

Why Venice?

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Editorial

OBOE Journal aims to be an observatory, to become a platform for discussion, to research and elucidate the ostensive moment of the artistic act. Borne out of the specificity of exhibition studies and with a particular focus on periodic exhibitions, the journal continues to expand its scope towards the exhibitionary in a broader sense. This includes the moment of exposition, when the artwork, understood as an activator of multiple layers of perception – sensory, ideational, bodily, spatial, temporal, memorial, cultural, economic, political, and more – composes our experience of the infinitely complex contemporary moment.

OBOE's approach involves tracing trajectories and examining relationships between actors in evolving assemblages. Exploring the connections between art and the general audience, discussing the dimension of the art market, reflecting on the emergence of diverse cultures, analysing the role of the media, as well as understanding politics and governmental strategies, which converge to varying degrees when defining the ostensive manifestation of the artwork.

OBOE Journal also arose from the necessity of building a bridge between nodes, and of understanding the layered intersections that emerge in exhibitions. The journal addresses multiple disciplines, whilst taking into account a number of heterogeneous subjects that partake in our aesthetic and visual experience today.

OBOE Journal aims to become a scholarly laboratory, where topics that are urgent in this field may be further investigated and re-mediated. Writing art history, and especially exhibition history, demands new methodologies, and we envisage the malleable space of a recurrent journal germane for investigating and re-writing this evolving discipline.

For this reason, alongside an open thematic approach, we have decided to publish special issues on specific topics that will recur over time. These editions aim to become methodological tools for an in-depth study of art and the exhibitionary.

We chanced upon the title *OBOE* as an acronym for our subtitle 'On Biennials and Other Exhibitions'. Over time it sedimented and became familiar. We were intrigued by the fact that it alluded to music, and the act of playing and performing, as something entailing participation and evolution. The oboe is an instrument, and by nominating the journal as such we foresee it becoming an accompaniment to those scholars who remain devoted to studying the theory and practice of these contemporary – but never reductively contemporary – exhibitionary formats.

Why Venice?

The inaugural issue poses a question: “Why Venice?” The answer lies somewhere between contingency and necessity. Our founding members have met at Iuav University in Venice and have been dealing with the study of the Venice Biennale in multifarious ways over the years. The concept of the journal had its origin in the conference and volume *Starting from Venice. Studies on the Venice Biennale* (2010) which evidenced the need to fill a historiographical aporia we continuously encountered. Many are the studies devoted to the Venice Biennale, but many are the gaps and fallacies that remain around the study of this exhibition. Attending to some of these oversights in “Why Venice?” remains critically important, and not just because this is our first issue, but because it intends to answer something we felt was fundamental. We wanted to collate a selection of contributions which would set the pace for future issues devoted to the Venice Biennale and its history. These touch upon very different time periods and contribute to our understanding of the complexity of studies around the Venice Biennale.

In her Preface to the issue, *OBOE*’s director, Angela Vettese, explicates the reasons for the birth of this periodical, which she considers an infinite platform for the examination of the gerundive nature of artistic and exhibitionary acts.

The issue takes off with the essay of guest contributor Caroline Jones. By looking specifically at the case of the group *Oreste* in the 1999 Venice Biennale, her analysis takes into consideration the century from 1895 to 1999, during which she argues it is possible to measure the impact of biennials on themselves and on the emergence of increasingly social forms of contemporary art.

We thought it was essential to make excellent but little-known research written in Italian accessible to the international community. Our choice was to translate a foundational text by Maria Mimita Lamberti, “International Exhibitions in Venice” (1982), which, although written several decades ago, remains a highly relevant study. We hope this effort, which we aim to replicate in future issues, will help to widen the perspective on Biennale studies and contribute to supporting excellence in non-English research by young scholars.

Camilla Salvaneschi discusses the evolution of the art periodical published by the Venice Biennale in the 1950s and 1960s: a journey from informative instrument to a container for critical thought and theory. Salvaneschi argues that the magazine was fundamental in articulating the model of the exhibition magazine, as recently exemplified by *documenta* and *Manifesta* amongst others.

In her contribution on *Ambiente come Sociale* at the 1976 Venice Biennale, Martina Tanga examines Enrico Crispolti’s innovative curatorial approach for the 1976 show. Tanga considers his unique strategy as it simultaneously aligned with and critiqued the Biennale as a cultural institution.

Departing from the necessity to understand the framework within which the Biennale takes form and the question of where it positions itself in relation to the history of exhibitions, Clarissa Ricci reconsiders the curatorial contribution of the 45th Biennale (1993), *Cardinal Points of Art*, directed by Achille Bonito Oliva, and outlines the features that contributed towards reshaping the Biennale into its contemporary format.

In this first issue, we also wanted to give space to shorter texts such as Vittoria Martini’s, which touches upon the branding strategies of the Biennale. Specially adapted for this issue, Martini’s essay is the first of a number of conference papers we hope to present in forthcoming issues.

In conclusion, we would like “Why Venice?” to remain in the interrogative, and for us to abide with its question mark. Our hope with this issue is to stimulate questions and perspectives that might open and give space to new paths of research for other scholars.

Angela Vettese**Why OBOE? The Gerundive Nature of Artworks****Abstract**

The introduction to *OBOE*'s first issue aims to illustrate how a certain method of studying exhibitions is directly linked with the study of contemporary art history. Mirroring contemporary art's gerundive nature the journal's periodicity becomes the ideal space to write an inclusive history of biennials, but also of the many avenues for art's manifestation.

Keywords

Venice Biennale, Biennials, Artworks, Art Journal, Exhibition Studies

Translation from Italian by

Sonia Hill

Why OBOE? The Gerundive Nature of Artworks

Angela Vettese

The first poster advertising the *Esposizione Internazionale d'Arte della Città di Venezia*, which took place from 22 April to 22 October 1895, promised a packed programme of entertainment:¹ as well as advertising the event, this list also presents itself as a programme. From the very outset, the Venice Biennale sought to bring together initiatives designed to redefine the external perception of the city and life within it. Brought about by mayor Riccardo Selvatico and a group of intellectuals and businessmen who met regularly at Caffè Florian, including figures such as Antonio Fradeletto and Giovanni Bordiga, the event aimed to meet a number of different requirements. The first was to respond to the appeal from the newly founded Kingdom of Italy to celebrate its very existence through exhibitions and fairs.²

This informal committee founded an event that was never intended to be episodic, but was always planned to be repeated every two years, endowing it with special features to make it stand out from similar events. The intention was to make it a high-quality occasion, so a decision was made to only showcase the visual arts and not furnishings, manufactured items or objects. It was believed that paintings and sculptures could “stimulate the public more with the fame of illustrious foreign artists”,³ thereby leaving aside all localism (albeit with some controversy – this is what led to the birth of the Fondazione Bevilacqua La Masa and, subsequently, the Venice Pavilion) and also the sense of nationalism. It was only during the Fascist period that the Central Pavilion in the *Giardini* (gardens) featured the word “ITALY” on the architrave, which is now set in the ground at the Arsenal. The committee also made a daring decision not to insist on the most popular styles, so that the public could “compare the most diverse aesthetic approaches”,⁴ thereby launching themselves into the arena of experimentation. Despite seeming to follow

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The program comprised “Serenades – Regattas – Sporting Competitions – Illuminations – Boat Events – Concerts – Bacchanale del Redentore – International Fencing Tournaments – Fireworks – Great Theatrical Performances and other exceptional Celebrations”. A copy of the lithographic poster, now in the Historical Archives of the Venice Biennale, can be seen in Caroline A. Jones, *The Global Work of Art. World's Fairs, Biennials, and the Aesthetics of Experience* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), plate 13.

2

Memorandum from Minister Rattazzi dated July 15, 1892, which called for the celebration of the royal couple's silver wedding anniversary, cited in Antonio Maraini, *La Biennale di Venezia* (Venice: Ufficio Stampa dell'Esposizione, 1932), 20.

3

Prima Esposizione Internazionale d'Arte. Numero Unico Illustrato 1895, exh. cat. (Venice: Giardini di Castello, April 22 - October 22, 1895).

