

From Biennale to Biennials. Cartographies of an Impossible Desire

edited by
Anita Orzes, Vittorio Pajusco,
Stefania Portinari



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Abstract

This volume explores the biennial phenomenon examining their artistic, geopolitical, and institutional dimensions. While primarily centred on these two major events, as the Venice and São Paulo biennials, the essays in this book also enlarge upon other biennials, exhibitions and institutions, offering comparative and relational insights. Ultimately, the volume highlights the historical complexity of biennials and their roles as cultural devices, underscoring their function as spaces of experimentation and legitimation amid broader political and institutional tensions.

Keywords Biennials. Transnational networks. Contemporary art. Geopolitics. Venice Biennale. São Paulo Biennial.

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**From Biennale to Biennials.
Cartographies of an Impossible Desire**



Prima Esposizione Internazionale d'Arte della Città di Venezia, 1895. Exhibition catalogue

Foreword

Vittorio Pajusco, Stefania Portinari

Università Ca' Foscari Venezia, Italia

"After all, the biennial model itself is based on the impossible desire to concentrate the infinite worlds of contemporary art in a single place", wrote Massimiliano Gioni, curating the 55th Venice Biennale entitled *The Encyclopedic Palace*.¹ The 200 existing or supposed current biennials in the art world and this editorial series devoted to studying them are driven by the same unrealistic yet compelling ambition: that of embracing the infinite worlds of art, guided by a great fascination with the history of exhibitions and the desire to reconstruct specific ecosystems within contemporary art history.

Such a process allows for the comparison and critical reassessment of various historiographical interpretations of biennials, particularly considering transnational and postcolonial studies. It invites reflection on national identities (debating whether they still exist from an artistic perspective), and highlights the emergence of visual trends and artists viewed through a wide-angle, global lens. This undertaking amounts to a cartography of a utopia, an endless task that is perhaps even more mesmerizing because of its very impossibility.

From Biennale to Biennials. Cartographies of an Impossible Desire is the second volume for the *Atlante delle Biennali* (Atlas of Biennials) editorial series, part of the *Storie dell'arte contemporanea* (Histories of Contemporary Arts) collection from Edizioni Ca' Foscari - Venice University Press. It explores the São Paulo Biennial as a dream that flourishes on the other side of the ocean and becomes a vital periodical large-scale exhibition, the essentiality of graphic art in Eastern European countries, transnational dialogues, snares and hopes, but also ghosts and apparitions, discords, and neo-colonialism. It is furthermore a space for reflection and dialogue on the biennial phenomenon, as well as the power and impact of the biennial as a model, concept, and political, cultural, and artistic tool.

As stated in the "Foreword" to the catalogue of the First International Art Exhibition of the City of Venice, when the Municipality of Venice established

1 Gioni, M. (2013). *Is Everything in My Mind? The 55th International Art Exhibition, The Encyclopedic Palace = Exhibition Catalogue* (Venice, Gardens and Arsenale di Castello, 1 June-24 November 2013). Venice: La Biennale di Venezia, 28.



to “open every biennium an Art Exhibition” (an idea that had arisen in the spring of 1893) an Advisory Commission was elected in the session of the City Council on 19 April 1894 to draft its regulation. This commission was composed partly by the Municipal Council and partly from an “assembly of Venetian artists”. This group unanimously voted that these exhibitions “should expand beyond the boundaries of Italian art”, not only because an “international exhibition should attract more public by the fame of illustrious foreigners who will compete in it, but also because it will bring to all intelligent people who are not able to undertake long journeys the way of knowing and comparing the most diverse aesthetic directions, and it will also enrich the intellectual patrimony of the young local artists who, by the works of their brothers from other nations, will feel themselves drawn to broader conceptions”.²

The Mayor of Venice, chairman of the Commission, then appealed to famous foreign artists to agree to serve on a Patronage Committee (which included, among others, Puvis de Chavannes, Gustave Moreau, Max Liebermann, Lawrence Alma Tadema, Edward Burne Jones, John Everett Millais, and Anders Zorn), who agreed with ‘warm cordiality’ to invite some international colleagues. This testifies to the organizers’ belief that “the name of Venice always arouses an ancient sentiment, a mixed feeling of inebriated admiration and almost domestic intimacy, in all spirits devoted to beauty, whatever language they speak and whatever country they belong to”. For this reason Venice “greeted with festivity the inauguration of the exhibition”, on that 30 April 1895, “wishing that the artists would find, thanks to the Biennale, excitement and comfort to create even greater works of art”, and that art itself “will unite the most excellent people of all countries in a bond of spiritual fraternity”: expressing from the beginning an exaggerated but beautiful desire for globality and sharing, which we now make our own with the hope that the editorial series *Atlante delle Biennali* will continue our academic amity and the studies we love.

² “Prefazione” (1895). *Prima Esposizione Internazionale d'Arte della Città di Venezia. 1895. Catalogo illustrato = Exhibition Catalogue* (Venice, Gardens of Castello, 30 April-9 November 1895). Venice: Premiata Stabilimento Tipolitografico Fratelli Visentini, 3-5 (authors’ transl.).

From Biennale to Biennials. Introduction

Anita Orzes

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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).

Brazil and the Biennial Context

Here and There: Exchanges Between Italy and Brazil from the Biennials (1948-52). A Conversation

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Abstract This dialogue highlights the significant influence of the Venice Biennale model on the establishment of a biennial exhibition in post-war São Paulo. It examines how cultural exchange and artistic collaboration between Italy and Brazil helped the São Paulo Museum of Modern Art (MAM) to achieve its goals of legitimizing modern Brazilian art and building international connections. It also delves into the role of the first São Paulo Biennial organizers and their relationships with diplomatic and cultural bodies. Additionally, the prevalent historiographical emphasis on Biennial's role in shaping abstractionism in Brazil is contrasted with the first Brazilian representation at the Venice Biennale in 1950 and the national prizes awarded at the inaugural *Modern Art Museum Bienal* in 1951, which focused on figurative art.

Keywords Venice Biennale Model. São Paulo Bienal. São Paulo Museum of Modern Art (MAM). Post-war Abstractionism. Brazilian Art Historiography.

Vinicius Spricigo The São Paulo Biennial had not begun as an independent organization but as an initiative of the São Paulo Museum of Modern Art (MAM), founded in 1948 by Italian-born businessman Francisco Matarazzo. Lourival Gomes Machado, the Biennial's first Artistic Director, suggested that the success of the São Paulo Biennial was tied up with that of the museum itself: "It was felt that MAM was being tested. If the museum could not secure its international reputation, it might as well abandon its entire ambitious project" (Machado 1951, 15).

The *Modern Art Museum Bienal* was the first to implement the Venice Biennale's system of national representation within a different geographical context, aiming for the museum's internationalization. In this conversation,

we will focus on the exchanges between Italy and Brazil in implementing this system within post-war São Paulo. Marina Barbosa in this book traces some connections between Francisco Matarazzo, Pietro Maria Bardi, and Rodolfo Pallucchini regarding the first Brazilian representation in Venice in 1950. The presentation organized by MAM of Brazilian modernism at the 25th Venice Biennale was crucial in paving the way for creating a biennial exhibition in São Paulo. In the opening statement published in the exhibition catalogue, Machado argues that “the reference to Venice was inevitable. Rather than moving away from it, it was seen as a useful and encouraging lesson” (Machado 1951, 15).

In an unpublished interview earlier in 1948, Matarazzo expressed his aspiration to host an art festival in São Paulo similar to the Biennale and remake the *Modern Art Week of '22*.¹ These plans reflected the museum's dual objectives: on the one hand, to institutionalize modern Brazilian art by collecting and displaying it and, on the other hand, to connect the local art scene to international trends of the time.

Ana Magalhães These quotations bring aspects that present historiography might have never considered when dealing with the idea of the formation of the MAM and the Biennial. This quotation from Francisco Matarazzo is extraordinary in one sense. He did not clearly declare his intentions but likely intended to celebrate, in 1951, the thirtieth anniversary of the modernist landmark exhibition in São Paulo. As we saw recently in the 100-year celebration, it is still a major reference. *Modern Art Week of '22* is a milestone, although it has been the subject of hot debate in 2022. However, you can clearly see that, politically and economically speaking, it continues to play a role in projecting Brazil as a modern nation. In this sense, both initiatives were somehow embedded in promoting a narrative of Brazilian modern art. These aspects have never been considered.

How strange it was - if we think of a country like Brazil - coming out of a long *interregnum* after the end of a dictatorship in 1945 and trying to reengage with the international sphere. Brazil needed to affirm itself as a modern nation and embrace its place of the League of Nations into the United Nations. We have some forces that were seeking to do that, to promote Brazil as a modern nation. The country was also kind of compelled to be a modern nation and be part of this game of modernized democratic societies in the Western sense. For instance, it was very revealing to me working with a doctoral student, Breno Faria (2022), who was investigating the making of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs collection and the idea of Modern Art. He went through a great deal of the archives in Rio de Janeiro, and from the results we can clearly see that the Ministry tried to reorganize itself to promote this idea of the Brazilian modern culture by sending lecturers, scholars, and artists abroad and to promote Brazil as a modern nation.

1 Arquivo Histórico Wanda Svevo, Fundação Bienal de São Paulo: indications given by Francisco Matarazzo for an interview, 7 October 1948. Considered a milestone in Brazilian modernism, the *Modern Art Week of 1922* was held at the Municipal Theatre in São Paulo from 13 to 18 February 1922. The event covered several fields (painting, sculpture, architecture, music, dance, literature) and included important figures such as Graça Aranha, Oswald de Andrade, Menotti del Picchia, Mario de Andrade, Anita Malfatti, Heitor Villa-Lobos, Victor Brecheret, Emiliano Di Cavalcanti and others.

Both these international aspirations concerned constructing a narrative of modern art in Brazil [fig. 1].



Figure 1 Max Bill, *Tripartite unit*. First São Paulo Bienal, Swiss section, 1951.
Credited to: Arquivo Histórico Wanda Svevo

A group of well-known critical texts also points out to the *Modern Art Week of '22*. They are classics in Brazilian historiography: if we consider the

'Modernist movement', we can mention Mário de Andrade's lecture to his students at the University of Brazil in Rio de Janeiro in 1942, and when Mario Pedrosa writes about it in a different context ten years later. Then, in the late 1950s and the beginning of the 1960s, Paulo Mendes de Almeida, also one of the directors of MAM, considered the *Modern Art Week of '22* as the starting point of the history that brought to the creation of the MAM. This group of texts and essays was trying to build a narrative of Brazilian modern art, with the museum and the Biennial. Of course, it was essential in 1951 the nucleus of Brazilian artists presented in São Paulo Biennial's special room with the presence of Tarsila do Amaral, Anita Malfatti, and Cândido Portinari, among other big names. We can count also Sérgio Milliet's monograph, as director of MAM, on Tarsila do Amaral, published in 1953. Many signs justify and argue in favor of this idea of international aspirations. Brazil was also trying to be a modern and cosmopolitan nation.

VS The historiography you commented on is a familiar territory, mainly due to Francisco Alambert and Polyana Canhête's book *As Bienais de São Paulo* (2004), in which they trace the genealogy of the Biennial back to the *Modern Art Week of '22*. This prevailing narrative also highlights Biennial's role in the post-war development of geometric abstraction. The connection between Max Bill's *Tripartite Unity* (1948), awarded the International Sculpture Prize at the Biennial's inaugural edition, and his influence on two concrete art groups is well known. In a letter sent to Yolanda Penteado (Matarazzo's wife), Bill referred to a great exhibition held at the São Paulo Art Museum (MASP), founded by Assis Chateaubriand in 1947.² Despite a dispute between Matarazzo and Chateaubriand, both museums worked together and used the same venues in São Paulo. Furthermore, Bill's exhibition at MASP was crucial for his participation in the first Biennial.

It met existing debates cultivated within Brazil's established artistic and critical milieu. As an explicitly internationalist project, the Biennial provoked a clash between modernist figuration in Brazil and post-war abstraction as an international language. From a geopolitical point of view, Switzerland had less influence on the Brazilian art scene compared to France or Italy. The presence of Bill's *Tripartite Unity* is representative of the Biennial's role in the circulation of European concretism. Still, its recognition by the jury must be understood in relation to other prizes awarded at this inaugural edition. The equivalent prize for painting was granted to French artist Roger Chastel's figurative abstract *Les Amoureux au Café* (1951). The dispute between abstraction and figuration was also evident in the prizes awarded to Danilo Di Prete (painting) and Victor Brecheret (sculpture), both Italian-born. Art historian Michael Asbury (2006) observed that certain Brazilian artists who later contributed to Grupo Frente in Rio de Janeiro and Ruptura in São Paulo, including Ivan Serpa and Geraldo de Barros, were awarded minor acquisition prizes. Other concretist artists, including Franz Weissmann, had their artworks refused, and Abraham Palatnik's *Aparelho Cinecromático* was selected only after an intervention from the art critic Mário Pedrosa.

² Arquivo Histórico Wanda Svevo, Fundação Bienal de São Paulo: Letter from Max Bill to Yolanda Matarazzo, 12 April 1951.

AM The emphasis on abstraction, especially geometric abstraction, comes from the fact that by the end of the decade Brazil had promoted new concrete groups in exhibitions abroad. This is a significant point after the *National Exhibition of Concrete Art* (1956) in Brazil. This exhibition will have a heading with another exhibition that Max Bill organized in 1960 on concrete art groups worldwide in which Brazilians also took part. By 1958-59, a traveling exhibition of Brazilian modern art was held, where these concrete art groups were widely promoted. Not only were they exhibited, but they were also very much commented on by a figure like Mário Pedrosa. He was a major agent in making these artists known through critical debate abroad. There was a huge dispute about abstraction and figuration between 1948 and 1952. This is unclear for the Brazilian artistic *milieu*, not to mention the international artistic world. The experiences on abstraction were already there, playing their roles, and you had a lot of debates and discussions, but this was not a one-line progressive narrative.

One fascinating fact about the Biennial of 1951 is that Emiliano Di Cavalcanti, the major Brazilian modern artist, was furious that he was not allowed to be considered for the prize. He was considered as a major artist, and the prize was not given to anything similar to what he understood as good modern art. In 1952, Di Cavalcanti made a significant donation to the MAM, now at the Museum of Contemporary Art, University of São Paulo (MAC USP). He donated 569 drawings and works on paper from his studio and build another idea of modern art in the museum collection. If we consider that it held probably about 200 works of art, donating 569 drawings is really a huge gesture. So, this is one index of the temperature of the discussion at that time. Leon Degand's exhibition *From Figurativism to Abstractionism* (1949), which opened the MAM to the public, created a huge battle and Emiliano Di Cavalcanti was very aggressive in attacking all the tendencies of abstraction. This opened discussions and the dispute over what modern art should be, which was not solved until the end of the decade.

One can see conversations between groups of artists from different countries trying to work with abstract and figurative languages, sometimes in similar ways. On the other hand, there was a large variety of experiences of modern art language and a wide range of artistic geographies. Having groups and artists organized in national pavilions creates a very strange arrangement, because they lived in a period when nationality was very fluid.³ There were many immigrant artists, especially in a country like Brazil, where there was a strong wave of immigration during and after the Second World War. That is very well-known in Brazilian historiography. There was a lot of criticism from the press about the National Prize for Painting given to Danilo Di Prete, an Italian artist who had just arrived in Brazil and was not a Brazilian artist. The painting awarded was not an abstract experience, and it has much more to do with certain ideas of realism and figurativism.

I have always wondered how we nowadays speak very easily about national avant-garde movements in the context of the Venice Biennale and the São Paulo Biennial. We can speak about Italian futurism, French cubism, and German expressionism as if it were like this from the beginning. This

³ Unlike Venice, the São Paulo Biennial did not have discrete purpose-built pavilions. However, the perceived power or cultural influence of specific nations and regions did govern their position within a shared exhibitionary space.

was not the reality of these groups at the beginning of the twentieth century, nor of these artists at the beginning of the 1950s when they were dislocated from their motherland or native countries.

VS Matarazzo's Italian roots and his continued connections to both Italy and São Paulo's substantial Italian émigré community were significant to the museum's international purview. MAM had aspired to be a point of contact with Italian artists and intellectuals, having planned a reciprocal arrangement for transporting works to the biennials of Venice and São Paulo, and outlined broader ambitions for an Italian-Brazilian study center, travel bursaries for artists, film screenings, and exhibitions that would offer an overview of the Italian art scene. A 1950 MAM statement underlines this

desire to contribute as much as possible to the development of cultural relations between Italy and Brazil, aims to intensify these relations and facilitate contacts between the artistic and cultural environments and elements of the two countries as much as possible.⁴

Considering its close relationship with Italy, the museum established a respectful distinction between the two biennials and positioned São Paulo as a Southern-hemispheric, specifically Latin American, counterpoint to Venice: "Without intending to rival the most famous and traditional artistic expression in the world".⁵

The Brazilian government's decision to participate in the Venice Biennale for the first time in 1950 was crucial to consolidate Matarazzo's initial plans, first outlined in 1948, to set up a biennial in São Paulo. Presided over by Matarazzo and commissioned by the Brazilian Ministry of Health and Education, Brazil's first exhibition in Venice included the pioneers of modernism, such as Emiliano Di Cavalcanti and Candido Portinari, alongside a selection of works from younger artists, including Milton Dacosta and José Pancetti. It indicates criteria also observed in the Italian representation at the first Biennial one year later, from Carlo Carrà to the youngest Sergio Vacchi [fig. 2].

⁴ Arquivo Histórico Wanda Svevo, Fundação Bienal de São Paulo: Museu de Arte Moderna, 15 June 1950, 1.

⁵ Arquivo Histórico Wanda Svevo, Fundação Bienal de São Paulo: Museu de Arte Moderna, 15 June 1950, 5.



Figure 2 Sculptures by Giacomo Manzù, *Grande Ritratto di Signora*; Luciano Minguzzi, *Ballerina Giapponese*; Pericle Fazzini, *Figura che cammina*, *Donna seduta* and *Caduta da cavallo*; and Massimo Campigli. First São Paulo Biennial, Italian section, 1951. Credited to: Cav. Giov. Strazza, Arquivo Histórico Wanda Svevo

AM We should consider what happened before the creation of the São Paulo Biennial and the museum. What Matarazzo did as a gesture when he started to get involved with the creation of MAM was actually to ‘hire’ agents or mediators in Italy and France to buy an international collection for the museum. We know that the Italian group of works he bought for the initial nucleus of the MAM collection is the largest, it actually doubles the number of works that Matarazzo bought in France.

When the MAM opened its doors in 1949, it mainly had a large collection of Italian artworks, a half collection of French artworks, and a collection of Brazilian artworks. This collection of Brazilian artworks was very much connected to what we might call a *São Paulo School of Painting*, for instance, to figures like Alfredo Volpi, Fulvio Pennacchi, and other artists. Among his connections with Italy, which are the same as those in France, Matarazzo hired Italian intermediates.

Regarding the Italian works, it is clear now that he had a two-phase acquisition process. In the first, he engaged Pietro Maria Bardi, who was still in Italy, to buy some artworks. In the second phase and the more significant number of works, he hired Margarita Sarfatti, a very important art critic. She had a great role in Italy during a period of the fascist government, but she exiled herself to Argentina by then, and she was helping Matarazzo with his acquisitions in Italy. She used her influence as an art critic in Italy, side by side with gallerists and artists, to buy the works for the collection.

In the case of France, he was helped by the painter Alberto Magnelli, the brother of a very well-known Brazilian industrialist in São Paulo. Matarazzo spawns of course in the elite of São Paulo but also has very important diplomatic connections. We still have to consider the role of Yolanda Penteado, his wife then, and Maria Martins, who connected Matarazzo with diplomatic structures and the artistic milieu. Martins was an artist very well connected in the US, where she had made the initial part of her career in the framework of very important groups that we know were engaged in the preparation of the show *From Figurativism to Abstractionism*. She was following the decision steps made in the US to send works from that country that never came to Brazil for the show. She was engaged in such a crucial role and was one of the artists to have been presented, but she never came. We are mentioning a woman who was the wife of the Brazilian ambassador in Washington at that time. This was also the case for Yolanda Penteado because she had also divorced her first husband, who was a diplomat as well. These two women in the Brazilian elite had very important international connections and it was crucial that Yolanda Penteado also traveled in 1950-51 to engage in conversation with diplomats in France, England, Belgium, and Italy.

I have never really studied the documentation to define the names of those who came from Italy. However, what is interesting, at least from my viewpoint, regarding Italian representations in the São Paulo Biennial, which is also somehow pursued by other delegations, is the presentation of a comprehensive number of artists that would establish a narrative. Older artists or senior artists with younger artists. This was a model that was somehow established in the 1950s. In the case of Italy, this is even more important because Italy was trying to rehabilitate its tone after the fall of the fascist regime. Italy was also trying to show that it was a modernizing nation that needed to engage with a democratic society.

A series of modern Italian art exhibitions in South America started as early as 1946. They preceded not only the creation of the São Paulo Biennial but also of the Museums of Modern Art in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro. These exhibitions of young artists and modern Italian art ran until 1952, traveling to São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, Santiago de Chile, and Buenos Aires. That was also an exciting diplomatic effort from Italy, and we cannot forget a figure like Bardi. He first came to Brazil as part of a diplomatic initiative to reconnect Italy and Latin America. His exhibition of old masters in Rio de Janeiro in the Ministry of Health and Education, as well as the one of modern Italian painting, was made in the context of cooperation between Italy and Latin America.

VS I just want to highlight that the combination of formal diplomacy and personal relationships underpinned the Biennial's ability to represent a sufficiently broad range of nations. To achieve a biennial that could adequately present a local contribution to the international art scene while also bringing artists from all over the world into Brazil, MAM needed to strengthen its international relations, and it did so in part by international agencies and embassies. Before adopting a curatorial model, the Biennial operated under what Anthony Gardner and Charles Green called "consular curating" (2015, 30). A system whereby selecting works largely lies with diplomatic and cultural bodies is characteristic of second-wave biennials, including São Paulo.

The impact of this was particularly evident in the case of Cuba, whose participation faced more significant logistical and financial difficulties. Cuba's representation at the inaugural Biennial was not secured in a direct relationship with that nation but rather via a US-based intermediary headed by José Gómez-Sicre. The geopolitical role played by the Visual Arts Section of the Pan-American Union in the Biennial is also analyzed by Maria de Fátima Morethy Couto in this book, so this discussion leads also on how the Biennial established a specific position within an international art scene and offered a unique perspective on modern art. As Ana Magalhães and other Brazilian researchers have also pointed out, cultural diplomacy in the context of US Cold War policies towards Latin America played an important role in the first São Paulo Biennial, as well as in the formation of the collection of the Museum of Modern Art of São Paulo, which is now part of the MAC USP.

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Brazil in the “Renewed International Solidarity” of Biennials (1947-51)

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Abstract After a six-year suspension, the 24th Venice Biennale reopened in 1948 with a strong international focus and a desire for “renewed international solidarity”, as stated by its General Secretary, Rodolfo Pallucchini. By late 1947, correspondence from Italo-Brazilian figures in São Paulo showed interest in including Brazil in the Venice Biennale through their recently established institutions: Anna Maria and Pasquale Fiocca of Domus Gallery, Francisco Matarazzo of Museum of Modern Art – MAM, and Pietro Maria Bardi of Museum of Art – MASP. Pallucchini proposed collaborations between Domus Gallery and MAM for the 24th Venice Biennale and, later, between MAM and MASP for the 25th. Despite these efforts, Brazil could not send artworks in 1948, though its name appeared in the catalogue. Brazilian participation was finally realized in 1950, with Francisco Matarazzo’s MAM and Bardi as co-curator of the retrospective exhibition of Ernesto De Fiori. Thus, this essay analyzes the political disputes between MAM and MASP over Brazilian Biennale participation and explores how the Venice Biennale inspired the creation of the São Paulo Biennial, enhancing Brazil’s standing in the global cultural scene.

Keywords Venice Biennale. São Paulo Biennial. Francisco Matarazzo. Pietro Maria Bardi. International cultural relations.

The Venice Biennale is renowned as one of the oldest and most prestigious international art organizations, still thriving today. Over its long history, and particularly following its reform in 1930, it expanded its scope by establishing festivals for Music (1930), Film (1932), and Theater (1934). In later years, the Biennale further broadened its influence with the introduction of the Architecture (1980) and Dance (1999), solidifying its position as a global leader in the promotion of the arts across multiple disciplines.

After a six-year suspension due to World War II, the Venice Biennale reopened in 1948. In addition to welcoming the public back with a focus on promoting both Italian and international contemporary art through the exhibition of some European avant-garde movements, it returned with a strong international vision. It sought to re-establish “a renewed

international solidarity”,¹ as described by its General Secretary, Rodolfo Pallucchini (1908-1989),² reflecting a post-war desire to foster global artistic connections and cooperation.

Pallucchini played a pivotal role during this era of international openness, organizing the first five post-war editions of the Venice Biennale from 1948 to 1956. He was essential in dialoguing and connecting Brazilian cultural institutions and the Venetian exhibition. Another figure to mention is Giovanni Ponti, President of the Venice Biennale and Extraordinary Commissioner of the autonomous body La Biennale di Venezia, who found an opportunity to get involved in cultural activities during this period after liberation.³

Thus, this paper aims to analyze the disputes surrounding Brazil’s entry into the Venice Biennale, focusing on two museums led by Italo-Brazilian personalities who played a significant role in São Paulo society during the twentieth century, as well as the importance of Brazilian participation at Venice in the establishment of the São Paulo Biennial.

In Brazil and Italy academic research has focused on cultural exchanges between Europe and Brazil, from the perspective of Brazilian and European modernist artistic production (Almeida 1976; Miceli 2003). On the international institutional dialogues between Brazilian and Italian biennials, instead, an unprecedented analysis was carried out in a previous essay of mine (Barbosa 2015)⁴ and more recent research has expanded on this argument (Rocco 2018; Andrade 2019; Saroute 2021).

From a methodological perspective, Castelnuevo and Ginzburg’s study of the relationship between center and periphery in the history of the Italian artistic field offers valuable insights into how artistic movements and ideas emerge from cultural centers and are subsequently appropriated in peripheral areas. This framework enables the reflection on the complexity of Brazilian artistic phenomena, shedding light on how Brazil has navigated its position within the international artistic landscape, balancing the influence of dominant global trends while asserting its own unique cultural projects (Castelnuevo, Ginzburg 2019).

In this context, on 28 May 1948, the 24th Venice Biennale was inaugurated. It featured the participation of 14 countries: eleven from

1 The quotation is from the cyclostyled text of Pallucchini’s committal greeting, in Bandera 2011, 78.

2 Rodolfo Pallucchini was born in Milan and graduated in 1931 in Literature from the University of Padua, with a thesis on Giambattista Piazzetta and his school. In 1935 he was appointed Inspector of Antiquities and Fine Arts, with responsibilities at the Estense Gallery in Modena, where he later became director. In 1937, he earned his habilitation in the History of Medieval and Modern Art, and two years later, he directed the Directorate of Fine Arts in Venice until 1950. In 1947, he founded and edited the journal *Arte Veneta* and took on the role of General Secretary of the Venice Biennale, playing a crucial role in the exhibitions of the post-World War II era. For more on Pallucchini’s work in the post-war biennials, see Durante 2011; Lorenzini 2019.

3 The Venice Biennale, along with Italy’s national exhibitions such as the Triennale in Milan and the Quadriennale in Rome, has a direct relationship with the political moments experienced in Italy, being led by figures with significant political activism. Following the end of World War II and the onset of liberation, this organization began to be composed of some leaders affiliated with anti-fascist parties, as its new president, Giovanni Ponti. For more on Giovanni Ponti’s involvement in the Venice Biennale see Tomasella 2011, 609.

4 My doctoral thesis (Barbosa 2015) analyzes the origins and early developments of two museums established in post-World War II São Paulo by prominent Italian figures: Francisco Matarazzo and Pietro Maria Bardi. It examines the significance of their international relationships, particularly with MoMA in New York for the MAM and with the Venice Biennale for the MAM and the MASP.

Europe, two from the Americas, and one from Africa. While Brazil's name appears in the catalogue for this exhibition, it did not take part in the event (24. *Biennale di Venezia* 1948).

Since late 1947, correspondence from Italo-Brazilian figures in São Paulo has indicated a desire to include Brazil in the Venice Biennale through their artistic institutions. Even before the official inauguration of São Paulo Museum of Modern Art (Museu de Arte Moderna) – MAM, on 15 July 1948, Francisco Matarazzo (1898-1977)⁵ initiated contact with the Biennale, expressing interest in organizing a Brazilian art exhibition for its 24th edition through his museum. This is evidenced by the correspondence between the Venice Biennale and the Domus Gallery, owned by the Italian immigrant couple Anna Maria (1913-1994) and Pasquale Fiocca (1914-1994), who shared a similar interest.⁶ Pallucchini suggested to Fiocca that, due to the limited space for foreign participation, a partnership between MAM and the Domus Gallery should be established.⁷

Considering the short timeframe, Pallucchini recommended that, even before the official invitation for Brazilian participation in the Biennale was issued, a process that began in January 1948, Matarazzo should contact the Brazilian Ministry of Education to accept the invitation. He also advised Matarazzo to send photographs of the Brazilian artworks to be submitted for approval by the Biennale's Visual Arts Committee (Commissione Arti Visive). This would be the only way for Brazil to participate; otherwise, MAM could organize a show under the museum's name and take responsibility for transporting the works.⁸

Despite the concerted efforts of Pallucchini and Matarazzo to secure Brazil's inaugural participation in the Venice Biennale, the initiative ultimately failed due to the “absolute disinterest of Brazilian authorities and the disunity among local artistic communities”.⁹ In a telegram, Brazilian ambassador Pedro de Moraes Barros cited also technical difficulties related

5 Francisco Matarazzo was a prominent Brazilian industrialist and art patron. Born into a family of Italian immigrants and nephew of Francesco Matarazzo, he played a crucial role in establishing MAM and was instrumental in organizing the inaugural São Paulo Biennial in 1951. Matarazzo was also one of the founders of the *Teatro Brasileiro de Comédia* and the studios of *Companhia Cinematográfica Vera Cruz*. His marriage to Yolanda Penteadó further strengthened his commitment to fostering artistic exchange and supporting Brazilian artists. Together, they left a lasting legacy in the arts, while Matarazzo's involvement in various industrial ventures helped shape Brazil's economic development in the mid-twentieth century. For more info see Almeida 1976.

6 Venice, The Venice Biennale, Historical Archive of Contemporary Arts (ASAC), Fondo Storico (FS), Arti Visive (AV), serie Paesi, b. 5 (1948-64). Correspondence from Pasquale Fiocca to the Director of the 24 Biennale d'Arte, undated: “Tramite la nostra Galleria, alcuni artisti Brasiliani e Italiani qui residenti, aspirerebbero a partecipare alla prossima Biennale che si terrà in Venezia in maggio 1948”. As a side note, the Domus Gallery was established in February 1947 in São Paulo and quickly became the primary venue for modern art exhibitions in the city. It played a vital role during its five-year existence until the founding of the MAM.

7 ASAC, FS, AV, serie Paesi, b. 5 (1948-64). Correspondence from Pallucchini to Pasquale Fiocca, 1 December 1947.

8 ASAC, FS, AV, serie Paesi, b. 5 (1948-64). Correspondence from Pallucchini to Matarazzo, 8 January 1948.

9 ASAC, FS, AV, serie Paesi, b. 5 (1948-64). Correspondence from Enrico Salvatori to Illustrissimo Professor [Ponti or Pallucchini], on 24 May 1948. In this Salvatori reports having received a letter from Matarazzo on 17 April 1948, informing him that this initiative had failed.

to the shipment of artworks but conveyed hope for Brazil's participation in the next edition of the Venice Biennale.¹⁰

Dissatisfied with the outcome, Pallucchini continued to advocate for Brazil's participation, even offering to accept the late shipment of artworks, as had been arranged for the United States. He also emphasized that Brazil's name had already been printed in the exhibition catalogue and that the country's absence would be a significant disappointment for visitors.¹¹ Despite his efforts, Brazil's participation ultimately did not materialize.

Although the challenges, diplomatic contact between Italy and Brazil was maintained particularly favoring Matarazzo,¹² who visited the Venice Biennale in the latter half of 1948 (Alambert, Canhête 2004, 32). The following year the Brazilian preparation for participation in the 25th Venice Biennale began, this time with the MAM, which would assume the cost of transportation and insurance of the works, besides offering a prize in the currency of the time of 500,000 lire, which could be given freely. Matarazzo also requested that the choice of the works should be made in partnership between him, Pallucchini and a group of critics São Paulo (Sérgio Milliet, Quirino da Silva, Geraldo Ferraz) and from Rio de Janeiro (Mário Barata Santa Rosa, Mário Pedrosa).¹³

The involvement of São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro art critics in the 25th edition of the Venice Biennale initiative suggests it could have been an attempt to establish partnerships between the two modern art museums in the country, both founded in 1948 with the support of the American businessman Nelson Rockefeller, who was the president of the MoMA of New York since 1939. It may also have been a strategy to prevent alliances with São Paulo institutions, as Pietro Maria Bardi (1900-1999),¹⁴ director of the Museum of Art of São Paulo (Museu de Arte de São Paulo) – MASP, had also expressed interest in participating in the Venetian event.

