a kind of (provisional) conclusion to the question of biennales in France²⁷.

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Notas

* Professor at the University of Paris 8 (France), where he is also member of the Aesthetics, Practice and Art History research team (EPHA) of the Laboratory of Image Arts and Contemporary Art (AIAC). E-mail: jerome.glicenstein@univ-paris8.fr.

¹ For the circumstances surrounding the creation of the Venice Biennale, see in particular L. Alloway (1968).

² This return to a State investment in cultural issues was far from unanimous at the time. On this point, see G. Monnier (1995: 335-339).

³ The new Biennial resulted from an association between the State, the City of Paris and the department of the Seine; it was called "Manifestation Biennale et Internationale des Jeunes Artistes". It was inaugurated on October 2, 1959.

⁴ Before the War, Cogniat had been director of the *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* and the Galerie Beaux-Arts, and, in this capacity, he contacted Paul Eluard who organized the legendary *International Exhibition of Surrealism* (1938). See L. Kachur (2001: 22-24).

⁵ Raymond Cogniat was Senior Inspector of Fine Arts (from 1943 to 1966), art critic for the newspaper *Le Figaro* (and one of the founders of AICA), member of the board of directors of the Association française d'action artistique and curator of the French section of the Sao Paulo Biennale.

⁶ On Raymond Cogniat's work in Venice and São Paulo, see B. Piniau *et al.* (1998: 94-97). On French cultural action abroad in the post-war years, see Centre Georges Pompidou (1977: 831-847).

⁷ Lassaigne, like Cogniat, was a civil servant. He was at the time curator at MAMVP and was responsible for French participation at the Venice and São Paulo biennials during the 1950s and 1960s.

⁸ On BMPT at the Biennale de Paris, see C. Gintz (1986: 157-158).

⁹ See also, B. Buchloh (1990: 139) and L. Lippard (1997: 30).

¹⁰ In the words of Jacques Lassaigne (1969: 11).

¹¹ For a description of this project, see G. Gatelliere (1969: 44-45). See also C. Legrand (1991: 19-20).

¹² On the contestation of Paris Biennale and the "Counter Biennale", see Paren and Perrot (1983: 101-102).

¹³ On the political and artistic agitation in France in 1969, see H. Bellet (1996: 480).

¹⁴ Georges Boudaille was an art critic for *Les Lettres françaises*, the cultural magazine of the French Communist Party. He remained at the head of the Paris Biennale until 1985.

¹⁵ The confrontation of these more classical practices with the rest of the exhibition created a kind of dissonance noted by some commentators: "(...) we do not really understand the presence here of this option, which is readily taken to be the "catch-all" of the Biennial, a jumble in which vestiges from another time seem to recompose in miniature the Salon des Indépendants" (Pavie, 1971:52).

¹⁶ The full statement of the proposal is contained in the article by Michel Claura (1971: 100-101).

¹⁷ Bernard Borgeaud, Michel Claura, Patrick d'Elme, Olivier Nanteau and Philippe Sers.

¹⁸ See notably Alain Jouffroy (1971: 49). On the confusion between different forms of figurative painting, see Jean-Louis Pradel (1986: 141).

¹⁹ Marina Abramovic, Christian Boltanski, VALIE EXPORT, Barbara Leisgen, Urs Lüthi, Antoni Muntadas, Keith Sonnier, etc.

²⁰ See Lucy R. Lippard (1975, non-paginated).

²¹ Among others: Maiten Bouisset, Geneviève Breerette, Jean-Luc Chalumeau, Catherine Millet, Giovanni Joppolo, Bernard Lamarche-Vadel, Jean-Louis Pradel, Anne Tronche; who all, in various capacities, played a fairly important role on the French art scene at the time.

²² The debate is transcribed by Jean-Luc Chalumeau (1980: 16-21).

²³ The statements by the art critics of the committee, and a few others, are partly recorded in the catalogue. See "Commission des critiques d'art", in 11^e Biennale de Paris, exhibition catalogue, Paris, 1980, pp. 20-44.

²⁴ In the words of the art critic Catherine Francblin (1982: 8).

²⁵ Notably Julian Schnabel, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Anselm Kiefer, Markus Lüpertz, Georg Baselitz, Francesco Clemente, Enzo Cucchi, Mimmo Paladino and others.

²⁶ Claude Mollard, the director for Fine Arts at the time in the Ministry of Culture (who was the main partner of the event), nevertheless expressed his doubts about the success of Georges Boudaille's wager as early as 1984, even considering that "it would be necessary to change the curator regularly" (Mollard, 1986: 265).

²⁷ Shortly before that, the artist Alexandre Gurita had taken possession of the name "Biennale de Paris". He decided to turn it into a work of art that consists of organizing new Paris Biennales, as if the event had never been interrupted. Two new Biennales thus took place, in 2004 and 2006 (numbered XIV and XV to designate their link with the original Paris Biennale). These events nevertheless function in a rather different, less formal, way, and with the idea of bringing together a group of mainly French artists and theorists.

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