4

Ibid.

on from the Salons and the expos, the Venetian exhibition was founded with innovative intentions hidden beneath its folds. In many ways, these aspects illustrate why a certain method of studying art history, particularly contemporary art history, by organising exhibitions, began with the Venetian formula.

The phenomenon defined as “biennialisation” has, in fact, spread around the world, with expectations not too far removed from those explored above, despite the fact it developed during a different period of history, that is to say after the two world wars, accelerating its pace following the reorganisation of the world after 1989 and during the information revolution.⁵ Consequently, it can and must be described using modern terminology and explored with the caution of those who, do not underestimate the succession of events across the planet and their effects on art. After all, it is due to eminently historical events that the biennial format has become so widespread.

Venice was followed by the São Paulo Art Biennial (1951), the quinquennial documenta in Kassel (1955) and then other biennials in Sydney (1973), Havana and Taipei (1984), Cuenca and Istanbul (1987), Lyon (1991), Sharjah (1993), Johannesburg (1995–97), the touring European show Manifesta, as well as Dakar, Porto Alegre and Shanghai (1996), Berlin (1998), and Yokohama (triennial) (2001), Singapore (2006), Ushuaia (2007) and other places. Although each event came about for different reasons, they still all have some key aspects in common: first and foremost, they all offer themselves as representing a different way, which is often deliberately alternative to the Venetian example. Despite this, it was in Venice that certain established exhibition practices were questioned most stridently. The event went on to become a conflagration of exhibitions and performances, succeeding in overturning the decisions of the directors in charge, often with stinging criticism of ideas that responded to the terms exhibition, nation, collective identity and visual art as solitary disciplines that never intersect with other fields.⁶ This phenomenon became obvious in 1993, when the artistic director himself delegated some of his tasks to a very extended staff of curators, so as to ensure that the offerings and subject matter were as diverse as possible.⁷

The new biennials tend to redefine the language of exhibitions with many often contradictory reference points: on the one hand, we have entertainment for a learned audience, from the perspective of the society of the spectacle; we have city rebranding methods involving an elevated lexicon; we see the city being used as a vehicle for the culture industry with all its connotations of consumption. The exhibition is used to boost profits from tourism but also for social control purposes, resembling a new version of the ancient “festival, flour and pitchfork.” On the other hand, however, we find examples at the limits of activism, perhaps seeking to rouse a sedated region to consciousness, pollinating local tradition with moments of international openness, emerging from postcolonial logics in Africa and Central and South America, but also highlighting new centres of economic power such as Russia, China, Korea and the Arab states, escaping European-American polarity as the quintessential axis of twentieth-century artistic production.

The list of issues that can answer the question “a new biennial: why?” is therefore truly vast and touches upon themes that range from geopolitics to peacekeeping systems such as soft diplomacy, also implemented through sport or music festivals for young people. However, we must not forget that, as regards the specific field of artistic production, these events also question curatorial methods.

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For an examination on the global proliferation of the biennial format see Anthony Gardner and Charles Green, *Biennials, Triennials and Documenta: The Exhibitions that created Contemporary Art* (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2016), as well as the comprehensive volume edited by Elena Filipovic, Marieke van Hal and Solveig Øvstebø, *The Biennial Reader* (Ostfildern: Hatje Kantz, 2010).

6

See Angela Vettese, “The National Pavilions at the Venice Biennale as a Form of Public Space”, in *Public Space? Lost and Found*, eds. Gediminas Urbonas, Anne Lui, and Lucas Freeman (Cambridge MA: MIT School of Architecture and Planning; and London: SA+P Press, 2017): 211–221.

7

See Clarissa Ricci, *La Biennale di Venezia 1993-2003, l'esposizione come piattaforma*, (PhD diss. luav University and Ca' Foscari University in Venice, 2014): 29–129.

Although the Venice Biennale often ends up being comparable to a parent to be killed off, it is impossible to deny that it remains a starting point. The very fact that it is criticised illustrates how it continues to be a source of inspiration.

Numerous studies have been conducted on each of these aspects, but an inclusive history of biennials or even of the International Art Exhibition on its own has never been written. A magazine on the subject of periodic exhibitions, which takes Venice as its historical and geographical starting point, could therefore act as a field of investigation that leads us along many different paths.⁸ A magazine on biennials resembles a keyhole through which to observe contemporary art and its multiple problematic relations with artworks, their changing language, the audience types to be targeted, changing global political situations, and new accounts of historical events and relations between peoples, but also with the philosophical statute of art.

With regard to this latter point, the growth in periodical exhibitions places the accent on an essentially modern and contemporary type of temporality, brought about by the acceleration in technological discoveries over recent centuries and developed with the need of capitalism – initially commercial and industrial and now primarily in the tertiary sector – with regard to the impossibility of permanence. Just as money does not stop, swept up in an unrelenting flow, we conceive our lives and our ability to present ourselves as something perpetually in motion. While a stable economy such as the agricultural one allowed for millennia of relatively stable religions and cultures, the situation born out of the West and centred around trade, then heavy industry and now communication, has rendered us ever less suited to any form of permanence.

The dynamic history of museums helps to explain this phenomenon. Having started life for the most part as private collections, going on to become unchanging public centres, they are now dominated by change. None of the newly conceived museums willingly keep their display the same. The collections are added to with as much dynamism as possible. They have all learned to stage temporary exhibitions that inspire visitors to return. A purely contemplative, repetitive and obsessive approach, such as the one described by Thomas Bernhard in *Old Masters* (1985), has become unthinkable.

We are driven by a desire for change and addicted to fast usage. By putting itself forward as a temporally subdivided event, ever identical yet different from itself and therefore captured as it is being constructed, the periodic exhibition forms an ideal part of an overall exhibition that necessarily puts itself forward as being continually in progress. In historical and artistic terms, we can interpret this as the current version and offshoot of a Dadaist and Surrealist approach. Artists, curators and the public have primarily learned this *modus operandi* from certain historical avantgarde exhibitions that we would now describe as interactive and that, over and beyond the terminology, declare themselves to be non-monumental and indeed aimed at problematising the way in which we look at works and the impermanence of the works themselves.

I am thinking particularly of two memorable exhibitions, both held in New York in October 1942, capable like few others of underscoring the “fluctuating world” that contemporary art was bringing into focus. The first is the web of string developed by Marcel Duchamp for the Surrealist exhibition at the Whitelaw Reid Mansion, while the second comprises the chairs designed to act as easels, the curved walls that concealed grottoes, the deceptive lighting and the general sense of a haunted cavern conceived by Frederick Kiesler for Peggy Guggenheim’s Art of This Century gallery.

Furthermore, the gerundive nature of artworks was also established at the same time. From the 1910s onwards, they no longer tended to be defined as a field of resolved compositional forces, but instead became an open process. This did not come about easily and it is true to say that the Futurist evenings, the Dada eve-

nings, the *Ursonate* declaimed by Kurt Schwitters, but also seemingly extravagant projects such as the *Nesting Tables* developed at the Bauhaus by Josef Albers (1922) or the sense of sliding walls inherent in Mies Van Der Rohe's *Barcelona Pavilion* (1929), were marked by an awareness of change. The post-war period pushed strongly in this direction, with works that displayed a decided sense of motion (we should remember *Le Mouvement* exhibition, curated by Pontus Hulten in 1955 at Denise René's Parisian gallery) and Situationist practices, including the walk born out of the public transport strikes in August 1953, implemented according to the concept of drifting as put forward by Guy Debord.⁹ A similar awareness led to the development of techniques and works that already revealed their transitory nature and ongoing relationship with time in their definition or title: from Willem de Kooning's problems completing a work, conceived as continually reviewable, we come to Pollock's dripping, Robert Morris' *Box with the Sound of its Own Making* (1961), and Richard Serra's *Splashing* in the *Nine at Leo Castelli* exhibition (New York, 1968), and so on, to the point that the artwork is put forward as being open to movement, to the variations of atmospheric time, to perceptive reactions and to the human relations that it generates. The unpredictable temporality of the performance, of public art, of relational aesthetics generated in the 1960s and explored from the 1990s onwards, speaks a language that continues on from those early proposals, based on a plurality of visions and flexible results. As Lawrence Alloway understood when talking about the "multicellular" nature of Venice,¹⁰ there is a relationship between exhibitions and repetition and between repetition and infinite reproducibility.