Actually, Bardi initially proposed to hold a retrospective exhibition of the artist Lasar Segall, because he was hosting in his gallery a solo exhibition

10 ASAC, serie Paesi, b. 5 (1948-64), Telegram 15 June 1948, from Moraes Barros to Rodolfo Pallucchini: “CON VIVO RAMMARICO DEBBO COMUNICARLE CHE MALGRADO OGNI SFORZO GOVERNO BRASILIANO NON ESSENDO STATO POSSIBILE CAUSA MOTIVI TECNICI SPEDIRE QUADRI DESTINATI BIENNALE MIO PAESE NON POTRE QUESTA VOLTA PRENDERE PARTE GRANDE MOSTRA VENEZIANA MIGLIORI SALUTI MORAES BARROS AMBASCIATORE BRASILE”.

11 ASAC, FS, AV, serie Paesi, b. 5 (1948-64). Correspondence from Pallucchini to Moraes Barros, 17 June 1948.

12 ASAC, FS, AV, serie Paesi, b. 5 (1948-64). In a correspondence dated 17 July 1948, Giovanni Ponti asked the Italian diplomatic and consular representatives to maintain active contact with Brazil and to particularly support Matarazzo's work.

13 ASAC, FS, AV, serie Paesi, b. 5 (1948-64). Correspondence from Matarazzo to the President of the Venice Biennale [Giovanni Ponti], 5 December 1949.

14 Pietro Maria Bardi was an Italian writer, curator, and collector. He began his career in the 1920s as a journalist, writing for prominent newspapers such as *Gazzetta di Genova* and *Corriere della Sera*. Later, he transitioned to the art world by opening the Galleria Bardi in Milan in 1928. After moving to Rome, he founded the Galleria d'Arte Palma, supported by the *Sindacato Nazionale Fascista di Belle Arti*, and became involved in the debate surrounding Rationalist architecture. Bardi first visited Brazil in 1933 and permanently relocated there in 1946 with his wife, architect Lina Bo Bardi. In 1947, he co-founded the MASP, where Lina Bo Bardi designed innovative exhibition methods, including the use of crystal easels to enhance the presentation of artworks and make art more accessible to the public. His significant contributions had a lasting impact on the Brazilian art scene. For more information on Bardi's career in Italy, see his first biography Tentori 1990.

of this artist.¹⁵ He was also aware that the Biennale was organizing a posthumous exhibition of the artist Ernesto De Fiori, and offered to collaborate.¹⁶ Finally, he proposed the participation of MASP in the Brazilian show at the Venice Biennale, criticizing the MAM.¹⁷

Although Bardi's co-curation with Carlo Carrà and Giovanni Scheiwiller was confirmed during the retrospective exhibition of Ernesto De Fiori at Palazzo Centrale (that was the main pavilion, previously also known as the Italian Pavilion), there were efforts to include Bardi in the Brazilian participation. Umbro Apollonio,¹⁸ the curator of the Historical Archives of Contemporary Art, requested that Edoardo Bizzarri, the director of the Italo-Brazilian Cultural Institute of São Paulo, should consider including Bardi. He suggested exploring the possibility of appointing Bardi as “segretario per l'organizzazione o per la scelta” expressing his concern that “mi spiacerebbe di vederlo escluso” while noting Bardi's affiliation with another museum in São Paulo (25. *Esposizione Biennale Internazionale d'Arte* 1950).

On 6 June 1950, the 25th Venice Biennale was inaugurated, featuring the participation of 22 countries: fifteen from Europe, four from the Americas, two from Africa, and one from the Middle East. Brazil was represented by MAM, with no possibility for co-participation, as Matarazzo was both the organizer and financier of the Brazilian exhibition. The exhibition was curated by José Simeão Leal, the director of the documental service of the Ministry of Education, while Paolo Matarazzo, Francisco's brother, was responsible for its setup. The introductory text for the Brazilian section of the catalogue was written by Sérgio Milliet (25. *Esposizione Biennale Internazionale d'Arte* 1950, 224) [fig. 1].

15 ASAC, FS, AV, serie Paesi, b. 5 (1948-64). In correspondence dated 26 August 1949, Bardi expressed to Pallucchini that the nomination for the Venice Biennale proposed by Olsvaldo Teixeira, the Director of the National Museum of Fine Arts, was inadequate. He proposed Lasar Segall as a more suitable artist.

16 ASAC, FS, AV, serie Paesi, b. 5 (1948-64). In correspondence dated 23 November 1949, Bardi informed Pallucchini about the De Fiori exhibition, noting that he owned *La Bagnante* from 1917 in his private collection. He also mentioned writing the preface for the artist's biography included in the volume published by Giovanni Scheiwiller through Ulrico Hoepli.

17 ASAC, FS, AV, serie Paesi, b. 5 (1948-64). Correspondence from Bardi to Pallucchini, 23 November 1949.

18 For more information on Umbro Apollonio's role at the Venice Biennale see Pajusco 2019.



Figure 1 25. *Esposizione Biennale Internazionale d'Arte, Brazil Exhibition*, 1950, room 53.
Courtesy Archivio Storico della Biennale di Venezia (ASAC)

Another relevant element was the announcement, in the Brazilian section of the Venice Biennale catalogue, of the creation of the MAM Biennial, that would have been the 1st São Paulo Biennial, based on the Venetian show.

A few days before the opening of the 25th Venice Biennale, Matarazzo wrote to Pallucchini to request the statute of the Venice Biennale and advice on the creation and organization of the São Paulo Biennial. He also expressed a desire for cooperation between the two institutions.¹⁹ Among Pallucchini's suggestions was the idea that the São Paulo Biennial should have more autonomy in inviting nations, allowing for invitations without necessarily going through diplomatic channels and without selecting specific works. However, this was a difficult rule to change, as evidenced by various correspondences with the contacted countries.²⁰

Consequently, Matarazzo and his wife, Yolanda Penteado – an aristocrat and socialite from São Paulo, and the niece of one of the greatest promoters of modernism in the city – embarked on an intense period of work. While Matarazzo sought support from his industrial friends, Penteado traveled to Europe to persuade the countries she visited to participate in the exhibition. Thanks to her strong connections and occasionally accompanied by Brazilian sculptor Maria Martins, who was married to diplomat Carlos Martins and

19 ASAC, FS, AV, serie Mostre all'estero, Biennali di San Paolo del Brasile, folder no. 1 (1951-73). Correspondence from Matarazzo to Pallucchini, 1 June 1950

20 Countries like the USA chose their artists through MoMA, Italian artists were nominated by the Venice Biennale and other countries used representatives from their governments or embassies, as was the case with Mexico. Probably it was difficult to break some rules that were already established and frequent in the countries that already took part in the Venice Biennale, which is why the Brazilian system was later criticized by France, which asked the São Paulo Biennial to issue invitations directly to its delegation.

well-versed in the national and international art scene, she effectively served as Brazil’s cultural ambassador. Penteado also received political backing for her visits, including letters signed by then-Brazilian President Getúlio Vargas.

France was the first country to join the Brazilian exhibition. Following that, Italy accepted the invitation, albeit at great cost. Initially reluctant, Holland changed its mind after Yolanda’s visit, paving the way for participation from Belgium, Switzerland, and Great Britain. This shift encouraged other countries, including Japan, Canada, the United States, and various Central and South American nations, to join as well, accepting invitations directly from the Biennale’s board of directors (Amarante 1989, 13).

The 1st São Paulo Biennial was inaugurated then on 20 October 1951, at the esplanade of Trianon, a site of historical significance due to its location on Avenida Paulista. The São Paulo City Hall designated this area for the Biennial,²¹ which later sparked disputes between MAM and MASP. At that time, both institutions were based in a building on Rua 7 de Abril in São Paulo, and they both sought to establish their headquarters on the same site on Avenida Paulista, where MASP is located today.

Designed by Brazilian architects Luís Saia and Eduardo Kneese de Mello, the 5,000 m² pavilion, popularly known as the ‘caixotão’ (big box) and referred to by intellectuals as the ‘Muro de Sartre’ (Sartre’s wall), was distinguished by its rigid, modern forms (Amarante 1989, 13). Inside, it housed the works of 21 countries participating in the São Paulo Biennial: eleven from the Americas, nine from Europe and one from Asia (*I Bienal do Museu de Arte Moderna de São Paulo* 1951, 42).

On the occasion of the 1st São Paulo Biennial, the International Architecture Exhibition (EIA) was established. Similar to Yolanda Penteado’s efforts, it was Eduardo Kneese de Mello who traveled for two months, giving lectures on modern Brazilian architecture in Portugal, Spain, Italy, France, Switzerland, Belgium, the Netherlands, Denmark, Sweden, Finland, Norway, England, Mexico, Cuba, Venezuela, Colombia, and Peru, seeking participation in the EIA.²² This exhibition would later, in 1973, be renamed as São Paulo International Biennial of Architecture (BIA), with effectively anticipating the Venice Architecture Biennale, which officially opened in 1980 (Herbst 2007, 82).

Additionally, exhibitions of Performing Arts, Film, Music, and a Ceramics Competition were organized that year, echoing similar events that had been held from the 1930s at the Venice Biennale. This reflects an effort to create an event comparable to its Venetian counterpart, with the São Paulo Biennial even being referred to in the Italian media as a rival to Venice.²³

Despite the expressed rivalry, there was no genuine competition between the two Biennials. On the contrary, Matarazzo ensured that the São Paulo Biennial was scheduled in alternate years to the Venice Biennale, thus avoiding technical issues and preserving Italian support. His goal was to establish an official collaboration between the two art events, much like he

²¹ Arquivo Histórico Wanda Svevo, Fundação Bienal de São Paulo FMS_00024-2A. *Termo de Cessão do terreno do Trianon*.

²² LINS, Paulo de Tarso Amendola. *Arquitetura nas Bienais internacionais de São Paulo* (1951-61), 27

²³ ASAC, FS, AV. *Raccolta Documentaria Extra Biennale. Mostre all’Estero. Biennale di Sao Paulo 1951-1971. “Sao Paulo rivale di Venezia”*. *Il Momento*, 29 November 1951.

had done with MoMA in New York when he secured the support of Nelson Rockefeller for the creation of MAM.²⁴



Figure 2 Francisco Matarazzo at the 33rd Venice Biennale, 1966.
Courtesy of Arquivo Histórico Wanda Svevo - Fundação Bienal de São Paulo

Italian immigration in São Paulo played a pivotal role in fostering cultural collaborations between Brazil and Italy in the post-war period, particularly evident in the context of the Venice Biennale. This collaboration laid the groundwork for various projects, albeit of different scales, between notable institutions and figures, such as Matarazzo at the MAM and Bardi at the MASP.²⁵ Their efforts not only opened doors for their respective institutions but also sought to establish lasting partnerships that bridged the artistic communities of both countries. Through their engagement with international institutions, they facilitated a rich exchange of ideas and practices, enhancing the cultural landscape in Brazil and reinforcing ties with abroad.

Another significant aspect to highlight is that Brazil's participation in the Venice Biennale provided an immediate impetus for the creation of the São Paulo Biennial, benefiting from Italian support and involvement from its inception. Today, the São Paulo Biennial is often regarded as the 'primogenitor' of the Venetian one, which bolstered Brazil's credibility in the international cultural landscape, a country still finding its footing at the time.

24 ASAC, FS, AV, serie Mostre all'estero, Biennali di San Paolo del Brasile (1951-73), folder no. 18. Correspondence from Matarazzo to Pallucchini, 18 November 1950.

25 After its debut in Venice, the MAM handled Brazil's representation at the Venice Biennale until 1963. The newly created Fundação Bienal de São Paulo then took over, managing this role until 1968 when the Ministry of Foreign Affairs assumed responsibility due to Matarazzo's declining health. In 1993, the Fundação Bienal resumed the task.

This newfound recognition attracted greater participation from countries across the Americas and beyond, fostering a spirit of new international solidarity and collaboration in a different geography of the arts.

The success of the São Paulo Biennial was so remarkable that, in its second edition, in 1953, it presented one of Picasso's most important works, *Guernica* (1937). This achievement was particularly impressive for a newly established biennial and further solidified its reputation as a vital platform for contemporary art enhancing Brazil's cultural profile but also facilitated a dynamic exchange of ideas and artistic practices on a global scale [fig. 2].

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Archaeology of Engagement and Discursive Practices in the São Paulo Biennial

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Abstract This essay explores the evolution of engagement and discursive practices within contemporary art biennials, focusing specifically on the São Paulo Biennial's initial articulations towards the public. As a pioneering platform, the São Paulo Biennial has organically developed educational and discursive strategies between art, curators, educators, and the public until a complex structure is established. This essay investigates how these practices emerged and evolved from the Biennial's inception, emphasizing the role of educational programs and training for monitors. It highlights the contributions of key figures such as Wolfgang Pfeifer, who laid the groundwork for art history classes, and Amália Toledo, who integrated creative exercises into training and reflecting on education art and the public.

Keywords São Paulo Biennial. Educational practices. Discursive engagement. Contemporary art. Institutional memory.

Summary 1 Historical Background. – 2 Key Figures in the Development of Educational Programs. – 3 Conclusion.

The São Paulo Biennial, established in 1951 as the 'second' Biennial after the Venice Biennale, has a crucial role in the history of large-scale art exhibitions.¹ While it initially followed the Venice model, mirroring aspects such as national representations and even the format of its catalogs, the São Paulo Biennial soon developed a distinct identity. It became a platform for rethinking international art production from a South American perspective, challenging the hegemony of Eurocentric art histories and creating a space for dialogue with the continent's diverse artistic practices. Unlike the Italian Biennale, whose audience was mainly international and specialized, the São

1 Other projects called 'biennials' started and faded before the inception and creation of São Paulo Biennial. Therefore, to name it as the 'second' biennial means it is the one that is still active since its creation; see Altshuler 2013; Gardner, Green 2016; Kompatsiaris 2017.

Paulo Biennial engages primarily with the local and regional public, with close to 97% of its visitors coming from the city, country, and continent.² This emphasis on addressing local audiences led to the development of unique educational and discursive programs that emerged organically as a response to the need for deeper interaction with visitors encountering 'modern' art for the first time. These programs, evolving, became a core part of the Biennial's mission, ensuring a continuous commitment to public engagement that set it apart from the more exhibition model of biennials. The São Paulo Biennial thus serves not only as a reference point for other biennials but as a space where art engagement is approached critically and inclusively, offering parameters of what a biennial can be.

This essay deepens into the 'archaeology'³ of these practices, tracing the evolution of the engagement practices and the key figures who contributed to their development. By examining the Biennial's historical trajectory, this essay aims to understand how these engagement frameworks were built, evolved, and sometimes overlooked in subsequent editions. A central focus is placed on the contributions of Wolfgang Pfeifer, the Technical Director of the São Paulo Museum of Modern Art, whose initial efforts in the 1950s laid the foundation for a structured approach to training monitors – a kind of proto-mediation school aimed at introducing modern art, its themes, techniques, and artists to a group of students that would specialize in the structure of the biennial to guide the public. This initial focus on art history and guided tours began a long-term commitment to public interaction, as Minerini Neto notes:

The creation of seminars for the formation of monitors, tasked with the delicate role of elucidation, represents a pioneering approach to engaging the public with contemporary art in São Paulo during the 1950s. (2014, 76)

It's crucial to this essay to acknowledge the significant research undertaken by José Minerini Neto, particularly in his doctoral thesis, *Education in the Biennial Art São Paulo: from MAM courses to the Permanent Educational Programme* (2014). The researcher's work offers a comprehensive analysis of the evolution of the Biennial's educational programs, providing invaluable insights into the depth and breadth of archival materials surrounding these early efforts. His research highlights how the training of monitors evolved into a more systematic practice, even though it lacked an institutional framework at the time. Rather than setting a direct precedent for other biennials, these engagement practices emerged organically, responding to the unique challenges of introducing modern art to the public and encountering it for the first time. From then to now, we ensure a more organized and critical understanding of such programs, staging them into forms of discursive practice, until defining those biennials who have this range of discursive programs (either education or public) as 'self-conscious biennials' (Gardner, Green 2014; 2016).

² See Cohen 2014, as a keynote speaker at the World Biennial Forum no. 2 in São Paulo; see also Spinelli, Pfeiffer 2012 and #30xbienal [Video series]. Available at <https://www.youtube.com/hashtag/30xbienal>.

³ Reflecting on the term offered by Michel Foucault on the accumulation of the knowledge that happens through time, hidden changes and similarities to the past in the traits of history.

Despite these early advances, the Biennial has faced challenges in preserving its institutional memory, with each new edition often seeking to reinvent itself, sometimes at the expense of past learnings. This renewal cycle has led to a fragmented understanding of the historical contributions of its educational programs. As Minerini Neto highlights:

Much of the memory of the educational activities was not located in this research and may be lost forever, as the focus was on archiving information about the exhibitions and the participating artists, without the same concern for the documents generated by the educational efforts at the Biennial. (2014, 383)

The São Paulo Biennial Foundation Historical Archive Wanda Svevo was conceived in 1955 but lacks systematic educational references and documentation. The archive is primarily dedicated to information from the press. Documents exchanged internally and externally from the organization of the biennial and visual designs and catalogs. The organization of the educational archives came along when more critically defined frameworks, like O'Neill and Wilson's *Educational Turn* (2010),⁴ provided an understanding of the evolving role of discursive and educational programs within contemporary art biennials. The authors highlight how these elements, once considered secondary to the exhibition, have become central to curatorial practice, particularly in biennials. This perspective situates the development of biennial programs within a broader historical and theoretical context, emphasizing the shift towards educational and discursive practices as critical components of contemporary curatorial strategies.

To address any funding gap, this research revisited the foundational years of the São Paulo Biennial by drawing on three key sources: Minerini's thesis, the *Seminar Art in Time* (2013) by the São Paulo Biennial Foundation and SESC São Paulo, and *#30xBienal (Educational Activities)*,⁵ which offers a series of videos documenting the evolution of the Biennial's educational program. Additionally, it incorporates insights from various articles on the history of the São Paulo Biennial.

1 Historical Background

The São Paulo Biennial started in 1951 as an affirmation of Brazil's cultural modernization. The *Modern Week of '22*, which points to the beginning of Brazilian Modernism and settles the necessity of the construction of regional thinking, departed from coloniality and focused on the unique hybrid context of the country. Founded by Italian-Brazilian industrialist Francisco (also known as 'Ciccillo') Matarazzo, it has been a prominent exhibition and contemporary art structure in South America's art scene since. Initially organized by the São Paulo Museum of Modern Art (Museu de

⁴ Notably, O'Neill and Wilson have authored a series of influential works exploring these themes, with this volume standing out as the most significant for this research due to its comprehensive analysis of the intersection between curating and education in the biennial format.

⁵ *#30xbienal* [Video series]. Available at <https://www.youtube.com/hashtag/30xbienal>.

Arte Moderna) – MAM, the São Paulo Biennial Foundation was later founded to take charge of the exhibition, fostering its growth and significance. At the beginning of the 1960s, the exhibition moved to its main house: the iconic Francisco Matarazzo Pavilion within the Parque do Ibirapuera, the three-story architectural building designed by Oscar Niemeyer and Hélio Uchôa spams into 30,000 m².

The São Paulo Biennial emerged as a response to the growing global interest in modern art exhibitions and circulation. The need to create a platform connecting Brazil's burgeoning art scene with international movements and its growing industrialization and urban structure was evident; from its inception, the Biennial aimed to challenge the Eurocentric focus of contemporary art discourse by providing a space for displaying and discussing art from Latin America alongside international works. This initiative positioned the Biennial as a crucial player in reshaping art historical narratives, emphasizing the perspectives and contributions of artists and intellectuals from the Global South, making itself a representative visual arts event in South America that could catapult the region into a post-World War II and pre-globalized world (Gardner, Green 2014).

From the very beginning, one of the distinguishing features of the São Paulo Biennial is its commitment to educational programming, which began as an informal effort but quickly evolved into a structured component of the Biennial's activities. The need for educational initiatives became rapidly evident during the first edition of the Biennial. Despite attracting thousands of visitors, including many students, the artworks' complex and abstract nature left audiences struggling to connect with the exhibition. Diplomats, curators, museum directors and some artists even started to assume the position of guides or monitors of the public organically. Intellectuals and artists, such as those participating in discussions at the School of Sociology and Politics, expressed concern over the public's difficulty engaging with the avant-garde art presented at the Biennial (Groys 2008).

The solution appeared in the event's second edition two years later, with the appointment of trained monitors becoming a solution to bridge this gap, offering explanatory tours to make contemporary art more accessible and understandable. Wolfgang Pfeifer, the Technical Director of the São Paulo Museum of Modern Art, initiated art history classes to train monitors and individuals responsible for guiding visitors through the exhibition space, using the structure already in place by the School of MAM. This early focus on art education began a tradition that sought to democratize access to contemporary art and foster critical engagement among visitors.

By the 1960s, these programs had become more formalized under the direction of figures like Amália Toledo, who introduced creative exercises alongside art history, emphasizing the importance of hands-on learning and fostering an appreciation of creativity. The training of monitors during this period involved a deeper understanding of art movements and direct interaction with artists and curators, providing a holistic educational experience. These efforts helped establish the São Paulo Biennial as a space where educational initiatives complemented the exhibition itself, transforming the experience for visitors from passive observation to active engagement.

As the Biennial grew, its educational programs began to serve as a model for similar initiatives in other biennials. However, the continuity of these efforts faced challenges, particularly as each new edition sought to

bring a fresh perspective and often overlooked the learnings of previous iterations. This tension between innovation and the preservation of past educational strategies remains a central theme in the history of the São Paulo Biennial, shaping its evolving identity as both an exhibition and a site of critical discourse.

The structure of the exhibitions and how they are reflected in the interaction with the public have changed over time and history. The development of technology and immersive practices, the detailing of concepts, and shifts in the cultural (and economic and geopolitical) context surrounding contemporary artmaking also reflect how we conceive and understand the exhibitions. Public engagement and education programs have become essential elements of modern art biennials, fostering a deeper connection between audiences and the art on display. Examining the historical context and motivations behind their initiatives that permeated the public and education demonstrates the evolving role of biennials in shaping artistic discourse and cultural exchange.

2 Key Figures in the Development of Educational Programs

The evolution of educational practices at the São Paulo Biennial cannot be understood without acknowledging key figures' significant contributions, such as Wolfgang Pfeifer and Amália Toledo. These individuals played instrumental roles in shaping the Biennial's approach to public engagement, each introducing innovations that responded to their time's specific needs and challenges.

Wolfgang Pfeifer, the Technical Director of the São Paulo Museum of Modern Art (MAM), pioneered integrating education into the Biennial's framework. Beginning with the first edition in 1951, Pfeifer introduced art history courses to train monitors – individuals tasked with guiding visitors through the Biennial's exhibitions. His approach was grounded in the belief that a deeper understanding of modern and contemporary art could foster a more meaningful interaction between the public and the displayed artworks. These courses emphasized knowledge acquisition and developing critical thinking skills among the monitors, encouraging them to engage visitors in discussions about the art they encountered.

Pfeifer's efforts laid the groundwork for a structured educational program that would continue to evolve throughout the following decades. His focus on continuous learning and interaction with artists and curators created an environment where monitors were seen as guides and active mediators between the art and the audience. This engagement model became a blueprint for subsequent biennial editions, setting a precedent for the importance of training in the context of art exhibitions.

In the 1960s, the educational focus of the São Paulo Biennial expanded under the guidance of Amália Toledo, who introduced a more hands-on and creative approach to the training of monitors. Toledo believed in fostering creativity to enhance appreciation for contemporary art, integrating practical exercises such as drawing and creative thinking into the curriculum. Her philosophy emphasized the importance of understanding art through the process of creation, a shift from the more didactic approach that characterized the earlier training sessions.

Toledo's contributions significantly shaped the Biennial's identity as a learning and creative exploration space. She introduced shorter, more intensive training sessions that included workshops led by artists and curators, offering visitors a direct connection to the creative processes behind the artworks on display. This approach enriched the visitors' understanding and created a more dynamic and interactive experience for visitors, positioning the São Paulo Biennial as a leader in innovative art education practices. Toledo's focus on creativity as a pathway to understanding art influences how contemporary biennials design educational programs.

Considering the thematic evolution of engagement practices, from didacticism to participatory engagement, we can highlight that the educational practices of the São Paulo Biennial have evolved significantly over time, reflecting broader shifts in the philosophy of public engagement within contemporary art. In its early years, the Biennial's educational focus was primarily didactic, addressing the lack of public familiarity with modern art. This was exemplified by the structured art history classes and explanatory tours introduced by Pfeifer, which sought to provide visitors with a foundational understanding of the artworks they encountered.

As the Biennial matured, the focus shifted towards a more participatory engagement model. Influenced by global pedagogical trends, such as Paulo Freire's ideas and the increasing emphasis on audience agency, the Biennial's programs prioritized dialogue and interaction over instruction. The transition from 'explaining art' to 'experiencing art' marked a significant change in how the Biennial approached its public, creating an environment where visitors were encouraged to form their interpretations and engage in critical discussions about the exhibitions.

If we examine the challenges of institutional memory/continuity versus reinvention of it, a recurring challenge in the history of the São Paulo Biennial's educational practices has been the tension between continuity and reinvention. Each new edition of the Biennial often brings a fresh curatorial vision, which, while fostering innovation, can sometimes lead to overlooking previous educational strategies. This renewal cycle has created gaps in the institutional memory of the Biennial's engagement practices, making it difficult to build upon the successes of past editions. Unfortunately, this is an issue faced by all the institutions that promote biennials.

This problem is particularly evident in transitioning between different approaches to training mediators and designing public programs. For example, the structured, continuous training model championed by Pfeifer was later replaced by shorter, more flexible formats under Toledo. While these changes reflected evolving educational philosophies, they also resulted in a lack of continuity that made it challenging to assess the long-term impact of these programs. The absence of a comprehensive archival strategy has further complicated efforts to preserve and learn from the Biennial's educational history, highlighting the need for more systematic documentation of these initiatives.

The innovative educational practices developed at the São Paulo Biennial have impacted other biennial organizations, influencing how other large-scale exhibitions approach public engagement. There is an emphasis on structured training for mediators, the integration of creative exercises, and the shift towards participatory engagement. The São Paulo Biennial's experience serves as a valuable case study for understanding how educational

initiatives can enhance biennials' cultural and social relevance, positioning them as both exhibitions and platforms for learning and dialogue.

This analysis demonstrates that a dynamic interplay between tradition and innovation has characterized the São Paulo Biennial's approach to education. While the challenges of maintaining continuity remain, the Biennial's commitment to public engagement has left an indelible mark on the field, offering insights into the potential of biennials to act as spaces of critical reflection and cultural exchange.

3 Conclusion

The history of the São Paulo Biennial's educational and discursive practices reveals a complex interplay between tradition and innovation, offering valuable lessons for contemporary art exhibitions. From its early years, the Biennial has embraced the challenge of engaging diverse audiences with modern and contemporary art, evolving from a didactic approach to a more participatory and dialogic model. Key figures such as Wolfgang Pfeifer and Amália Toledo played critical roles in this evolution, each contributing unique perspectives that helped shape the Biennial's approach to art education.

Pfeifer's emphasis on structured training and art history provided the foundation for a more informed and engaged audience. At the same time, Toledo's creative approach brought new vitality to the educational programs, emphasizing the importance of experience and creativity in learning. These efforts have had a lasting impact, influencing how biennials worldwide consider their role as educational platforms. By prioritizing public engagement, the São Paulo Biennial has helped to redefine the relationship between contemporary art and its audiences, making art more accessible while fostering a deeper understanding of its cultural and historical contexts.

However, the São Paulo Biennial's history also underscores the challenges of maintaining continuity in constant reinvention. The cyclical nature of biennial exhibitions, with each edition bringing new curatorial perspectives, has often led to a loss of institutional memory, making it challenging to build on past successes. The absence of a systematic archival strategy has further complicated this issue, highlighting the need for better documentation and preservation of the Biennial's educational initiatives. Addressing this gap is essential for ensuring that future editions can draw on the rich history of the Biennial's engagement practices while embracing the spirit of innovation that defines contemporary art biennials.

Looking forward, the São Paulo Biennial's experience offers important insights for other biennials and large-scale exhibitions seeking to balance educational continuity with creative renewal. As biennials continue to increase globally, they must struggle to maintain their unique identity and adapt to changing cultural landscapes. The São Paulo Biennial demonstrates that a thoughtful integration of educational programs can play a crucial role in this process, helping to create spaces where art and audiences can meet in meaningful ways.

In revisiting the São Paulo Biennial's history, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of the potential of biennials to act as platforms for cultural dialogue and critical reflection. It highlights the importance of looking back to move forward, acknowledging the contributions of past

editions while envisioning new possibilities for public engagement. As the biennial model continues to evolve, the lessons learned from the São Paulo Biennial's educational programs remind us that the true impact of art lies not only in the works on display but in the conversations, connections, and learning experiences that these exhibitions inspire.

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Biennials and Geopolitics

The Pan-American Union and the São Paulo Biennial (1955-67) Geopolitical Arrangements in Defense of Modern Art

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Abstract The representations of the Pan-American Union in seven editions of the São Paulo Biennial (1955-67) emphasize its geopolitical bias and the plots that governed the choices of artists and works. The initiative was coordinated by José Gómez Sicre, a Cuban living in the United States who was head of the Visual Arts Section of the Pan-American Union, linked to the Organization of American States (OAS), from 1948 to 1976. During the height of his tenure, in the Cold War years (1950-60), Sicre organized ten annual exhibitions of Latin American art (solo and group) at the Pan-American Union's headquarters in Washington, D.C., as well as promoting the touring of some of these exhibitions throughout the region. At the same time, taking his own ideal of modern Latin American art as a reference, he took the initial steps towards setting up the current Art Museum of the Americas (formerly the Museum of Modern Art of Latin America), incorporating works by the artists he protected. This essay highlights some of the awards won by the artists supported by Sicre and reflect on the impact of their work on the Brazilian and international art scene of the period, to reveal geopolitical plots in defense of modern art.

Keywords São Paulo Biennial. Francisco Matarazzo. Pan-American Union. José Gómez Sicre. America.

The São Paulo Biennial, founded in 1951 by the Italian-Brazilian industrialist Francisco Matarazzo, had a significant impact on the cultural life of Brazil, furthering an appreciation for modern art among local audiences. It also put the city of São Paulo on the map of the major international exhibitions in the post-war years, giving it a special place in the Americas. The Biennial facilitated an unprecedented movement of artworks, artists, and cultural agents in Brazil and Latin America, speeding up the flow of information and trends and fostering stronger connections between countries on the continent. Furthermore, it boosted the development of professional and social networks and transnational interests, which were reflected in the selection of artists, curators, and judges and the awards at the event. This led to a significant reorganization of the art systems in the region.

The participation of renowned cultural agents (art critics, art historians, curators, museum directors, representatives of international artistic associations, gallerists, etc.) seemed essential for ensuring the success and recognition of the São Paulo Biennial abroad in its first decade of activity, and this strategy was going to be replicated by other similar regional shows in the 1960s (Giunta 2004, 275).¹ These agents could support the much-desired process of promoting local artistic production internationally, writing positively about what they saw or advising on acquiring artworks for private and public collections or museums. At the same time, they left their mark on the local scene, influencing awards and sparking discussions that reflected the hegemonic cultural centers. The mobility of a significant contingent of artists, curators, critics, jurors, as well as art dealers and collectors, produced clashes, associations, and disputes that made evident the contradictions embedded in local, regional, and international categories in a world shaped by geopolitical divisions, economic motivations, and intricate power dynamics.

Some names stand out for their far-reaching presence and impact in the Latin American art scene at the time, including the Argentinean critic and art historian Jorge Romero Brest (1905-1989), who directed the Torcuato di Tella Institute in the 1960s, the also Argentinean Marta Traba (1930-1983) who settled in Colombia, and was the first director of the Museum of Modern Art of Bogotá, before leaving to Venezuela, the French critic Pierre Restany (1930-2003), who wrote extensively about Brazilian and Argentinean art, and the Cuban, based in the USA, José Gómez Sicre (1916-1991). This was by no means a group of friends or professional colleagues who shared the same points of view on the art of their time, but they have crossed paths on several occasions and sometimes collaborated. Furthermore, they all championed modern/contemporary art and praised the potential of art produced in Latin America. They would regularly visit Brazil in the 1950s and 1960s to follow the São Paulo Biennial, acting as jurors, commissioners, or art critics.

