

From Biennale to Biennials. Introduction

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In 2000, René Block organized *Das Lied von der Erde/The Song of the Earth* at the Museum Fridericianum, an exhibition centered on eight biennials (Havana, Istanbul, Johannesburg, Kwangju, Lyon, Pittsburgh, São Paulo and Sydney) symbolically represented through a selection of artists (Block 2000). The exhibition was accompanied by the conference *Biennials in Dialogue* (3-6 August 2000), which sought to foster debate on biennials by broadening the spectrum of invited biennials to those of Berlin, Taipei, Lima, Shanghai, Ljubljana, London, Dakar and the itinerant Manifesta. This conference soon became a recurring and itinerant event, taking place every two years in a different city (Frankfurt in 2002, Singapore in 2006 and Shanghai in 2008) in concomitance with a biennial.¹

Biennials in Dialogue is part of a dense chronology of meetings on biennials that unfolded at a relentless pace during the first decade of the 2000s. These forums for debate, alongside the numerous publications and research that emerged during those years, illustrate how these exhibitions began to receive unprecedented attention, becoming an object of study.² This led, on the one hand, to the coining of terminology to enable reference to the proliferation of this exhibition format and its characteristics and, on the other hand, to try to decipher and understand the biennial phenomenon through, for example, its quantification or the identification of groups and typologies of biennials.

Thus, while concepts such as biennialization or biennial boom gained popularity, expressions like ‘mega-exhibitions’ or ‘large-scale international exhibitions’ emerged to encompass artistic events that, despite not being held every two years (as some were triennials, quadrennials or quinquennials),

1 Manifesta 4, the 1st Singapore Biennial and the 7th Shanghai Biennial, respectively. Additionally, 2014 saw *Biennials: Prospect and Perspectives* (Centre for Art and Media Karlsruhe), a conference part of the Biennials in Dialogue series, despite no longer retaining its original name or periodicity (Weibel 2015, 2-4).

2 Among the most outstanding are the special issue *Biennials of Manifesta Journal* (2003-04) and the books *The Manifesta Decade. Debates on Contemporary Art Exhibitions and Biennials* (Vanderlinden, Filipovic 2005) and *The Biennial Reader* (Filipovic, Van Hal, Øvstebø 2010).

were nonetheless integral to the biennial phenomenon (Enwezor 2003-04, 94-119; Jiménez 2004; Niemojewski 2010, 91-2). Furthermore, efforts were made to grasp the scale of this phenomenon through the compilation of these exhibitions (Belting, Buddensieg, Weibel 2013, 100-7; Kolb, Patel 2018, 15-34). And, at the same time, attempts to classify them according to their foundational motives, objectives, organizational structures, modes of development or sources of funding multiplied. This is evidenced not only by the work of scholars (Blyder 2004, 151; Van Hal 2010, 20-8) but also by the roundtable discussion *Bienais, bienais, bienais...* organized at the 28th São Paulo Biennial (Mesquita, Cohen 2008, 25).

Indeed, the “biennial fever” – to use the words of Okwui Enwezor (2003-04, 96) – is also evident in initiatives promoted by the biennials themselves, which actively engaged in reflecting on the biennial phenomenon through a wide range of discussion forums. Among these, it is worth mentioning the roundtable *Bienales, Instituciones, relaciones Norte-Sur*, part of the 7th Havana Biennial (2000), which brought Havana, São Paulo, Venice, Gwangju and documenta into dialogue. Or the conference *Where Art Worlds Meet: Multiple Modernities and the Global Salon*, organized shortly after the closing of the 51st Venice Biennale (2005), which was dedicated to examining the past, present and future of this exhibition format.

In this cartography of events and studies on biennials, *To Biennial or not to Biennial?* (2009), a conference held in response to the proposal to establish a biennial in the Norwegian city of Bergen, stands out. Indeed, in light of the proliferation of the biennial model, the idea was to create a space for reflection from which to evaluate, *a posteriori*, the creation or not of a biennial in Bergen (Filipovic, Van Hal, Øvstebø 2010, 6-8).³ Furthermore, the intention to critically contextualize the biennial phenomenon is also evident in the relocation of the ‘biennials archive’, originally conceived within the framework of the 28th São Paulo Biennial and comprising a vast collection of catalogs, from the Pavilhão Ciccillo Matarazzo to the Bergen Kunsthall. Similar to what had been done the previous year in Brazil, a reading room-library was set up in Norway, freely accessible to both the public and researchers, thus acknowledging the value of this ‘biennials archive’ as a source for scholarly study (*To Biennial or not to Biennial?* 2009, 11).⁴