The examination of the biennial phenomenon, therefore, puts itself forward as an analysis of the artistic language in its making, in its exhibition, in its seeking formal series that pertain – in a Kublerian way – to the *anthropos* that we have become and the anthropocene we have constructed. Within this scenario, a magazine can even be presented as an evolving exhibition platform, with an indefinite temporality and within which we can imagine infinite dialogues, in keeping with the ancient Socratic method that takes nothing for granted, and artists' projects designed to be ongoing. This magazine format ends up embodying slippery temporality, which is stimulating because it is never targeted at an end point except perhaps a "definitively unfinished" asymptote such as Duchamp's *Large Glass*. All this in the awareness that the Venice Biennial and its legacy also live on by emanating an unfinished music, the sound of an oboe that accompanies and describes thought in its making.

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Guy Debord, "Theory of the Dérive", *Internationale Situationniste*, no. 2 (December 1958): 62-66.

10

See Lucy Brandnock, Courtney J. Martin, and Rebecca Peabody (eds.), *Lawrence Alloway, Critic and Curator* (Los Angeles: The Getty Research Institute, 2015): 158. See also Lawrence Alloway, *The Venice Biennale 1895-1968: From Salon to Goldfish Bowl* (New York: New York Graphic Society, 1968), 153.

Author's Biography

Angela Vettese is Founder and Director (since 2001) of the Graduate Programme in Visual Arts at the Università Iuav di Venezia, where she teaches Theory and Criticism of Contemporary Art. She has previously taught at the Università Luigi Bocconi in Milan (2000-2007/2011-2013) and has participated in the ERC European Research Council commissions (2012/2013). She has directed the Civic Gallery of Contemporary Art in Modena (2005-2008) and the Arnaldo Pomodoro Foundation in Milan (2008-2009). She has also been president of the

Fondazione Bevilacqua La Masa (2002-2013), as well as City Councillor for the Cultural Activities and Development of Tourism in Venice (2013-2014). In 2017 and 2018 she was artistic director of Arte Fiera Bologna. She has written numerous essays as "The National Pavilion as the Venice Biennale as a Form of Public Space" (in *Public Space? Lost and Found*, 2017). Recent book titles include *The National Pavilions of the Venice Biennale: Spaces for Cultural Diplomacy* (2016), *L'arte contemporanea tra mercato e nuovi linguaggi* (2017), *Desiderio* (2019).

Caroline A. Jones**Event Structures and Biennial Culture: Oreste at the Biennale****Abstract**

Over the century from 1895 to 1999, we can measure the impact of biennials on themselves, and on the emergence of increasingly social forms of contemporary art. I argue that in their inheritance from world's (and national) fairs, biennials were engines for the transfer of fairs' "festal apparatus" to the centre of contemporary art itself. In particular, I will review the historical case of the collaborative group Oreste in the 1999 Venice Biennale, in which "relational art" (introduced in 1993 by one of the *Aperto* curators, Nicolas Bourriaud) was further tested in the biennial context. Marking the shift from boat transport, xerox machines, and snail mail to novel infrastructures called email, listservs, and the "World Wide Web," the Oreste collective created a transnational network bringing over 100 artists to Venice, and connecting virtually with more than 500 artists world-wide. This little-known group had no stylistic coherence or "ism" to proclaim; instead, they had a loose aesthetic agenda celebrating events, networks, and increasingly social forms of art, often staged in "Spazio Oreste". This they claimed from the edge of the Central pavilion where the traditional nationalist building had been punctured in 1952 for a terrace garden designed by Carlo Scarpa, symbolically marking the rehabilitation of edifice and event after the years of fascism. We can understand something crucial about twenty-first century biennial culture, by examining how local artists created a global network to localize an "artway of thinking" at the millennial turn.

Keywords

Oreste, Authorship, Contemporary Art, Relational Aesthetics, Collective

***Director's note**

As an exceptional circumstance, due to the author's expertise, the present text benefited from an open peer review from the director and the editors.

Event Structures and Biennial Culture: Oreste at the Biennale

Caroline A. Jones

Becoming Biennial¹

Astonishingly, in the founding documents of the Biennale di Venezia from 1893, the first intentions expressed were neither strongly “biennial” nor necessarily international.² The city officials and intellectuals who inaugurated the now perpetual infrastructure were inspired by the one-off national exposition held in Venice in 1887 after the city had been chosen for the honour by the 8th Artistic Congress in Rome in 1883.³ The national exposition had been staged in a purpose-built pavilion erected in the public *Giardini* (still standing five years later, and begging to be used again). Documents from the earliest deliberations among Venetian city councillors from April of 1893 envision an exhibition like the national one, but *without* Rome’s authorisation. As the minutes reveal, the councillors expressed an intention of “perpetuity” in honouring the king and queen’s wedding anniversary (a noble goal!) but only made passing reference to the idea that the show might be a *repeating* one (the key phrase is “ad ogni biennio” meaning “every second year”).⁴ It was not until

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The author is deeply grateful to the critical readings of this essay by Emily V. Bonvino, Clarissa Ricci and Camilla Salvaneschi. This new generation of scholars are contributing critically to the specification and theorisation of the interface between Italy’s complex local politics, regional cultures, and the global artworld – I am thankful for the care they took, for their kind corrections, for their informative citations and for their enriching ideas. I’m also in debt to Agnes Kohlmeyer and Pieranna Cavalchini, who introduced me both intellectually and literally to the founders of Oreste, and to Amara Antilla who widened the net.

2

Unless explicitly cited otherwise, all references and quotes from the founding documents come from the *Serie Scatole Nere, Box 1= Periodo dell’Organizzazione 1894-1895, Archivio storico delle arti contemporanee* – hereinafter La Biennale di Venezia (Historical Archives of Contemporary Arts, Venice Biennial) ASAC, S.N., b. 1.

3

In her book *Venice: Fragile City, 1797-1997* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), Margaret Plant reports that “The first opportunity to offer Venice as a showcase for art occurred when the Esposizione Artistica Nazionale for 1887 was assigned to Venice in 1883 by the Eighth Artistic Congress in Rome”, 215.

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The phrase is in the manuscript notes from the first meeting of April 19, 1893, la Biennale di Venezia, ASAC, S.N., b. 1. So buried is the phrase that Plant asserts that the exhibition was not referred to as biennial until after the Second World War! Plant, *Venice: Fragile City*, 216.

1894 that the imagined exhibition shifted from being implicitly *national* to explicitly *international* in scope.⁵

That change was registered on March 30, 1894, and the show's opening was also postponed a year to allow the international *Comitato di patrocinio* (Patron's Council) to advise on the exhibition's contents and spread news of the event.⁶ Yet the precise tempo of repetitions remained elusive. While it is perhaps only an accident of graphic design, the first exposition's poster merely announces: "1895, *Esposizione Internazionale d'Arte della Città di Venezia*", corrected only in later posters and catalogue to read "*Prima Esposizione Internazionale...*" (*First International Exhibition...*). What interests me further is what was printed underneath the poster's heading: "*SERENATE, REGATE, GARE SPORTIVE, LUMINARIE, FRESCHI, CONCERTI, BACCANALE DEL REDENTORE, TORNEO INTERNAZIONALE DI SCHERMA, GARE PIROTECNICHE, GRANDI SPETTACOLI TEATRALI, ED ALTRI ECCEZIONALI FESTEGGIAMENTI*".⁷ These are the kinds of festive accoutrements which had, for centuries, adorned Venice's civic rituals (such as the "Marriage to the Sea" of medieval times), but more proximately, these event-structures reveal the biennial's debt to the exhausted machinery of the world's fairs.

The constellations of boating events, sports, fireworks, theatrics, and refreshments made it clear that tourism was an important part of the mix, but unlike the omnivorous world's fairs, the Venetians' future-oriented recycling of the past would focus primarily on *art*. The first summary offered to the town by the three founders (poet and mayor Riccardo Selvatico, along with politician Antonio Fradeletto and philosopher Giovanni Bordiga) had married patriotic royalism to pragmatic hopes for a future "benefitting the reputation [of the city, and] creating an art market" (that is, a market for *contemporary* art) in a town long-famous for its picture trade.⁸ Thus the biennial would emulate the market competition staged by the world's fairs, but rather than bring in foreign vendors, hoped to seed local ones.