José Gómez Sicre, the subject of my paper, actively contributed to the expansion of the Latin American art scene during the Cold War and directly influenced the São Paulo Biennial. This is corroborated by the various letters he exchanged with the event organizers since January 1951, when he wrote to Lourival Gomes Machado, Artistic Director of the 1st São Paulo Biennial, avowing his enthusiasm for the show and committing to its promotion. This official correspondence initiated an institutional relationship that would be consolidated with the increasing participation of Gómez Sicre in the Biennial. His letters to Arturo Profili, General Secretary of the show during the 1950s, became more friendly and casual over the years, and they abandoned English as the official language and wrote to each other in Portuguese and Spanish. Still, since their first exchanges, Gómez Sicre hasn't slowed away from advising about the countries and artists the Biennial should invite and the people and institutions it should contact. In a letter dated 2 December 1952, he requested a different attitude toward Latin American countries on the part of the representatives of the Biennial, suggesting the show should put more emphasis on the art of the hemisphere and be a Pan-American

¹ In commenting on the Cordoba Biennial, for instance, Andrea Giunta asserts that "it was fundamental that prestigious figures from the international circuit could appreciate *in situ* what the country was doing".

manifestation. He asks Profili if he does not think that presenting the same panorama of European art of well-recognized masters is duplicating other similar events in Europe. I feel strongly, he states,

that if little more attention was given to the American countries, the Biennial would have a flavour more of its own and would serve to spread knowledge and appreciation of the art of the Americas and to increase the prestige of our nations.²

A few months later, on 4 February 1953, he recommended the Biennial should make the invitations privately, directly, to artists or groups of artists, without the intervention of official agencies, and thus better and more appropriate representations would result. Ironically, he declares in the sequence that he could suggest several names, not only from Cuba or Guatemala, but from Venezuela, Peru, Haiti, and Colombia, “which would give a good impression and could compete on an equal basis with the European artists”.³

Gómez Sicre’s suggestions were well received by the representatives of the São Paulo Biennial, who thanked and praised him for his indispensable cooperation. Profili wrote on 2 April 1953:

Your suggestions, dear friend Mr. Gómez Sicre, show something more than your sympathy with the Biennial. They show the nobility of your work, the intelligence, and the understanding with which you consider it and carry it out. To work with you is a sincere satisfaction to me and my collaborators.⁴

Five years later, as preparations for the 5th Biennial were underway, Profili continued to seek Gómez Sicre’s assistance. On 4 October 1958, he wrote:

Start now by suggesting the names you think are appropriate for each country. The Biennial has already started to establish direct contact with official entities, so the names you suggest could already be included. [...] Write to us soon with your suggestions, including the people who head the official entities with whom we could deal directly.⁵

In this same letter, Profili declared that he would get the Biennial Board to

2 Arquivo Histórico Wanda Svevo, Fundação Bienal de São Paulo. Correspondence from José Gómez Sicre to Arturo Profili, 2 December 1952.

3 Arquivo Histórico Wanda Svevo, Fundação Bienal de São Paulo. Correspondence from José Gómez Sicre to Arturo Profili, 4 February 1953. It is important to point out that Gómez Sicre rejected the idea of having special prizes for American countries, believing they could compete on their merit with the European countries.

4 Arquivo Histórico Wanda Svevo, Fundação Bienal de São Paulo. Correspondence from Arturo Profili to José Gómez Sicre, 2 April 1953. To the Brazilian sculptor Maria Martins, who at the time was traveling abroad making contacts for the 2nd Biennial in the name of the organizers of the show, Profili stated that “Gomez Sicre, with his Pan-American Union, can, if he wants to, alone, secure the participation of eighteen Pan-American states in our II Biennial, especially since he is a man who can really do it, due to his prestige and his sensitivity”: Arquivo Histórico Wanda Svevo, Fundação Bienal de São Paulo. Correspondence from Arturo Profili to Maria Martins, 16 December 1952.

5 Arquivo Histórico Wanda Svevo, Fundação Bienal de São Paulo. Correspondence from Arturo Profili to José Gómez Sicre, 4 October 1958.

include Gómez Sicre on the International Jury, especially considering his presence as an official witness for the Latin American countries. Based on the consulted documents, it can be assumed that during Profili's tenure as secretary, Gómez Sicre became an informal advisor on Latin American affairs to the São Paulo Biennial and tried to promote his institutional arts agenda for the region.⁶

He played a key role in getting some countries to participate in the show by mediating negotiations with authorities and entities and ensuring their commitment. He was closely involved in these negotiations throughout the first decade of the Biennial and received detailed reports from Profili on their progress. His approach to Haiti's participation is a good example of his methods. After Haiti's presentation in the 1st São Paulo Biennial, he advised that connections should be made with the Centre d'Art of Port-au-Prince instead of the Foyer des Arts Plastiques, which had overseen the 1951 showcase, if they wanted to feature authentic Haitian primitive artists. As Bruno Pinheiro has pointed out, the Centre had numerous supporters among foreign players from the international art world and its absence in the 1951 negotiations generated comments among critics who expected to see works that had already been consolidated by international art networks (Pinheiro 2023, 48).⁷ Gómez Sicre had a close relationship with its manager, the American painter Dewitt Peters, after he visited the Centre in 1944, and they collaborated on a few occasions. In July 1956, commenting about the forthcoming Biennial with Profili, he declared that:

As for Haiti, I think there won't be much of a problem. The point is that if you ask only for paintings and sculptures of primitive artists, you will get an excellent result. If you ask for everything, you will have the intervention of a Society called Le Foyer des Arts Plastiques, whose members are second and third-class artists. To obtain a good set of important works, you must limit the submission to the creators represented by Le Centre d'Art. Its Director is Diwitt Peters, with whom I am always in contact, and I can help you and help him to ensure that what is sent is of first class. You must deal with this problem clearly, otherwise you will fall into the trap of bureaucracy.⁸

Gómez Sicre's influence on the artistic and cultural scenes in the post-war United States and Latin America has been the subject of recent examination by art historians and visual art researchers. They have aimed to unravel the intricacies of a complex web of cultural projects, personal and diplomatic relations, and corporate and political interests. These researchers include Claire F. Fox, author of the first in-depth study about the subject, Alejandro Anreus, Michael Wellen, Alessandro Armato, and Ivonne Pini. They all

6 I have conducted in-depth research at the Wanda Svevo Historical Archive/São Paulo Biennial Foundation, examining numerous correspondences between Gómez Sicre and the Biennial's representatives. Additionally, I have analyzed Gómez Sicre's papers at the Nettie Lee Benson Latin American Collection of the University of Texas at Austin. The archival materials reveal the significance of his professional connections, personal interactions, and engagements related to some of the Biennial awards.

7 See also, from the same author, Pinheiro 2022.

8 Arquivo Histórico Wanda Svevo, Fundação Bienal de São Paulo. Correspondence from José Gómez Sicre to Arturo Profili, 25 July 1956.

emphasize the significance of Gómez Sicre's actions, at least until the late 1960s, in promoting a concept of Latin American modern art that could be readily accepted and included in the canon endorsed by major US art institutions of that time.

Gómez Sicre was the head of the Visual Arts Section of the Pan-American Union (PAU), the secretariat of the Organization of American States (OAS), from 1948 until 1976. That year, he became the director of the Museum of Modern Art of Latin America, connected to the OAS, a position he held until his retirement in 1983.⁹ During the Cold War (the 1950s-60s), he organized up to ten annual exhibitions of Latin American art at the Pan-American Union Headquarters in Washington, D.C., some of them of young Brazilian artists.¹⁰ In many cases, these exhibitions were the first solo shows of these artists in the United States and could be a turning point in their careers.¹¹ He also promoted continental tours of some of these exhibitions. Likewise, he gave support and consultancy to larger-sized exhibitions of Latin American art inside and outside the United States, believing in the possibility of creating international art centers other than Paris and strengthening intra-Latin American solidarity.

Furthermore, Gómez Sicre coordinated at close quarters the editions of the Pan-American Union's *Boletín de Artes Visuales* (Bulletin of Visual Arts), active between 1957 and 1973.¹² In his constant editorials for the bulletin, Gómez Sicre "militated against nationalism and mediocrity in the arts and argued in favor of free trade, Latin American cultural pride, and aesthetic quality" (Fox 2013, 4-5). Also noteworthy is the fact that he authored several articles in US and Latin American newspapers and magazines and acted as an unofficial consultant to US museum directors regarding the acquisition of Latin American artworks for their collections. At the same time, drawing on his ideal of Latin American art, he took the first steps towards building the collection of what is now the Art Museum of the Americas (formerly Museum

9 Gómez Sicre's relationship with the Pan-American Union began in 1946 when he was hired as an expert in arts to work at the Division of Intellectual Cooperation, under the supervision of Mexican Concha Romero James (1900-1987). In 1948, the Organization of American States (OAS) was established as the supreme body of the inter-American system of governance. The name of its predecessor organization, the Pan-American Union, was retained to refer to the location of the OAS General Secretariat in Washington, D.C. Despite the establishment of the OAS, the Visual Arts Division continued to use the old name, Pan-American Union, in official correspondence. The Visual Arts Section became the Visual Arts Division in 1961.

10 The Brazilian artists whose works were exhibited at the Pan-American Union Headquarters included: Roberto Burle-Marx (May to June 1954, traveling exhibition); Ivan Serpa (August to September 1954); Fayga Ostrower and Arthur Luiz Piza (September 1955, joint exhibition); Aloísio Magalhães (December 1956 to January 1957); Aldemir Martins (January to February 1958); Carybe (October to November 1958); Maria Bonomi (January to February 1959); Iberê Camargo (March 1959); Antonio Henrique Amaral (April to May 1959); Marcelo Grassmann (July 1960); Maria Helena Andrés (March to April 1961); Roberto de Lamônica (September to October 1961); Manabu Mabe (May to June 1962); Abraham Palatnik (July 1965); Wega Nery (January to February 1967); Tomie Ohtake (April to May 1968); Sonia Ebling (November to December 1968); Alberto Teixeira (September to October 1969); cf. Sanjurjo 1997.

11 Among the most well-known artists who had their first US solo shows at the Pan-American Union are Fernando Botero and Alejandro Obregón from Colombia, José Luis Cuevas from Mexico, Ernesto Deira and Raquel Forner from Argentina and Fernando de Szyszlo from Peru.

12 The *Boletín de Artes Visuales* succeeded the *Boletín de Música y Artes Visuales*, created by Charles Seeger in 1950. Seeger was a musician and composer and worked at the PAU from 1935 to 1953.

of Modern Art of Latin America), located in Washington, D.C., incorporating works of the artists he exhibited or protected.¹³

Alfred Barr Jr., the first Director of the Museum of Modern Art in New York (MoMA), was undoubtedly one of the most significant influences on Gómez Sicre's understanding of modern art, which valued abstract (or semi-abstract) currents alongside so-called primitive or naïve art. Barr first met Gómez Sicre during a visit to Cuba in 1942 to acquire artworks for MoMA's emerging Latin American collection. Following that meeting, Barr recommended Gómez Sicre for a short-term fellowship to study in New York and enlisted his help in organizing the exhibition *Modern Cuban Painters* at MoMA, which took place in 1944 and had a condensed version presented in other US locations as well as in Argentina. Barr was also the one who recommended Gómez Sicre for the position of director of the Visual Arts Section of the OAS.¹⁴

Gómez Sicre utilized the São Paulo Biennial to temporarily showcase the Latin American artists he admired and supported, intending to enhance their international reputation, but also

to increase his prestige [...] and, in general terms, to amplify the resonance of the main work he undertook since he joined the OAS in 1946: to promote and institutionalize, in Latin America, modern art of a 'formalist' tendency that would break away from the model, then already very weakened, of Mexican muralism. (Armato 2015, 33)

Gómez Sicre was indeed a strong critic of Mexican muralism, considering it an official and stale movement, overly didactic, and subordinate to political interests.¹⁵ He opposed socialist realism for the same reasons.

As Claire Fox has highlighted, Gómez Sicre moved within interconnected corporate, diplomatic, and governmental circles, exerting influence through a personal network of supportive critics, gallerists, curators, and the artists themselves. He argued for a "liberal internationalism" in which the cultural sphere is tied to multinational corporate interests and established his transnational curatorship projects on the principle of exchange and circulation of merchandise (Fox 2013).¹⁶ He exalted universalist values

13 The first donation received by the museum in 1949 was a painting by Brazilian artist Candido Portinari, *Return from the Fair*, 1940.

14 Correspondence from José Gómez Sicre to Arturo Profili, 3 June 1957. Arquivo Histórico Wanda Svevo, Fundação Bienal de São Paulo. In 1957, in a letter to Profili, Gómez Sicre openly suggested that Alfred H. Barr should participate in the 4th São Paulo Biennial jury. He stated that "there are few personalities in the world today who enjoy a better reputation for serenity and impartiality". Barr did indeed come to Brazil that year, invited by the representatives of the Biennial.

15 His tumultuous relationship with David Siqueiros contributed to his negative vision of Mexican muralism. Siqueiros, in turn, described Gómez Sicre in an interview in 1958 as an "agent of abstractionism".

16 In a 1962 editorial for the *Boletín de Artes Visuales*, Gómez Sicre highlighted the growing regional impact of private sponsorship in the arts, praising examples such as the Institute of Contemporary Art in Lima, the Center for Art and Letters in Montevideo, the Torcuato di Tella Foundation in Buenos Aires, various foundations in Venezuela, the Kaiser Industries in Argentina, which supported the Biennial of Córdoba, as well as Francisco Matarazzo. He placed particular emphasis on the American oil company Esso, which operated on a transnational scale; cf Gómez Sicre 1962b.

based on the ideals of freedom of expression, and artistic subjectivity. But she also observes that

his early intellectual formation did not augur his contemporary epitaph as a cold warrior for the arts. Indeed, in the 1940s, his political perspectives were more progressive than those of many of his contemporaries who went on to become revolutionary intellectuals.

In her opinion,

Gómez Sicre managed to survive the McCarthy era, only to emerge on the other side a cold warrior. [...] He debuted a vitriolic anticastrismo after the Revolution, and upon Cuba's expulsion from the OAS in 1962, he and a handful of other Cuban cultural workers became *de facto* representatives of their nation at the PAU. (Fox 2010, 90)

His connection with the São Paulo Biennial and the Brazilian art scene is just a small part of a wider range of activities in the US and Latin America. It should be analyzed in a broader context, where the OAS/PAU served as a hub promoting Pan-Americanist ideals as a strategy to counter communist influence in the region, especially after the Cuban Revolution.

In the 1960s, for instance, Gómez Sicre helped organize the Esso Salons for Young Artists, an inter-American event sponsored by the OAS and the Esso (Standard Oil) Company, aimed at artists under forty. The Esso Salons took place in countries where Esso had affiliates, including Brazil, Argentina, Haiti, the Dominican Republic, Venezuela, Peru, Chile, Puerto Rico, and El Salvador. In El Salvador, the salon welcomed participation from all Central American citizens. Award-winning pieces from the various national salons would then compete in the final Salon, held at the Pan-American Union in Washington, D.C., in 1965. He also assisted in organizing the Córdoba Biennial and served on the jury of its first edition, where the Argentinean painter Raquel Forner was awarded the Grand Prize. The Biennial was active from 1962 to 1966 and aimed to promote artistic interactions within the region or continent, which aligned with Gómez Sicre's cultural strategies.

Furthermore, he frequently communicated with Leonel Estrada, who organized the Coltejer Biennial in Medellín, Colombia, from 1968 to 1972. In 1971, he pleaded with Estrada not to accept Cuban artists living on the island in the 3rd Biennial, stating that it was a request in favor of democracy (Garcés 2018, 113). With the same spirit, he strongly reacted to the 6th São Paulo Biennial (1961), which had Mário Pedrosa as Artistic Director and included countries of the communist bloc, such as Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania, and the Soviet Union. Gómez Sicre wrote a negative review of the Soviet Union's first appearance on the show for *Américas*, magazine of the OAS, stating that even those sympathetic to Eastern European political doctrines expressed their discontentment with the low quality of the exhibition:

Few times has São Paulo seen exhibits so poor, so feeble, speaking so clearly not of a nation with pretensions to the domination of the rest of humanity but of an underdeveloped people. [...] The Soviet painting sent to this Brazilian contest was in the realm of amateur, of the intuitive done without knowledge or daring. In any light, it was incongruent that

a country that claims to use logic and discipline in technological matters should be so utterly lacking in both characteristics and produce a kind of painting that would shame second-year students in most countries that have never dreamed of being great Powers. (Gómez Sicre 1962a, 3-9)¹⁷

Gómez Sicre was a prominent figure at the São Paulo Biennial until its 9th edition in 1967. He served as the commissioner for Cuba three times and oversaw the Pan-American Union pavilion, which was the only official representation of a supranational body in the show at that time. Additionally, he was a member of the Biennial jury in 1959, 1963, and 1965, where the same jury that selected the regular awards was responsible for choosing works for the acquisition prizes as well. At the request of Francisco Matarazzo, he also helped bring an exhibition he curated on pre-Columbian art to the 7th São Paulo Biennial in 1963. This exhibition had previously toured various European cities in 1962 and was co-financed by the Colombian government and Esso Colombia S.A.

Despite being the first exhibition of its kind outside of Europe and in a peripheral capital, the São Paulo Biennial was modeled after the format of the Venice Biennale. It was based on national representations, with each country being responsible for its own, and it also awarded several prizes. The São Paulo Biennial did not challenge the 'Venetian formula' or its organizational and media structures; instead, it utilized this formula to strive for a prominent position in the international cultural landscape. In the early years of the Biennial, this scheme ensured the participation of numerous artists and foreign delegations at no cost to the organizers. As Profili explained to Gómez Sicre in a letter dated 17 February 1953, when replying to his suggestion that the Biennial should contact the artists privately, "at this time we may invite-only Governments and official entities which thus will assume duties and honors, will take upon themselves the organizing and sending of the delegations".¹⁸

The São Paulo Biennial became internationally recognized in part due to its extensive award system, which provided legitimacy to the show. This system, which was in place until the 14th edition in 1977, included regular awards, honorable mentions, and various acquisition prizes sponsored by different companies, collectors, public and diplomatic bodies, and civil associations or foreign representations in Brazil. Additionally, artists had the opportunity to sell their works during the event, like the practice at the Venice Biennale. Until the 8th edition (1965), prizes were awarded by category (painting, sculpture, engraving, and drawing) to national and foreign artists. Furthermore, from the 2nd Biennial (1953) onwards, a Grand Prize was awarded to an artist who stood out for the body of work presented.

In 1967, during the Brazilian military dictatorship, the regulations of the Biennial were revised, leading to significant changes in the award system.¹⁹

¹⁷ Gómez Sicre expressed similar concerns to the Argentine press in 1962, during his participation as a juror in the 1st Córdoba Biennial, warning about "international political plots" aiming to promote the "wonders of the plastic culture of the Soviet bloc" at the São Paulo Biennial, cf Longoni, Mestman 2010, 50.

¹⁸ Arquivo Histórico Wanda Svevo, Fundação Bienal de São Paulo. Correspondence from José Gómez Sicre to Arturo Profili, 17 February 1953.

¹⁹ The new regulations influenced the jury's composition, resulting in a panel of nine members, eight of whom should be from abroad, thus ensuring diverse geographical representation at

The number of regular prizes increased, and they were unified under the title 'Prêmio Bienal de São Paulo'. The Itamaraty Prize was introduced to replace the Grand Prize as part of an agreement between the Biennial Foundation and the Brazilian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (known as Itamaraty), which began funding the awards and providing ongoing support for the exhibition. This year also saw the establishment of the Grand Latin American Prize Francisco Matarazzo, honoring the industrialist who founded the Biennial and was stepping down from directing the show. Under this new framework, acquisition prizes, honorable mentions, and several special awards remained in effect. For the 15th edition (1979), all awards were abolished, which had already occurred in major international exhibitions, such as the Venice Biennale and the Paris Biennale de Jeunes, created in 1959.

The acquisition prizes of the São Paulo Biennial were initially intended to build a collection for the São Paulo Museum of Modern Art (MAM), with occasional donations to other museums in Brazil. As described by Ana Magalhães, it was a patronage system where the management of the MAM invited businesspeople, associations, and important collectors to contribute money to purchase artworks for the museum: "Unlike the regular awards, the acquisition prizes of the São Paulo Biennial thus had a clearer sense of permanence" (Magalhães 2013, 473).²⁰

The awards granted at the São Paulo Biennial should be considered within the context of similar international art exhibitions, as these awards propelled not only the careers of artists but also those of critics, curators, and art dealers. It's important to consider the cultural strategies implemented by public and private institutions that recognized the importance of soft power on the global geopolitical stage, such as the Visual Arts Section of the Pan-American Union under Gómez Sicre's leadership.

Gómez Sicre participated in the first edition of the São Paulo Biennial in 1951 as the commissioner for the Cuban delegation, his home country. He fulfilled this role again in the following two biennials. On all three occasions, he brought together artists of the so-called 'Cuban avant-garde', whose careers he had closely followed since the early 1940s. This group included names such as Mario Carreño, a lifelong friend of Gómez Sicre, Amelia Peláez, Cundo Bermúdez, Luiz Martínez Pedro, Raúl Milian, René Portocarrero, and the Cuba-based Romanian, Sandú Darié. Some of these artists were included in the previously mentioned exhibition *Modern Cuban Painters* and also represented Cuba at the 1952 Venice Biennale, which was the only post-war edition of the show to feature the country.²¹ The works chosen by Gómez Sicre demonstrate his clear interest in the experiences of the early twentieth-century European avant-gardes. This fact is highlighted in his presentation text about the Cuban delegation at the 2nd São Paulo

the Biennial. For the first time, commissioners from national delegations were prohibited from serving on the award jury simultaneously.

20 The works acquired on these occasions are now part of the collection of the Museum of Contemporary Art at the University of São Paulo (MAC USP) and no longer of the Museum of Modern Art of São Paulo. See also, from the same author, Magalhães 2023.

21 For more information about the exhibition *Modern Cuban Painters*, see https://assets.moma.org/documents/moma_catalogue_2317_300062020.pdf. After 1952, Cuba took part in the 33rd Biennale in 1966, showcasing works by René Portocarrero, and again at the 36th Biennale in 1972, featuring pieces by Wifredo Lam.

Biennial, while also pointing out that European avant-garde values were assimilated in the country in an innovative mode:

The current Cuban art scene is characterized by a lack of provincialism, meaning there is no delay or obstacle to new ideas. Cuban art consistently reflects universal movements and incorporates diverse approaches. However, on the Antillean Island, this reflection takes on a unique resonance and is infused with a distinct personal essence. (Gómez Sicre 1953)

Table 1 Cuban delegations organized by the Visual Arts Department of the Organization of American States – OAS at the first three São Paulo Biennials

Cuban Delegation 1st São Paulo Biennial (1951)	Cundo Bermúdez, Mario Carreño, Luiz Martinez Pedro, Amelia Peláez, René Portocarrero
Cuban Delegation 2nd São Paulo Biennial (1953)	F.I. Azevedo, Cundo Bermúdez, Mario Carreño, Sandú Darié, Luiz Martínez Pedro, Rafael Moreno, Amelia Peláez, René Portocarrero, Roberto Estopinã Vera (sculpture), Alfredo Lozano (sculpture), Raúl Milián (drawing), Rolando López Dirube (drawings)
Cuban Delegation 3rd São Paulo Biennial (1955)	Wilfredo Arcay, Sandú Darié, Luiz Martínez Pedro, Amelia Peláez, René Portocarrero, Roberto Estopinã Vera (sculpture), Raúl Milián (drawing)

During the three editions he served as commissioner, Gómez Sicre made only minor adjustments to the selection of artists, consistently favoring white male artists despite the substantial Afro-Cuban population [tab. 1]. The works presented largely adhered to lighter forms of geometric abstraction. Artists such as Amelia Peláez, Luiz Martínez Pedro, Cundo Bermúdez, René Portocarrero, Roberto Estopinã Vera, and Sandú Darié participated in at least two Cuban delegations under his charge. It is noteworthy that Peláez was the only woman figuring in these occasions. Gómez Sicre considered her work “among the most outstanding paintings Cuba has so far produced, [...] in which we witness a careful transposition of domestic objects in a universal language”.²²

It’s worth mentioning that the 2nd São Paulo Biennial was held in connection with the celebrations for the fourth centenary of the city of São Paulo and was significantly larger than the previous edition. It was hosted in two new buildings designed by Brazilian architect Oscar Niemeyer in the newly inaugurated Ibirapuera Park. Thus, the increased number of artists in the Cuban delegation at this Biennial likely reflects the demands of the event. Subsequent Cuban representations at the São Paulo Biennial were organized by government agencies: the National Institute of Culture for the 1957 and 1959 editions and, following the Cuban Revolution, by the National Council of Culture in 1961 and 1963.

²² Amelia Peláez, b.1896, d.1968, Cuba: <https://www.oas.org/artsoftheamericas/amelia-pelaez>.

Beginning with the 3rd São Paulo Biennial, Gómez Sicre organized the Pan-American Union delegation, also known as the OAS pavilion. He selected works by artists from various Latin American countries, calling attention to those from the Northern Andes and Central America.²³ According to Gómez Sicre, this initiative stemmed from the desire to showcase works of American artists who, for various reasons, were either not included in their national delegations or whose countries did not participate in the Biennial that year. When introducing the first group of artists he selected, Gómez Sicre stated:

The Pan-American Union is starting a permanent section at the São Paulo Biennial to showcase artists deserving of recognition at this important event in America. The selection includes various trends in contemporary art, such as surrealism, expressionism, and non-objective art. Through the Pan-American Union, artists from the continent have another platform to share their artistic message. (Gómez Sicre 1955)

This platform was available over seven iterations of the Bienal de São Paulo, until its 9th edition, held in 1967. In the following São Paulo Biennials, there is no mention of Gómez Sicre, even though he continued in his position at the OAS in Washington, D.C., until 1976.

The first two Pan-American delegations at the São Paulo Biennial in 1955 and 1957 included a significant array of artists from various nationalities (six and five, respectively). While several of these artists may have faded from mainstream art history, they were quite active during those years, participating in international exhibitions and obtaining recognition in some. In their home countries, they contributed to important discussions surrounding national identity and international engagement, collaborating with other intellectuals and institutions. It's important to note that not all of them were based in their native countries at the time; a few had settled in major art centers like Paris and the United States. Moreover, some of them participated in both their national delegations and the Pan-American delegation simultaneously. For instance, Chilean artists Roberto Matta and Carlos Faz exhibited paintings in two separate rooms at the 3rd São Paulo Biennial (1955), representing both Chile and the Pan-American Union. This dual representation also applied to the Venezuelan Alejandro Otero and the Colombian Edgar Negret at the 4th Biennial in 1957, as well as the Argentinean Clorindo Testa at the 6th Biennial in 1961.

Starting with the fifth edition (1959), the Pan-American delegation featured only two or three artists, mainly working in different media [tab. 2]. In a letter to Profili dated 25 June 1958, Gómez Sicre announced a reduction in the number of artists while also indicating an increase in the number of artworks displayed at the OAS pavilion. At the 5th Biennial, for instance, Armando Morales from Nicaragua showcased eight paintings, while Georges Liautaud from Haiti presented ten sculptures. At the 6th Biennial, both Alfredo da Silva from Bolivia and Clorindo Testa from Argentina exhibited

23 "His goal in doing so was to work outside the sphere of his formidable curatorial competition in the contemporary field - influential figures such as Jorge Romero Brest and Mario Pedrosa, for example, were well established in Argentina and Brazil. In Central America and the northern Andes, he could also avail himself of U.S. corporate and foundation connections, such as the Rockefeller family's Standard Oil Company affiliates" (Fox 2010, 90).

six paintings each. However, the Pan-American Union's most substantial representations occurred at the 8th and 9th Biennials (1965 and 1967): Carlos Poveda presented twenty-two drawings, and Raúl Valdivieso exhibited twelve sculptures at the 8th Biennial, while Mauricio Aguilar showcased twelve paintings and Alberto Collie displayed thirteen sculptures at the 9th Biennial, marking the final participation of this supranational body at São Paulo.

Table 2 Pan-American Union Delegations at the São Paulo Biennial

3rd São Paulo Biennial 1955	PAINTING Roberto Matta (Chile) – resident in France Alejandro Obregón (Colombia) – resident in France DRAWING José Ignacio Bermúdez (Cuba) – resident in the USA José Luis Cuevas (Mexico) Hugo Consuegra (Cuba) ENGRAVING Carlos Faz (Chile) **passed away shortly before the event.
4th São Paulo Biennial 1957	PAINTING Carlos Mérida (Guatemala) – Acquisition Prize Manuel Rendón (Ecuador) Enrique Zañartu (Chile) Alejandro Otero (Venezuela) - Acquisition Prize SCULPTURE Edgar Negret (Colombia)
5th São Paulo Biennial 1959	PAINTING Armando Morales (Nicaragua) - Acquisition Prize SCULPTURE Georges Liautaud (Haiti)
6th São Paulo Biennial 1961	PAINTING Alfredo da Silva (Bolivia) Clorindo Testa (Argentina)
7th São Paulo Biennial 1963	PAINTING David Manzur (Colombia) ENGRAVING Omar Rayo (Colombia) DRAWING Pedro Pont-Vergés (Argentina) – Honorable Mention
8th São Paulo Biennial 1965	DRAWING Carlos Poveda (Costa Rica) – Honorable Mention SCULPTURE Raúl Valdivieso (Chile)
9th São Paulo Biennial 1967	PAINTING Mauricio Aguilar (El Salvador) - resident in the USA SCULPTURE Alberto Collie (Venezuela) - resident in the USA

In many cases, artists participated in the São Paulo Biennial shortly after holding individual exhibitions at the Pan-American Union headquarters in Washington, D.C. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, the artistic agenda of the Pan-American Union was quite diverse, showcasing both solo and group exhibitions of artists from different nationalities and featuring thematic

shows, such as *Artists of the United States in Latin America* (1956), *Fine Arts of the Caribbean* (1957), *Modern Ceramics from Latin America* (1958), *3,000 Years of Colombian Art* (1960), *Neo-figurative Painting in Latin America* (1962), *A Panorama of Cuban Art Abroad* (1964). As Claire Fox notes, thanks to Gómez Sicre's efforts, it "became a major player in the burgeoning hemispheric arts scene, the scope of its activities surpassing other cultural initiatives of the OAS" (Fox 2010, 83). However, we can align with Alessandro Armato's observation that Gómez Sicre appears to utilize the OAS pavilion at the São Paulo Biennial as a platform to promote Latin American artists with whom he had personal or institutional ties (Armato 2015, 36). As illustrated in Table 3, there are numerous instances of this occurrence.²⁴

Table 3 Pan-American Union Delegations at the São Paulo Biennial

Exhibitions/Artists	Pan-American Union	São Paulo Biennial
Carlos Faz	1953	1955
José Luis Cuevas	1954	1955
Roberto Matta	1955	1955
Alejandro Obregón	1955	1955
Manuel Rendón	1955	1957
Enrique Zañartu	1956	1957
Edgar Negret	1956	1957
David Manzur	1961	1963
Omar Rayo	1961	1963
Alfredo da Silva	1961	1961
Raúl Valdivieso	1964	1965
Carlos Poveda	1965	1965
Mauricio Aguilar	1966	1967

Gómez Sicre reflected on the connection between his work at the Pan-American Union and the São Paulo Biennial in an unpublished text where he evaluated his work:

Not only was the OAS' gallery in Washington extremely active, but it also advocated abroad the most renowned artists who passed through it. The São Paulo Biennial, in Brazil, was a befitting venue from which to expand the nascent prestige of those artists who, because of their talent, had triumphed in the Washington gallery. Indeed, the OAS served to provide a wide range of artists with access to an important venue in which many Latin American countries did not participate because they did not accept their modern artists. It was through the OAS that different

²⁴ In contrast, Georges Liataud and Armando Morales held solo exhibitions at the Pan-American Union in 1960 and 1962, following their participation in the 5th São Paulo Biennial in 1959.

artists entered each edition of the Biennial after having had their first shows in the OAS' gallery.²⁵

As we've seen, Gómez Sicre had a significant influence on the São Paulo Biennials in various ways. I'd like to highlight some of the awards received by the artists he supported. Carlos Mérida [fig. 1], in 1957, and Armando Morales in 1959, were each awarded an acquisition prize. Their works, *Estabilidad sobre dos puntos* (1956) and *Sirenas II* (1958), are part of the collection of the University of São Paulo Contemporary Art Museum (MAC USP). Alejandro Otero also earned an Acquisition Prize in 1957, though his work is not represented at the MAC USP. Additionally, Pedro Pont-Vergés and Carlos Poveda were awarded Honorable Mentions in 1963 and 1965, respectively, while representing the Pan-American Union. Meanwhile, Fernando de Szyszlo, and Edgar Negret – two artists highly acclaimed by Gómez Sicre – also earned Honorable Mentions at the São Paulo Biennial in 1957 and 1965, respectively. The Cuban René Portocarrero, whom Gómez Sicre considered “an outstanding figure in the generation which initiated the modern art movement in Cuba”, received an Acquisition Prize at the 7th Biennial in 1963.²⁶



Figure 1 Carlos Mérida, *Estabilidad sobre dos puntos*. 1956. Casein on laminated parchment, 90 x 66,1 cm. MAC USP Collection

The most significant prize, and possibly the one that brought Gómez Sicre the most satisfaction, was the International Drawing Prize given to the Mexican artist José Luiz Cuevas at the 5th São Paulo Biennial in 1959. Cuevas and Gómez Sicre shared a close friendship, with Gómez Sicre

²⁵ Text by José Gómez Sicre assessing his work in the Gómez Sicre Papers, Nettie Lee Benson Latin American Collection Archive, University of Texas at Austin. Folder 3: now in Pini, Bernal 2020, 8.

²⁶ See René Portocarrero, b.1912, D.1985, Cuba: <https://www.oas.org/artsoftheamericas/rene-portocarrero>.

actively following Cuevas' career. They kept in regular contact, exchanging letters and offering advice to each other throughout their lives. For Gómez Sicre, Cuevas' work was a clear example of the possibility of moving beyond the muralist ideals in Mexico. Cuevas was featured in the Pan-American pavilion in 1955, but in 1959, he was part of the Mexican delegation with thirty drawings. During that edition of the Biennial, Gómez Sicre served as a member of the São Paulo award jury for the first time.

