



A recurring occurrence: biennials and perennial exhibitions of contemporary art
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Gabriel Ferreira Zacarias*
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Abstract

The text presents the main historiographical and theoretical guidelines of the thematic issue, briefly introducing the addressed themes and its different approaches. It equally suggests a possible reading approach of the collected essays.

Keywords

Biennials. documenta. Exhibitions history. Global turn.

Resumo

O texto apresenta as principais linhas historiográficas e teóricas que orientam a organização do dossiê, bem como uma síntese das abordagens e dos temas tratados, oferecendo ao leitor algumas sugestões de percurso através do material reunido.

Palavras-chave

Bienais. documenta. História das exposições. Virada global.

Approximately one year after the publication of the call for articles for this dossier, the COVID-19 pandemic in Brazil has reached disastrous levels for the country, deepening a crisis that is also affecting the culture sector dramatically. Postponed to September of 2021, the 34th São Paulo Biennial may have its inauguration dates changed once again, further extending a gap that may well exceed that of 1998-2002, caused at the time by the controversial 'Rediscovery Exhibit'¹. Here in Brazil, but also abroad, we have not heard from the institutions promoting biennials and other periodic contemporary art exhibitions critical reflections of the current scenario and the challenges for the future of megaexhibitions². In the recent past, the experience of institutional crises has led cultural agents and curators to rethink the following out of these events. In 2008, Ivo Mesquita even proposed a 'quarantine' during the 28th São Paulo Biennial, organizing an 'archivistic' exhibition, accompanied by a series of meetings and debates to discuss the biennial model and propose reformulations for the São Paulo Biennial Foundation. However, these proposals to rethink the biennial model ended up falling by the wayside, and once the crisis had passed, the system went back to running as usual. The current crisis is unprecedented, the return to 'normality' might be chimerical, and the future of exhibitions is an open question, which will demand that new criticisms be raised.

The purpose of this dossier is not to discuss biennials 'in the age of pandemics,' in other words, to discuss the crisis's specific effects on mega-exhibitions. Still, we do propose taking advantage of the current hiatus to survey existing thinking about periodic contemporary art exhibitions and their history. It is worth remembering that the 'biennialization' phenomenon has been mentioned repeatedly in recent decades. At the dawn of the 'global turn,' the multiplication of biennials was hailed as a form of decentralization of the art circuit. Hans Belting, for example, highlighted the opening of new geopolitical axes which, according to his understanding, marked a break with the geography of art implicit in modernist historiography (Belting, Buddensieg, Weibel, 2013). But the primarily market-oriented dynamics of this expansion quickly became evident, its movement following the lines of expansion of globalized capitalism, and it would be frivolous today to continue conceiving of it only from the perspective of an epistemological rupture. On the other hand, viewing mega-exhibitions as solely marketing events would be reductive too. Not only because it is territory in constant dispute – some authors speak of biennials of resistance (Marchart, 2014), others propose that biennials are able to serve as both "spaces of capital" and "spaces of hope" (Kompatsiaris, 2014: 78). But also because the large exhibitions do in fact possess epistemological functions, affecting the field of art research. One can see how periodic exhibitions have historically served as central mediators in the recognition of artists and trends, effectively screening for the canon and influencing historiography. This mediating function took on more urgency, perhaps after the biennialization of the global turn, when the major exhibitions assumed the task of reviewing the canon and promoting a critique of traditional art history. The features that the new history of art has assumed since then consequently have a direct relationship (and one not yet sufficiently analyzed) with global mega-exhibitions. As Gardner and Green noted:

At the beginning of the 21st century, a series of biennials across the globe... tried to redefine the existing canon of modern and contemporary art, moving back and forth rather than through the terrain of the present and, at least equally important, redefining the public's involvement with art itself, as something intertwined with politics and geography, through complex public programs that emerged along with the exhibitions themselves (Green, Gardner, 2016: 275).

Thinking about the current place occupied by periodic exhibitions thus implies considering two offshoots that emerged in recent decades in the context of epistemological renewal and which marked the practice and research of art: the history of exhibitions and the studies of global art. The texts present in this dossier are related to this context, presenting great geographical and temporal reach. Biennials on all