At least two event-structures were thus already present in the first iteration of the biennial show: tourism, with its penchant for "*GRANDI SPETTACOLI*" (great spectacles), and a *contemporary* art market that would need to be continually refreshed. Events naturally accrued to the repeating exhibition, which was celebrated in 1900, for example, by a small parade of Venetian students sweetly dressed as medieval proponents of the liberal arts, pantomiming the Italian moment when "genius" changed from an attribute of place to a divine gift bestowed on artists. Events would also be staged by works of art, as when a particular painting

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In the meeting of March 30, 1894, the previous resolutions were amended to allow "Parte, I: [...] modificazione della parte [...] colla deliberazione 19 Aprile 1893, l'Esposizione di Belle Arti da inaugurare in Venezia nel 1895 sarà *Nazionale ed Internazionale*" [emphasis added]. In the meeting of March 27, 1894, they were still debating whether to restrict the show to Italy only: "Gli studi della sotto-commissione confermarono il concetto che l'Esposizione non debba, per ragioni tanto artistiche quanto economiche, restringersi solo all'Italia". *la Biennale di Venezia*, ASAC, S.N., b. 1.

6

The Patron's council is mentioned in a folder labeled "Relazione della Commissione consultiva, 1894", resolving the question of internationalism toward the end of the meeting dated March 27, 1894; *La Biennale di Venezia*, ASAC, S.N., b. 1. The committee will help "distance [the selection] from the favouritism of a local consensus [...] so that our Venetian exhibition has from the first moment the best guarantee of a splendid success." ("*...distanze al fervore del loco consenso, anche l'unico membro della Commissione che aveva manifestato dei dubbi sulla possibilità pratica dell'impresa si dichiarò vinto e possunso che la Mostra veneziana ha per se, fin da questo momento, le migliori guarentigie d'uno splendido successo*"). All translations hereafter, unless otherwise noted, are by the author.

7

The sentence on the poster can be translated as: Serenades, Regattas, Sport Competitions, Lightings, Boat events, Concerts, Bacchanal of the Redentore, Fencing International Tournament, Pyrotechnic Competitions, Great Theatrical Performances, and Other Exceptional Celebrations.

8

Minutes of the town council for April 19, 1893, translated and cited by Enzo Di Martino, *History of the Venice Biennale: 1895-2005: visual arts, architecture, cinema, dance, music, theatre* [1995], trans. Barbara Trotto, Susan Candy (Venice: Papiro Arte, 2005), 10.

was submitted to the first biennial to provoke a controversy pitting the freedom of artistic expression and cosmopolitan decadence against provincial mores and clerical unease.⁹ This might seem to emulate the annual “affront to the bourgeoisie” established by repeating Parisian *Salons des refusés*—those predictable scandals intended to rattle the French academy and its complacent public. But as one of the Biennale’s early historians, Lawrence Alloway, reminds us, the proximate models for Venice were not the state-authorized French Salons (even the “*refusés*” were commissioned by the state). What Venice emulated, in Alloway’s account, were the recently federated German cities’ voluntary art associations (*Kunstvereins*) and their annual exhibitions – driven by artists’ vanguard priorities and with an intentionally “Secessionist” attitude towards the state academies.¹⁰

The event structures fostered by the Biennale are what I want to address here. Below I will theorise an “event” as offering a strange punctuation in one’s ongoing sense of being – punctuation that holds the possibility for transforming the self. Here, it is important simply to note how the biennial exhibition positioned itself curiously between the “difference” of event and the “repetition” of ritual, creating the “event structures” I speak to in this essay.¹¹ The impulse to event—which I see migrating from the exhausted world’s fairs into the “trade-specific” repetitions following the Biennale’s 1895 founding – ripened in the confidence expressed over a century later by the Italian artist collective we are concerned with here – Oreste, who orchestrated a robust, event-driven intervention at the 1999 Biennale.¹² Fuelled by a new infrastructure called “the World Wide Web”,¹³ their informal and effer-
vescent exchanges would demonstrate to the now global art world that Venice was neither a centre nor a periphery. The art world had to register a new cartography: no longer “international” with industrial-era hubs and spokes, it would be an expansive membrane of nodes in a net, pulsing with friendships, connections, networks, and *events*.

9

I am referring to *Il Supremo Convegno* (The Supreme Meeting), hung in Gallery “D” in the inaugural biennial. It had been submitted by Giacomo Grosso, famous professor from the prestigious Accademia Albertina in Torino, whose president had asked Biennale officials to place this work “of audacious and fantastical composition” in a good light. Grosso’s symbolist allegory of the death of a Don Juan-like character combined dark moralising with lascivious babes in a quasi-Satanic ritual. The Catholic Patriarch of Venice (Giuseppe Sarto) was predictably outraged and demanded the work be taken down; the Biennale remanded the judgment to the “committee”, which refused. See “The Grosso case”, entry on the “History” section of the Venice Biennale website, English version, quotation from a letter in the ASAC archives, as cited online at <https://www.labiennale.org/en/history-biennale-arte>, accessed March 2014.

10

Munich set the most persuasive model with its 1888 *Der III Internationalen Kunstausstellung* (third because they counted a very early 1788 show, allowing this one to become a jubilee); this city was also home to important *Kunstvereins* and of course the Munich “Secession”. For the discussion of Munich’s international art exhibition of 1888 see Lawrence Alloway, *The Venice Biennale: from Salon to Goldfish Bowl* (Greenwich: New York Graphic Society, 1968), 33.

11

On difference and repetition, see Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994). See below for further discussion involving theories of event and experience by Alain Badiou and Michel Foucault.

12

For a recent overview of Oreste’s history and the relationship between its collective and exhibitionary dimensions, see Marco Scotti, “Da Oreste alla Biennale all’archivio. Per una storia del rapporto tra dimensione collettiva e momento espositivo nell’esperienza del progetto Oreste (1997-2001)”, *Ricerche di S/Confine*, Dossier 4 (2018): 172-187. Giancarlo Norese, who was part of Oreste, recently reconstructed the history of the group, *Progetto Oreste (1997-2001)*. A kind of index, available at https://www.academia.edu/10160936/Progetto_Oreste_1997-2001_-_A_kind_of_index, accessed October 2019.

13

Internet protocols were being linked as early as the 1980s among high-energy physicists, forming a “network of networks” called the Internet; Tim Berners-Lee inaugurated the concept and software for the World Wide Web in 1989, which became functional around 1990. But it is important to recognise that while academics were the first adopters, most did not use email (for example) until the mid-1990s.

Aesthetic shifts

In arguments I have elaborated elsewhere, the biennial's recurring energies participated, and perhaps even stimulated, a historical shift towards the present aesthetics of experience.¹⁴ The nineteenth century world's fairs had built a discourse of movable objects circulating in a civil, secular society. Such understandings continued in the Biennale editions of the first half of the twentieth century, as the great exhibitions' festal associations also fueled the biennial form. Once the biennials took over from fairs as a site for international display, art was further segregated and thus intensified into the "artworld" as we recognize it today.¹⁵

Events were seeded by the world's fairs (dominated by France and England), but there were very specific Italian variants. With the takeover of Venice's Biennale by the fascist government in Rome, for example, further "festivalisation" ensued – it was the spectacle-loving fascists who founded the Venice film festival (immediately countered by an anti-fascist version at Cannes). The goal was explicit: the film event aimed at bringing to the Lido the same kind of energy (not to mention fame and celebrity glitter) that had long been enjoyed in the Giardini during the Biennale. Also in the background of this war-time festivalisation was Mussolini's earlier plan for a permanent world's fair in Rome: *EUR – Esposizione Universale Roma* (Universal Exhibition Rome), scheduled to open in 1939 as a twenty-year anniversary celebration of fascism's putative founding. Although construction on EUR began in the 1930s, it was abandoned after Italy was mobilised for war.¹⁶

Following fascism's defeat in the Second World War, there was need for renewal and renovation of the Venice event. Reopening in 1948, the Biennale witnessed a new Cold War contest among the remnants of pre-war figuration (socialist and fascist realisms had dominated and divided the field) and various kinds of abstraction (geometric versus a new gestural or unformed style); national pavilions played out the new bloc politics. To make matters even more challenging, Venice soon faced competition, as São Paulo (in 1951) and then documenta (1955) took up the contemporary in recurring festal forms. documenta's founder Arnold Bode declared a "100-day museum" in Kassel, emphasising the temporary event structure of the exhibition. This would be updated in 1972 by the young *Gastarbeiter* brought in to be the 5th edition's curator, Harald Szeemann, who one-upped Bode by announcing documenta as a "100-day event."