Cuevas' victory cannot be solely credited to his friend's interference, but Gómez Sicre certainly advocated for him. On 30 July 1959, he urged Profili, saying, "I would like you to continue bringing up the works of José Luis [Cuevas], [Fernando] Szyszlo, and Armando Morales. We need to support them as much as possible".²⁷ A month later, on 11 August he wrote again regarding Cuevas' participation in the Mexican delegation:

In any case, I suggest you allocate a space for him that can be somewhat isolated within the Mexico section, allowing him to present his monochrome works without the distraction of the colours used by the other Mexican artists nearby.

And to Lourival Gomes Machado, Artistic Director of the 5th São Paulo Biennial, in a letter dated November 1959, Gómez Sicre expressed his dissatisfaction with Machado's opposition to Cuevas' nomination for the International Drawing Prize. Gómez Sicre stated: "I don't think you can raise a whole campaign against an artist just because he does not please a certain critic".²⁸ He also emphasized that the jury's decision regarding Cuevas' award should not be contested, as Cuevas had obtained thirteen of the seventeen votes. Gómez Sicre pointed out that Cuevas received more votes than British artist Barbara Hepworth, who was awarded the Biennial Grand Prize that year, as well as more votes than any other foreign prize contenders.

In 1967, the Pan-American Union participated in the São Paulo Biennial for the last time. A letter found in Gómez Sicre's papers at the Benson Library at the University of Texas at Austin sheds light on his reasons for withdrawing despite the accolades. On 27 May 1968, Gómez Sicre wrote to Brazilian art critic Geraldo Ferraz, thanking him for the positive review of the Pan-American Union delegation. However, he also expressed frustration over the delays in retrieving the works from Brazilian customs and the indifference with which the matter was officially addressed. Gómez Sicre felt that Biennial's representatives lacked goodwill toward both the Pan-American Union and him. As a result, he was seriously reconsidering participation in the following show, not wanting to endure such an unfortunate situation again.²⁹ A few years earlier, in 1961, he had complained to Mário Pedrosa, the Biennial's Artistic Director at the time, that while he received press announcements about the Biennial promptly,

²⁷ Arquivo Histórico Wanda Svevo, Fundação Bial de São Paulo. Correspondence from José Gómez Sicre to Arturo Profili, 30 July 1959.

²⁸ Benson Latin American Collection. José Gómez Sicre's papers, Box 9, folder 9. Correspondence from José Gómez Sicre to Lourival Gomes Machado, 2 November 1959.

²⁹ Benson Latin American Collection. José Gómez Sicre's papers, Box 9, folder 9. Correspondence from José Gómez Sicre to Geraldo Ferraz, 27 May 1968.

he could never find any mention of the Pan-American delegation, despite having sent the necessary documentation about it long ago.³⁰

When organizing the Pan-American Union delegations at the São Paulo Biennial, Gómez Sicre's primary goal was not to influence the Brazilian cultural landscape but to further the careers of the artists he supported beyond South America. He sought to leverage the connections he made at a show like the Biennial to promote these artists. In an interview late in his life, Gómez Sicre stated that his role as a curator and critic was to guide, open doors, showcase, and promote emerging artists from Latin America, with the intention of establishing new artistic values and standards. In this regard, he achieved some success, albeit temporarily.³¹ While he praised Latin American art and worked to address regional inequalities in the art and culture sector, he did not aim to confront dominant artistic values or create strategies for cultural resistance. Regarding the São Paulo Biennial, it seems he hoped for greater recognition at the show, which ultimately did not materialize.

His successes, however, influenced the regional art scene, particularly through acquisitions made for museums across the Americas, such as MAM SP (later transferred to MAC USP). Nonetheless, it cannot be claimed that the artists he championed have gained lasting recognition in this context; their artistic contributions largely remain on the fringes of major narratives, with their works often relegated to the technical reserves of museums. Moreover, the awards they received did not result in the establishment of consistent policies for acquiring Latin American art for these institutions. The Art Museum of the Americas may be an exception, but its collection primarily reflects the tastes of its founder.

30 Arquivo Histórico Wanda Svevo, Fundação Bienal de São Paulo. Correspondence from José Gómez Sicre to Mário Pedrosa, 18 August 1961.

31 "More than just a Cold War Warrior. José Gómez Sicre and the Art Museum of the Americas". <http://www.oas.org/artsoftheamericas/more-than-just-a-cold-war-warrior>.

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The Inrush and Regress of Modernity. The Demise of the Krakow International Biennial of Graphic Arts

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Abstract In 1955, the Biennial of Graphic Arts was inaugurated for the first time in Ljubljana (Yugoslavia). Its major diplomatic goal was to provide a regional alternative to the Venice Biennale and champion the Cold War East-West power division. Its formula quickly spread across the world, mostly thanks to members of International Association of Art Critics (AICA), who often sat on the juries of graphic art exhibitions. One of the sister shows that sprang to life following the example set by Ljubljana's show was the Krakow International Biennial of Graphic Arts (Międzynarodowe Biennale Grafiki). When in 1966 the members of the Krakow's branch of Polish Association of Artists and Designers organized the 1st International Biennial of Graphic Arts, even in their wildest dreams they could not expect how significant their exhibition would become in the next 15 years. After the introduction of martial law in the Polish People's Republic, the operation of the Artists' Association was suspended and subsequently dissolved. Considering these events, the members of the Krakow's branch of Artists' Association refused to stage the Biennial despite the authorities insisting on preparing the show. When martial law was abolished in 1983, the exhibition returned, however many artists still decided to boycott the state supported event. The once great festival of international cultural diplomacy turned out to be an impossible desire. Finally, this paper also explores the last three editions of the Krakow Biennial (1984, 1986, 1988), focusing on the tensions introduced by martial law and the subsequent demise of its myth.

Keywords Krakow International Biennial of Graphic Arts. Modernism. Desire. Prints. Demise.

Summary 1 The International Network of Graphic Art Biennials. – 2 The Greatest (Yet Uneasy) Adventure of Polish Graphics. – 3 Against the Cold War Parochialism. – 4 The Mimetic Desire. – 5 The Turning Point. – 6 Just Another Exhibition.

The exhibition studies often concentrate on stories of significant success and put in the research perspective the politics that brought a particular event to successful execution. Very rarely exhibition studies discuss the fall

or dissolution of major, high-budget, periodic art shows.¹ Studies on failure emerge infrequently and debates attempting to uncover the reasons that led to a dissolution of major exhibiting projects are even scarcer.

This essay attempts to shed more light to the history of the decline of one of the biggest in terms of the volume of submitted works biennials that emerged on the Soviet side of the Iron Curtain, exploring the reasons behind the demise of the Krakow International Biennial of Graphic Arts (Międzynarodowe Biennale Grafiki w Krakowie). This Biennial was established in 1966 as a bottom up project by a group of Polish printmakers with the consent of the communist authorities. The event was intended to become an important tool for decentralizing cultural politics in the country, as well as to become one of the new tools for implementing the Brezhnev-era cultural diplomacy. Unofficially, the Biennial was devised to become a materialization of a long emancipation process initiated by a group of artists who struggled with censorship and who attempted to overcome parochialism introduced by the Cold War geographical divisions. Right from its inception, the Biennial's organizers insisted on maximal internationalization of the show; a strategy that in the late 1980s paradoxically contributed to the progressing demise of Krakow Biennial. This essay highlights the long road the Biennial went from the rising star on the map of the early globalized art world, to the show ridiculed by the critics, weighted down by a constant influx of politically clichéd artworks selected by the jury.

1 The International Network of Graphic Art Biennials

The Krakow International Biennial of Graphic Arts was set up in 1966 as the second oldest graphic art exhibition in the Eastern Bloc and became one of the several graphic art exhibitions which followed the format of the oldest of periodic graphic art shows in the region – the archetypical Ljubljana Biennial of Graphic Arts, which was founded in 1955. Between 1955 and 1975 graphic art exhibitions with a program modeled on Ljubljana's spread all across the world, from Tokyo to San Juan. These exhibitions drew from the model developed in Ljubljana and formed a quasi-network of events, which invited the same jury members, awarded prizes to the same sets of artists, and devised a similar method for selecting works for display. The common characteristics of these shows, regardless of geographic location, was a strong emphasis put on the internationalization and inclusivity. These exhibitions were early indicators of the globalization processes of the post-World War II art world.

The catalyst for disseminating the Ljubljana's format were the jury members, who traveled between different exhibitions and helped to spread the word about the new exhibitions. In the case of the International Biennial of Graphic Arts, the key figure for the process was a Polish art historian Mieczysław Porębski working as a jury member at the 3rd Ljubljana Biennial of Graphic Arts of 1959 (cf. "III Międzynarodowe Biennale Grafiki" 1970) [fig. 1].

¹ An exception to this trend is the studies on the 34th edition of the 1968 Venice Biennale, see Collicelli, Martini 2020, 83-100. For the overview of troubled politics of the Venice Biennale see Portinari 2022, 81-98.



Figure 1 Jury examining the prints at the 3rd Ljubljana Biennial of Graphic Arts, 1959. From the left: M. Porębski, J. Leymarie, N. Abe, G. Marchiori, P. Floud. The National Digital Archive, Warsaw

Porębski, along with another Polish art historian active in Ljubljana – Ryszard Stanisławski, brought their experience to Poland where they became jury members for the Krakow International Biennial of Graphic Arts transferring the matrix of modernization ideas from Ljubljana to Krakow.

In the Eastern Bloc countries, graphic art exhibitions were quickly appropriated for the purpose of promoting a positive image of socialism and utilized for the needs of cultural Cold War. Following the ground-breaking exhibition titled *Art in Socialist Countries* held in Moscow in 1958-59, an entire wave of periodic cultural events aimed at developing comparative and confrontational modes of discussing art came to life (Reid 2016, 270).

The Krakow International Biennial of Graphic Arts also belonged to this wave of new cultural ventures and had similar foundations to Ljubljana's Biennial of Graphic Art. Both Krakow's and Ljubljana's exhibitions were designed to maximize international participation, expose the exhibition to the widest possible international audience and demonstrate the superiority of the locally produced graphic art over the prints submitted from the Western countries.

2 The Greatest (Yet Uneasy) Adventure of Polish Graphics

In the title of the book devoted to the first edition of the Biennial, Zofia Gołubiew described the year 1966 as the onset of the "greatest adventure of Polish graphics" (Wróblewska et al. 2006a). It is worth noting that then both graphic genres – workshop graphic art and graphic design – received equal exposure at their own international events. The 1st International Graphic Biennial was organized in Krakow, and the 1st International Poster

Biennial in Warsaw.² In 2016, both events celebrated the 50th anniversary of the first editions. As noted by Andrzej Banach, the Krakow International Biennial of Graphic Arts was a kind of extension of the formula of the pre-war International Woodcut Exhibition in Warsaw.

In 1933 and 1936 there were two editions organized by the Institute of Art Propaganda (Banach 1966, 24-6). It was not until 1966 that the organizers of the Krakow Biennial secured permission to invite artists from abroad. It is worth noting that the idea of setting up an international exhibition of prints in Krakow can be traced back to the late 1950s. However the Krakow's community of artists could not convince the central authorities who were reluctant to any international initiative, especially those which were proposed beyond Warsaw. Despite their efforts, the centralized authorities showed no interest in organizing a competition with international reach. Krakow was treated as a provincial city, while graphic art, as a reproducible medium, was still widely disrespected.

Even though the ideas of the printmakers from Krakow were treated with a significant degree of skepticism and mistrust, the authorities finally recognized their plea by granting them a permission to organize a show with a nationwide outreach. The striving of the artists in Krakow brought to life the Polish Nationwide Biennial of Graphic Art, which was a watershed for the printmakers in Krakow and was the key event that altered their position. The Biennial established in 1960 on the initiative of the Association of Polish Artists and Designers. Three editions were held in the years 1960, 1962, and 1964. The first and third editions took place at the Palace of the Society of Friends of Fine Arts (Palace of Arts) in Krakow, and the second at the National Museum in Krakow. This periodic event gathered and displayed prints from across the Polish People's Republic and replaced the Nationwide Exhibition of Graphic Art and Drawing (namely *Ogólnopolska Wystawa Grafiki i Rysunku*), which had been regularly organized since 1956.³ Its limited scope was far insufficient for the growing aspirations of Krakow's printmakers, who established their own event that was independent from the centralized authority and the Central Bureau of Artistic Exhibitions (*Centralne Biuro Wystaw Artystycznych*).⁴ The Nationwide Biennial was the first sign of consolidation among Krakow's printmakers, and a significant step towards setting the foundation for the emergence of the International Biennial of Graphic Arts.

The strict regulations ruled out the possibility of submitting monotype prints, which aroused contradictory feelings in the community due to the popularity of this technique at the time. Only works made on clichés were eligible for the national competition, which made it possible to obtain more prints (Bogucki 1960, 30). The decision to exclude monotype techniques from the competition may have been due to the broad definition of this medium, which can refer to almost any technology that uses printing methods. Traditionally, the monotype process used a copper etching plate as the matrix, but in contemporary work it can vary from zinc to glass to

² For the history of the International Poster Biennial in Warsaw, see Matul 2015, 15-41.

³ The 1st Nationwide Exhibition of Graphic Art and Drawing took place at CBWA in Warsaw from 1 June until 2 July 1956. The exhibition of the second edition of the show was open between April 7 and 3 May 1959. See Egit-Pużyńska 2021, 46.

⁴ See also Jakimowicz 1997, 225.

acrylic glass. The monotype process also produces a unique print and thus for some critics it does not fall under the definition of 'reproducible' medium.

The 1st Polish Biennial of Graphic Art gathered 412 works by 159 artists. Lucjan Mianowski was awarded one of the main prizes for a print titled *Jeune fille à Paris*. In 1956, Mianowski graduated from the Academy of Fine Arts in Krakow, after completing his studies in graphic art at the studio of Konrad Szrednicki.⁵ His diploma from the Academy earned him much acclaim. In 1959, Mianowski received a scholarship from the French Government to study at the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts in the lithography studio of Pierre Clairin. Mianowski studied there between 1959 and 1960 and later between 1963 and 1964.

At the beginning of the 1960s, Lucjan Mianowski and Tadeusz Łapinski were the two printmakers recognized internationally, who had the opportunity to travel and gain international experience.⁶ By recognizing Mianowski's work, the jury of the show clearly set the tone for future editions of this show, which were meant to become a quest for avant-garde solutions and boldly look to the West. The Nationwide Biennial in Krakow was organized also in 1962 and 1964, with a similar outreach and similar strategy of amassing possibly the biggest number of participants, especially young artists and recent graduates of academies of fine art. The strategy paid off and the fourth edition of the show planned for 1966 was already turned into an international event.

3 Against the Cold War Parochialism

From the very beginning, the International Biennial of Graphic Arts was funded by the Ministry of Culture and Art and the municipal budget of the City of Krakow. Thorough preparations for the establishment of the first edition began with a personal invitation to all foreign artists who, according to the organizers, might be interested in participating in the competition. This rule was not implemented in the case of Polish artists to whom no invitations were sent. In subsequent editions of the Biennial, most artists sent their works on their own initiative, but the organizers sent invitations to select, well-known artists. This practice allowed organizers to expand the international outreach of the project and significantly increased its prestige.

Invitations were sent out abroad to all likely participants, but at home no names were specified for it was decided to select works in open competition. In view of the limited exhibition space and the need to maintain a clearness of display, the selectors chose 1,000 entries, including some 700 prints from abroad. The exhibition, which was general in scope and contemporary in form, provided insight into present-day graphic art standards of forty countries and a review of all conceivable techniques. On show there were works by many of the world's most famous artists. The immensity and

⁵ On this artist see Nosek 2002, 27.

⁶ In 1961, Łapiński's lithographs were noticed at an exhibition in Toronto by Gustave von Groschwitz, who, at that time, was a senior curator at the Cincinnati Art Museum and who was known as the founder of the International Biennial of Contemporary Colour Lithography. On his invitation, in 1963 Łapiński moved to the United States, where he received the position of 'artist in residence' at the Pratt Graphic Center in New York. See Stapowicz 2007, 59.

richness of the display simultaneously posed the danger that the viewer might be overwhelmed by a cacophony of different motifs.

The main exhibition of the Biennial took place at the Palace of the Society of Friends of Fine Arts (Pałac Sztuki) and in the newly built Exhibition Pavilion of the Art Exhibitions Bureau (currently the Bunkier Sztuki Contemporary Art Gallery).⁷ The new building provided ideal conditions for organizing large exhibitions. The first edition amassed an overwhelming number of 1,003 prints by 134 authors representing 41 countries (Skrzynecki 1966).⁸ The main organizing bodies included the Ministry of Culture and Arts, the Presidium of the People's Council in the City of Krakow, and the Association of Polish Artists and Designers. In this way, the organizers received legitimacy from all political levels – the central, the regional, and the professional. The Biennial was organized under the protection of Józef Cyrankiewicz, the Prime Minister of the Polish People's Republic.

The importance and breakthrough of this event was not immediately noticed. Jacek Gaj, a Polish master of copperplate etching, recalled: “for the artists this undertaking was almost unreal, the importance of this event was absolutely beyond comprehension” (2006, 79). The event was endorsed by the President of Krakow's branch of the Association of Polish Artists and Designers (ZPAP) and also, thanks to the support of Lucjan Motyka, by the Committee of Culture at the Central Committee of the Polish United Workers' Party.

The initiators of the 1st Krakow International Biennial of Graphic Arts were Witold Skulicz, Mieczysław Wejman, Włodzimierz Kunz, and Konrad Srzednicki. Two of them, Wejman and Skulicz, held the main organizational duties, while Srzednicki and Kunz performed supportive roles. Konrad Srzednicki was the most senior out of the four, and also a long-time member of the teaching body of the Krakows Fine Arts Academy. Skulicz, Wejman, Kunz, and Srzednicki were working at the Academy of Fine Arts in Krakow and were members of the Association of Polish Artists and Designers (ZPAP). The academy and the association became two progressive bodies which swelled the ranks of the Biennial's organizational committee.

4 The Mimetic Desire

The Krakow International Biennial of Graphic Arts came to life during politically turbulent times. Due to its international character, the edition was organized with a number of self-imposed political precautions by the organizational committee. Around 1966 many Polish citizens still had fresh in their memories the fate of Antoni Słonimski, Karol Estreicher and 32 other repressed members of cultural life in Polish People's Republic who in 1964 signed the *Letter of 34*, addressed to Józef Cyrankiewicz in defense

⁷ The Exhibition Pavilion (BWA Gallery in Krakow) was built in 1965. The Biennial and later the triennial of graphic arts were organized there. The tradition was taken over recently by Bunkier Sztuki (Contemporary Art Gallery in Krakow).

⁸ The 1st International Poster Biennial in Warsaw exhibited 608 posters of 349 designers from 32 countries. See “608 prac 349 autorów na I Międzynarodowym Biennale Plakatu w Warszawie” 1966.

of the right of free speech (Eisler 1993).⁹ Lucjan Motyka, who acted as the Minister of Culture at the time of opening of the first edition recalls that, despite the tense atmosphere, the biennial was organized without any official interference from the Central Committee of the Polish United Workers' Party (Motyka 2015, 105-6). However, there were two top-down conditions on which the biennial could be brought to life. The first one mentioned an obligation to invite artists from the Soviet Union. The second one assumed that a section titled *The Man and the Contemporary World* would be established to award prizes to the works that approached problems of the contemporary world, often related to a specific socialist ideology promoted at the time by the authorities. This part of the biennial was meant to function almost as an independent and parallel competition to the main contest, a biennial within a biennial.

Interestingly, the main prizes were awarded mostly to representatives of the Western schools of graphic art in order to promote the biennial on the international arena as a modern and progressive event and to maintain a degree of curatorial and artistic autonomy from the communist authorities. Since 1966 until 1988 only artists from the West and Polish artists won the main prize. The Grand Prix of 1966 in the open section of the exhibition was awarded to a Japanese printmaker, Kumi Sugaï. The decision to honor Sugaï had more of an artistic foundation, rather than political. Kumi Sugaï was part of the first generation of twentieth-century Japanese artists to become acquainted with Western painting techniques, but he also explored both typography and Japanese calligraphy, which were important in his graphic art.

Sugaï dedicated himself to painting, occasionally working with other media such as prints. He moved to Paris in 1952, enrolling at the Académie de la Grande Chaumière. In 1962 he began to shift away from the abstraction that was in vogue on his arrival in Paris, moving from calligraphic, mainly monochromatic, organic motifs to more hard-edge geometric imagery. In 1966, Sugaï was already a well-recognized artist. He participated in the Pittsburgh International (now Carnegie International) five times between 1955 and 1970; Exposition Universelle in Brussels in 1958; documenta in Kassel in 1959 and 1964; and the São Paulo Biennial where in 1956 he obtained the Prize for Foreign Artist. As a member of École de Paris, his name on the list of prize winners was the best testimony to the direction that the biennial organizers would like to assume with their show. The biennial was meant to become one of the global centers where graphic art would be judged and discussed, not different from the events on the other side of the Iron Curtain. In 1966, Sugaï reached the top of his career. The recognition Sugaï received in Krakow can be seen as an example of Westernization of the Krakow Biennial and manifestation of more particular interest of its organizers who were looking to strengthen the biennial's position by awarding prizes to the 'big names' of the contemporary graphic art world.

The Grand Prix in the 'Man and the Contemporary World' section went to Hannes Postma, who was a Dutch printmaker educated at the

⁹ The *Letter of 34* was a two-sentence protest letter prepared by Polish intellectuals in a protest against censorship. The letter was addressed to the Prime Minister Józef Cyrankiewicz. It was delivered on 14 March 1964. The letter resulted in repression of its signatories. A Polish writer, Melchior Wańkowicz faced the most severe repressions and was sentenced to three years in prison. The sentence was later suspended by the authorities to avoid public criticism. For the history of the consequences the signatories faced, see Łuczak 2022.

Rijksakademie van Beeldende Kunsten in Amsterdam. His oeuvre consists of prints that sought a connection with the New Figuration, combining figurative with abstract elements. In his prints, the viewer can occasionally find recognizable figurative motifs, such as human figures; torsos or limbs seem to float through space. The decision to award Postma a prize was a surprise. An even bigger surprise was the fact that his work was an example of colorful abstract figuration that did not allude to any political events nor was it clearly relating to socialist internationalism. Even though this decision was unexpected, there was a strong reasoning behind it. In April 1966, right before the opening of the 1st Krakow Biennial, the Central Bureau of Artistic Exhibitions in Warsaw organized a blockbuster exhibition titled *Contemporary Tendencies. Painting from the Collection of Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam and Stedelijk Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven* (Współczesne tendencje. Malarstwo ze zbiorów Stedelijk Museum w Amsterdamie i Stedelijk Van Abbemuseum w Eindhoven) (Potocka 1996). The main organizer of the exhibition was Edy de Wilde, who, from 1946 until 1963, worked as director at the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven, and from 1963 until 1985 led the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam (Verhulst 2002). This exhibition introduced many works of Western artists, including apparently neutral Dutch artists. Postma was then a safe choice which would neither stir much controversy nor it would be too conservative to spoil the efforts towards modernization of the biennial the organizers had assumed.

The selection of prints recognized with the main prizes was, in fact, an amalgam of different tendencies in printmaking, which reflects the abundance of trends presented at the biennial. Finding one key which might explain the choices made by the jury is impossible, however until the 1980s the show insisted on the internationalization of the list of invited guests as well as it supported the idea of confrontation between the representatives from the Western countries with the artists from the Eastern bloc. A Polish printmaker and one of the organizers of the biennial, Ryszard Otręba recalled that there was no singular overarching policy, and every prize was discussed and justified separately (Raczek-Karcz 2019, 53). Interestingly, the only policy that ruled the selection process was the diversity and parity to include some number of prints from the East and keep the distribution of topics and countries awarded evenly. Interestingly, while the award of the Grand Prix usually stirred up heated debates, the main prizes usually went unnoticed. In fact, those prizes were given for actual artistic merit and the printmakers who received one of the main prizes either excelled in technical aspects or the program they proposed in their work was particularly compelling.

The deliberate attempts to open the Krakow Biennial to the contemporary Western artistic trends were quickly spotted by critics. Sławomir Bołdok, who wrote for one of the most important Polish art magazines *Przegląd Artystyczny* (which was published by Krakow's branch of Polish Artists' Union) noted:

I have a great deal of respect for the jury of this year's edition of the Biennial, however, I keep my right to disagree with their judgements. I think that Hannes Postma from Holland and Kumi Sugai from École de Paris received the Grand Prix not just because of the pure artistic merit of their works. [...] I think that the jury followed the current international

vogue for op-art and abstraction and their decision presents a compromise between pure abstract art, and subtle Japanese prints. (Bołdok 1967, 3-10)

Bołdok's observation, although fueled by a sentiment for the local Krakow school of graphic art, seems to raise a valid point. From almost 1,000 prints selected by the jury for the first edition of the biennial, the majority seemed to be works representing variations on abstract art. This trend is particularly visible in the works of the members of École de Paris and other well-established artists of that time such as Hans Hartung or Henry Moore (Haber 2015, 27-33). Other significant entries included op-art works by Getulio Alviani and Victor Vasarely, who held particularly high esteem among critics and received prizes in 1966 and in 1968. A particularly strong representation came from Japanese artists, such as Yozo Hamaguchi or Kunihiro Amano. Japanese artists submitted possibly the most technically advanced works, which often combined traditional woodcut techniques with contemporary motives.

Although the Graphic Art Biennial in Krakow was not a ground-breaking novelty on the European stage, the initial editions still required complex thinking and compromises from all the organizers due to the fact that they did not operate with a full degree of political freedom.¹⁰ For this reason, it was agreed that two parallel prizes would be awarded, which corresponded to the thematic division into two categories. As Maria Hussakowska, an art historian and critic associated with Krakow, recalled, the emphasis was placed on keeping the right proportions between artists from the Soviet Union and those from other countries (Hussakowska 2006, 21). Another requirement was the presence of at least one Soviet jury member (Skulicz 1970, 16). The composition of the international jury had to be approved each time by the Ministry of Culture and Art and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. If the organizational committee wanted to invite a judge from the Federal Republic of Germany, for example, a judge from the German Democratic Republic had to be present. This procedure was long, and the approval of the authorities had to be obtained with regard to the program of foreign visitors' stays, which included, among others, trips to Wieliczka and Zakopane, or rafting down the Dunajec River (Górka-Czarnecka 2006, 88). Despite these limitations resulting from the cultural policy of the authorities, in the opinion of the organizers, the biennial was considered a success of Polish art on the international stage.

After the first edition, it was time for press reviews that insisted on the extension of the Biennial program with new artistic ventures. From the very beginning, the Biennial was to be a meeting between artists – art practitioners and theorists. It seems like one of the main objectives of the organizational committee was that the biennial would become a “mental space”: a place where practice and art theory met in the international arena, becoming a platform for exchanging ideas and confronting various creative attitudes (Bogucki 1961, 2) [fig. 2].

¹⁰ The Organizing Committee of the first edition also included: Konrad Srzednicki, Tadeusz Jackowski, Włodzimierz Kunz, Grzegorz Napieracz, Andrzej Pietsch, Tadeusz Zachariasiewicz.



Figure 2 The 2nd Krakow International Biennial of Graphic Arts, Palace of Art, 1968.
The National Digital Archive, Warsaw

It can be argued that this aspiration for modernization can be compared to the socio-psychological mechanism termed by René Girard the ‘mimetic desire’ (1965, 24).¹¹ The desire mechanism described by Girard assumes two patterns of influence. The internal mediation is based on the direct competition between the imitator and the model, potentially leading to rivalry and conflict. In the external mediation, on the other hand, the model is mediated ‘from the outside’ meaning the model doesn’t become a direct obstacle to the imitator’s desire. In case of the Krakow Biennial, the internal mediation was likely not at play, as such pattern would only have occurred if the organizers had become influenced by Western models of cultural production and strived to directly transfer these Western solutions to home ground. This did not happen, as the organizers attempted to create their own glocalised version of the periodic exhibition and tailor it to their own local needs. The latter process described by Girard, external desire, is therefore more fitting in this case.

5 The Turning Point

A major catalyst for the demise of the Biennial’s formula came in 1981, when martial law was introduced in the Polish People’s Republic on the morning of Sunday 13 December. The Association of Polish Artists and Designers was among the first professional bodies to openly express support for the strikes in Gdansk. Due to the lack of loyalty among the Polish representatives of the Association of Polish Artist and Designers (ZPAP), the operation of the union

¹¹ For a breakdown of Girard’s mimetic theory, see Palaver 2013, 33-134 and also Golsan 1993, 29-30.

was suspended the same day martial law was introduced. The Association of Polish Artists and Designers was responsible for organizing events and exhibitions and its branch in Krakow was responsible for bringing to life the International Biennale of Graphic Arts.

In 1982, after eight successful editions, the Biennial was not held. The authorities feared that the printmakers would turn the event into a protest and wanted to maintain the status quo.

Paradoxically, the period of martial law provided a strong creative stimulus for artists, despite the obstacles they faced. It had the opposite effect on cultural life in Poland than the authorities had intended. In 1984, when martial law was finally abolished, exhibiting activities resumed, but many Polish artists still refused to take part in an event sponsored by the state. They joined the so-called *Ruch Kultury Niezależnej* (the Independent Culture Movement), an informal and illegal formation which had to seek alternative spaces for exhibiting. The Catholic Church in Poland cooperated as allies with artists, transforming churches into temporary art galleries: one such event was the Anti-Biennial of 1984 organized in the cellar of the Church of Saint Maksymilian Kolbe in Mistrzejowice in Nowa Huta. The Anti-Biennial displayed everything that the State-supported Biennial could not and therefore resembled a true Bakhtinian carnivalesque, just like in the prints of Romuald Oramus, who presented his cycle entitled *Rituals*. The graphics from the *Rituals* series were created in exceptional circumstances. Romuald Oramus had his studio in a tenement house on the Market Square in Krakow. From its windows he could see all the demonstrations and activities of the militia.

6 Just Another Exhibition

After the watershed of 1982, the Biennial attempted to restore its position by presenting as many examples of Western European, American, and Japanese prints as possible. During these editions, the discussions of new artistic techniques and the problems related to these, including graphic methods (serigraphy, offset, photography, computer graphics, and video) became more prominent (Kowalska 1988, 4). At the same time, in the minds of critics, reflections arose that situate graphics in a rather marginalized position in the field of art. The form of the main exhibition did not change, however, and was still based on the same, simple layout – the works were hung next to each other in several rows on the wall or on specially prepared racks. This was rather surprising because, at that time, other similar biennials around the world experienced more curatorial intervention in the layout of the exhibitions since the large-format graphic sheets (exceeding 100 × 100 cm) became popular in the 1980s.

The 9th edition of the Krakow International Biennial of Graphic Arts finally took place in 1984. At that time, the date of the biennial was changed from June (all previous editions took place this month) to September. The jury, headed by its Chairman Włodzimierz Kunz, awarded the Grand Prix to Walter Valentini from Italy (*Biuro Wystaw Artystycznych w Krakowie* 1984). It is significant that one of the members of the jury was the winner of the previous edition, Albin Brunovsky, which was a sign of generational change. The custom of inviting the laureate of the previous competition to the jury committee was practiced twice.

In the description of the preparations for this edition, Andrzej Pietsch emphasized the organizational aspects of the exhibition. The Biennial was not only a platform for presentation of works, but it served also as a platform for theoretical debates.¹² Within the framework of this event, discussions were held on the definition of graphics, the limits of graphics, criteria for the evaluation of submitted works, and the modes of presenting them during the exhibition. According to Pietsch, the Biennial would never be able to fulfill all the expectations, because there is no ideal formula for a competition of this kind. There is no single recipe for dealing with the overwhelming number of works and the simultaneous presentation of each of them in accordance with the intention of the creator.¹³ While summing up the main biennial exhibition of 1984, a Polish art critic Stanisław Stopczyk noted moreover that many artists known from the previous edition of the biennial also qualified for the 1984 edition. The assessment of this fact was negative, because the printmakers presented very similar works, which, according to Stopczyk, showed a certain stagnation in the development of the graphic art world, which is a sign of desperation of the jury to maintain the credibility of the event, and to rely on a certain proven 'canon' in graphic art. This was one of the main issues that contributed to the demise of the show, which sometimes resembled a para-private event organized for the state's money.

In 1986, the jury decided to award the Argentinean graphic artist Liliana Porter, which was a rare example of honoring a female artist from Latin America. In relation to the main exhibition of the Biennial of 1986, various allegations were made against the verdict of the jury. On the one hand, it was recognized that honoring so many different works gave the impression that the jury had set itself the goal of recognizing all directions, styles, and trends. On the other hand, there were accusations of a lack of objectivity and the omission of representative trends such as the booming at that time 'Neue Wilde' movement. The 12th edition of the Biennial did not bring a breakthrough and the traditional formula of organizing the main exhibition was exhausted, which was reflected in Polish art critic Bożena Kowalska's diagnosis:

For at least ten years Krakow International Biennial of Graphic Arts has not brought any revelations. There is no revealing of new phenomena here, nor new trends that would herald something that has not yet happened. It is also true that the many recognised graphic artists ignored the show. But these are not the artists from whom one would expect innovative ideological and artistic concepts. They had formulated them long time ago. Such entries are rather expected from young, yet unknown authors. (1986, 3)

According to Kowalska, the Biennial did not stand out with anything new, neither in terms of its direction nor its artistic level. She emphasized that the rules allowing submission in any technique and in any format had not changed in decades. However, this openness, which was once the pride of

¹² For the analysis of the impact of the Biennial in the 1980s on Krakow's circles of printmakers and the value of discussions around the Biennial on the position and understanding of graphic art, see Brdej 2017.