continents are examined, in recent and historical editions, either monographically or comparatively. Their authors come from different countries and present varied approaches. In general, the dossier could be organized around two planned axes. The first, dedicated to issues related to biennials and periodic exhibitions within the new dynamics of the globalized system of contemporary art, such as the geopolitics inherent to the emergence of biennials outside the old artistic centers, such as the Southeast Asian Biennials surveyed by Leonor Veiga or the exhibition inSite in Mexico, analyzed by Luiz Sérgio Oliveira. Simultaneous to questionings of the role of biennials and other periodic mega-exhibitions in recent decades and the process of forming a global arts system was the advent of studies and publications on exhibitions, for example, in works by historians such as *Exhibitions that made Art History* by Bruce Altshuler (2008; 2013), and editorial projects such as the collection "Exhibition Histories"³. In this emerging field of exhibition history, a genealogy was created notably linked to the canons of art history, characterized by reference to historical moments and remarkable curatorial cases (Cavalcanti, et al., 2016; Cypriano, Marins, 2016), with an emphasis on mega-exhibitions with international recognition (in the case of Brazil, the "Biennial of Anthropophagy," for instance) (Lagnado; Lafuente, 2015)⁴. The origin of this chronology can undeniably be traced to the Venice Biennale, while the Havana Biennial would mark the beginning of the process of expanding biennials into regions previously considered peripheral to the international contemporary art circuit (Niemojewski, 2010) and - although these geopolitical hierarchies have been questioned on different occasions - documenta continues to be reaffirmed as 'the mother of all curatorial statements' (Esche, 2013: 9). This statement refers not only to the exhibition's centrality in the contemporary discussion of aesthetics, but also to the politicization of debates in more recent curatorial projects, an issue also addressed by Gabriel Zacarias in the analysis of the 13th documenta and Nora Sternfeld when speaking, beyond Kassel, about boycotts promoted by cultural agents and exhibition organizers.

Another vector aligns historiographical approaches with canons already established in the history of exhibitions. The Venice Biennale, the oldest of them all, created in 1895, and as such the reference for the periodic exhibitions, has its recent conjunctures analyzed by Angélica Vásquez. Once the most important center of modern art, Paris hosted, from 1959 to 1985, biennials geared toward 'young artists,' promoting the new avant-garde, especially after the 7th Paris Biennale in 1970, as highlighted by Jérôme Glicenstein. While, from the 1970s on, periodic exhibitions came to be associated with contemporary production, previously, in the immediate post-war period, they were responsible for promoting abstraction as a 'universal language.' In writing about documenta, Nanne Buurman highlights the role of the modernist myth in concealing the institutional continuities of Nazism. The influence of American cultural diplomacy also factors in this process, a phenomenon similarly addressed in the writings of Marcos Rosa and German Nunez, with respective emphasis on the presentations of 'abstract expressionism' and 'technological art' at the São Paulo Biennials. The Biennial and documenta also appear in the article by Tiago Machado, related through the interventions by the artist Daniel Buren, which stand in counterpoint to the emergence of the curator-author and the exhibition as work of art.

Closing the set of published texts are contributions that deal with some leap year discussions. Joaquín Barriendos addresses the Havana Biennale from the geopolitical perspective of the magazine *Third Text*. Writing about the Havana and Johannesburg Biennials, Juliana Caffé discusses the origins of periodic exhibitions and the genealogies of the history of exhibitions, a subject also discussed by Vinicius Spricigo in an article on the representation of Brazilian artistic production at international exhibitions in Great Britain. Although the texts fall within the previous axes, it is possible to draw a transversal line between them, linked through epistemological discussions situated in the current context by Mirtes Marins in a text that deals with decoloniality and the pandemic. Certainly, other vectors and transversals can be traced between the themes and approaches presented in this dossier. As such, we invite the reader to

explore the various possible paths of reading and establish their own relationships. We hope that such reflections, historiographical and current, can promote a critical reflection on the contemporary art biennials and periodic exhibitions rooted in the academic context.

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Notas

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¹ In the year of 2000, many events were programmed to celebrate the anniversary of the 'discovery' of Brazil by Portuguese colonizers. Also known as 'Brazil 500 Years', the exhibition was curated by Nelson Aguilar (commissioner of the 22nd and 23rd editions of São Paulo Biennial). It took place at the Ibirapuera Park, in São Paulo, between April 7 and September 23 2000, and was visited by 1.8 million people. It was the largest art exhibition ever organized in Brazil, occupying a great part of the complex planned by Niemeyer at the Ibirapuera Park, a total of 60 thousand square meters, which consumed a large amount of private sector resources allocated to cultural projects. The 25th Biennial originally foreseen to take place that year, was thus postponed due to the resulting lack of funds and institutional apparatus.

² The debate focused on the Venice Biennale, organized in 2020 by Marco Baravalle and Vittoria Martini under the provisional title *Inhabiting the void*, was an exceptional case, which ended up confirming the rule due to its institutional independence. *Covering the Distance*, defined after the postponement of the Architecture Biennial, when *Biennale* announced an exhibition of documents mainly from the Archive of Contemporary Arts, as a strategy to fill the void of the Central Pavilion in the Venice Giardini. The title was later changed to *The Venice Biennale in Pandemic Times*. See the Forum of Italian Contemporary Art. Available at: <http://www.forumartecontemporanea.it/focus-ii-the-venice-biennale-in-pandemic-times>.

³ Collection started with Rattemeyer, Christian; et al. *Exhibiting the New Art: 'Op Losse Schroeven' and When Attitudes Become Form'* 1969. London: Afterall Books, 2010.

⁴ For a critical examination of the privilege decided upon at the 24th Biennial, see: (Spricigo, 2016).

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