This was, of course, a response to the eventful nature of 1968, which had led the young Szeemann to put on shows of Fluxus events and happenings at his sleepy Bern Kunsthalle, even as student protests dominated that season's Venice Biennale. Protesters raged specifically against the linkage between Biennale and art market, which, as we know, had been a primary goal of the event's founders.¹⁷ The exhibitionary circuits of the Biennale had been supported for three-quarters of a century by a market for contemporary art – a percentage of any sales from biennial shows had paid for the development of subsequent editions, which could promote new markets for newly exposed artists, and so on. Protesters targeted this loop,

14

See Caroline A. Jones, *The Global Work of Art: World's Fairs, Biennials, and the Aesthetics of Experience* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).

15

The "art world" would be announced as such in the important essay by philosopher Arthur Danto, "The Artworld", *The Journal of Philosophy*, 61, no. 19 (American Philosophical Association, Eastern Division Sixty-First Annual Meeting, October 15, 1964): 571-584.

16

Emily V. Bovino notes, "Ironically, EUR was eventually completed in the 1960s for the Rome Olympics despite the 'defeat' of fascism". Email communication with the author, November 21, 2017.

17

For a short account, see Chiara Di Stefano, "The 1968 Biennale. Boycotting the exhibition: An account of three extraordinary days" in *Starting from Venice: Studies on the Biennale*, ed. Clarissa Ricci (Milan: et al., 2010), 130-133. See also Vittoria Martini, *La Biennale di Venezia 1968-1978: la rivoluzione incompiuta* (PhD diss., Università luav and Università Ca' Foscari, Venice, 2011).

and won immediate concessions.¹⁸ First the monetary prizes were abolished by 1969, and then finally the *Ufficio Vendite* (Sales Department) was closed for good in 1973.¹⁹ The cancellation of an object-centred market ideology behind recurring exhibitions was a breath-taking change.

Banishing commerce allowed the biennial structure in Venice to exhibit non-consumable art; youthful politics confirmed this drift. Venice now had every opportunity to become truly responsive to contemporary artists – more permeable to the “non-objects”, conceptual art, and eventful stagings that were elsewhere functioning as “alternative” vanguards to the commercial gallery and stodgy museum. The new openness had already been creeping into the less-centralised national pavilions, as when Lygia Clark represented Brazil in the Biennale of 1968 with her “trans-objects”, instigators of experience rather than stable forms. Brazil, galvanised by its own biennial back home, had already generated dramatically performative, non-marketable art events that would only much later make it to the Venice Biennale.²⁰ When they did, in the particularly notable intervention by the group *Oreste* I am interrogating here, it would no longer be an echo of the last century’s games, but a prophecy for the next.

Openings

I have argued that event forms were built into the structure of biennial ephemerality itself, materialised in the *spettacoli* (spectacles) at the first biennale in 1895 and the 1900 parade of the liberal arts. These festal additions were certainly highly formalised and hierarchical. Yet as the market was banished in the 1960s, several ruptures – within the Biennale and outside it – further broke the hold of objects. These followed on the encouragement of the “open work” that had already been seeded in 1962 by Italy’s most internationally famous literary theorist, Umberto Eco, whose important *Opera aperta* theorised notions of cultural production along the lines of the “open score”, Cagean aesthetics (aleatory mergings of dance and “noise”), and art world happenings.²¹ Although only later identified as “discourse production”, this can be seen in an aspect of the open work that was already emerging in the art world of the 1970s: formal material residues of otherwise informal and evanescent practices. Xerox books, pamphlets, polemics, purchased ads and other print forms brought meetings, happenings, and protests into discursive media. After 1968, eventful art forms and their accompanying textual media came to be in tune with the increasingly progressive politics of a young audience interested in biennials’ inherently comparative, international and aspirationally global compass.

18

The art fair begins here: Cologne’s Kunstmarkt of 1967 had been a small scale, purely German event. Once Venice’s market function came under a cloud after the 1968 protests, Cologne’s fair became international, and Basel’s was declared (1970). Of course, although there is no “official” market linked to the Biennale fortunes today, if one were to subtract the financial and material contributions made by global galleries to the installations at the present-day Biennale (not to mention such galleries’ funding of all the opening night parties), it would be a very, very different event. On the German art fairs, see Nadine Oberste-Hetbleck ed., *Zur Geschichte des Düsseldorfer Kunsthandels* (Düsseldorf: Düsseldorf University Press, 2014); and her essay “Zum Verhältnis von Art Brut und Kunstmessen in Europa am Beispiel der kunstKÖLN”, in *Blickränder – Grenzen, Schwellen und ästhetische Randphänomene in den Künsten*, eds. Astrid Lang, Wiebke Windorf (Berlin: Lukas Verlag für Kunst- und Geistesgeschichte, 2017), 475–490.

19

See Clarissa Ricci “Breve Storia dell’Ufficio Vendite della Biennale di Venezia 1895–1972. Origini, Funzionamento e declino”, *Ricerche di S/Confine* VIII, no. 1 (2017): 1–20.

20

I’m referring to Hélio Oiticica and his *parangolés*, among other practices of the late 1960s in Brazil. See Jones, *Global Work of Art*.

21

Umberto Eco, *Opera aperta: forma e indeterminazione nelle poetiche contemporanee* (Milan: Bompiani, 1962). For Happenings and their roots in the aesthetics of John Cage, see Allan Kaprow, *Assemblage, environments & happenings* (New York: H.N. Abrams, 1966). See also John Cage, *Silence: lectures and writings* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1961).

Slowly but surely, the fair's festal structures were being incorporated into the art itself, as even Venice eventually had to acknowledge. Foregrounded in curatorial practices by the likes of Szeemann (whose first love had been theatre), performative rituals had spread throughout the contemporary art world during the 1970s, building on the pervasive tactics of conceptual art, the transnational antics of Fluxus, the liberatory energies of happenings, the sexual-political transgressions of *Aktionen*, the technical maturation of video, and eventually, the transducing power of digital convergence. These modes and forces all tended to be politically progressive (postmodern reinvigorations of the old avant-garde). In the urgent prose of philosopher François Lyotard writing in the early 1980s: "What is at stake in a literature, in a philosophy, in a politics perhaps, is to bear witness to differends by finding idioms for them".²² Those "idioms" would increasingly be negotiated in the art world via technologically-mediated durational events.

Szeemann certainly played a role in bringing this to Venice. His activities throughout Europe – most famously at event-driven versions of *documenta* in the 1970s – had cemented his role as the "go-to" guest curator for making recurring exhibitions newsworthy and contemporary. His first stab at the Venice Biennale was as a member of the curatorial team²³ founding, with Achille Bonito Oliva, the 1980 structure called "*Aperto*," intended to open the Biennale to younger artists of an eventful mien. Szeemann claimed to have created *Aperto* all by himself, but like much of his self-mythologising, this is at the very least exaggerated. One historian of the Biennale, Enzo Di Martino, gives the "open" move entirely to curator Achille Bonito Oliva, identifying Szeemann merely as one of "a committee of critics" who advised on the "disappointing" international survey of 1970s artists.²⁴ Szeemann's account, by contrast, is almost comically self-aggrandising: "I created *Aperto* for the Venice Biennale" – or later, "I was only able to curate it by threatening to resign and on the condition that I was able to work alongside Achille Bonito Oliva. [...]" Unfortunately, *Aperto* later became a bureaucratic appendix, linked to proposals by curators and reserved for artists under 35 years of age, [...].²⁵

What matters is not so much the adjudication of credit, but the emergence of an idea of opening (certainly belated by the broader standards of the other arts, whether music with Cage or literary criticism with Eco). Luckily for our story, Szeemann got a second chance at "opening" the Biennale in 1999, when he was finally named its sole commissioner. This time he had help from Agnes Kohlmeyer, a German-born art historian and curator who had moved to Venice in the mid-1980s, and Cecilia Liveriero Lavelli, an art historian and filmmaker getting her PhD in Bologna.²⁶ The difference in the two *Aperto* events across the two decades is marked.