The ‘biennials archive’, along with the roundtable *Bienais, bienais, bienais...*, was part of curators Ivo Mesquita and Ana Paula Cohen’s proposal to shape the 28th São Paulo Biennial into “a platform for the observation and reflection upon the culture and system of biennials within the international art circuit” (2008, 16). This roundtable, together with *Bienales, Instituciones, relaciones Norte-Sur*, *Where Art Worlds Meet: Multiple Modernities and the Global Salon* and *To Biennial or not to Biennial?*, highlights the strong reflexive component of biennials in the wake of the biennial boom.

Such reflexivity, moreover, was already present in previous decades, as evidenced by the *Primeiro Encontro de Organizadores de Bienais Internacionais* in 1981. Promoted by the São Paulo Biennial, this meeting facilitated exchanges among representatives of the biennials of Sydney, Paris, Venice,

³ Ultimately, it was decided to transform the planned biennial into a triennial event, named Bergen Assembly, whose first edition took place in 2013.

⁴ *To Biennial or not to Biennial?*. Event brochure of the International Conference *To Biennial or not Biennial?* (2009, 11).

Medellín and São Paulo, as well as documenta. Over the course of two days (10-11 December), participants presented their respective artistic events and engaged in discussions on theoretical principles and organizational matters. This space for dialogue, along with the resulting decision to establish a permanent association of biennials, serves as further evidence of the ongoing commitment to collectively reflecting on the biennial phenomenon.⁵

Of a similarly reflective nature, though more focused on the specificity of a particular biennial, were the meeting to analyze the 1st Havana Biennial (1984) and the conference *Una nuova Biennale: contestazioni e proposte* of the Venice Biennale (1968). The Havana gathering provided a forum for sharing impressions on the inaugural edition of the Cuban event and for weighing aspects related to the adopted exhibition model (Llanes 2012, 64).⁶ Meanwhile, the Venetian conference, along with the roundtable *Proposte per la Biennale. Una tavola rotonda, un progetto* (1968), served as a moment to determine the course the historic institution should take following the *contestazione* (protest) and to delve into what the Biennale should represent for Venice, Italy and the world (Orzes 2024a).

Indeed, a biennial possesses local, national, continental and international characteristics, meanings and aspirations. Its role at the local or national level may differ from the one it assumes within a broader context, such as the continental one in which it is situated. And, in turn, this may not align with the role it plays at the global level. Additionally, a biennial is not a static entity but a dynamic one, constantly evolving. Consequently, its role within each of these contexts must undergo continuous revision and be analyzed in relation to the artistic, historical and geopolitical contexts of the time.

The various levels that comprise biennials necessitate addressing them from a plurality of perspectives. This diversity is reflected in the numerous approaches to research on these exhibitions. Without claiming to be exhaustive, but rather by way of illustration, it is worth noting that biennials have been analyzed through the lens of their historical context and founding motives, as well as through national participations, artistic trends and the participating artists.⁷ There are also studies that explore them from the history of collecting and the art market, or in relation to contemporary art fairs (Barragán 2020; Mazze Cerchiaro 2023; Ricci, Tavinor 2021). Furthermore, while some researchers have focused on the particular history of a biennial,⁸ others have inquired into their crossed and collective history (Orzes 2024b; Spricigo 2019).

Likewise, the biennial phenomenon has been investigated from a geographical perspective. While the *European Biennial Network* (2007-09) focused on the reality of European biennials, the first World Biennial Forum (*Shifting Gravity*, 2012) centered on Asia as both a context and a continent. The third edition of this international forum was intended to take place in Africa (Mutumba 2015), following its stop in Latin America, where, starting from São Paulo (*How to Make Biennials in Contemporary Times*, 2014), an

5 Arquivo Histórico Wanda Svevo, Fundação Bienal de São Paulo, 01-06791. *Primeiro Encontro de Organizadores de Bienais Internacionais*, São Paulo, 12 December 1981.

6 Instituto de Estudos Brasileiros, Universidade de São Paulo, AAA-AA-019. Amaral, A. "Bienal da Havana, um balanço positivo", *Folha de S. Paulo*, São Paulo, 12 June 1984, 29.