¹³ See also "X Międzynarodowe Biennale Grafiki w Krakowie" 1984, 2.

the organizers, had two further consequences. On the one hand, it built up a variety of the show, and on the other hand, it caused trouble to the organizers due to the sheer size of the exhibition.

The peak of criticism came in 1988 which brought the case of Marek Jaromski who received the Grand Prix from the jury. His prize was controversial as he was recognized instead of a Czechoslovak artist, Jiri Anderle, who was at that time much more internationally acclaimed and favored by the critics. The decision to present the main award to Marek Jaromski was rooted in the fact that giving a prize to an international artist would spark more criticism towards the outdated by that time modernization campaign that was still pursued by the biennial's organizers. The titles of Jaromski's prints were also alluding to the vernacularised stories from the New Testament which was meant to become the organizer's answer to the accusations of showiness and excessive internationalization. It was the third prize from the Biennials organizer's in a row for Jaromski, a fact that was widely noted by the press. It was also the last edition of the Biennial under its old management, prior to the fall of the Berlin Wall and its reinstitutionalization in the 1990s.

By 1988, the once great festival of international cultural diplomacy turned into a desire impossible to fulfill and maintain in new political and cultural conditions. The Biennial quickly crumbled under its own political weight, challenged by the outside forces, which pressed the organizers to either terminate the operation or to change its formula. The modernization dream of Krakow's printmakers that assumed staying local but, at the same time, becoming global in the late 1980s became a political burden that could not be held any longer. After 20 years of continuous successes, the modernist legacy of the Krakow Biennial turned this periodic show of graphic art into a scapegoat for the media, changing the once-rising-star Biennial into the so-called "just another exhibition", to use the title of a book by Vittoria Martini and Federica Martini (2011). The great modernization myth became way too heavy to carry on into the new reality after the fall of the Berlin Wall.

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Conceptual Dimensions of the Venice Biennale

Per una 'Mostra Coloniale' alla Biennale di Venezia

Desideri, speranze e ideologie impossibili

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Abstract The geographic and colonial institutions established in Italy between 1860 and 1880, tasked with exploring the Mediterranean and African regions, played a decisive role in shaping colonial imagery and reinforcing the notion of an apparent national identity. Colonial exhibitions were the sector most profoundly influenced: displaying objects and artefacts, these exhibitions provided an opportunity to construct a historical identity. Beginning with the First International Exhibition of Colonial Art in Rome in 1931, numerous subsequent exhibitions aimed to disseminate colonial ideology through artworks. The Venice Biennale managed to maintain a certain degree of autonomy, rejecting several proposals to showcase colonial art between 1928 and 1934. However, the intense and relentless fascist propaganda prevalent before and during the Ethiopian war facilitated the inclusion of colonial art in the Venice Biennale, beginning with the 1936 edition.

Keywords Colonialism. Colonial art. Venice Biennale. Italian Colonialism.

Sommario 1 La (de)costruzione di un immaginario coloniale. – 2 La Biennale di Venezia e l'arte coloniale: un desiderio dapprima impossibile. – 3 «Proposte per una 'Mostra Coloniale' alla Biennale (declinata)». – 4 1936: il sogno coloniale nelle sale dei «disegni d'Africa».

Questo saggio mette in luce come i tentativi di inserire una sezione d'arte coloniale nella Biennale di Venezia riflettessero non solo l'ambizione di celebrare l'impero fascista, ma anche la volontà di indirizzare il dibattito artistico e culturale italiano verso nuovi orizzonti ideologici. La ricostruzione della Prima Mostra Internazionale d'Arte Coloniale del 1931 a Roma, la proposta per una sala coloniale alla Biennale di Venezia del 1934 (poi declinata) e la mostra *Somalia Pittoresca* del 1936 a Venezia sono alcuni esempi chiave che evidenziano questa complessa relazione tra arte, ideologia e storia. Le proposte per una mostra coloniale alla Biennale, tra desideri di controllo e ambizioni di conquista, rappresentano il tentativo di tradurre in arte un'idea di dominio, esplorando i limiti e le contraddizioni di un immaginario coloniale che rimase sempre parziale,

incompleto, eppure concretamente presente nelle dinamiche culturali dell'Italia al tempo del fascismo.

1 La (de)costruzione di un immaginario coloniale

Come riporta un articolo della *Gazzetta di Venezia* del 1885:

Non è ancora un secolo che l'Africa veniva appena degnata di uno sguardo di commiserazione; oggi è quasi, direi, sulla bocca di tutti. Se ne occupa con ansietà il popolano che spende volentieri il suo soldo per comprare il giornale che ne parli; come lo scienziato che nella solitudine del suo gabinetto esamina, studia, compara, l'immenso materiale che viene oggi di più ammassandosi per la conoscenza di questa terra degli enigmi.¹

A partire dalla metà dell'Ottocento la popolazione italiana entrò in contatto, spesso senza volerlo, con l'Africa. Le autorità governative – dapprima sotto la guida dei re d'Italia Vittorio Emanuele II e Umberto I, con l'invasione di territori nel Corno d'Africa a partire dal 1882 e poi con la presa dell'Eritrea e della Somalia, successivamente per iniziativa del governo fascista negli anni Venti – misero in atto un programma di presa di coscienza coloniale volto a giustificare le intenzioni politiche. Nel 1885 la *Gazzetta Letteraria* promuoveva l'interesse espansionistico sostenendo che 'tutti' – dalle persone comuni allo scienziato – erano attratti dalle terre africane; riviste come *L'Esploratore*, il *Giro del Mondo* e il *Giornale illustrato di Viaggi e delle Avventure di terra di mare* dedicavano ampio spazio alle esplorazioni del tempo. Tuttavia, in quegli anni, l'alto tasso di analfabetismo e di povertà non consentiva a molti di acquistare periodici o resoconti; più che attraverso le riviste, il 'popolo' veniva raggiunto con i volantini distribuiti nelle città, decorati con illustrazioni e semplici slogan d'effetto.

Partendo da questi presupposti, è importante riconoscere il ruolo fondante delle immagini coloniali come strumento di propaganda in grado di svelare gradualmente il contesto d'origine e permettere la decifrazione della sua struttura interna: una struttura indubbiamente complessa ma che riuscì a ottenere un ampio consenso da parte dell'opinione pubblica del tempo.

L'avvento delle Società geografiche nel 1867 e, successivamente, dell'Istituto Coloniale Italiano nel 1906, svolse un ruolo determinante nel favorire l'accettazione del colonialismo, a partire dalla sconfitta del Regio Esercito Italiano ad Adua (nell'attuale Etiopia) nel 1896 fino alla Prima guerra mondiale. La promozione della conoscenza geografica – centrale nella politica espansionistica – contribuì ad alimentare miti e stimoli patriottici.

Gli istituti geografici diffusero l'idea di un 'sogno coloniale', un desiderio di espansione propagato attraverso l'educazione scolastica, la letteratura, la fotografia e la pittura. Diari e pubblicazioni editi dagli esploratori erano arricchiti da schizzi, disegni e acquerelli realizzati da artisti ispirati dai racconti di chi aveva visto l'Africa, ma erano principalmente 'immagini immaginate', ovvero rappresentazioni interpretate liberamente dai pittori che tendevano a svilire la popolazione africana.

Il colonialismo italiano fu un momento storico doloroso, inizialmente

1 Appendice della *Gazzetta piemontese*. *Gazzetta di Venezia* (1885), ora in Del Boca 2002, 319.

attenuato nella sua narrazione ufficiale, poi gradualmente rimosso dalla memoria collettiva e riportato alla luce solo negli ultimi decenni. Un fenomeno che, nonostante le sue dinamiche drammatiche, venne glorificato in particolare modo negli anni Trenta dal fascismo, attraverso rappresentazioni evocative dei territori d'Oltremare, progettate per suggestionare e persuadere gli italiani che la 'terra degli enigmi' fosse una meta da esplorare e conquistare. I conflitti, le vittime e gli strumenti di repressione furono volutamente celati, oscurando così la reale situazione storica. Tra il mito e la realtà, vi era la propaganda coloniale, la quale si adoperò per influenzare l'opinione pubblica attraverso immagini, tanto efficaci quanto brutali. Non è un caso, infatti, che il settore più influenzato dagli interessi scientifici, intellettuali e politici sia stato quello delle mostre coloniali. Secondo lo studioso Paolo Chiozzi (1992, 37-46), le esposizioni di reperti africani possono essere considerate veri e propri 'luoghi delle immagini', attraverso i quali – soprattutto mediante le fotografie, concepite come testimonianze storiche – era possibile trasmettere un'ideologia sociale e politica, ancor prima di esporre oggetti e collezioni etnografiche.

La storia del colonialismo italiano s'intreccia con quella dei musei etnografici e delle mostre coloniali, il cui sviluppo fu ritardato a causa della sconfitta di Adua. Il Museo Coloniale di Roma,² concepito come un'esemplificazione patriottica del ruolo del colonialismo nella costruzione dello 'stato-nazione', nacque infatti con ritardo; le esposizioni di manufatti africani nei musei coloniali, miravano a legittimare interventi commerciali e politici, contribuendo attivamente alla costruzione di un'identità storica da imprimere nell'immaginario ideologico collettivo. I reperti, sottratti nel corso delle esplorazioni geografiche, trovarono così spazio in edifici permanenti, sale di musei etnografici o bellici e, talvolta, in mostre temporanee di modesto successo. Queste esposizioni tendevano a classificare l'Africa in categorie rigide e denigratorie, riducendone il valore culturale a una rappresentazione semplificata e subordinata. Gli allestimenti museali, progettati senza alcuna considerazione della realtà storica e culturale del continente, miravano unicamente all'esaltazione del prestigio italiano: pannelli decorati con palme, ricostruzioni di villaggi e modellini di uomini africani seminudi facevano da sfondo ai reperti indigeni.

Bisognerà attendere gli anni Venti per assistere a un diverso impulso organizzativo nelle mostre coloniali, che iniziarono a superare la semplice esposizione di prodotti agricoli e di manufatti per trasformarsi in strumenti di legittimazione del dominio coloniale. Questo processo trovò piena espressione negli anni Trenta, quando la politica fascista mise in atto un vero e proprio programma di propaganda estetica. L'arte, e in particolare gli artisti, assunsero un ruolo centrale nella costruzione di un immaginario visivo che esaltava la missione coloniale.

Il 1931 è l'anno della Prima Mostra Internazionale d'Arte Coloniale, organizzata a Roma presso il Palazzo delle Esposizioni [fig. 1], promossa

2 Il Museo Coloniale di Roma fu istituito nel 1904 nella sede dell'Istituto Botanico con la titolazione di Erbario e Museo coloniale. A partire dal 1914 fu noto come Museo Coloniale divenendo un vero e proprio istituto politico e culturale fino alla sua totale chiusura al pubblico del 1971. I reperti raccolti nel Museo Coloniale furono congiunti a quelli del Museo Nazionale Preistorico Etnografico 'Luigi Pigorini' di Roma. Tutti i materiali sono di proprietà statale, tutelati e valorizzati dal Ministero dei Beni e delle Attività Culturali e del Turismo. Cf. Gandolfo 2014, 125-38. Sul tema cf. tra gli altri in particolare Ciminelli 2008; Moure Cecchini, Duncan 2022; Acocella, Nicoletti, Toschi 2025; Messina 1993; Bassani 1977; 2015; Gabrielli 1998.

dall'Ente Autonomo della Fiera Campionaria di Tripoli, sotto l'Alto Patronato di Benito Mussolini, allora capo del Governo.

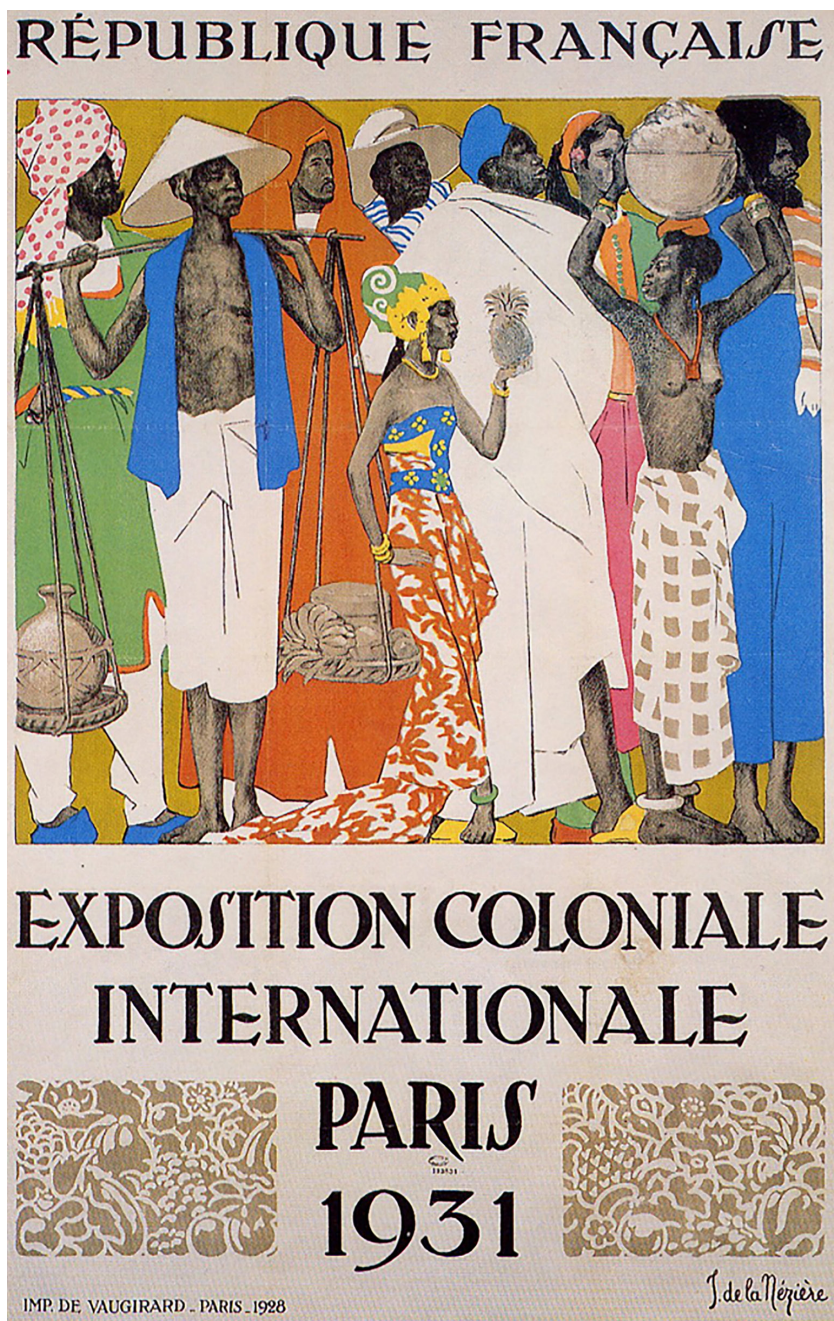


Figura 1 Manifesto della Prima Mostra Internazionale d'Arte Coloniale di Roma, 1931.
Courtesy Collezione privata, Thiene

La mostra accolse opere di pittura, scultura, progetti di architettura, disegni e incisioni e di arti decorative delle colonie sia italiane che straniere, con l'intento di raggiungere il cuore degli italiani affidando all'arte la responsabilità e l'onore di diffondere e di propagandare l'idea di colonialismo:

L'Ente pensa che per giungere al cuore ed alla mente degli uomini non vi ha mezzo più rapidamente suasoivo dell'arte. Alla bellezza, comunque e in qualsivoglia forma espressa, a questa invincibile ambasciatrice con la quale non si discute, la quale vince solo con il mostrarsi, l'Ente Autonomo Fiera di Tripoli affida l'onore e la responsabilità di propagandare su vasta scala l'idea coloniale. (Prima Mostra Internazionale d'Arte Coloniale 1931, 33)

Per la prima volta, dunque, in maniera dichiarata, si decise di affidare all'arte il compito di esortare gli italiani a una giusta idea di conquista dei domini africani. Attraverso l'organizzazione di mostre d'arte coloniali e la partecipazione a esposizioni estere, il governo fascista tentò con sempre maggior decisione di ottenere dei vantaggi politici.

Nel 1931 l'Italia prese parte all'*Exposition Coloniale Internationale* di Parigi con un proprio padiglione, segnando un ulteriore passo verso l'affermazione del suo progetto coloniale sulla scena internazionale [fig. 2].

Parallelamente, con la mostra di Roma, il fascismo intensificò la diffusione degli interessi coloniali per mezzo dell'arte, incentivando pittori ed esploratori a partire verso le terre d'Africa con la promessa di agevolazioni per il viaggio e il soggiorno nelle colonie.

Dalla fine del 1934, Mussolini mobilitò le autorità per avviare la guerra d'Etiopia, accompagnando l'intervento militare con una massiccia operazione propagandistica. Oltre alle esposizioni artistiche, il regime rafforzò il proprio controllo sui mezzi di comunicazione, sfruttando cinema e letteratura per costruire un immaginario destinato a permeare ogni ambito della società. Da quel momento, la propaganda coloniale raggiunse livelli senza precedenti, coinvolgendo tutti gli enti e imponendo un'adesione totale alle direttive fasciste. Come scrive Giuliana Tomasella (2016, 96):

Nella sua ossessione pianificatrice, il tardo fascismo non lasciò nulla al caso, organizzando meticolosamente e in modo diversificato mostre e rassegne dalle quali si aspettava un cospicuo ritorno di immagine. In una sorta di spartizione delle relative aree di competenza, a Venezia, in quanto sede della Biennale, spettò il ruolo di punto d'incontro dell'arte internazionale, a Roma, con la Quadriennale, quello di promotrice dei pittori e scultori italiani, a Napoli, infine, in virtù della sua posizione, del fatto che aveva dato i natali alla Società Africana d'Italia ed era sede dell'Istituto Orientale, venne assegnato il compito di rappresentare storia e destini dell'Oltremare.



Figura 2 Manifesto della *Exposition Coloniale Internationale* di Parigi, 1931.
Courtesy collezione privata, Thiene

Tra il 1934 e il 1935 si svolse la Seconda Mostra Internazionale d'Arte Coloniale a Napoli, seguita dalla rassegna che doveva essere considerata «la più grande manifestazione coloniale italiana e fascista» (Labanca 2002, 260), ovvero la Mostra Triennale delle Terre Italiane d'Oltremare (Napoli, 1940); Roma invece, attraverso la Quadriennale, sostenne gli artisti italiani e rimase sede degli obiettivi espansionistici, a partire dall'istituzione del Museo Coloniale del 1904; Venezia, sede della Biennale, continuò a garantire una rassegna artistica internazionale, con criteri di selezione di alto livello, mantenendo inizialmente una forte indipendenza dall'arte coloniale.

Tuttavia, la prima esposizione pubblica di arte africana si tenne proprio a Venezia, durante la XIII Esposizione Internazionale d'Arte del 1922. Carlo Anti e Aldobrandino Mochi presentarono la *Mostra di Scultura Negra* con trentatré sculture africane lignee realizzate da artisti congolesi, provenienti dal Museo Etnografico di Roma e dal Museo di Antropologia e di Etnologia di Firenze. Questa esposizione, nel contesto di un dibattito culturale tra il concetto di 'classico' e di 'primitivo', permise un primo confronto con la cosiddetta *Art Nègre*, già ampiamente discussa a Parigi con la fondazione del Musée d'Ethnographie du Trocadéro nel 1878, e attraverso diversi esponenti delle avanguardie artistiche.

2 La Biennale di Venezia e l'arte coloniale: un desiderio dapprima impossibile

L'approccio della Biennale nei confronti dell'arte coloniale fu tuttavia singolare. Le opere coloniali venivano considerate una forma d'arte 'speciale', assimilabili ai manufatti popolari o a realizzazioni naïf. Come scrisse Roberto Papini su *Emporium* (1931, 267):

Arte coloniale? Se si tratta di quella dei paesi da colonizzare dai ghiacci dell'Artide o dell'Antartide al bollore dei Tropici, su per giù la conosciamo e l'abbiamo da tempo, a torto o a ragione, catalogata nel mezzo delle arti rustiche o primitive o contadinesche o selvagge, cioè, nella gerarchia delle arti inferiori [...]. Esiste l'Arte con l'a maiuscola quando è tale e non quando nasconde la propria inesistenza o povertà o il proprio dilettantismo col pretesto che è coloniale o marinara o infantile o, peggio ancora, del maestro elementare e del dopolavorista. L'arte è un lavoro, non un dopolavoro.

L'arte coloniale, dunque, non veniva considerata come esteticamente valevole, ma piuttosto come strumento subordinato a finalità propagandistiche, in grado di diffondere un'idea di potenza italiana nei confronti dei paesi colonizzati. Il suo ruolo principale non era quello di affermarsi per meriti qualitativi, ma di veicolare un'idea di supremazia culturale e politica, rafforzando l'immagine dell'Italia come potenza coloniale.

Un esempio significativo è rappresentato dal caso di Giuseppe Biasi (Sassari, 1885-Andorno Micca, 1945), che partecipò alla Prima Mostra Internazionale d'Arte Coloniale del 1931 con diciotto opere realizzate tra il 1924 e il 1930. La produzione pittorica di Biasi può essere ripartita in tre fasi cronologiche: un primo periodo legato alle origini sarde, un secondo riferito agli anni Venti e ai viaggi nelle colonie d'Italia, e una fase finale legata al suo trasferimento a Biella. Nel 1909 l'artista sardo espose per la prima volta alla Biennale di Venezia con il dipinto *Processione nella Barbagia di Fonni*, e nel 1914 con le opere *La processione del Cristo* e *Sera di Festa a Teulada*. Da quanto scrisse Vittorio Pica nella rivista *Emporium*, nel 1917 Biasi era un artista da segnalare «avendo esposto, e non senza successo, durante l'ultimo lustro a Venezia» (Pica 1917). Nel 1920, l'artista fu nuovamente presente alla Biennale con le tele *Teresita*, *L'uccello turchino* e *Paesaggio sardo*, ottenendo il premio Opera Nazionale Combattenti. Dal 1924 al 1927, Biasi visitò la Tripolitania, la Cirenaica e l'Egitto e, come riportò Guido Marangoni lo fece «per non rimanere del tutto assente dal movimento» di tutti quegli artisti

italiani che «si indirizzarono all'arte coloniale seguendo le fortune della patria» in quegli «anni di battaglie e di conquiste oltremare» (Marangoni 1938).

Per Giuseppe Biasi in realtà l'Africa rappresentò una vera e propria apertura verso nuovi orizzonti: le piazze del Cairo, di Tripoli, gli indigeni e i beduini, la vita locale e i mercati, furono fonte di ispirazione per nuove rappresentazioni. L'artista si allontanò dalla sua amata Sardegna per giungere a nuove strade che lo portarono nel 1927 a esporre nel Cairo assieme a Mukhatar e Said, due artisti egiziani. Seppure non possediamo testimonianze figurative di questa mostra, essa conferma quanto il periodo africano sia stato significativo per Biasi.

Durante il suo soggiorno in Africa, l'artista pianificò un programma espositivo per le Biennali di Venezia del 1926 e del 1928. Rientrato in patria nel 1927, Biasi iniziò a mobilitarsi per una propria personale di dipinti africani per la vicinissima edizione del 1928 chiedendo sostegno al ministro delle Colonie Luigi Federzoni. Tuttavia, Antonio Maraini, segretario generale della Biennale, respinse la proposta dichiarando che «il carattere severamente artistico delle mostre veneziane» non consentiva «mostre a scopo di propaganda, sia pure nobilissima quale sarebbe certo quella dall'Eccellenza Vostra proposta».³ Aggiungendo inoltre, onde evitare il malcontento del ministro, che Biasi era stato comunque invitato a esporre alla Biennale. L'artista sardo presentò infatti alla commissione undici quadri di nudo, ma solo *Serenità* e *La teletta* furono accettati. Questi ultimi, dai densi colori e dagli schemi grafici esotici, non suscitarono particolare interesse da parte della critica. L'episodio di Giuseppe Biasi chiarisce la posizione della Biennale di Venezia nei confronti delle opere coloniali, considerate nobili per scopi politici, ma ben lontane dai criteri identitari e artistici della rassegna veneziana.

3 «Proposte per una 'Mostra Coloniale' alla Biennale (declinata)»

Alcuni documenti rinvenuti presso l'Archivio Storico delle Arti Contemporanee della Biennale attestano sia il desiderio di coinvolgere Venezia nella diffusione dell'arte coloniale, sia la volontà della manifestazione veneziana di voler rispettare le rigorose regole di selezione artistica. Tali documenti sono contenuti nel fascicolo intitolato «Proposte per una 'Mostra coloniale' alla Biennale (declinata)»,⁴ e comprendono una serie di corrispondenze tra figure interessate alla realizzazione di un'esposizione d'arte coloniale a Venezia.

La prima lettera risale al 2 settembre 1933 e fu scritta da Angelo De Rubeis, capo Gabinetto dell'allora ministro delle Colonie Emilio De Bono, ad Antonio Maraini.

3 La vicenda è riportata in Altea, Magnani 1998, 195-6.

4 ASAC, Attività 1894-1944, Scatole nere, b. 104, fascicolo «Mostre speciali. Proposte per una 'Mostra coloniale' alla Biennale (declinata)».

Roma, 2 settembre 1933, Anno XI

Illustre Professore,

Nello scorso maggio Ella ebbe cortesemente ad assicurare S.E. De Bono che avrebbe sottoposto alla Commissione degli inviti alla XIX biennale la proposta di ospitare una sezione coloniale nella mostra stessa.

Per incarico di S.E. il Ministro, assente da Roma, mi permetto ricordarLe la cosa, grato se vorrà tenermi informato delle ulteriori decisioni della Commissione.

Con distinti saluti

Angelo De Rubeis

Ill.mo

Prof. Antonio Maraini

Commissario Sindacato Nazionale

Fascista delle Belle Arti

Via del Gesù 62

Roma⁵

Il breve cenno fa riferimento a una conversazione avvenuta nel maggio precedente, durante la quale il segretario generale Maraini aveva assicurato al ministro De Bono che avrebbe sottoposto alla commissione della Biennale del 1934 la proposta di ospitare una sala d'arte coloniale. De Rubeis, pertanto, scrive a Maraini su incarico del ministro per ricordargli la promessa, nella speranza di ricevere aggiornamenti sulle decisioni prese dalla commissione. Non vi è traccia di una replica da parte di Maraini, ma altri documenti del fascicolo consentono di ricostruire la decisione del segretario generale in merito alla proposta.

Il 30 novembre 1933, la *Gazzetta di Venezia* pubblicò l'articolo «Per una Mostra d'arte coloniale a Venezia» in cui venivano presentate tre proposte di Mirko Artico, giovane architetto veneziano e fiduciario della sezione Gruppi Universitari Fascisti (G.U.F.) di Venezia dell'Istituto Coloniale Fascista. L'articolo illustra un breve ma ambizioso programma volto a promuovere «una maggiore propaganda coloniale attraverso il campo artistico» nel territorio veneziano. La prima proposta prevedeva l'organizzazione della *Terza Mostra Internazionale d'Arte Coloniale* nel Settentrione, preferibilmente a Venezia, in quanto «centro turistico nazionale ed internazionale di primo ordine, città ricca di tradizioni commerciali ed artistiche con l'Oriente». La seconda proposta suggeriva l'allestimento permanente di un padiglione artistico coloniale in Biennale. Infine, il programma proponeva un'idea atta a incoraggiare gli artisti a recarsi nelle colonie italiane e a esporre nelle mostre coloniali, concedendo loro delle agevolazioni, dei rimborsi spese o delle borse a concorso. Lo scritto riporta che lo stesso Istituto Coloniale Fascista prese in considerazione le richieste di Artico per poterle sottoporre alle istituzioni direttamente interessate, con l'auspicio che:

La Mostra Internazionale d'Arte Coloniale, la quale, dopo aver avuto una prima volta sede in Roma, verrà l'anno venturo effettuata a Napoli, nella sua peregrinazione sia alla terza edizione organizzata a Venezia, o

⁵ ASAC, Lettera dattiloscritta 94AC2 di A. De Rubeis ad A. Maraini su carta intestata «Ministero delle Colonie. Il Capo Gabinetto del Ministro», 2 settembre 1933.

comunque, che l'Arte coloniale trovi una degna logica sede integrativa in seno a quella che è la maggiore Mostra periodica Internazionale d'Arte.⁶

Una copia di questo articolo fu allegata alla lettera inviata da parte di Mirko Artico ad Antonio Maraini il 18 dicembre 1922, in cui l'architetto ribadiva la volontà di attuare a Venezia una mostra d'arte coloniale. Nella missiva, Artico faceva riferimento al fatto che il programma era stato approvato dal segretario federale del Partito Nazionale Fascista, l'avvocato Giorgio Suppiej. E che anch'egli era del parere si potesse «cominciare sin dalla prossima Biennale dedicando qualche sala del padiglione centrale all'Arte Coloniale».⁷ Lo scritto di Artico prosegue con la speranza che il segretario generale prenda in esame la sua richiesta, che ben s'inquadrava con le direttive del fascismo che prevedevano la promozione delle colonie italiane. Nelle righe conclusive Artico chiede a Maraini di tenerlo informato sulla sua prossima venuta a Venezia, per potergli consegnare personalmente una lettera di Giorgio Suppiej.

Pochi giorni dopo, il 20 dicembre 1933, Maraini rispose da Firenze ad Artico, confermandogli di aver ricevuto la lettera e il ritaglio dell'articolo che esplicava la sua lodevole iniziativa e di tenerlo aggiornato, accettando di incontrarlo in laguna una volta rientrato. Per la realizzazione di una mostra coloniale per la Biennale del 1934, Maraini scrisse:

Ma quanto alla Biennale ho l'obbligo di dirLe sin d'ora che tanto il compito amministrativo quanto la commissione degli inviti già si sono pronunciati contro le sale dedicate a speciale genere d'arte, come per esempio arte navale, arte agricola, ed anche coloniale.⁸

Aggiungeva inoltre che, proprio riguardo all'arte coloniale, era stata respinta una proposta dello stesso ministro De Bono e che, in ogni caso, l'intero programma della rassegna era già stato stabilito e approvato dalle Superiori Gerarchie.

Dalle fonti rinvenute, la questione sembra concludersi nel gennaio 1934, quando Maraini ricevette da Artico la lettera dell'avvocato Suppiej, scritta il 13 dicembre 1933, nella quale in poche righe chiedeva l'allestimento di alcune sale alla Biennale per una mostra coloniale, anche per ravvivare quella che Suppiej definiva la «grigia e morta arte della mostra».⁹ Maraini rispose il 27 gennaio 1934:

⁶ ASAC, Ritaglio di articolo di giornale 94AC allegato alla lettera manoscritta 94AC, *Gazzetta di Venezia*, 30 novembre 1933.

⁷ ASAC, Lettera manoscritta 94AC di M. Artico ad A. Maraini su carta intestata «Ma non v'è mar che spenga la mia fiamma», 18 dicembre 1933.

⁸ ASAC, Lettera dattiloscritta 94AC3 di A. Maraini a M. Artico, 20 dicembre 1933 (con arte marinara si intendono le vedute marine naïf; così come nell'espressione «arte agricola» - citata precedentemente nell'articolo di Papini - si fa menzione ai valori del governo fascista che intendeva costruire una identità nazionale basata anche sul rilancio della campagna e dell'agricoltura, quindi a un'arte che esaltasse i temi del lavoro nei campi ma eseguita pedestremente, magari avocata tramite concorsi o proveniente dalle mostre sindacali d'arte)..

⁹ ASAC, Lettera manoscritta 94AC4 di G. Suppiej ad A. Maraini su carta intestata «Federazione dei Fasci di Combattimento Venezia. Il Segretario Federale», 13 dicembre 1933.

Caro Avv. Suppiej,

l'arch. Artico, che è venuto l'altro giorno da me con la Sua lettera, Le avrà detto le ragioni per le quali non possiamo adottare nella Biennale il criterio di fare delle sale dedicate ai 'generi d'arte', come arte sacra, arte marinara, arte coloniale e simili. Ella comprende troppo bene come, seguendo questi criteri, ci si possa allontanare da quei criteri di selezione artistica ai quali deve ispirarsi la Biennale. Verrà quindi perdonarmi. Ma nello stesso tempo sarò ben lieto di tenermi a Sua disposizione perché la Sua idea di una Mostra coloniale possa essere realizzata in sede separata e con l'importanza che merita.

Mi abbia, caro Avv. Suppiej, con i più cordiali e deferenti saluti fascisti Suo.¹⁰

La lettera, pur non firmata, ma evidentemente scritta da Maraini, sembra mettere in pausa la questione per i due anni successivi. Il rifiuto della Biennale verso l'arte coloniale si configura come un caso emblematico dell'intersezione tra arte e politica, dove si cercò di mettere l'estetica al servizio dell'ideologia, con l'ambizioso obiettivo di ottenere legittimazione e adesione alle mire espansionistiche del regime (cf. Manfren 2016). Tra desideri, speranze e ideologie, dunque, in parte impossibili.