22

François Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute* [1983], trans. Georges Van Den Abbeele (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 13.

23

The 1980 Venice Biennale was directed by Luigi Carluccio together with a committee including Achille Bonito Oliva, Flavio Caroli, Michael Compton, Jean Leymarie and Harald Szeemann. There was yet another curatorial team for the main exhibition "Arte degli Anni '70" that included Martin Kunz.

24

Szeemann's claim to have "invented" *Aperto* can be found in the interview with Hans-Ulrich Obrist, "Mind over Matter", *Artforum* 35, no. 3 (November 1996); compare to Szeemann's marginalisation in Di Martino, *History of the Venice Biennale*, 70.

25

Harald Szeemann interviewed by Obrist, "Mind over Matter": 5; and Szeemann, "The timeless, grand narration of human existence in its time", introductory essay to the 49th Esposizione internazionale d'arte, *Plateau of Humankind*, English ed. (Venice: La Biennale di Venezia, 2001), xvii.

26

Thanks to Giancarlo Norese for enlightening me about Cecilia Liveriero Lavelli's importance in connecting Szeemann to the Italian artists. Email interview with the author, November 11-12, 2017.

Enter Oreste

When Szeemann returned to Venice for his research around 1998, the Venice Biennale's *Aperto* had long since lapsed, creating a gap cited (along with the apparent conservatism of documenta) as one of the instigations for the 1996 founding of *Manifesta*.²⁷ For Venice, the opening of *Manifesta* in Rotterdam may have been the jolt that led once more to Szeemann, always reliable for putting an exhibition venue back on the map. This time fully in charge, Szeemann rendered the 48th Venice Biennial more open than ever before. At the cusp of the new millennium, he wanted it to absorb all the unsuccessful *Apertos* before it, reclaiming them for the theme of "*dAPERTutto*"—the word literally meaning "everywhere," but with the word for "OPEN" functioning as a breath of fresh air in the middle of its curious orthography.²⁸ While Italian scholars interpreted "everywhere" to signal the new global vision Szeemann brought to the event, English-speakers were encouraged (by Szeemann's own statements and texts in English) to think it was more of a democratic inclusion of all ages and genders – "open to all".²⁹ Szeemann's multi-lingual versions also condemned predecessor biennials by announcing in the catalogue that it would be "breaking [...] the Biennale's self-imposed rules" with an aggressively transnational and socially networked incursion into the structure and architecture of the biennial system itself. That infiltration was a new viral organism calling itself "Oreste".

Marking the shift from boat transport, postal mailings, fax machines and long distance telephone calls sent through ocean floor cables and landlines, Oreste engaged novel infrastructures called email, listservs, and the "world wide web". The loose collective insisted that "*Oreste non è di nessuno*" or "*Oreste non è nessuno*" ("Oreste is nobody's", or "Oreste is nobody"), staging itself as a "general identity" with specific if anonymous ambitions.³⁰ Seemingly alluding to tragic

27

See René Block and Henry Meyric Hughes, debated by Hedwig Fijen, in "How a European Biennial of Contemporary Art Began", in *The Manifesta Decade: Debates on Contemporary Art Exhibitions and Biennials in Post-Wall Europe*, eds. Barbara Vanderlinden and Elena Filipovic (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2005), 189-191.

28

The full title is even more delirious: *dAPERTutto/APERTO overALL/APERTO parTOUT/APERTO überALL* (Venice: Biennale di Venezia and Marsilio, 1999). Note that Szeemann explicitly authorised the English (mis)translation of *dapertutto* as "Open to All", even though that is not correct from the Italian. See Carol Vogel, "At the Venice Biennale, Art Is Turning Into An Interactive Sport", *The New York Times*, Arts Section, June 14, 1999: "This year, however, Mr. Szeemann has expanded and renamed the *Aperto*, making it *Dapertutto*, or open to all, mixing mature artists like Louise Bourgeois, Bruce Nauman and Sigmar Polke with young unknown artists [...]". In a helpful reading by Emily Bonvino: "Visually, the word functions much like 'Oreste' does when Pietroiusti says it made him think of 'rete' (net): it's nice because 'apert(o)' is in the middle with two 'doors' on either side (*d* and *utto*). Even though it doesn't read '*aperto a tutti*' or 'open to all' [...] it definitely evokes that meaning through misreading". Email communication with the author, November 21, 2017.

29

For Clarissa Ricci, *dAPERTutto* signaled "a shift towards spatiality and globalisation. This is why Szeemann looked all over the globe for artists. He brought a big number of Chinese artists [...], stressing also the spatial enlargement of the Biennale which coincides with the new buildings utilised from this Biennale onwards: Arsenale, Gaggiandre, etc... So the word refers also to the Biennale everywhere in Venice". Email communication with the author, December 22, 2017. See also Clarissa Ricci, *La Biennale di Venezia 1993-2003: l'esposizione come piattaforma* (PhD diss., Università luav and Università Ca' Foscari, Venice, 2014), particularly pages 335-343; available online at <http://dspace.unive.it/handle/10579/4596>. On Szeemann's intentions as conveyed to the English-speaking press, see Vogel, "At the Venice Biennale". For a different view of forces for the "enlargement" of the Biennale, see Jones, *Global Work of Art*.

30

The first version occurs in the published brochure available as the Biennale opened, circa April-May 1999; the second is from minutes of Oreste group meetings in Venice, held between the October 29, and the afternoon of October 30, 1999. I am deeply grateful to "Orestian" Emilio Fantin for sharing these minutes with me in an email interview, October 2017. "General identity" from Fantin email, October 2017.

epic (Aeschylus's *Oresteia* describes the mythic cycle in which Orestes avenges his father's murder by murdering his mother),³¹ "Oreste" was in fact hilarious in the ears of its founders – simultaneously evoking a cheap Roman trattoria and the Italian term for "network"—*rete*.³² Mindful of the (originally Italian) literary collective "Luther Blissett" (whose performative pranks were mostly aimed at a "homeopathic" injection of counter-information that could inoculate the public against fake news),³³ the "Orestians" decided to form a different kind of conduit for their collective energies. While the pseudonymous "Blissett" came to produce an eerie composite image for himself and author a prize-winning novel, [fig. 1] his was an identity

fig. 1
"Luther Blissett", the collective
author, as visualized on
[www.lutherblissett.net/img/
luther-blissett-300.jpg](http://www.lutherblissett.net/img/luther-blissett-300.jpg)



31

Much more can be said about the logic of naming your collective after a matricidal hero – my thanks to Emily V. Bovino for our discussions about this logic in the context of post-war Italy's feminist movements and the anarchist strain that runs through Italian politics and culture. Bovino notes an important precedent necessitating further research – the work of radical theatre group Societas Raffaello Sanzio, whose work was shown in the 1984 Venice Biennale, and whose 1996 production of *Theater der Welt- Oresteia* in Vienna may have been known to the Orestians in 1999. See Valentina Valentini, trans. Tom Rankin "The *Oresteia* of the Societas Raffaello Sanzio," *Performance Research* 2, no. 3 (1997): 58-64, referencing Societas Raffaello Sanzio, *Orestea (una tragedia organica?)* (Cesena: SRS, 1995).