7 Asbury 2006; Konaté 2010; Portinari, Stringa 2019; Ricci, Salveschini 2024

8 Alambert, Canhête 2004; Dulguerova 2023; Marchart 2008; Rocca 2019.

effort was made to shift perspectives toward and from the Global South. In this vein, Anthony Gardner and Charles Green have begun to interrogate the history of these exhibitions from the South, ultimately mapping out a network of biennials that, in the context of the Cold War and through a framework of “critical regionalism”, sought to realign “cultural networks across geopolitical divides” (Gardner, Green 2016, 83).

In addition to the Biennial of the Mediterranean and the India Triennial, among the regionalist biennials were a considerable number of events dedicated to printmaking, such as the Ljubljana Biennial of Graphic Arts, the San Juan Biennial of Latin American Engraving or the Cali American Biennial of Graphic Arts. When these are considered alongside the Santiago American Biennial of Engraving and the Krakow International Biennial of Graphic Arts and, in parallel, the proliferation of photography and sculpture biennials is taken into account, it is possible to appreciate that the biennial phenomenon can also be analyzed through the lens of the technical specialization of these exhibitions.⁹

The Latin American printmaking circuit, developed between the 1960s and 1970s, simultaneously highlights the possibility of examining the biennial phenomenon through specific periods. These include, for instance, the 1950s, marked by the initial dissemination of this exhibition format, the 1970s, which witnessed a transformation of the model, and the 1990s, characterized by an unprecedented proliferation. A chronological approach, in turn, underscores the importance of contextualizing biennials within a specific historical and cultural context. Among the most notable cases is France’s ambition to reclaim its prominence on the international art scene through the Paris Biennial, or the establishment of the Gwangju and Johannesburg biennials at critical moments of social and political transition in South Korea and South Africa (Jean 2023, 64-6; Enwezor 2003-04, 108-9).

In conclusion, biennials can be studied from artistic, historical, temporal, geographical or political perspectives. The interplay of these dimensions, which overlap, intersect and mutually influence one another, makes these exhibitions a phenomenon as fascinating as it is complex, ultimately impossible to fully encompass. This is further evidenced by the fact that, despite the extensive scholarship on biennials in recent years, there remains a prevailing sense that much work is yet to be done; and, in each new forum of debate or publication, the need to continue studying biennials and to gain a deeper understanding of their exhibition phenomenon is repeatedly reaffirmed.

In 2023, the international conference *Dalla Biennale alle biennali. Il desiderio impossibile/From Biennale to Biennials. The Impossible Desire* (Università Ca’ Foscari Venezia) aimed to serve as a further space for dialogue and reflection on biennials, their history and their phenomenon. Bringing together biennials from three continents, over three days (26-28 April), the discussions centered on the cultural and geopolitical ambitions of these exhibitions, their local and global interests, as well as their heterogeneous nature and ever-evolving exhibition format. This book takes the conference as its point of departure, acknowledging the impossible desire to fully encompass the biennial phenomenon, while focusing on

⁹ For example, the Ballarat International Foto Biennale (Australia), the Chennai Photo Biennale (India), the Brighton Photo Biennial (United Kingdom), the Tallinn Photomonth (Estonia), the Vancouver International Sculpture Biennale (Canada), or the Sculpture Quadrennial Riga (Latvia).

the artistic, geopolitical and institutional cartographies that unfold from Venice and São Paulo. Therefore, in this context, the plural 'biennials' refers primarily to these two sister events. However, the multidirectional plots that generate (and cross) Venice and São Paulo mean that the reflection that emerged from the contributions gathered here is not only limited to these two centers but, in comparative and relational terms or as case studies, includes other events, institutions, exhibitions and biennials.

The volume opens with a conversation between Vinicius Spricigo and Ana Magalhães, who delve into the years surrounding the 1st São Paulo Biennial, positioning it at the center of a triangulation formed by the 1922 Modern Art Week, the São Paulo Museum of Modern Art (MAM) and the Venice Biennale. Through their analysis, the two scholars highlight the intricate network of artistic and cultural exchanges between Italy and Brazil, as well as the diplomatic and personal relationships that sustained them. In this dialogue, such relationships shed light on the creation of MAM's collection, while in Marina Barbosa's research, they serve to trace the origins of certain national participations in the São Paulo Biennial. Furthermore, with a constant focus on personal and inter-institutional relations, Barbosa reconstructs the dispute between two prominent figures (Pietro Bardi and Francisco Matarazzo) and two key cultural institutions of São Paulo (MASP and MAM) regarding Brazil's first participation in the Venice Biennale.