4 **1936: il sogno coloniale nelle sale dei «disegni d'Africa»**

Sarà solo nel 1936 che una mostra di quadri coloniali verrà accolta a Venezia: si tratta dell'esposizione del pittore Giorgio Grazia (Bologna, 1895-1975), *Somalia Pittoresca*, inaugurata l'8 febbraio del 1936 nelle sale che erano state del Grand Hotel d'Italie Bauer-Grünwald, in calle Larga XXII marzo (che si trova tra i campi San Moisè e Santa Maria del Giglio nel sestiere di San Marco), allestita dall'Istituto Coloniale Fascista sotto gli auspici della Federazione dei Fasci di Combattimento. All'inaugurazione, come ricordato dalla *Gazzetta di Venezia* del 9 febbraio 1936, erano presenti diverse personalità, tra cui il nuovo segretario federale del Partito Nazionale Fascista, il cavaliere dottor Nino Scorzon, e l'avvocato Mirko Artico, divenuto Presidente della sezione provinciale veneziana dell'Istituto Coloniale Fascista.

Giorgio Grazia si recò in Somalia nei primi anni Trenta, presentando nel 1934 la sua prima mostra coloniale a Mogadiscio presso la Casa del fascio. Rientrato in patria, nel 1935 espose le sue opere al Museo Coloniale di Roma, alla quale fecero seguito una serie di mostre in diverse città, tutte promosse dallo stesso Istituto Coloniale Fascista.¹¹ A Venezia, Grazia espose circa sessanta opere, ottenendo un certo riscontro da parte della stampa locale: *Il Gazzettino di Venezia* del 14 febbraio 1936 sottolineava come l'artista bolognese, con le sue tele, si fosse rivelato «di una sensibilità coloristica non comune» trattando «bravamente i soggetti più vari» grazie alla sua personalità che sapeva «cogliere armonie dalle cose raccolte nelle

¹⁰ ASAC, Lettera dattiloscritta 94AC5 non firmata di A. Maraini a G. Suppiej su carta intestata «La XIX Biennale Venezia. 1934 - Maggio - Ottobre - A. XII», 27 gennaio 1934.

¹¹ ASAC, Fascicolo n. 19831 «Giorgio Grazia», *Grazia Giorgio. Scheda informativa*, giugno 1938.

nature morte».¹² Le opere di Grazia, con tocchi essenziali, raffiguravano in suggestive impressioni, tipi somali, distese d'acqua, vegetazioni, o la semplice densa atmosfera della terra rossa africana.

La mostra itinerante *Somalia pittoresca* fu ampiamente pubblicizzata come strumento di propaganda, soprattutto a partire dal 1935, anno di inizio della guerra d'Etiopia, con l'obiettivo di testimoniare un prestigio internazionale al quale tanto l'Italia aspirava. Non è un caso infatti che, nell'articolo del 14 febbraio in riferimento alla mostra di Grazia, si evidenzi come «gli avvenimenti attuali» aumentino «l'interesse di questi quadri» appagando «più che a sufficienza ogni curiosità». Una curiosità figurativa volta a rendere più piacevoli e attraenti le drammatiche e cruenti circostanze storiche: le pubblicazioni prima e durante la guerra d'Etiopia selezionarono specifiche immagini e messaggi per coinvolgere gli italiani nei loro 'diritti' coloniali. Allo stesso modo, l'istituzione dell'Unione Radiofonica Italiana presentò incessantemente l'idea di una Etiopia barbara e incivile, costringendo il Paese al silenzio e all'ascolto obbligato durante i discorsi pubblici di Mussolini; il cinema con l'Istituto Luce ebbe un ruolo decisivo, come pure la scuola, dove i giovani erano chiamati a scrivere temi sulla potenza del regime italiano.

È probabilmente in questa linea di prevaricazione che nella ventesima edizione della Biennale di Venezia del 1936 si decise di lasciare spazio a una raccolta di disegni africani realizzati da Massimo Quaglino (Refrancore, 1899-Torino, 1982) e a una *Mostra individuale* di Mario Vellani Marchi¹³ (Modena, 1895-Milano, 1979). Si può ipotizzare che forti pressioni politiche spinsero il segretario generale Maraini a rivedere la sua posizione iniziale; nell'introduzione al catalogo della rassegna del 1936, Maraini dichiarò che dagli anni Trenta la Biennale aveva cercato di riportare gli artisti a un contatto più diretto con la vita e a una più facile intesa con il pubblico, con un approccio profondamente nuovo rispetto agli anni precedenti. Ciò portò a uno scioglimento degli «irrigidimenti teorici» mettendo in luce «il fondo di umanità che era, che è in ogni animo di artista italiano, capace di sentire il soffio rinnovatore del fascismo» (Maraini 1936, 27-8).

La propaganda fascista riuscì quindi a entrare nelle sale del Palazzo delle Esposizioni della Biennale ospitando, oltre alla mostra futurista organizzata da Filippo Tommaso Marinetti nel Padiglione dell'URSS rinominato Padiglione del Futurismo Italiano) che pure presentava alcune opere a tema coloniale che evocavano giungle o battaglie africane, due sale di «disegni d'Africa». La sala settima raccoglieva infatti un gruppo di ottanta disegni e acquarelli dell'artista Massimo Quaglino realizzati durante un viaggio a Río de Oro e presentati dal critico Marziano Bernardi. A quanto scrisse quest'ultimo, Quaglino si avventurò per quaranta giorni, affiancato dal giornalista Ernesto Quadrone, con un motopeschereccio lungo le coste dell'Africa Occidentale e delle Canarie. Il viaggio appare avventuroso e

¹² ASAC, Fascicolo n. 19831 «Giorgio Grazia», ritaglio di articolo *Somalia pittoresca*, *Il Gazzettino di Venezia*, 14 febbraio 1936.

¹³ Dalle indicazioni che appaiono nel catalogo della Biennale si può intendere come i disegni di Massimo Quaglino, presentati dal critico d'arte Marziano Bernardi, siano intesi come un gruppo di opere poste all'interno delle sale, seppure con una loro identità, mentre la sezione di Mario Vellani venisse considerata proprio una «mostra individuale», come spesso avveniva per gli artisti considerati più interessanti, assegnandole dunque un ruolo a una attenzione diversi, ed era infatti introdotta da Orio Vergani (XX. *Esposizione internazionale biennale d'arte* 1936).

audace, poiché Quaglinò colse al volo l'opportunità di partire e intraprendere una crociera atlantica tra burrasche e rare soste, per tuffarsi «nella vita più attiva, più rude, più fisicamente avvincente – per trarne sensazioni, vedute, episodi, insomma, un mondo nuovo e diverso dal consueto» (Bernardi 1936, 52). I suoi disegni, non riprodotti nel catalogo, vengono definiti «bellissimi, rigorosi» e «sorprendentemente espressivi» realizzati con una solida rapidità. Quaglinò, pittore e illustratore, rappresentò singolari impressioni lasciandosi incantare dalle forme e dai toni cromatici delle nature morte africane. Nella sala vicina a quella con i disegni di Massimo Quaglinò, vi erano le sculture dell'artista Giannetto Mannucci (Firenze, 1911-1980) che espose le opere *Ninetta*, *Alina* e *Testa virile*. La sala ottava, invece, ospitava la raccolta di disegni di Mario Vellani Marchi, presentata dallo scrittore Orio Vergani. Anche l'esperienza del pittore viene raccontata in termini valorosi: tra la fine del 1934 e gli inizi del 1935, Vellani Marchi partì da Genova assieme a Vergani, incaricati dal *Corriere della Sera*, per illustrare e «'vedere' senza indugi, scrivere e disegnare senza pentimenti». Se il giornalista scrisse quaranta articoli, il pittore consegnò «un centinaio di disegni in bianco e nero» e un altro centinaio di tavole, di cui solo una parte furono esposte alla Biennale. I disegni di Vellani Marchi appaiono come immagini di cronaca, realizzate in momenti non sempre facili, e riescono comunque a rappresentare foreste, fiumi del Congo e montagne del centro d'Africa con schizzi fedeli e graficamente intensi. Anche in questa sala, le opere dell'artista modenese erano affiancate dalle sculture di Bruno Innocenti, tra cui *Greta*, *Zuara* e *Testa di Giovane*.

Secondo quanto scrisse Orio Vergani:

Per la prima volta [...] un pittore affronta in tutta la sua panoramica ampiezza e non solamente dal piccolo angolo di questa o di quella città, o di questa o quella colonia, tutto il complesso panorama paesistico ed etnico dell'Africa, attraverso l'infinito variare degli orizzonti e dei tipi umani, degli ambienti e dei costumi. (1936, 56)

Tra il dicembre del 1934 e l'ottobre del 1935, la propaganda coloniale fascista si intensificò rapidamente, sfruttando tutti i mezzi di comunicazione per diffondere un'immagine del colonialismo funzionale agli interessi del regime. È chiaro, dunque, che in un contesto di crescente controllo ideologico, la celebrazione di Mussolini divenne un elemento centrale della politica culturale del regime, e la Biennale di Venezia non poté sottrarsi a questa dinamica.

Sebbene opere celebrative dell'impero fossero presenti nella Biennale del 1938, l'attenzione principale fu riservata alla *Mostra Triennale delle Terre Italiane d'Oltremare* di Napoli del 1940. L'esposizione fu organizzata in termini colossali: un'area di un milione e duecentomila metri quadrati con 54 padiglioni e 150 sale per ospitare le opere di tutte le nazioni straniere invitate, comprese le istituzioni coloniali presenti in Italia. Collezioni etnografiche e musei coloniali prestarono oggetti di grande valore storico; un complesso imponente, per il quale si prevedeva addirittura lo sradicamento di un albero in Etiopia¹⁴ da trasportare ed esporre in mostra. L'Esposizione,

¹⁴ «È giunto, trasportato con ogni cura per parecchie centinaia di chilometri, lo storico albero di Ual-Ual da cui, in risposta alle aggressioni degli armati negussiti, partì il nostro primo colpo di

inaugurata nel maggio 1940, doveva rappresentare il culmine della propaganda coloniale fascista, ma segnò invece l'inizio della sua fine. Lo scoppio della Seconda guerra mondiale, l'imminente invasione della Grecia, e, di lì a poco, la perdita di tutte le colonie faticosamente conquistate, misero in luce la distanza tra le ambizioni italiane e la realtà storica.

Fin dalla fine dell'Ottocento, la costruzione di categorie e narrazioni stereotipate sull'Africa ha rappresentato un ruolo cruciale della propaganda coloniale italiana e gli studi sulla Prima Mostra Internazionale d'Arte Coloniale di Roma hanno permesso di individuare alcuni elementi ricorrenti di questo immaginario, evidenziando come le esposizioni artistiche non fossero strumenti di valorizzazione delle culture locali, ma veri e propri mezzi di egemonia volti a rafforzare il consenso verso una politica espansionistica.

In questo contesto, lo studio degli avvenimenti storici in relazione alle esposizioni artistiche coloniali ha permesso di evidenziare il ruolo delle principali città italiane: Roma e Napoli emersero come centri strategici per la propaganda coloniale, sia da punto di vista politico che artistico, mentre Venezia, pur mantenendo il proprio status di punto di riferimento e di confronto con l'arte internazionale, dovette gradualmente adeguarsi alle direttive del regime. Se nei primi anni Trenta la Biennale sembrava ancora mantenere una certa autonomia nei confronti dell'imposizione a mostrare la cosiddetta 'arte coloniale', con l'avanzare del progetto fascista e l'inizio della guerra d'Etiopia, anche quella rassegna fu progressivamente costretta alla legittimazione politica.

L'accettazione di opere di artisti coloniali, come nel caso di Giuseppe Biasi, segnò l'inserimento graduale della propaganda nell'istituzione veneziana, culminando nel 1936 con il riconoscimento dell'arte coloniale alla Biennale.

L'esposizione *Somalia Pittoresca* e la mostra personale di Mario Vellani Marchi sancirono definitivamente questo allineamento, non tanto promuovendo l'arte coloniale come espressione artistica autonoma, quanto piuttosto come strumento visivo della retorica imperialista.

Con l'intensificarsi della guerra, il controllo ideologico sulle arti si fece sempre più stringente, la cultura venne spesso subordinata alla validazione dell'impresa politica. L'arte coloniale divenne così il mezzo per una diffusione visiva e ideologica dell'espansione italiana, che nel clima sempre più oppressivo del tardo fascismo, neppure la Biennale di Venezia poté rifiutarsi di decantare.

Lo studio delle esposizioni coloniali dimostra dunque come il linguaggio artistico sia stato reso conforme alle esigenze della propaganda politica, contribuendo alla costruzione di un immaginario che ha accompagnato la storia coloniale. Tuttavia, il crollo dell'impero fascista segnò anche la fine di questa operazione, lasciando in eredità un repertorio visivo, strutturale e ideologico la cui memoria è rimasta a lungo rimossa, riaffiorando solo nei decenni più recenti come oggetto di riflessione, non solo storica, ma anche critica e culturale, ora più che mai necessaria.

fucile che segnò il virtuale inizio della guerra per la conquista dell'Impero. L'albero verrà esposto a Napoli nella prossima Mostra triennale delle terre d'oltremare e quindi donato dal Governo della Somalia al Museo coloniale di Roma» («Lo storico albero di Ual Ual alla Mostra delle Terre d'Oltremare». *Il Giornale Italiano*, 21 febbraio, 1940).

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The Shifting Policies of Exhibiting Conceptual Art from Yugoslavia Abroad: The Case of the 1976 Venice Biennale

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Abstract For the 37th edition of the Venice Biennale in 1976, organized under the newly established, politically left-wing leadership of President Carlo Ripa di Meana and the Director of the Visual Arts Section, Vittorio Gregotti, the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia presented for the first time an exhibition of recent conceptual art practices in the national pavilion. The preparation process of the exhibition became the subject of a rather controversial chain of events, including the censorship by the Yugoslav authorities of original proposal to present the country's earliest and most radical conceptual art practices, which led to the withdrawal of Yugoslav participation in Venice. As a result, the representatives of the Venice Biennale sent a note of protest to Yugoslav President Josip Broz Tito, whereupon the exhibition was realized in the Yugoslav Pavilion, albeit with a compromise solution regarding the original curatorial concept. During the same period, however, Yugoslavia officially participated in other international biennials, such as the São Paulo and Paris Biennials, where the exhibitions showing the latest positions in conceptual art were not subject to censorship or similar political interventions. This article presents and analyzes the ambivalent Yugoslav institutional and exhibition policies at the biennials in the 1970s, with a focus on Yugoslav participation in the 1976 Venice Biennale.

Keywords Venice Biennale. Yugoslavia. Conceptual Art. Exhibition History. Cultural Politics.

Summary 1 Yugoslav International Exhibition Policies: A Brief Historical Overview. –2 Yugoslavia at the 1976 Venice Biennale. – 3 Conceptual Art and the Shifting Policies of Representation in Exhibition .

For the 37th edition of the Venice Biennale in 1976, titled *Ambiente, Partecipazione, Strutture Culturali* (Environment, Participation, Cultural Structures), the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY) presented for the first time an exhibition of conceptual art in its national pavilion in the Giardini area. Curated by Radoslav Putar a prominent Zagreb-based art critic and art historian, this exhibition aimed to showcase recent

artistic positions from Yugoslavia that aligned with the international conceptual art tendencies.¹ The selected artists, including Radomir Damjanović Damjan, Braco Dimitrijević, Herman Gvardijančić, Boris Jesih, Julije Knifer, and Ivan Kožarić, presented works that challenged the conventional modernist notions of art and authorship. In the foreword of the exhibition catalogue Radoslav Putar criticized the market-driven approach to exhibition making and emphasized that the exhibition was not intended to be a representative showcase but rather a reflection of the diverse and innovative artistic practices emerging from Yugoslavia (Putar 1976). The works featured in the exhibition abandoned and dismantled the modernist idioms, such as classical abstraction, surrealist symbolism, and the “dramatic investigation” of figuration. Instead, Putar (1976) based the selection of works for the exhibition on “unconventional representational criteria” as well as the conceptual qualities and innovation of their art practices, with an intention to provide “no statistical information about Yugoslav art” to the international audience.

However, Putar’s curatorial vision initially met with resistance from Yugoslav cultural officials, who preferred established modernist artists to represent the country at the Venice Biennale. The criticism expressed in the exhibition catalogue is undoubtedly Putar’s reaction to a very complex and controversial chain of events that overshadowed the process of preparing and staging this exhibition. The Yugoslav authorities censored the original curatorial proposal to present the country’s earliest and most radical conceptual art practices. This censorship even led to the (temporary) withdrawal of Yugoslavia’s participation in the Venice Biennale. The Yugoslav exhibition at the 1976 Biennale and its political, diplomatic and infrastructural framework reflect the complicated and often contradictory ambitions associated with the international exhibition policy of the Yugoslav state in the 1970s, which form the focus of the analyzes in this article.

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1 Radoslav Putar (1921-1994) was a prominent art historian, art critic and curator from Zagreb. He holds a significant position within the history of twentieth century art in Croatia and the broader Yugoslav context, particularly during the period between the mid-1950s and early 1980s, when his analytical and critical approach to various phenomena of modern and contemporary visual arts provided a substantial framework for the liberalization, theoretical understanding and institutional affirmation of the advanced, radical and new artistic practices. He started his professional career as an assistant lecturer at the Faculty of Philosophy in Zagreb in 1951, after which he became curator at the Museum of Arts and Crafts in Zagreb in 1962. Ten years later, in 1972 he was appointed director of the Gallery of Contemporary Art in Zagreb, concluding his career as director of Museum of Arts and Crafts from 1979 to 1983. His professional undertakings were, nevertheless, not only institutional: he was active as a regular art critic from the mid-1950s for several newspapers and journals in Zagreb, the editor of the *Spot* periodical on photography during 1970s, a founding member of the Gorgona group and a protagonist of the New Tendency movement from its launch in 1961, to name only his most prominent engagements. Since his professional beginnings as an art critic, Putar was very well informed about the currents on the international art scene and showed a rather comprehensive understanding of different art phenomena that appeared on the global scope from the early 1950s onwards. As his activities in the international world of art advanced in the following years and decades through organization and participation in various international exhibitions and art events at home and abroad, he established a branched professional network internationally.

1 Yugoslav International Exhibition Policies: A Brief Historical Overview

In order to understand the circumstances that were decisive for the organization and outcome of Yugoslavia's participation in the 1976 Venice Biennale, it is important to consider the immediate historical background of Yugoslavia's official relationship with this international exhibition, as well as the country's general exhibition policies abroad. Yugoslavia was given a national pavilion in the Giardini in Venice in 1938 and, apart from the period during the World War II and in 1948, has participated in the Venice Biennale without interruption ever since.² Following the 1948 Tito-Stalin split and the break away from Soviet political influence, Yugoslavia embarked on an independent foreign policy trajectory, skilfully maneuvering between the Eastern and Western blocs. This involved cultivating positive relations with both the Soviet Union and the United States, a strategy that culminated in Yugoslavia's founding membership of the Non-Aligned Movement in 1961. This movement served as a crucial platform for developing nations to pursue autonomous foreign policies, independent from the constraints of Cold War bipolarity.

As a socialist state, Yugoslavia's independent stance garnered significant international recognition, particularly within left-leaning political circles, including the Italian Communist Party that had influence over the Venice Biennale during the 1970s. Yugoslav exhibitions in Venice in the 1960s were characterized by the dominant modernist model of representation, which gradually became a subject to criticism in the Yugoslav art world for not daring to reshape and include artist positions that deviated from the mainstream and institutionalized modernist tendencies in the country.³

In the mid-1960s, the so-called moderate modernism and its institutions (museums and galleries of modern art and major exhibitions promoting modernism) became well-established in Yugoslavia as part of the political and economic consolidation and liberalization of Yugoslav society.⁴ By the end of the 1960s, a new generation of artists emerged who reacted critically to the official language of modernism in Yugoslavia as a code of representation of a value system in art that they did not recognize as their contemporary one and inclined toward more conceptual approach to art making.⁵

The Yugoslav cultural apparatus, which was in charge for organizing exhibitions abroad, did not recognize the changes that were taking place in the artistic life, so that new and radical artistic tendencies were either sent to the Venice Biennale posterior to the time of their appearance in Yugoslavia or were not included in the exhibition selection at all. Criticism toward Yugoslav official exhibition policies for abroad was voiced by curators

2 For a detailed historical overview of Yugoslav participation at the Venice Biennale, see Ereš 2020.

3 For examples of such criticism, see Horvat Pintarić 1964; 1966; B.A. 1966.

4 The expression 'moderate modernist art' refers to the art of 1950s and 1960s that relied on the tradition of the Parisian modernism (École de Paris). Moderate modernism became the official state art of socialist Yugoslavia that replaced the paradigm of socialist realism in the early 1950s. The main features of moderate modernism are a focus on pictorial problems, formal laws, and the autonomy of art, as well as maintaining elements of figurative art (Đurić, Šuvaković 2003).

5 For an overview of conceptual tendencies in Yugoslav art during the 1970s, see Susovski 1978; Ilić 2021.

and museum experts in the country.⁶ In 1969, Radoslav Putar, who was at the time the director of one of the leading art institutions in Yugoslavia – the Gallery of Contemporary Art in Zagreb, described the current Yugoslav exhibitions strategies for international audience as insufficiently professional, bureaucratically burdened and outdated, because they “respected (artistic) authorities that have been ‘confirmed’ by tradition or the establishment”, which led to “presenting deceptive artistic greatness” and harmed the interests of “our country and its art in the international context”.⁷

At the same time, the Yugoslav art community was well acquainted with the activities of the Venice Biennale as an international exhibition, which they regularly visited. Some of them questioned the programmatic topicality as well as the obvious political and commercial influence to which this manifestation was subject in the 1960s. Thus, on the occasion of the 1966 Venice Biennale, Yugoslav art critics reported that the exhibition was characterized by conformism, routine and superficial audacity, and noted the institutional crisis in which the Venice manifestation found itself at the time (Gagro 1966; Horvat Pintarić 1966).

An infrastructural context should also be taken into account when analyzing Yugoslav exhibition policies at the Venice Biennale. In the 1970s a change within the system of organization of Yugoslav exhibitions abroad occurred leading to organization and conceptualization of Yugoslav participation at international biennials, such as those in Venice, Paris and São Paulo, being delegated to directors or curators of museum institutions. The appointed exhibition commissioners, as they were named at the time, were required to send their exhibition proposals to the Fine Arts Commission of the Inter-Republican Coordination Committee for Cultural Cooperation for ratification, which in most cases was just a procedural formality resulting in most of these exhibition proposals being approved. The effect of this change was that the exhibition curator gained a greater degree of independence in the process of decision-making and thus a more significant role in regard to conception of Yugoslav exhibitions abroad, in comparison to the centralized and controlled federal model of exhibition organization that was in effect during the 1960s (Ereš 2020, 175-8).

Before the administrative body of the Inter-Republican Coordination Committee for Cultural Cooperation (ICC) was founded in 1971, a survey had been made among the representatives of museum institutions and art organizations in Yugoslavia about participation at art exhibitions abroad, including the international biennials, with the aim to analyze and summarize Yugoslav exhibition policies abroad, as well as to prepare the strategy for

6 Criticism of Yugoslav exhibition policies at international art events, particularly the Venice Biennale, emerged in the mid-1950s and persisted throughout the 1960s. Prominent figures, including Aleksa Čelebonović (former commissioner of the Yugoslav pavilion), Miodrag B. Protić (Director of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Belgrade), Katarina Ambrozić (Belgrade-based curator), Vera Horvat Pintarić (Zagreb-based art historian), and Radoslav Putar, voiced concerns regarding these policies. Their critique centered on the inconsistency of exhibition selections, which often failed to align with the evolving trends and contemporary artistic practices prevalent at the Venice Biennale. Notably, these critics highlighted the exclusion of significant contemporary Yugoslav artists from the national pavilion, suggesting a disregard for the most innovative and progressive artistic movements within the country. More in Ereš 2020.

7 The Archives of Yugoslavia, Fund 599 (Federal Commission For Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries), Materials for the analysis of participation in international art manifestations (AJ-559-86-194), 8 December 1969.

the future exhibition planning. Radoslav Putar's contribution to this survey was, again, made from a critical perspective. He claimed that a

professional base for organizing exhibitions abroad has not been established yet, that Yugoslav exhibitions abroad had been conceived upon an understanding of culture as a symbol of a certain status and in connection with respect for the authority proven by artistic traditions or the establishment.⁸

He also criticized the tendency for commercialization when conceiving the exhibition policies abroad that resulted in privatization and individual benefiting, asserting that more radical and contemporary artistic positions should be included in these exhibitions. Putar's criticality was not welcomed among the members of ICC, whose understanding of art predominantly followed the more conventional, moderate modernist idiom, and who had diverse approaches and usually outdated knowledge of the current art tendencies, which all resulted in Putar not being able to influence the transformation of exhibition policies in a more significant manner.

Taking all this into consideration, from the early 1970s onward the exhibitions in the Yugoslav pavilion at the Venice Biennale can't be observed primarily as a means of implementing Yugoslav international cultural policy, but rather as the result of various factors that have had an equally significant influence on the structure and physiognomy of these exhibitions. The role of curators (commissioners), their professional preferences and the artistic trends they promoted or inclined toward, represent a much more significant context for understanding the Yugoslav exhibitions at the Venice Biennale than was previously the case, during the 1950s and the 1960s. Furthermore, the new practice introduced by the Venice Biennale in the early 1970s of defining a central thematic and contextual framework for each new exhibition edition resulted in exhibitions set in the national pavilions changing from the survey format (retrospective or group exhibition) to thematically or conceptually conceived exhibitions.

2 Yugoslavia at the 1976 Venice Biennale

The Venice Biennale underwent an important reform on 25 July 1973, culminating a process that had begun five years earlier, in 1968. This reform was marked by the adoption of a new statute that redefined the Biennale as a "democratically organized cultural institution" committed to "full freedom of thought and expression" (Martini, Martini 2011, 126). Its main goal was to foster this art exhibition as an event focused on research, experimentation, and critical discourse. Carlo Ripa di Meana, a functionary of the Italian Socialist Party, was appointed head of the Venice Biennale institution, while the architect Vittorio Gregotti became the director of the Visual Arts Sector.⁹ The new artistic management of the

⁸ The Archives of Yugoslavia, Fund 599 (Federal Commission for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries), Materials for the analysis of participation in international art manifestations (AJ-559-86-194), 8 December 1969.

⁹ For a detailed analysis of the history of the Venice Biennale and its transformation in the 1970s, see Portinari 2018.

Venice Biennale, with a pronounced left-wing ideological profile, sought to change both the programmatic character and the format of the exhibition in order to clearly distance itself from the market-oriented character of the event in the previous period. Gregotti's programmatic ambitions aimed at a more direct integration of exhibitions in national pavilions into the central thematic frameworks of the Biennale, focusing on the processes of re-examining the social function of art and its institutions, so that the new exhibition format would function as an international platform for initiating critical debate on current issues in visual arts and other fields of knowledge production that goes beyond the classical representational patterns of exhibition practice (Martini 2010; Portinari 2018).

The organizers of the 1976 Venice Biennale sought to initiate a conversation between the Biennale and the international art community during the exhibition preparation process on the topic of the social and technological context of recent art production and particularly the notion of environment. Prior to defining the theme for the Biennale, a series of consultations took place in 1975 and 1976 between representatives of national pavilions and the Biennale administration. Radoslav Putar, being the director of the Zagreb Gallery of Contemporary Art, represented Yugoslavia in these discussions. Since he was familiar with the new conceptual direction the Venice Biennale was taking at the time, Putar was officially appointed as the commissioner of the 1976 exhibition in the Yugoslav pavilion and was invited to submit a proposal for the exhibition concept to the ICC, which at the time advocated that Yugoslavia (being a socialist country) should officially support the new leftist orientation of the Biennale's management through participation in the event. As answer to the general theme of the 1976 exhibition *Ambiente, Partecipazione, Strutture Culturali*, which aimed at fostering a dialogue between visual arts, the notion of the environment and the current social concerns, Putar proposed a survey of the recent development of the so-called 'new artistic practice'¹⁰ in Yugoslav art, an exhibition that would map a chronological development of conceptual art in the country since the late 1960s. His exhibition concept was elaborated as follows:

Considering the possibility of a Yugoslav presence in this exhibition, we believe that an effort should be made to document and present the phenomena that have raised fundamentally new questions about the appearance and function of contemporary language in art after 1970. It is well known that in recent years, both in the world and in our art, there has been a series of very complex processes that have led to one of the most radical changes in the appearance and status of the artwork (the path

10 The term 'new artistic practice' was introduced to Yugoslav art criticism and curatorial practice by art historian Ješa Denegri on the occasion of the exhibition *New Artistic Practice 1966-1978*. The exhibition gave an overview of the various tendencies of Conceptual Art practices in Yugoslavia and was opened in 1978 in the Gallery of Contemporary Art in Zagreb. The term itself originated from the title of the last subsection of the text by Catherine Millet, *L'art conceptuel comme sémiotique de l'art*, originally published in *VH 101* (Millet 1970), and published in 1972 in Serbo-Croatian in the magazine *Polja* (Mile 1972). As Denegri explained, this term seemed more appropriate to encompass the diverse phenomena of the new art of the seventies in Yugoslavia than the more concrete and specified term Conceptual Art (Denegri 1978, 5-11). *Artistic practice* emphasized that despite its heteronomous features, it is always about art conceived as a process, action/activism, transformative, and performative act, comparable with the philosophical term 'praxis'.

towards the dematerialization of the art object, the further expansion of media, the emphasis on the mental component of the artwork over its visual appearance, etc.), which has been conditioned and accompanied by equally visible changes in the behavior of the artist himself, who actively and critically positions himself in relation to many social and cultural structures that determine and evaluate his work. In Yugoslavia, these general processes found their specific manifestations, which in our opinion have a certain place in the international context, and therefore we propose an attempt at their reappraisal and presentation.¹¹

This exhibition proposal featured a retrospective of the OHO group, a collective recognized for its pioneering contributions to the development of neo-avant-garde and conceptual art within the Yugoslav art scene that emerged between 1966 and 1971, alongside works by younger contemporary artists who have gained international recognition in the recent years, including Radomir Damjanović Damnjan, Marina Abramović, Goran Trbuljak, and Braco Dimitrijević. The proposed exhibition featured artistic experimentation beyond traditional modernist media, encompassing installation, video, photography, text-based works, and performance documentation. The inclusion of these conceptual art practices, previously absent from official Yugoslav representations at the Venice Biennale, signified a notable shift in established exhibition norms. This exhibition proposal, however, was not accepted by the Fine Arts Commission of the ICC, the official federal authority in charge for organizing Yugoslav exhibitions abroad. As a result, a series of bureaucratic obstructions accompanied the process of alteration of the original exhibition proposal under the request of ICC, finally leading to the cancellation of Yugoslav participation at the Venice Biennale only one month before the official opening of the manifestation.¹²

The Yugoslav withdrawal from the participation at the Venice Biennale had several effects. A prominent Yugoslav art historian Ješa Denegri sent letters to Enrico Crispolti and Tommaso Trini, leading figures of the Italian art world involved in organizing events at the Venice Biennale, as well as to Vittorio Gregotti, the director of the Visual Arts Sector at the Venice Biennale expressing his disappointment with this incident. Denegri argued that the ICC responsible for approving the Yugoslav participation had rejected Putar's proposal without providing any clear explanation, attributing this to intolerance and distrust within the political and administrative bodies of Yugoslav state towards the proposed artists and their innovative artistic practices. Given this situation, Denegri's intention was to recommend the Yugoslav artists for inclusion in the exhibition *Attualità internazionali '72-76*,

11 The Archives of Yugoslavia, Fund 465 (Federal Institute for International Scientific, Educational, Cultural and Technical Cooperation), Radoslav Putar's Proposal of the concept of Yugoslav participation at the Venice Biennale, 16 February 1976 (AJ-465-1455).

12 For a detailed reconstruction of the process of withdrawal from Putar's conception and Yugoslav participation at the 1976 Biennale, see Ereš 2020, 196-203.

a central event organized within the framework of the Venice Biennale.¹³ Ultimately, Marina Abramović was included in this exhibition, showcasing her work alongside other international contemporary artists.

After the official decision that Yugoslavia would not participate in the Venice Biennale, the Biennale president Carlo Ripa di Meana sent a protesting telegram to Yugoslav President Josip Broz Tito inviting him to intervene so that Yugoslavia could participate in the Biennale.¹⁴ In response to this telegram and under probable political pressure from the Yugoslav leadership, an emergency meeting of the ICC Fine Arts Commission was called, resulting in the decision to send a Yugoslav exhibition to the Venice Biennale (after all). This sudden change in decision echoes the recent reproachment in diplomatic relations between Yugoslavia and Italy. The two countries had signed the Treaty of Osimo in November 1975, resolving long-standing border disputes on the coast near Trieste that had lasted since the end of World War II, paving the way for closer political and economic cooperation (Mišić 2013). Given Yugoslavia's interest in maintaining good relations with the neighboring Italy, the absence of socialist Yugoslavia from the reformed Venice Biennale under the left-wing leadership would represent an unnecessary misunderstanding for the newly established favorable bilateral political climate.