32

Email to the author from participating artist Cesare Pietroiusti, July 30, 2014: "since I had proposed a very complicated and 'stiff' name for the residency – something like 'first experimental laboratory of artists' residency and exchange blablah' someone (Mario Pieroni, one of the initiators), who wanted to make fun of me, proposed 'oreste' because, he said, it sounded like the name of a whatever roman trattoria. I immediately liked it not because of Aeschylus but because that name somehow included the term 'rete' (net, network)...". The association with the *Oresteia* was, however, on the mind of the "Elettra" group (announcing itself as "Oreste's sister") meeting in Spazio Oreste during the Biennale to form a network of independent arts institutions throughout Europe. See Giancarlo Norese ed., *Oreste at the Venice Biennale* (Milan: Charta, 2000), n.p. I am immensely grateful to Agnes Kohlmeyer for the gift of this book during our interview in Venice in 2005.

33

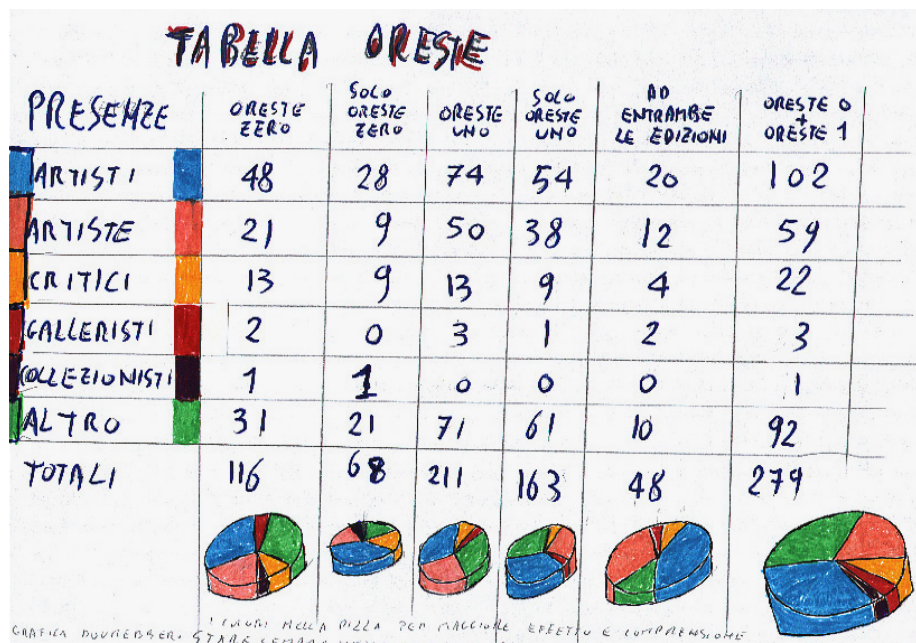
The Luther Blissett project is documented on <http://www.lutherblissett.net/>, which discusses a 1997 prank in this way: "'Homoeopathic counter-information': by injecting a strong dose of falsehood in the media, Luther Blissett showed the unprofessionalism of most reporters and the groundlessness of moral panic".

34

Minutes of the Oreste group meeting, October 1999.

theoretically open to anyone for prankish appropriation. Oreste, on the other hand, “while open, maintains its own organisation (and decision-making co-ordination), clearly visible and with declared functions as clear as possible to everyone, along with a variety of activities that are also well-defined and recognizable”.³⁴ Oreste had begun around 1997 by fostering conferences and short-term residencies with like-minded Italian artists (plus some critics, curators, and even a few collectors), especially those engaged with lively, event-based art and thoughtful about the implications of an incipient networked society. [fig. 2] In the useful history by Stefano

fig. 2
Pino Boresta, chart of participants in the short-term residencies at Paliano (Oreste “0” and Oreste “1”), during the summers of 1997 and 1998. Courtesy Giancarlo Norese.



Vittorini, Oreste really took off with a Fall 1997 conference organized in Bologna by Salvatore Falci, Eva Marisaldi, Giancarlo Norese, Cesare Pietroiusti, Anteo Radovan, Cesare Viel, and Luca Vitone (with Pietroiusti playing a determinative role).³⁵ [fig. 3] For Vittorini, the artists discussed the impact that technological innovation was having on the evolution of communication dynamics, on everyday life and on subjectivity, and how these changes would then be reflected in artistic practice. At the conference mostly artists intervened, presenting their own research and work. The activities carried out were clustered or organised in working groups so that the sharing of ideas could result in new collaborations.³⁶ Above all, the conference title – *Come spiegare a mia madre che ciò che faccio serve a qualcosa?* (how do I tell my mother that what I do serves a purpose?) – addressed the unrecognisable forms this art was

35

Stefano Vittorini, “Come spiegare a mia madre che ciò che faccio serve a qualcosa? Oreste alla Biennale Arte, tecnologia, network e ‘spazi di positiva inquietudine’: il caso Oreste alla Biennale di Venezia del 1999”, *Kabul Magazine*, Case Studies (June 13, 2016). Online at <http://www.kabulmagazine.com/come-spiegare-a-mia-madre-che-cio-che-faccio-serve-a-qualcosa-oreste-alla-biennale/>; accessed October 2017. Vittorini takes the name of the Bologna event as his title; the conference was: “Come spiegare a mia madre che ciò che faccio serve a qualcosa?: Comunicazione, quotidianità, soggettività. Un convegno sulle nuove ricerche artistiche in Italia” (how do I tell my mother that what I do serves a purpose?: Communication, the quotidian, subjectivity. A conference on new artistic research in Italy), held from October 31 – November 2, 1997. This was hosted by LINK in Bologna, which Emilio Fantin recalls as “one of the most important independent cultural and art production centers in Italy and abroad in the 1990s”. Email communication, October 2017. The Orestians’ conference title has also been translated as “How do I explain to my mother that what I do is useful?”. See the 20-page booklet published for *Oreste alla Biennale*, online at <https://issuu.com/noresize/docs/palimpsesto>. This booklet clarifies that “Oreste 0” first met in Paliano as a short-term artist residency program, before the fall LINK conference.

36

Stefano Vittorini, “Come spiegare a mia madre”.

fig. 3
 “Orestians” preparing for their first conference, “*Come spiegare a mia madre che ciò che faccio serve a qualcosa?*” at the house of Anteo Radovan in Bologna. Visible left to right are Cesare Viel, Giancarlo Norese, Eva Marisaldi, and Cesare Pietroiusti. Photograph by Silvia Alfei, posted on the Oreste Tumblr site progettooreste.tumblr.com/. Accessed November 2017. Courtesy Giancarlo Norese.



taking, fuelled by socially engaged, activist, and collaborative practices. Initially, the “purpose” served by Oreste was to question the individual as a unit of creation or interpretation: “only artificially can he consider himself as isolated”.

In conjunction with that goal, Oreste was redefining the *kinds of spaces* where art could happen: “analytical and experiential work groups can have a function [to] represent a non-place or a ‘heterotopia’ as Foucault would define it”.³⁷

Oreste began to take shape as an entity both networked and physical, social and technical, virtual and material. As one of the early collaborators, Cesare Pietroiusti recalled, “certainly [there was] the willingness to verify the existence and solidity of somehow a network of relationships between people. Among people who want to work together, to put into play their own ideas, their own time”.³⁸

There was also a clear new vision of how “art” could work. What distinguished Oreste’s mode of organisation from the apparently singular artist (*à la* Blissett) was their fundamental commitment both to coordination and decentralisation, fostering multiple independent cultural activities rather than consolidating production under a (pseudonymous) author-name. In an important October 1999 meeting (undertaken while the Venice projects were well underway), Orestians confirmed their commitment to document the loose but somehow “authorised” Oreste events at the Biennale, and by so doing “to privilege curatorial, decision-making autonomy of the various ‘local’ projects”.³⁹ The use of quotation marks around “local” is suggestive (given the internationalisation of Oreste underway at the Biennale). “Local” could span both the globally-accessible web activity of Oreste on “UnDo.net” as well as specific spatial interventions involving an abbey and a railway, or the place-based “Orestepoesia” in Duino (with artist Meri Gorni). Complicating “local” from the beginning, many Italian cities were part of the Oreste mesh.

The meeting in October 1999 was held in order to plan a post-exhibition publication that could document the blizzard of events (the biennale was to close on the 7th of November that year): “The release of the book, which will be

³⁷

As theorized in the article solicited for Oreste from psychoanalyst Elisa Ottaviani, “Oreste Sapiens-Sapiens”, in Norese, *Oreste at the Venice Biennale*, 22.