Gabriela Saenger Silva presents the archaeology of the educational strategies and discursive practices of the São Paulo Biennial. Through an examination of its first two decades, Silva outlines the organic development of its educational programs and how these initiatives responded to the intention to make the artistic event accessible to a non-specialist audience in a non-hierarchical manner. Maintaining focus on the 1950s and 1960s, Maria de Fátima Morethy Couto delves into the institutional relationship forged between the Pan American Union and the São Paulo Biennial through the figure of José Gómez Sicre. Her analysis of Gómez Sicre's multifaceted involvement in the Brazilian event, of the artists he supported both in São Paulo and in Washington, as well as of the awards conferred, underscores the use of the São Paulo Biennial as an exhibition showcase, a launching platform and a space for artistic validation.

Continuing the analysis of biennials through the lens of the Cold War, Wiktor Komorowski examines the impact that this geopolitical context had on the foundation, development and cessation of the Krakow International Biennial of Graphic Arts. In doing so, Komorowski not only elucidates the underlying reasons behind certain curatorial decisions but also identifies the introduction of martial law in Poland as the beginning of the biennial's decline; a decline marked by abstentions, criticism and counter-events. Ana Ereš maintains the focus on geopolitics, concentrating on Yugoslavia's international cultural policy and the turbulent circumstances surrounding its participation in the 37th Venice Biennale (1976). Her research highlights the tensions stemming from the censorship of the original curatorial project and how these tensions ultimately led to the opening of the national pavilion, albeit with an exhibition that was partially different from what had initially been planned.

Bringing the book to a close, the 37th Venice Biennale is also among the editions examined by Stefania Portinari in order to delve into the complex presence of Land Art within this event. By establishing a dialogue with other editions from the 1970s, Portinari charts a path that reveals the frictions

between artistic projects, curatorial intentions and the spatial limitations of the exhibition itself. Prior to this contribution, Enrica Sampong, turns to earlier decades and explores the various proposals for exhibiting colonial art in the biennials of the second half of the twentieth century. In doing so, Sampong examines how exhibitions were used to construct national imaginaries and to reshape colonial ideologies under Fascist Italy, while also highlighting the degree of autonomy that the Venice Biennale was able to maintain on several occasions.

As a whole, this volume sheds light on specific episodes in the history of biennials while highlighting the complex layering that characterizes these exhibitions. The essays gathered herein explore the artistic, diplomatic and pedagogical dimensions of biennials and define them as cultural devices that encapsulate both power relations and dynamics of circulation. Furthermore, the themes and approaches addressed reveal the capacity of these exhibitions to be spaces of legitimation and experimentation, as well as reflections of institutional, historical and political tensions.

Venice-São Paulo and beyond: while on this occasion the use of the plural 'biennials' has focused primarily on these two exhibitions, the volume already invites a broader exploration, incorporating other biennials either through comparative approaches or as case studies. It is hoped that at a later stage, it will be possible to delve even deeper into this 'beyond', broadening the scope of this initial reflection. Indeed, in continuity with the plural and dialogical spirit that inspired the conference *Dalla Biennale alle biennali. Il desiderio impossibile/From Biennale to Biennials. The Impossible Desire*, the aim is to incorporate a wider range of biennials, contexts and geographies, thus enriching and further complexifying the analysis proposed here.

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Conferences, Seminars and Roundtables

- Bienales, Instituciones, relaciones Norte-Sur* = Roundtable, 7th Havana Biennial (Havana, 19 November 2000).
- Biennials in Dialogue* = International Symposium (Kassel, 3-6 August 2000).
- Biennials: Prospect and Perspectives* = International Symposium (Karlsruhe, 27 February-1 March 2014).
- How to Make Biennials in Contemporary Times* = World Biennial Forum No. 2 (São Paulo, 26-30 November 2014).
- Primeiro Encontro de Organizadores de Bienais Internacionais* = International Meeting (São Paulo, 10-11 December 1981).
- Shifting Gravity* = World Biennial Forum, 1 (Gwangju, 27-31 October 2012).
- To Biennial or not to Biennial?* = International Conference (Bergen, 17 - 20 September 2009).
- Where Art Worlds Meet: Multiples Modernities and the Global Salon* = International Symposium (Venice, 9-12 December 2005).