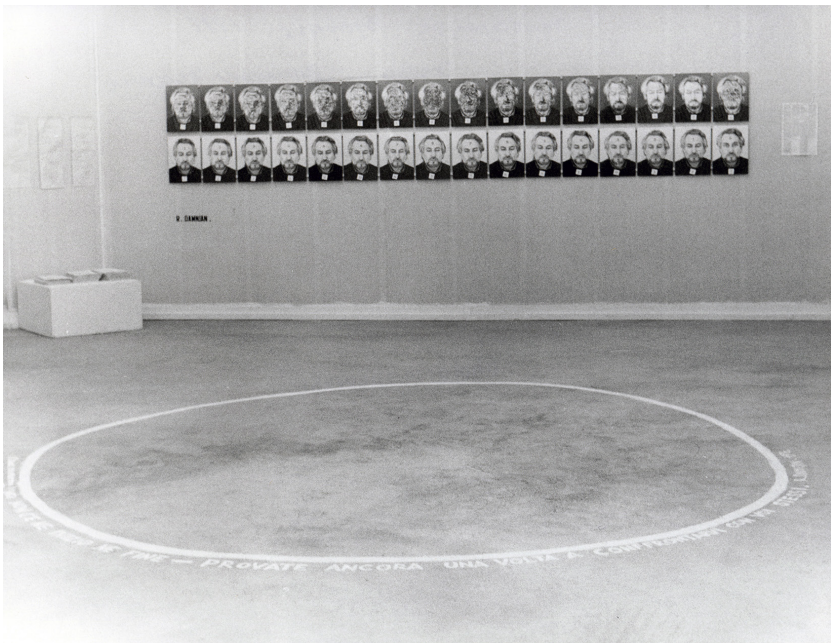
The final outline of Yugoslav exhibition that took place in Venice included, however, an intervention to the Putar's exhibition proposal and included works by two post-conceptual painters from Slovenia (Boris Jesih and Herman Gvardijančić) instead of the retrospective of the OHO group, partly corresponding to the originally designed framework for presentation of conceptual tendencies in recent Yugoslav art.¹⁵ The final contextualization of the Yugoslav exhibition, as presented at the beginning of the article and in Putar's preface in the exhibition catalogue, followed the initially conceived framework that focused on showcasing new artistic trends from Yugoslavia, which

13 Venice. Venice Biennale. Historical Archive of Contemporary Arts (ASAC), Fondo Storico (FS), Arti Visive (AV), b. 255: an excerpt from the original letter from J. Denegri to E. Crispolti and T. Trini, 31 May 1976, reads as follows (originally written in Italian): "Perciò quando Putar presentò questa concezione alle commissioni socio-politiche che decidono del finanziamento del progetto sorsero diversi ostacoli che portarono alla bocciatura della proposta. A quidicare dallo stato attuale delle cose il padiglione jugoslavo, quest'anno, rimarrà chiuso. Le ragioni di questo rifiuto non ci sono state comunicate, ma è chiaro che all'interno di quei corpi deliberanti esistono insofferenza e sfiducia, non soltanto verso gli autori proposto ma anche nei confronti della nuova arte nel suo complesso. Noi, naturalmente, nel nostro paese, cercheremo di chiarire questa situazione eccezionalmente grave e sintomatica, evitando scandali di ogni tipo. Proprio per questo non desideriamo compiere alcun atto di protesta davanti all'opinione artistica internazionale. Tuttavia per consentire agli autori menzionati di presentare le loro opere alla Biennale di quest'anno, in qualità di vicesommario, per quanto non in forma ufficiale, cerco di trovare il modo di dare anche a loro la possibilità d'inserirsi nella mostra *Attualità '72-76*".

14 ASAC, FS, AV, b. 255: telegram from C.R. di Meana to J.B. Tito, 19 June 1976: "Gentilissimo Presidente rivolgo un caldo invito ad intervenire autorevolmente perche Repubblica Federativa Jugoslava proprietaria di un Padiglione ai Giardini della Biennale di Venezia sia presente anche quest'anno come con grandi et positivi risultati lo est stata per molti anni stop l'assenza della Jugoslavia nel pieno della ripresa et partecipazione internazionale alla Biennale di Venezia risulterebbe per noi inspiegabile et dolorosa stop la ringrazio at nome consiglio direttivo et mio personale per ogni suo decisivo intervento Carlo Ripa di Meana Presidente Biennale Venezia".

15 The inclusion of Jesih and Gvardijančić in the exhibition selection, instead of the OHO group as initially intended, followed a suggestion by the Slovenian delegate on the ICC Fine Arts Commission. While no archival documents directly explain this shift, it is plausible to hypothesize that pre-existing tensions between the OHO group and the leadership of the Gallery of Modern Art in Ljubljana may have influenced this decision. This situation bears a potential resemblance to the group's exclusion from the 1970 Venice Biennale, as recounted by OHO member Marko Pogačnik in a later interview (Žerovc 2013).

emerged parallel to the appearance of fundamental conceptual changes in the understanding of art and the re-examination of the artist's position on a broader international level. However, the compromise solution that resulted from the given circumstances deviated from the original concept, which had envisaged a more radical and compact exhibition narrative [figs 1-2].



Figures 1-2 Exhibition in the Yugoslav Pavilion, XXXVII *La Biennale di Venezia*, exhibition view.
Photo courtesy of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Zagreb

The case of the Yugoslav participation at the 1976 Venice Biennale reveals ambivalence and inconsistency as main characteristics of the Yugoslav international exhibition policies. The refusal of Putar's original exhibition concept and its complex political consequences exposed not only the strategic ineffectiveness of the vast Yugoslav infrastructure of cultural bureaucracy, its conventional and somewhat anachronistic viewpoints on exhibition policies in terms of understanding the transformations that the sphere of visual arts underwent during the 1970s, but also an evident polarization between the cultural administration and modern art institutions/art professionals in the country.

3 Conceptual Art and the Shifting Policies of Representation in Exhibition

The contradictory policies of Yugoslav exhibitions abroad in relation to conceptual art paints an even more complex picture when we consider the country's official participation in other international biennials in the 1970s, such as the Biennale des Jeunes in Paris and the São Paulo Biennial. The inclusion of the latest positions in conceptual art did not seem to be subject to censorship or similar bureaucratic interventions at these international exhibitions, in which Yugoslavia had participated since its foundation. Examples such as the 7th Biennale des Jeunes in Paris (1971), where the Yugoslav participation included very radical, conceptual positions of young artists,¹⁶ as well as the 15th São Paulo Biennial (1979), where the Yugoslav selection showed an overview of the latest experimental, analytical and post-conceptual painterly practices,¹⁷ show that conceptual art positions were the central thematic framework for the representation of contemporary art from Yugoslavia at the international exhibitions other than the Venice Biennale.

The discussed ambivalence in policies of exhibiting conceptual art becomes even more apparent if we take the strategies of institutionalization of conceptual art in Yugoslavia into consideration. The two leading museum institutions for modern art in the country – the Museum of Contemporary Art in Belgrade (MoCAB) and the Gallery of Contemporary Art in Zagreb – hosted and organized several exhibitions of conceptual art tendencies since 1971 such as: *Examples of Conceptual Art* (Salon of the MoCAB, 1971), *Possibilities for 1971* (Gallery of Contemporary Art in Zagreb, 1971), *Young Artists and Young Critics* (MoCAB, 1972), *Documents on post-object phenomena in Yugoslav Art 1968-1973* (Salon of the MoCAB, 1973). In 1978 a large-scale retrospective of conceptual art practices in Yugoslavia *New Artistic Practice 1966-1978*, accompanied by a representative publication, was held at the Gallery of Contemporary Art in Zagreb, confirming that conceptual art was relatively institutionalized in Yugoslavia by the mid-1970s, and that presenting a survey of conceptual artistic practices in the national pavilion

16 The curator of the Yugoslav section at the 7th Biennale des Jeunes in Paris was Ješa Denegri. The selection of artists included: Braco Dimitrijević, OHO Group, Group E, Group KÓD, Pensioner Tihomir Simčić (Braco Dimitrijević, Goran Trbuljak), Vladimir Bonačić, Boris Bučan, Sanja Iveković, Dalibor Martinis, Zoran Radović and Gorki Žuvela, all protagonists of conceptual art tendencies in Yugoslavia.

17 Yugoslav artists selected for the 15th São Paulo Biennial were: Boris Bučan, Radomir Damjanović Damijan, Julije Knifer, Ivan Kožarić, Andraž Šalamun.

at the Venice Biennale in 1976 would not present a discrepancy with the institutional policies of the leading museums in the country, nor with the exhibition strategies of participation at other international art biennials.

What do these contradictions in policies of exhibiting conceptual art from Yugoslavia expose? In reference to the terminology proposed by the thematic framework of this publication, the case of the Yugoslav participation at the 1976 Venice Biennale reveals the conflicted desires of different protagonists that shaped the complex dynamics of art world in Yugoslavia. Whereas the cultural administration and cultural diplomacy aimed at maintaining the familiar model of centralized national representation at international art biennials that didn't problematize the authorities of modernist tradition in art, the art professionals – foremost museum curators specialized in contemporary art – required the transformation of the existing structures of exhibiting local art at global exhibition events that would critically disclose the challenges of contemporaneity in both Yugoslav art and society to the international audience. The shifting policies of exhibiting conceptual art from Yugoslavia at international biennials during the 1970s therefore reflect the instable art infrastructure in the country that could no longer regulate nor control the image of Yugoslav art for the foreign view. With the emergence of conceptual art in the late 1960s, a gradual process of redefining exhibition practices in Yugoslavia began, both for the international and local contexts. This process fundamentally challenged the established cultural model of Yugoslav modernity and its practices of representation.

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Sostituzioni, apparizioni e barene. Land Art alla Biennale di Venezia

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Abstract How to exhibit Land Art at the Venice Biennale: by reconstructing worlds or renouncing them, depending on how curatorial practices collide with the narratives of art historians versus militant curators. The Gardens of Castello, main site of the Biennale, are not an easy platform for land experiments, but reveal experiences rendered by geological cracks, nebulous atmospheres, green presences, chthonic installations. This intervention recounts Germano Celant's failures, Renato Barilli's visionariness, the desire for an impossible task and how the appearance of a Land Art piece can cost 25,000 dollars in 1970. And if unexpected 'substitutions' in a landscape can be works of art, Land Art can be made by water, a matter that from the Grand Canal embraces the sandbanks, spaces where anything can happen.

Keywords Land art. Venice Biennale. Michael Heizer. Richard Long. Fabrizio Plessi. Christo. Luca Maria Patella.

La Biennale di Venezia scaturisce in un giardino e dunque – come scrive Goffredo Parise – «basterebbero i Giardini per fare della Biennale, la Biennale».¹ Se la sua location si connette fin dagli esordi in modo così assoluto con la natura, prima di mapparvi una possibile presenza della Land

1 Parise, G. (1980). «Vedo i mari della Sonda». *Corriere della Sera*, 23 agosto, ora in Parise 1984, 76: Parise scrive nell'estate del 1980, ma evoca un ricordo del 1948, quando alla ripresa della mostra nel secondo dopoguerra immagina di entrare e uscire «dai banani di Gauguin» (ovvero dalla mostra degli impressionisti e postimpressionisti allestita nel Padiglione della Germania, vuoto a causa delle conseguenze belliche) alle felci del parco senza troppo accorgersene. Alla caduta della Repubblica Serenissima nel 1797 a Venezia segue il primo governo austriaco, dal 1806 al 1814 il dominio napoleonico, poi un secondo governo austriaco fino all'annessione al Regno d'Italia nel 1866: nel periodo napoleonico viene istituita la Commissione di Ornato, che controlla le trasformazioni edili e viene emanata la Legge speciale 45 del 1807 che, nel novero di provvedimenti massivi, rende realizzabile il progetto dei Giardini di Castello per creare un giardino pubblico, affiancato dalla via Eugenia (l'attuale via Garibaldi) progettata da Gian Antonio Selva al modo di un *boulevard* francese.

Art, che solitamente si localizza tra la mostra *Videonastri* di Gerry Schum nel 1972 e la retrospettiva di Robert Smithson nel Padiglione degli Stati Uniti nel 1982, è auspicabile riandare a una primavera del 1910 e supporre che i primi landartisti a immaginare progetti impossibili per Venezia siano stati i futuristi, prefigurando la medesima azione di *mass displacement* invocata nei tardi anni Sessanta da Michael Heizer, quando intende posizionare delle enormi rocce in uno spazio scavato nel suolo. Quel gruppo di sodali, accorso per supportare la personale del collega Umberto Boccioni allestita all'interno della collettiva annuale di giovani artisti a Ca' Pesaro, il 27 aprile 1910 lancia infatti dalla Torre dell'Orologio in piazza San Marco un volo di manifestini scritti in italiano e francese in cui si promette di far nuova la Venezia «passatista» e «colmare i piccoli canali puzzolenti con le macerie dei vecchi palazzi crollanti e lebbrosi», corrosi dall'umido e dalla salsedine.² È lo stesso effetto di modernità e di entropia che condurrà anche la prima azione italiana di Land Art eseguita da Smithson nel 1969, *Asphalt Rundown*, avvenuta in una cava di selce abbandonata in via Laurentina a Roma, creando una colata di asfalto: coprire una entità geologica e paesaggistica con un intervento che aggiunge un altro strato di sedimento e dunque di tempo è un gesto annichilente, secondo le intenzioni dell'artista, ma crea anche una energia nel processo; possiamo allora considerare i futuristi progenitori di una 'preistoria' di Land Art veneziana.³

Grandi progetti utopici di sbancamenti e costruzioni compiute su territori apparentemente impossibili da attraversare sono stati inoltre veramente ideati per Venezia alla fine dell'Ottocento, nello stesso momento in cui si afferma la Biennale. Dopo l'inaugurazione del ponte ferroviario che taglia la laguna e collega la città alla terraferma nel gennaio del 1846, sotto il secondo governo austriaco e tra molte polemiche poiché pone fine a una condizione di isolamento che è anche concettuale, se ne ipotizzano altri accompagnati da strutture degne degli insediamenti irreali che Constant immagina sotto l'egida dell'Internazionale Situazionista o di un certo *radical design* degli anni Settanta, come in una proposta del 1879 che intende congiungere l'approdo della ferrovia a campo Santi Apostoli e percorrere poi Venezia stessa proseguendo fin oltre l'isola di Murano, sferragliando

2 Il testo del volantino *Venezia Futurista* è firmato da poeti e pittori: Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, Carlo Carrà, Luigi Russolo, Boccioni, Gino Severini, Aroldo Bonzagni, Paolo Buzzi, Aldo Palazzeschi, Enrico Cavacchioli, Armando Mazza, Libero Altomare, Luciano Folgore; ne gettano qualche migliaio (secondo Marinetti duecentomila); in maggio il foglietto viene ristampato col titolo *Contro Venezia passatista*, per essere distribuito ai giornali, con testo tradotto anche in inglese, oltre che in francese, cf. Bianchi 2010; Stringa 2006.

3 Sul pensiero di Smithson cf. Flam 1996. L'opera di Land Art avviene a sud di Roma, al quattordicesimo chilometro di via Laurentina in una ex cava di selce (abbandonata fin dalla metà degli anni Sessanta), in occasione di una sua personale alla Galleria L'Attico: nell'invito all'opening, previsto per il 15 ottobre, è riprodotta in bianco e nero la mappa del luogo con cerchiata la zona dell'intervento accompagnata dalla scritta «Site for Asphalt Run / Down / (cava di Selce)» che ha dato luogo a fraintendimenti sul nome del sito, che nelle pubblicazioni viene chiamato ora Cava del Selce, ora Cava dai Selce (confondendolo con il nome del vicino paese), mentre come ha dimostrato l'azione del gruppo Stalker nel 1996 il luogo si trova tra Vallerano e Valleranello nella cosiddetta ex cava Nenni, precedentemente Co.Bi.La.

su impalcature di ferro e muratura.⁴ Viene pensata persino una strada per automobili che dalla terraferma passa per la città, che in una delle varianti si slancia attraverso la Giudecca, giunge all'isola di San Giorgio e con ponti girevoli giunge al Lido e poi a Chioggia e a Ravenna – quasi un'antenata del visionario *Floating Piers* (2016) di Christo con cui si è potuto camminare sulle acque del lago d'Iseo o del sistema MOSE, per la presenza di paratie mobili in ferro con testate di muratura – ipotizzata dall'ingegnere Eugenio Miozzi, che era stato capo della Direzione Lavori e Servizi Pubblici del Comune di Venezia al momento della costruzione del ponte automobilistico translagunare inaugurato nel 1933. Tra le congetture successive egli propone nel 1969 un'«autostrada sommersa», l'Autostrada Sublagunare Periferica della Città, che passerebbe in un tunnel a un metro sotto il livello del mare con fermate dal Tronchetto al Cavallino, prevedendone una ovviamente presso la Biennale, per un totale di 10.662 metri di lunghezza, di cui 6.544 sommersi (Miozzi 1969; Kusch 2021).

Tale data ci porta alla Biennale del 1968, quella della contestazione e delle proteste, che provocherà cambiamenti a livello ideologico più che organizzativi, creando un intenso dibattito sul futuro dell'esposizione e tra i vari pensieri, facendo seguito alle considerazioni che Bruno Alfieri già espone sulla sua rivista *Metro*, Giulio Carlo Argan propone di abbattere tutti i padiglioni e crearne solamente uno, in cui un'unica commissione avrebbe ideato un'unica mostra, per porre fine alle suddivisioni nazionali che gli pare non riescano sempre a offrire un'arte all'altezza degli standard internazionali. L'intenzione più perentoria è quella di Germano Celant, che seguendo quell'idea ammonisce che sarebbe però preferibile abbandonare poi la zona all'azione della natura (Portinari 2018; 2021). Se questa visione provocatoria rimanda alle affermazioni che Smithsonian aveva espresso nell'articolo intitolato «The Monuments of Passaic», pubblicato su *Artforum* nel 1967, in cui esaltava il concetto di entropia applicato ai territori sfruttati dall'industria devastatrice che, una volta disabitati, tornano allo stato primitivo, occorre ricordare anche le ragioni sotterranee per cui quel curatore può aver avuto interesse a esprimere un tale *statement*, considerati i recenti screzi intercorsi tra lui e la Biennale dopo che, invitato a far parte della Commissione per la selezione degli artisti italiani e rifiutatosi di collaborare con gli altri membri, si era subito dimesso e quanto un simile habitat sarebbe stato l'ideale per quell'Arte Povera appena emersa e che lui sperava di capitanare in tale sede (cf. Barilli 2017; 2023, 45-56). La sua affermazione politica, dunque, ha anche quella direzione.

È consuetudine pensare che la prima presenza di Land Art alla Biennale – se non altro evocata – si annoveri nel 1972, con la mostra dedicata ai *Videonastri* di Schum che espone anche il film *Land Art* (1969) da cui deriva il nome assegnato alla corrente artistica; ma si potrebbe piuttosto considerare che un'azione effimera ed efficace, che si inserisce

⁴ Pietro Manfrin, che dal 1870 è deputato del Regno e dal 1879 senatore (dal 1880 al 1881 sarà anche prefetto di Venezia) nel volume *L'avvenire di Venezia*, edito nel 1877, apre all'idea di altri collegamenti ferroviari con la terraferma: nel 1879 un progetto della Società veneta per le imprese e le costruzioni pubbliche propone un tracciato che da campo Santi Apostoli passi per le Fondamenta Nuove, attraversando poi le isole di San Cristoforo e Murano fino a Campalto, che prevede persino un'arcata girevole in ferro per passare il Canale delle Navi (a questo tracciato si rifarà Miozzi per l'idea di strada automobilistica del 1933); nel 1881 un altro prevede ben nove linee ferroviarie e due ponti lagunari con stazioni fino a Murano e Burano, cf. Cherubini 2002, 73-80.

in un elemento naturale, avviene invece già nel 1968, quando il pittore Nicolás García Urriburu, argentino residente a Parigi e che non è invitato alla rassegna, martedì 18 giugno – primo giorno di vernissage – alle otto del mattino compie un gesto di protesta come richiamo ecologico, rendendo verde per otto ore il Canal Grande versando da una gondola tra la Pescheria di Rialto e il municipio 30 kg di tintura di fluoresceina, una sostanza innocua impiegata per monitorare il flusso delle correnti che, meno intensa, continua a galleggiare in superficie fino a sera.

La volontà dell'artista è quella di collocare l'arte nella natura stessa, come scrive posteriormente nel manifesto *First Green Venice* (1968) ma, come accade spesso in quel tempo di passioni e di contraddizioni, sebbene l'intento fosse anticapitalista negli anni successivi egli ripete in vari luoghi quella che diviene una performance ed edita nel 1973 un'edizione di sei serigrafie a memoria delle azioni, a dimostrazione di come anche le imprese 'impossibili' possono essere ricordate per tramite di altri medium e monetizzate (Marchesi 2018, 19).⁵ L'effetto poetico e straniante di quel verde fluorescente non smette comunque di stupire a distanza di decenni e, pur con un effetto ampliato nel suo voler creare un allarme strano o inquinante, si riconduce all'essenza del vero colore dell'acqua di Venezia, che non è azzurra ma verde, come già era smeraldo dipinta nelle mappe antiche quali la mappa Emo del 1750.

Quando nel 1970 Umbro Apollonio è nominato direttore delle arti visive (una designazione impiegata per la prima volta, che sostituisce quella di segretario generale) assieme a un gruppo di intellettuali e amici quali Gillo Dorfles, Bruno Munari e Dietrich Mahlow, che come lui ripongono un grande interesse nell'arte optical e cinetica, propone di indirizzare una considerevole sezione della Biennale verso quella corrente, che in Italia è chiamata anche Arte Programmata, dall'omonima mostra pensata da Munari nel 1962 per gli showroom Olivetti. Questo atteggiamento si inserisce nell'idea di un rinnovamento, in risposta alle proteste che avevano lasciato strascichi anche politici e se da un lato ha un estremo impatto sul pubblico, dall'altro è un apporto ritardato e di parte, considerato che quelle ricerche si sono affermate in Europa alla metà degli anni Cinquanta e in Italia dal 1959 con il Gruppo T a Milano e il Gruppo Ennea poi N di Padova. Nel Padiglione Centrale perciò, secondo una consolidata tradizione di mostra-cuore della Biennale, si tiene *Proposte per una esposizione sperimentale* a cura di Apollonio e Mahlow, con allestimento di Davide Boriani e Livio Castiglioni, con una stanza dedicata persino alla Land Art per cui Apollonio inizia a

5 Questo catalogo della retrospettiva di Urriburu tenutasi nel 2018 a Buenos Aires è ricco di errori imbarazzanti sulla Biennale del 1968, ma riporta il manifesto *19 de Junio 1968. Primer Proyecto. Green Venice*, in cui l'artista afferma: «Art has no autonomous form anymore / art adopts nature's form and it is fluid, dynamic / art no longer has a place outside of nature: its place is inside of nature». Urriburu nel 1970 realizza operazioni simili con le *Hidrochromias Intercontinentales* colorando l'East River a New York, la Senna a Parigi, nuovamente i canali di Venezia (cf. *Hidrochromia Intercontinental*. Gran Canal, Venecia, 27 de Junio de 1970) e il Rio della Plata a Buenos Aires; nel 1973 edita la cartella *Portfolio-Manifesto Urriburu Coloration*, realizzata dagli Ateliers Laage di Ramatuelle con sei serigrafie: in quella dedicata a Venezia (1968) sono riportati il *Manifesto* e la scritta «June 19 1968. First Green Canal», ma la data non è quella dell'azione, che è avvenuta – come testimonia tutta la stampa del tempo – il 18 giugno; è probabilmente quella in cui è stato scritto il *Manifesto*, che infatti viene citato come posteriore sulla stampa veneziana. L'artista realizzerà anche numerose fotografie colorate a pastello (della serie *Hidrochromia Intercontinental*, 1970) o virate a colori (*chromogenic print*) e altre grafiche a effetto fotomontaggio dedicate all'azione veneziana.

prendere contatti con la gallerista Virginia Dwan di New York, che era stata un'importante sostenitrice per i landartisti, essendo molto legata a Heizer, di cui aveva finanziato il progetto *Double Negative* acquistando i 60 acri di terra su cui è stato realizzato, e che aveva contribuito anche ai costi per la *Spiral Jetty* (1970) di Smithson.

Dopo alcune interloquazioni da cui risulta la proposta di esporre una serie di piccole fotografie, il direttore chiede qualcosa di più significativo, che si configuri come «un esempio veramente rimarchevole» per il pubblico, come una delle foto di Heizer e in particolare magari *Displaced/Replaced Mass No. 1. Silver Springs* (1969), un lavoro di Earth Art eseguito nel 1969 e - forse consigliato da qualcuno - rilancia che l'immagine venga stampata in grande formato su un velario alto 5 metri e lungo 24 e, pur sapendo che verrà a costare 25.000 dollari, si dichiara disponibile a pagarne anche il trasporto.⁶

La serie di foto relativa a *Displaced/Replaced Mass* è composta in realtà da tre immagini, legate a tre azioni differenti compiute nel 1969 a Silver Springs in Nevada inserendo tre blocchi di granito dentro a tre differenti scavi eseguiti nel letto disseccato di un lago, che erano stati rivestiti e livellati con colate di cemento: il peso delle 'masse' poste nelle cavità (rispettivamente di 30, 50 e 68 tonnellate) corrispondeva al peso del terriccio tolto (Celant 1996, 19).⁷ Se i cataloghi delle Biennali storiche riportano alcune preziosissime riproduzioni delle opere al fondo del volume, un pregio che li contraddistingue anche da quelli dei Salon parigini, negli anni Settanta e successivamente, quando essi diventano ampiamente fotografici, la problematica che emerge è come spesso si tratti di immagini fittizie, di accompagnamento, inviate mesi prima dall'artista e che non solo non corrispondono alla percezione che se ne avrà nell'allestimento finale, ma proprio talora nemmeno alle opere effettive. Per tale motivo questo episodio è rimasto a lungo in dubbio, nell'impossibilità di ricostruire con certezza la situazione in attesa di rinvenire ulteriori materiali in altri archivi che definiscano una verità più definitiva, considerato che nel catalogo generale tra la lista delle opere esposte nella sala VI, dedicata unicamente a Heizer, risulterebbe esservi un'unica «fotografia proiettata» di *Doppio negativo. Virgin River Mesa, Nevada*, a cui corrisponde effettivamente un'immagine di tale lavoro tra le foto in bianco e nero che accompagnano la sezione, con la didascalia «*Double Negative*» in inglese che lo conferma.

Nel catalogo specifico della mostra però - a cui è auspicabile prestare maggior fede, in quanto creato appositamente e con una tempistica più tarda, riportando esso sia immagini di repertorio che foto delle sale della stessa Biennale - è invece indicata la presenza di un'opera differente, «*Massa tolta e rimessa. Silver Springs. Nevada*», come recita la didascalia e quindi effettivamente quella che risulterebbe avesse chiesto Apollonio, ma è ugualmente 'promessa' come singola proiezione fotografica, senza specificare quale sia delle tre della serie e dando adito a dubbi se fosse davvero una o trina. Nelle due pagine a essa riferita infatti - che seguono il

⁶ Venezia, La Biennale di Venezia, Archivio Storico delle Arti Contemporanee (ASAC), Fondo Storico (FS), Arti Visive (AV), b. 174: Biennale 1970. Lettera di U. Apollonio alla Galleria Dwan, 8 maggio 1970.

⁷ Heizer su *Displaced/Replaced Mass #1/2/3* (1969), che non esiste più, afferma: «The first sculpture object I built was *Displaced/Replaced Mass*, which used granite block set inside three depressions in the ground which were lined with concrete», si tratta dunque di materiali simili a quelli che già esistono nella regione, le rocce sono grigie, come il cemento.

testo «Note sugli 'earthworks'» di Diane Waldman, curatrice del Guggenheim Museum di New York – compare in realtà un'unica foto che si allarga su entrambe e che sembra mostrare una stanza con una proiezione che scambia le immagini facendole slittare una dopo l'altra o una accanto all'altra, suscitando un'esitazione nell'interpretarla come una proiezione statica o di tre immagini in *loop*: quella di sinistra è *Displaced/Replaced Mass #2* e quella di destra la *#3 (35a Esposizione Biennale Internazionale d'Arte 1970, 33)*.⁸ Il mistero si risolve ipotizzando che in realtà fossero presenti tutte e tre le testimonianze della serie e che fossero state proiettate con un sistema simile a quello adottato nello stesso anno da Heizer per *Actual Size. Munich Rotary* (1970; Whitney Museum of American Art, New York), un'installazione legata a *Munich Depression* – un'azione compiuta a Monaco in Germania nel 1969 dove realizza una voragine nel suolo – che consiste nel proiettarne le riprese panoramiche scattate a 360° in grandi dimensioni, una accanto all'altra senza soluzione di continuità e su ampi schermi grazie a proiettori appositamente realizzati allo scopo da un ingegnere, dopo averle trasformate in grandi *slide* fotografiche racchiuse tra due vetri, create dai negativi originali (da qui forse l'ambiguo termine 'diapositiva' usato nei documenti dell'archivio della Biennale), facendo assumere al tutto una dimensione ambientale che occupa l'intera stanza.

Un'altra questione interessante è il motivo che possa aver spinto Apollonio a quella scelta, in quanto storico dell'arte e non critico militante, per di più inserito nel contesto di una Sottocommissione per le arti figurative (bilanciata dal Comitato Internazionale di esperti) ancora composta da suoi pari ma anche da artisti, essendo l'espressione di un consesso politico in cui si innestano rappresentanti scelti dal ministero, dal comune, dal sindacato degli artisti, ma la sua vocazione didattica e documentativa, anche in quanto anima dell'Archivio Storico della Biennale (cf. Pajusco 2019), lo spinge certamente a mappare il presente per indirizzare il pubblico, con una operazione diversa da quella che compiranno Celant o altri, pur storici dell'arte come Enrico Crispolti, nella seconda metà degli anni Settanta. Sono inoltre tempi in cui giungono con rapidità informazioni su quanto sta avvenendo negli Stati Uniti, anche grazie a riviste come *Flash Art*, *Casabella*, *Domus* e nel 1968 si sono già tenute mostre come *Earthworks* alla Galleria Dwan (con Heizer, Walter De Maria, Dennis Oppenheim, Stephen Kaltenbach, Robert Morris, Smithson, Sol LeWitt, Claes Oldenburg, Carl Andre e Herbert Bayer) e *Pure Dirt Pure Earth Pure Land* di Walter De Maria alla Galerie Heiner a Monaco, così come *Earth Art* organizzata nel 1969 da Willoughby Sharp nel campus della Cornell University a Ithaca (NY), né è passata inosservata l'azione di Smithson a Roma nell'ottobre dello stesso anno. Non è un caso poi che, proprio da giugno a luglio in coincidenza all'inaugurazione della Biennale, Celant curi la mostra *Conceptual Art. Arte Povera. Land Art* alla Galleria Civica d'Arte Moderna di Torino [fig. 1] che presenta i 'suoi' artisti ma anche esempi di Land Art con opere fotografiche e film in cui espongono lavori, tra gli altri, Heizer, Christo, Smithson, Dibbets,

⁸ I riferimenti alle opere di Heizer sono riportati nel catalogo di quella specifica mostra (Apollonio, Caramel, Mahlow 1970, 109-13) allestita nel Padiglione Centrale della Biennale, che si intitolava in realtà solamente *Proposte per una esposizione sperimentale*, mentre il catalogo della mostra si intitola *Ricerca e progettazione. Proposte per una esposizione sperimentale*; in tale occasione Waldman interviene ricordando che questi artisti avrebbero preferito definire i loro lavori *Earth Works*.

Dennis Oppenheim, De Maria: perdura perciò la 'guerriglia' di Celant alla Biennale, che considera un accrocchio di professori pronti agli accomodamenti e di critici suoi competitor (cf. Celant 1970).⁹



Figura 1 *Conceptual art. Arte povera. Land art.* Catalogo della mostra curata da Germano Celant alla Galleria Civica d'Arte Moderna di Torino nel 1970

Un'altra sezione della mostra *Proposta per una esposizione sperimentale* è dedicata alla «Produzione manuale, meccanica, elettronica, concettuale» e prevede degli atelier per la stampa o la realizzazione di plurimi coordinati da

⁹ A Torino, assieme agli artisti dell'Arte Povera (Merz, Zorio, Pascali, Boetti, Calzolari, Paolini, Pistoletto, De Maria, Prini, Fabro, Penone, Kounellis), espongono Nauman, Weiner, Gilbert & George, Kaltenbach, Beuys, Manzoni, Ryman, Anselmo, Baldessari, Huebler, Kawara, Klein, Serra, Morris, Oppenheim, Barry, Flavin, Kosuth, Andre, Haacke, Sandback, Venet, LeWitt. Il termine 'guerriglia' naturalmente è qui impiegato in riferimento a quello che si può considerare il manifesto dell'Arte Povera, «Arte Povera. Appunti per una guerriglia» pubblicato sul nr. 5 di *Flash Art* del novembre-dicembre 1967.

Gianfranco Tramontin (che è docente all'Accademia di Belle Arti) e gestiti da artisti, ma volti al pubblico sia per mostrare come avviene un procedimento creativo che per coinvolgere direttamente i visitatori. Intesi come laboratori attivi, annoverano persino una fotocopiatrice – una strumentazione molto innovativa per quel tempo – e macchinari per lo stampaggio delle plastiche (cf. Apollonio, Caramel, Mahlow 1970; Portinari 2018). Grazie alla possibilità di sviluppare fotografie e all'impianto serigrafico nasce lì la grande fotoserigrafia di 90 x 154 cm che rimane tutt'ora di proprietà dell'ASAC, ora conservata nel Fondo Artistico, che è testimonianza però di quell'ulteriore opera di Heizer citata effettivamente nel catalogo generale, il celebre *Double Negative. 40.000 Tons Displacement*, realizzato nel 1969 a Moapa Valley nella Mormon Mesa in Nevada. La foto originale, scattata nel 1970 e così datata da Gianfranco Gorgoni – un italiano che dal 1968 si era trasferito negli Stati Uniti dove aveva avviato una significativa carriera di fotografo teatrale, passando poi a testimoniare la Pop Art e la Land Art, realizzando anche le iconiche immagini della *Spiral Jetty* di Smithson e che dunque potrebbe essere forse un ulteriore ingranaggio in questa vicenda, seppur non esplicitato dai documenti – viene stampata su carta in quelle grandi dimensioni, non sappiamo in quanti esemplari ma di cui qualcuno emerge talora nel mercato dell'arte, sempre senza indicazione di tiratura, con indicato in alto a sinistra il nome dell'artista accompagnato dalle precisazioni «Dwan Nevada / New York 1970» e in basso al centro il titolo *Double Negative*.

Alla Biennale successiva del 1972 si assiste alla prima uscita dai Giardini di una mostra dell'istituzione: *Sculpture nella città*, collocata in cortili e campielli, che si collega ad *Aspetti della scultura italiana contemporanea* allestita invece nel Padiglione Centrale, ma si tratta ancora di opere intese in senso tradizionale, volute in ampia parte da Giovanni Carandente che siede nella commissione interna e richiama esplicitamente l'omonima operazione di grande successo che ha compiuto a Spoleto per il V Festival dei Due Mondi nel 1962. Sono piuttosto i Paesi Bassi ad annoverare come partecipazione nazionale Jan Dibbets, che espone fotografie stampate su cartoncino e allestite orizzontalmente, accostate le une alle altre a creare un effetto minimale di orizzonte, che indagano effetti di luce su paesaggi di montagna o marini, come *Marea* (1969) che risulta prestata dalla collezione di Giuseppe Panza di Biumo.¹⁰

Se consideriamo che in quell'anno documenta 5 a Kassel, curata da Harald Szeemann, ospita landartisti che concretizzano opere in situ, come *The Circle. Back Walls From Left to Right* di Richard Long, alla Biennale questa corrente è invece una fantasima che aleggia, si intravede attraverso foto e apparizioni, proiezioni, film, solo come testimonianza. È in quella edizione del 1972 che si offre almeno la percezione dell'azione dei landartisti tramite i film documentari di Schum, che Renato Barilli invita a tenere la mostra *Videonastri* nel Padiglione Centrale: assieme a video d'archivio realizzati per nomi noti come Joseph Beuys, Daniel Buren e Richard Serra – grazie a questa sezione tra l'altro la videoarte compare per la prima volta alla Biennale – espone infatti la *Mostra TV I. Land Art* (1969) girata su pellicola

¹⁰ 36a Esposizione Biennale Internazionale d'Arte 1972, 78: in mostra sono *Montagne Olandesi; Luce-flash-luce; Montagne Olandesi "Mare"; Tende alla veneziana; Drappeggio di abbaino; Abbaino-Nastro; Orizzonte Terra/Mare*, tutte datate 1971.

e riversata in nastro magnetico, in bianco e nero e con sonoro, della durata di 35 minuti che riporta le azioni di *Earth Art* di Boezem, Dibbets, Flanagan, Long, De Maria, Oppenheim e Smithson.¹¹

Il videomaker e Barilli si erano conosciuti ad Amalfi nel 1968, in occasione di un convegno legato alla mostra *Arte povera più azioni povere* allestita negli Antichi Arsenali della Repubblica, promossa dal gallerista Marcello Rumma e curata da Celant, a cui si erano accompagnate delle performance tra gli altri di Richard Long – che aveva stretto mani per le vie della cittadina – e di Dibbets che con *Location of the White Line Sculpture, 25 cm Beneath the Sea of Amalfi* aveva cercato di dislocare una ‘linea bianca’ sott’acqua, interpretata in realtà da un nastro, con un’interessante azione che implica il concetto non solo di Land Art intesa come legame col paesaggio ma anche con l’acqua, tanto più in quanto elemento legato all’Italia, ma che è sempre stato tipico della sua poetica.

È da qui che inizia a prendere forma la Biennale dei curatori, rispetto a quella dominata dalle commissioni guidate dagli storici dell’arte, anche con mostre come *Opera o comportamento* in cui si confrontano due visioni curatoriali, da una parte quella di Francesco Arcangeli, professore dell’Università di Bologna e allievo di Roberto Longhi che presenta i pittori del cosiddetto Ultimo Naturalismo che riproducono un’idea di paesaggio in maniera neo-espressionista, con una materia carica e pastosa; dall’altra quella di Barilli che invita Gino De Dominicis, Luciano Fabro, Mario Merz, Germano Olivotto e Franco Vaccari. Se Merz in un intervento in esterni su un vecchio barcone con l’azione *Alla deriva con i numeri di Fibonacci. Vascello fantasma* porta per la laguna un’opera a igloo che poi posiziona nella sua sala, è Olivotto il personaggio interessante di questa sezione, rispetto alla tematica trattata.

Pur esordendo come pittore vicino all’arte minimalista, percorrendo un’autostrada in Germania ha una folgorazione alla vista di un pioppeto – che è un sito naturale ma anche artificioso, essendo piantumato in modo rigorosamente ordinato – e pensa di collocarvi una presenza assolutamente artificiale, quale un tubo in poliestere illuminato al neon posizionandolo come una *Sostituzione* di un intero albero o di un ramo – come effettua per la prima volta in una campagna della Riviera del Brenta nel 1969 impiegando un tubo alto 9 metri e mezzo, largo 11 centimetri. Innestando un neon minimalista, ma legato a un vibrare energetico parente dell’Arte Povera ed evocando romanticismo paesaggistico ed emergenza ecologica, compie una operazione linguistica concettuale ma testimoniando l’atto con fotografie che riprendono la luce diurna che varia, secondo un concetto caro anche a certi landartisti e in *primis* a Dibbets (cf. Francalanci 1971; Portinari 2008), esercita di fatto un *displacement* e una azione nella natura di cui non resta traccia se non nell’immagine derivata, poiché l’operazione dura una sola giornata.

¹¹ Il film, impiegato come trasmissione per la televisione tedesca, contiene le riprese di Jan Dibbets, *12 ore di marea con correzione della prospettiva, costa olandese* (febbraio 1969, 7’33”); Marinus van den Boezem, *Fontana di sabbia. Camargue* (gennaio 1969; 4’12”); Barry Flanagan, *Buco nel mare. Scheveningen* (febbraio 1969, 3’44”), Richard Long, *Camminando per dieci miglia su e giù e sparando ad ogni mezzo miglio* (gennaio 1969, 6’33”); Walter De Maria, *Due linee, tre cerchi nel deserto. Mohjave Desert* (marzo 1969, 4’46”); Dennis Oppenheim, *Il percorso del tempo che segue il confine del tempo tra gli Stati Uniti e il Canada. Fort Kent* (17 marzo 1979, ore 14 USA, ore 15 Canada; 2’07”); Robert Smithson, *Specchio fossile di miniera con quattro spostamenti di specchio. Cayuga Lake Region* (marzo 1969, 3’12”). Di Dibbets, nella sezione di video d’artista, è presente anche *Four Diagonals* (1970-71, 2’).

La sua modalità di allestimento alla Biennale rimanda ugualmente alle abitudini dei landartisti, presentando proiezioni da diapositive di *Sostituzioni* con interventi reali assieme a 4 *Indicazioni. Innesto di luce*, che si configurano come un compromesso tra azione nella natura e opera materiale, trattandosi di fotografie stampate su tela in cui viene innestato un vero neon, come a indicare dove è avvenuta la *Sostituzione*, oltre al video *11101112* [fig. 2].



Figura 2

Germano Olivotto, *Sostituzione* (1971) eseguita in un pioppeto: copertina del catalogo della mostra. Monografica curata da Ernesto Francalanci alla Galleria Salone Annunciata di Milano nel 1971

Anche la sua morte, avvenuta per incidente stradale nel 1974, è inseribile nell'agiografia degli artisti di quel tempo e fa sì che egli si possa a suo modo considerare un raro operatore di una Land Art delicata rispetto al dialogo con il paesaggio, alla Dibbets, e per di più molto italiano sia nella natura mediterranea delle sue preferenze che rispetto al rapporto con un territorio che va smarrendo la sua vocazione agricola e subisce forti trasformazioni industriali, considerato come l'Italia non sia un paese che si presta geograficamente alle azioni dei landartisti.¹²

La rivista *Data*, che dedica così ampio spazio a Olivotto e Dibbets in occasione di quella Biennale (de Sanna 1972, 56-9), l'anno successivo tratta di una mostra di Christo a Milano che si tiene tra maggio e giugno del 1973. Jan van der Marck (1973, 42-9) scrive in quell'articolo che «la *Valley Curtain* stessa non può essere mostrata alla Rotonda della Besana, poiché è già entrata nel limbo fotografico e cinematografico», manifestando un'idea molto bella, quella di una dimensione di mezzo che vive di compromesso: la difficoltà di esperire la Land Art non solo per motivi geografici, ma anche perché essa abbisogna di assoluto e di mito.

Un altro autore poetico ed eccentrico che coltiva la suggestione di imprese impossibili è Luca Maria Patella, che compie azioni nella natura come in

¹² Sul *Grande Cretto* di Burri, considerabile l'unica opera di Land Art italiana, cf. tra gli altri Costanzo 2022; 2024, sulla riproduzione fotografica e filmica delle opere di Land Art cf. Stevanin 2017.

Terra animata, un cortometraggio in 16 mm girato nella primavera del 1967 sulle Crete Senesi [fig. 3] assieme al cugino e alla fidanzata, poi divenuta sua moglie, che tra riprese virate in fucsia e rosso tendono delle cordelle bianche al modo di agrimensori-maghi o di cartografi di sogni impossibili, tra il rito e il gesto inutile, in una produzione che secondo Elio Grazioli in ambito filmico può essere ufficialmente considerata un documento di Land Art (Grazioli 2020).¹³



Figura 3 Luca Maria Patella, *Terra animata* (1967). Cortometraggio in 16 mm

Anche Patella inoltre si relaziona con gli alberi, ma in modo diverso da Olivetto o da quanto compiono Piero Gilardi o Gino Marotta, creando piuttosto habitat magici e ricchi di stupore con tronchi di alberi veri come in *Un boschetto di Alberi Parlanti e profumati*, e di *Cespugli Musicali, sotto un Cielo* (1970-71; Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool).

Nella storia della Biennale si conta un novero d'anni dissipati ma anche ricchi di eventi, sebbene talora confusi, animati di passioni e vivaci, come un varco disordinato tra 1972 e 1976 con edizioni problematiche, assenti, addirittura senza numero in catalogo, finché nel 1976 tutto riprende come in precedenza ma nel frattempo – dopo quella parentesi molto politica gestita da Carlo Ripa di Meana – hanno preso forza gli argomenti legati ad *Ambiente, partecipazione, strutture culturali*, come recita il titolo di quell'anno. Nel Padiglione della Gran Bretagna, presentato da Michael Compton, Richard

13 Patella nel 1968 inaugura la nuova sede della Galleria L'Attico, ovvero il garage di via Beccaria, con il film *SKMP2* che viene esposto alla Biennale di arti visive del 1978 nella sezione *Arte e cinema. Opere storiche, documenti e materiali attuali (1916-1978)* (cf. *38a Esposizione Internazionale d'Arte. Dalla natura all'arte dall'arte alla natura*, 267). Nel 1969 è presente alla Biennale Cinema con il filmato sperimentale *Vedo, vado!* (1969), film 35 mm, colore, sonoro, 25', con protagonisti lui e la moglie Rosa Foschi, che si pone come una sorta di continuazione di *Terra animata*, e che vince l'Oseella d'Argento.

Long assieme a fotografie di *Linee* tracciate con spostamenti di sassi e pietre durante i suoi cammini sull'Himalaya e in Irlanda, crea in situ *A Line of 682 Stones* consistente in tre linee di pietre rosate che si snodano attraverso l'edificio neoclassico [fig. 4], con un valore profondamente diverso dalle sedici pietre in arenaria dipinta di *Void Field* (1989) che verranno poste da Anish Kapoor alla Biennale del 1990, che non condividono lo spirito della Land Art.



Figura 4 Richard Long, *A Line of 682 Stones* (1976) allestita nel Padiglione della Gran Bretagna alla Biennale di Venezia del 1976. © Nicolò Venier

In quello stesso 1976, per tramite della Galleria del Cavallino di Venezia, l'Archivio Storico della Biennale acquista alcune opere di videoarte da Maria Gloria Bicocchi, proprietaria dello studio art/tapes/22 di Firenze, ora collocate nel Fondo Artistico: tra queste vi sono sei video dell'*Aspen Project* (1970) di Dennis Oppenheim, *open reels* parte di una serie di cinquantatré *shorts* composti tra 1968 e 1974 in cui egli mette in scena però performance con il suo corpo, seppur interagendo con elementi naturali in una riflessione legata ai processi biologici, come in *Compression Fern (Hand)* o *Compression Fern (Face)*, compiute con delle felci.¹⁴

L'operazione più nota di quella edizione è la mostra *Ambiente/Arte 1915-1976* curata da Germano Celant nel Padiglione Centrale, che nella prima sezione ambisce a ricostruire stanze e presenze delle avanguardie, con opere dal 1912 al 1945, e nella seconda si espande al periodo che va dal 1945 al 1966, impiegando per entrambe sia opere originali che ricostruite da musei, che altre ricreate dalla Biennale stessa, ed è da queste riproposizioni che inizia l'impiego del reenactment come suo *modus operandi*, come procederà anche in *When Attitudes Become Form. Bern 1969/Venice 2013* allestita alla

¹⁴ Cf. Marangon 2004; ASAC, FS, AV, Fondo Artistico: Maria Gloria Bicocchi, studio art/tapes/22, Firenze, 1976.

Fondazione Prada nella sede di Venezia nel 2013 e in *Post Zang Tumb Tuuum. Art Life Politics. Italia 1918-1943* nella sede di Milano nel 2018. Un terzo segmento invece è creato da tredici artisti contemporanei con ambienti appositamente realizzati per la Biennale, in cui sarebbe stata prevista la presenza dei landartisti, anche per indagare i rapporti tra opera d'arte e spazio esterno. Questa ipotesi però non si concretizza per l'impossibilità di ottenere dei materiali che siano anche pure foto o disegni e, tra le varie lettere di Celant al direttore delle arti visive Vittorio Gregotti, una specifica che non riesce a contattarli perché si troverebbero al lavoro «in Nevada», come se tutti al contempo si trovassero là. Affermazione veritiera o meno, scusa bellissima per indicarne l'irraggiungibilità ideale e nascondere magari la non disponibilità a confrontarsi con una mostra periodica poco adatta a certe esigenze di spazio, quell'affermazione dimostra davvero un desiderio impossibile da realizzare.¹⁵

L'unico futuro landartista presente a quella mostra risulta infine Christo, ma allora in una fase ancora legata al *nouveau réalisme* con gli impacchettamenti pervasivi. In realtà a concedere una sua opera significativa è il gallerista veneziano Giovanni Camuffo, che gestisce la Galleria del Leone con Attilio Codognato, che presta in extremis l'installazione *Corridor Store Front* (1964) dopo che l'artista - interpellato troppo tardi per poter agire altrimenti - aveva acconsentito a prestare un grande disegno del progetto *Wrapped Floor* (1969) eseguito al Museum of Contemporary Art di Chicago, oltre a due modelli in scala (uno con vista frontale e uno sul retro) e due fotografie di *Corridor Front* (1967).¹⁶ Merz invece, che in molte foto dell'epoca è ripreso intento a spalare terra nella stanza del suo *Tavoli* (1976) e sembra evocare la mostra *Pure Dirt Pure Earth Pure Land* (1968) di Walter De Maria di dieci anni prima, sta solo allestendo lo spazio poiché si tratta di un ambiente con sagome bianche di tavoli dipinti sui muri portati a nudo mattone, come tutta quella sezione che era stata appositamente fatta scialbare da Celant, accompagnato da un pavimento ricoperto di terra, ma non è né un'azione né un'opera con intenti di Land Art, come non lo è l'idea ctonia di Joseph Beuys che intende collegare la terra, l'acqua e il passato della sua infanzia con *Tram Stop* (1976) nel Padiglione della Germania, dove una sonda inserita nel terreno dovrebbe idealmente tornare a Krefeld, sua città natale.

La vera Biennale utopica, grandiosa, dove la natura esonda, è quella del 1978. Lo promette anche il titolo col quale fin dal 1972 si cerca di connotare le varie edizioni: *Dalla natura all'arte, dall'arte alla natura*.

Fin dall'ingresso il *Muro* di Mauro Staccioli collocato sul vialone che conduce al Padiglione Centrale si pone come un cippo gigante, un ostacolo alla visione forse proto Land Art o post Land Art, enorme per il visitatore ma dimensionato alle possibilità di quel giardino e con una relazione ambientale molto forte. È però nella mostra *Sei stazioni per artenatura*.

15 ASAC, FS, AV, Biennale 1978: lettera di G. Celant a V. Gregotti e al Presidente della Biennale, febbraio 1978: i «disegni peruviani» che avrebbe voluto esporre pare siano «in Inghilterra fino a settembre», si tratta con tutta probabilità delle foto di Robert Morris che nell'ottobre del 1975 aveva scritto su *Artforum* l'articolo «Aligned with Nazca», accompagnato appunto da fotografie come *Looking Down on a Nazca Line Drawing* (1975), quindi qui la designazione da «Nazca line drawing» assume nella lettera un senso che pare significare un 'disegno' sul tema dei motivi nazca peruviani, ma l'opera non lo è; cf. Morris 1975.

16 Alla prima mostra di Christo in Italia nel 1963 a Milano alla Galleria Apollinaire fa seguito - con le stesse opere portate dall'artista in auto - quella alla Galleria del Leone a Venezia.

La natura dell'arte nel Padiglione Centrale, che riprende ancora una volta l'idea di una grande rassegna collettiva istituita per appagare il pubblico e mostrare le tendenze più nuove, che torna Dibbets con una foto su tela di *Perspective Correction* (1967) e due di *Water Structures* (1975), oltre a essere presente nelle sezioni «Videonastri» con 4 *Diagonals* (1970-71), in «Arte e cinema, opere storiche, documenti e materiali attuali (1916-1978)» con il video *Horizon 1 - Sea* (1970) e a «Il libro come luogo di ricerca» con il libro d'artista *Domaine d'un Rouge-Gorge, Sculpture* (1969).

Ancora a *Sei stazioni per artenatura. La natura dell'arte*, nel segmento «Natura/Antinatura», è presente Walter De Maria con *Bed Of Spikes* (1968-69) che è però una installazione in acciaio composta da cinque placche con punte, mentre Richard Long in catalogo risulta aver presentato uno *Stone Circle* (1974) accompagnato da una foto in cui non è però allestito alla Biennale e una «*Spirale, 1971*» composta da quelli che in foto sembrano piccoli parallelepipedi di legno (*Artenatura* 1978, 166): si tratta dell'ennesimo caso apparentemente misterioso, legato alle tempistiche del catalogo. Dalle foto dell'allestimento e dai documenti presenti in archivio si evince che in tale sezione è collocata invece una *Sculpture* del 1969, formata da un accumulo di aghi di pino posti in un angolo e dichiarata proveniente da una collezione privata di Milano che possiamo immaginare sia quella di Panza di Biumo, ora al Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum di New York, ma compare effettivamente uno *Stone Circle* (e che è probabilmente quello dell'immagine) e ne abbiamo la prova grazie a un film, anzi a uno dei tre episodi del film *Dove vai in vacanza?* girato in quel 1978 proprio a quella Biennale. L'attore Alberto Sordi e l'attrice che interpreta la parte di sua moglie Augusta, nelle vesti di due fruttivendoli romani costretti a visitare la mostra dai figli intellettuali, inciampano nelle opere, si domandano cosa siano quelle presenze incomprensibili, lei rischia di essere venduta come «un'opera d'arte vivente», ma è capacissima di contare a colpo d'occhio quante siano le pietre dell'opera di Long mentre ci camminano attorno con un gruppo di visitatori: è dunque il cinema in questo caso a rendere percepibili le dimensioni dell'allestimento e a farci immedesimare nelle persone in movimento.

Altre opere che corteggiano una connotazione paesaggistica, se non altro concettuale, sono il foro cosparso di fango ai bordi eseguito nel muro esterno del Padiglione Centrale da Charles Simonds, *Wide View. Dwelling* (1978), che si pone come un cannocchiale sulla laguna e le opere di Olavi Lanu, che espone come rappresentante della Finlandia al Padiglione dei Paesi Nordici con una grande installazione composta da più gruppi di creature realizzate con materiali naturali quali terra, legno, muschio e aghi di pino, intitolata *Life in the Finnish Forest*. Quelle collocate all'esterno, non essendo mappate fotograficamente né nel catalogo generale né in quello del padiglione né su altri materiali a stampa creati successivamente in ricordo dell'evento, non si percepiscono per consistenza o posizionamento se non grazie a quel film di Sordi (che ne è anche regista), da cui risultano essere grandi ominidi stesi a terra, resi con fango e rami conficcati nel corpo: sono insomma delle installazioni che oggi chiameremmo di Art in Nature e non Land Art, come quelle presenti al Parco Sella in Trentino, che derivano più dall'arte topiaria. Così pure nella sezione dell'Australia John Davis, che pratica anche la Land Art e presenta in catalogo delle foto dell'impresa *Impianti sul lago Hattah (Vittoria)* (1976), alla Biennale allestisce solo l'installazione *Continuum and Transference* (1977-78) composta da rametti, corde, legni, corteccia, latex,

feltro, tela e sassi. Come scriveva insomma il pittore Enrico Baj ancora nel 1970, recensendo quella Esposizione Internazionale d'Arte per il *Corriere della Sera*, ci vuole coraggio per essere un collezionista di Land Art, «non bastano i soldi, ci vuole spazio per portarsi in casa un mucchio di detriti», tantissimo spazio per possedere «un campo arato dell'Oppenheim», ma in realtà se si consultano i registri della Biennale sussiste un mercato anche per quelle opere, se non altro per le loro testimonianze (Baj 1970).

Una certa Land Art o una certa utopia della Land Art torna comunque sotto altre suggestioni: in quell'anno ad esempio per la sezione di fotografia «L'immagine provocata» Fabrizio Plessi – un artista molto legato a Venezia e che era stato presente anche nei laboratori sperimentali del 1972 – presenta *100 pezzi d'acqua* (1973), una serie di foto e un video in cui cerca di tagliare l'acqua con un paio di forbici, con un gesto poetico e concettuale: tornano ancora sia l'elemento acquoreo che un gesto assurdo e irrealizzabile. La medesima operazione la compie mentre cerca di *Segare il Lago Stichter in due parti uguali* (1975), richiamando forse uno degli episodi del film *SKMP2* (1968) di Luca Maria Patella in cui compare Pino Pascali, che morirà di lì a poco nel settembre 1968 e che con una inusitata procedura avrà assegnato il Premio Giovani alla Biennale grazie alla presenza di Palma Bucarelli in giuria, la quale aveva scritto per lui un testo in catalogo. In quelle riprese, tra i gesti impossibili che compie nell'acqua della Puglia, c'è quello di segare il mare.¹⁷

Plessi in quegli anni crea opere come la fotografia *Un buco nell'acqua* (1973), in cui pianta nel liquido un grosso chiodo da edilizia e a suo modo evoca Barry Flanagan in *Hole in the Sea* (1969), una azione presente nel film *Land Art* di Schum, e impiegando così spesso quell'elemento richiama alla memoria anche il pensiero dell'alluvione che il 4 novembre 1966 aveva colpito in particolar modo Venezia e San Marco, così come quanto aveva scritto con potente visionarietà ancora nel 1960 De Maria *On the Importance of Natural Disasters*, a come si debba pensare agli eventi naturali non come a qualcosa di terribile ma come a una occasione estetica, perché nulla può competere con la natura stessa (cf. Young, Mac Low 1963).¹⁸

Il fenomeno dell'acqua alta e della fragilità di Venezia ispirano a Plessi soluzioni ironiche come le serigrafie o le grafiche a tecniche miste su tele emulsionate con colori acidi e post-pop dedicate alle grandi spugne che possono risucchiare l'acqua in eccesso e salvare la città, come nelle varie versioni di *Spugna d'emergenza in caso di alta marea a Venezia* (1972-73) [fig. 5], un po' inverosimili capricci alla Canaletto tra i palazzi storici, un po' visioni utopiche come quelle ideate da Superstudio tra 1966 e 1978, un po' progetti che ricordano quelli che Christo impiega per raccogliere i fondi per le sue imprese di Land Art e naturalmente spugne omaggio a quelle scelte da

17 SKMP2 è un acronimo con le iniziali dei cognomi dei protagonisti che hanno partecipato al film: Fabio Sargentini, Janis Kounellis, Eliseo Mattiacci, Pino Pascali e Luca Maria Patella (dunque 2 P), diviso in episodi dedicato ciascuno a un artista.

18 Walter De Maria dichiara: «I think natural disasters have been looked upon in the wrong way. [...] I like natural disasters and I think that they may be the highest form of art possible to experience. [...] I don't think art can stand up to nature. Put the best object you know next to the Grand Canyon, Niagara Falls, the red woods. The big things always win. Now just think of a flood, forest fire, tornado, earthquake, Typhoon, sand storm. [...] If all of the people who go to museums could just feel an earthquake. [...] But it is in the unpredictable disasters that the highest forms are realized. They are rare and we should be thankful for them». Sul tema aveva già scritto anche Ben Vautrier in *Accidents and Catastrophes* nel 1961.

Yves Klein per assorbire il valore dell'arte e del monocromo, mentre Patella gioca con le parole e trasforma Piazza di Spagna a Roma in una *Piazza di Spugna* (1967) su tela fotografica.

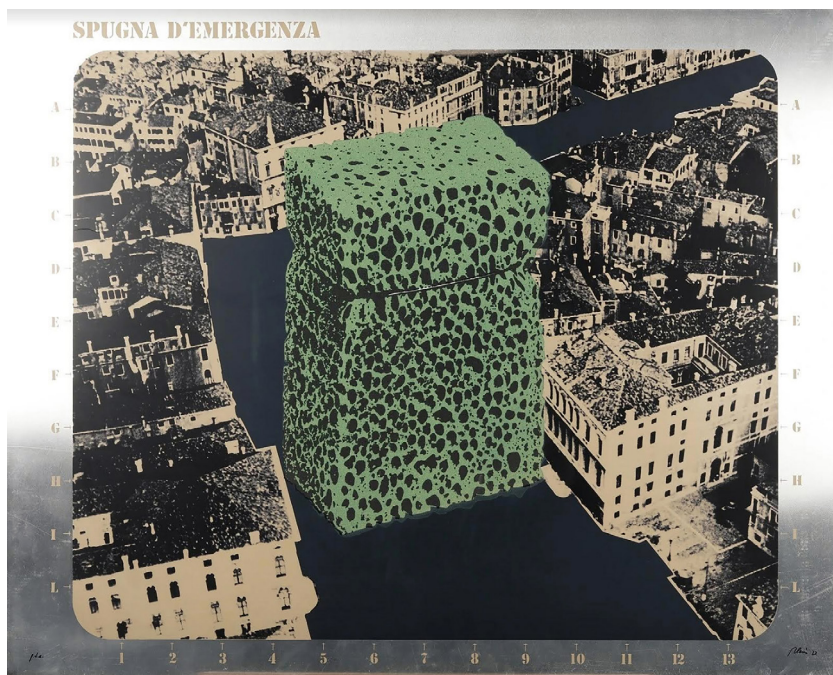


Figura 5 Fabrizio Plessi, *Spugna d'emergenza in caso di alta marea a Venezia* (1973). Serigrafia. Courtesy Fabrizio Pessi

Alla Biennale del 1980 si celebra il funerale di tutte queste vicende artistiche: è un'edizione che nasce malamente, con l'incarico di direttore del settore arti visive assegnato nel giugno del 1979 a Carandente che subito per ragioni politiche deve rinunciare (secondo la versione ufficiale per una incompatibilità in quanto funzionario dello stato, essendo ispettore centrale del Ministero dei Beni Culturali) e di cui prende il posto Luigi Carluccio. È Carandente però che lascia la pesante eredità di organizzare una mostra dedicata agli anni Settanta che, curata da Achille Bonito Oliva, Harald Szeemann, Michael Compton e Martin Kunz, vede la partecipazione di Long, Christo, Heizer e De Maria, ma la loro è ancora una volta una presenza assolutamente documentaria composta di disegni e foto, come di nuovo compare il film *Land Art* di Schum e se negli anni Ottanta e Novanta torneranno ancora presenze dei landartisti, è terminato quel loro momento auratico.¹⁹

19 In mostra a *L'arte negli anni Settanta* sono Richard Long con le foto *Mezza marea* (1971), *Una linea in Irlanda* (1974), *Cento vette in cento ore* (1976) *Camminata per tutte le strade e tutti i sentieri che toccano o attraversano un cerchio immaginario* (s.d.); il disegno *Mille miglia-mille ore* (1974); Christo con la documentazione di *Wrapped Coast, One Million Square Feet, Little Bay, Australia* (1969); Michael Heizer con la foto *Complex One/City* (1972-76); Walter De Maria con le foto *Disegno lungo un miglio* (1968) e *Lightning Field*, New Mexico, 87829 (1971-77). Nel 1982 alla Biennale si terrà una personale di Smithson, *A Retrospective View*, nel Padiglione degli Stati Uniti.

L'appartenenza di Venezia all'acqua evoca allo scrittore Tiziano Scarpa l'idea che abbia la forma di un pesce, mentre l'artista Milena Milani - compagna del gallerista Carlo Cardazzo - reclama che è un cuore. Questo luogo acquoreo che con la Biennale cerca esperienze extramediali legate anche alla natura, come quella del gruppo belga Mass Moving che nel 1972 prova a far nascere in un incubatore diecimila farfalle in piazza San Marco o la videoperformance del designer Giorgio Camuffo, editore della rivista *Venice is not Sinking*, che alla Design Week del 2011 immagina di togliere un enorme tappo dalla laguna, strappandolo via nei pressi di una riva e facendo cessare così il problema dell'acqua alta, semplicemente svuotando la città, non pare offrire però 'vere' opere di Land Art. Pure i progetti di un artista veneziano alquanto dimenticato, Rizziero Giunti, che immagina installazioni di grandi dimensioni che si slanciano tra le isole intitolate proprio *Isolari* (1986), sono più vicini a una certa scultura inglese vista anche alla Biennale negli anni Sessanta e Settanta, che alla Land Art.

È però proprio quell'idea marina, quell'acqua che circonda Venezia e che pulsa con le maree per i movimenti legati ai ritmi naturali l'elemento giusto per una Land Art veneziana, il non-luogo più strano e inafferrabile che somiglia ai deserti incogniti dei landartisti, in cui bisogna recarsi seguendo delle prescrizioni - come nel caso di Walter De Maria - arrivarvi con difficoltà, attendere il mutare della luce. Forse sono proprio le estremità della laguna, le barene, i siti nascosti tra l'acqua e la terra sempre a rischio di entropia e che assumono forme circolari, a nastro, a serpe, conformandosi naturalmente come il *Circumflex* (1968) di Michael Heizer a rivelarsi quello spazio inviolato, tranquillo, religioso e indeterminato nel tempo che un artista come lui avrebbe cercato. E se vi avvengono sperimentazioni al confine con altre avventure sensoriali, come la cucina ambientale del ristorante Venissa che a Mazzorbo impiega le erbe e gli odori del luogo, erede vegetale di una cucina artistica che dai futuristi giunge a Ferran Adrià, celebrato nel 2007 a documenta 12, anche il film *Atlantide* (2021) dell'artista Yuri Ancarani rende quelle zone un luogo ai confini del nulla, dove regnano eroismi e sogni. La gioventù che di notte vi sfreccia sui *barchini* truccati sfidando la morte in gara con se stessa per una impresa apparentemente insensata e con un atteggiamento sfrontato non diverso da quello di Smithson che cammina sulla *Spiral Jetty*, ci fa desiderare quei luoghi inospitali, vicini ma anche remoti, secondo una sensibilità colta anche dal film *Welcome Venice* (2021) di Andrea Segre, che invoca preoccupazioni sul destino di Venezia con personaggi che camminano tra le barene come sulle acque, in un luogo anfibio come lo è la Biennale stessa, che è sempre il documento di un certo presente ma resta anche sulla riva del tempo. Quindi forse il luogo giusto per cercare la Land Art a Venezia è l'acqua.

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From the Venice Biennale to the about 300 biennials around the world: this volume deals with the Bienal de São Paulo as a dream that flourishes on the other side of the ocean and becomes an autonomous and vital permanent temporary exhibition; the essentiality of graphic art in Eastern European countries; transnational dialogues, snares and hopes, but also ghosts and apparitions, discords and neo-colonialism. It maps the cartography of an utopia because, as Massimiliano Gioni wrote, the model itself of this exhibition “is based on the impossible desire to concentrate the infinite worlds of contemporary art in a single place”.



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