³⁸

Cesare Pietroiusti interview, as cited by Vittorini “Come spiegare a mia madre”.

³⁹

Minutes, October 1999.

bilingual (or multilingual) is urgent, to give an internationally visible follow-up to the work done in Venice”.⁴⁰ The group had already published a booklet-type guide to their schedule during the Biennale; a year after the exhibition itself they followed up with *Oreste at the Venice Biennale*. Published by Milan’s Charta, it was a trim compendium documenting the wide array of actions that marked “‘the rite of passage’ for Oreste, from that nascent state to the collective identity” registered at the Biennale, now to be committed to print.⁴¹ (While Giancarlo Norese was the book’s editor, his name is nowhere on the cover, reflecting the idea that sections would be given to the autonomous groups participating in events, who would, again, “curate” their own pages). [fig. 4] The initial booklet had shown a hive of networked relations

fig. 4

Oreste, covers for publications relating to the 48th Venice Biennale. Top: home page of the online project www.undo.net/oreste, reproduced on a booklet listing all activities hosted by Oreste at the 1999 biennale. Bottom: book, also designed by *UnDo.net*, edited by Giancarlo Norese, and published after the biennale (Milan: Charta, 2000).



40

Ibid.

41

Ottaviani, in Norese, *Oreste at the Venice Biennale*, 23.

on its cover (taken right off the opening page of Oreste's website as crafted by UnDo.net). The second more comprehensive catalogue features the smudged and suddenly archaic profile of a portable typewriter.⁴²

The cooperative Oreste described itself on the book's back cover as a transnational network of "roughly one hundred and sixty-four members" making appearances in Venice, incorporating a significant fraction of the younger artists in Italy and intensely *branché* with "more than five hundred people from the whole world" who participated virtually or otherwise in the project.⁴³

I have speculated elsewhere that the key curatorial contact for Szeemann – that is, the condition of possibility for his even learning of Oreste's existence – may have been Kohlmeyer, who was living in Venice and conversant with the local scene.⁴⁴ Or, it may have been visionary art dealer and collector Mario Pieroni, affiliated with the original group. Or perhaps it was curator Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, married to one of the key collaborators, a participant in Oreste's summer sessions and a theorist summoned to write in the final catalogue.⁴⁵ For Norese, the contact was Lavelli, "a good friend of mine, who was at the time the assistant of Szeemann".⁴⁶ Likely it was all of the above, echoed by the artists themselves who would have cited their association with the mysteriously named 'Oreste' as Szeemann made trips to Rome (where he met with Pietroiusti), Bologna, and elsewhere during his research for the main international show.

When Szeemann finally decided he wanted Oreste for the Biennale, it posed a dilemma for the loose collective. If Oreste aimed to renegotiate the art System in ways that might completely change business-as-usual, would joining the Biennale hamper that rather revolutionary goal? Admitting that the group "discussed and reflected a lot about the relationship between institutional and independent politics in an art context" and that "our participation at the Venice Biennale could have been contradictory", artist and Oreste organiser Emilio Fantin recalls a clear consensus in the end: "we thought that we could not escape this challenge in order to change the relationship with institutions [and] set up an international network [...]". Furthermore and perhaps most significantly, "we trusted Szeemann".⁴⁷ Norese too recalls "hundreds of emails", but has a more complicated account of the decision. Oreste understood its participation in the Biennale to be:

...a kind of "pharmakon", *we were led in to be sacrificed* [...] We then decided to establish a taboo: the prohibition to show our individual works in one of the most important places for artists to be. So we duplicated the situation we were used to while being together in our encounters: talking, eating and drinking, sometimes even smoking inside the biennale... and organising a series of about 100 events during the whole duration of the exhibition, and not only during the opening days.⁴⁸

The *pharmakon*, in Norese's telling, calls up all the complex philosophical discourse around the term: poison, medicine, scapegoat. For Jacques Derrida and others

42

Probably one of the iconic Olivetti portables that defined good design through the 1960s and 1970s.

43

Back cover, Norese, *Oreste at the Venice Biennale*.

44

My speculations are in Jones, *Global Work of Art*, 191.

45

See the charming "all star" film from the first summer session of Oreste in Paliano (called "Oreste 1"). The film is now digitized and on vimeo at <https://vimeo.com/226950741> — *Progetto Oreste Uno* (1998), "Paliano, 1-29 luglio 1998", 3+ minutes. A laughing Christov-Bakargiev is in an early frame.

46

Norese, email interview, November 2017.

47

Emilio Fantin in an email exchange with the author, October 2017.

48

Norese, email interview, November 2017. Emphasis added.

writing on the concept in the 1980s, it was crucial that these contradictions are not to be resolved. The cultural production (the “*pharmakon*”) both inscribes memory and erases it, both “cures” and “infects”, is the scapegoat that is arbitrarily charged with evil in order to restore order, etc.⁴⁹ Notably, the radical theatre producers who revived the *Oresteia* in 1995 also thought in these terms: “The actor in the company is the victim required to celebrate the ritual of degradation and regeneration of the performance-event”.⁵⁰ In that sombre and hilarious spirit, Oreste would be the infectious agent injected into the Biennale, corrupting its authorial apparatus, and hence serving as the remedy for a pernicious art world disease.

The group did its infectious best. It organised, enabled, provided spaces for, welcomed, and eventually documented a range of events and gatherings. These happened in *Spazio Oreste*, situated on the edge of the Central Pavilion where the high-profile international exhibition had long been staged. Oreste’s incursion energised the spot (in space “A”) where the crusty old edifice opens onto a small terrace designed by Carlo Scarpa in 1952, a gem-like garden intended to purge the toxic fumes of fascist occupation with a healing spatial tonic. [fig. 5] Scarpa had intended the space for lounging – but now there would be “lounging as art”.

fig. 5

Carlo Scarpa, sculpture garden for the Venice Biennale, 1952, as photographed by Eamonn Canniffe, ca. 2006. The glass doors open onto gallery “A” of the Padiglione Italia; these two areas constituted “Spazio Oreste” during the 48th Venice Biennale in 1999.



“Art vs. Economy: A Cultural Emergency?” was one meeting on July 9, 1999 (with Turkish curator Beryl Madra and a “cultural management” expert from Istanbul, Serhan Ada); “Contagious Lunch – Live” was orchestrated in the same space on the next day (by a pair of Swedish artists supported by the Swedish Art Fund). A program on the “San Francisco Video Scene” was mounted intermittently,

49

“The *pharmakon* is the movement, the locus, and the play...” From Derrida, *Disseminations*, trans. Barbara Johnson (London: The Athlone Press, 1981), 127; see also René Girard on the *pharmakos* or scapegoat in Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977).

50

Valentini, writing of the post-Artaudian theatrics of the Societas Raffaello Sanzio, in Valentini “The *Oresteia*”: 59.

discussions were held with “foreign students in Italy” throughout the Biennial’s duration, and an interactive performance was offered in October by German artist Regina Frank, trademarked “The Artist is Present®”.⁵¹ Later in the month at the same Spazio Oreste, a recap of what French sociologist Nicolas Bourriaud had recently dubbed *l’esthétique relationnelle* was offered by two Italian artists incorporating themselves as “artway of thinking”: “*Con molto piacere* (which they translate as “you are welcome”): *Assaggio d’arte relazionale* (a taste of relational art)”.⁵² Typical of the confused, passionate, and provocative meditations on the connected but still largely powerless globalised artist was this intervention by the “Foreign Investment” group claiming participants (in their nervous typography) from “London * New York * Liverpool * Berlin * Istanbul * Zurich * Kyoto * Singapore”:

FOREIGN INVESTMENT

This auspicious and select group has been driven together by destiny, the melting of the poles, the urgent imperatives of a world in which art has been staled [sic- stalled?] by property and commodification, and in which shared authenticity is rare.

CULTURAL CAPITAL / OUTRAGE AND EXCHANGE⁵³

Perhaps for the first time since its founding, the Venice Biennale’s main “international” show was invaded by raw transnational agency – self-organising, hospitably curated, open to spontaneous events, and utterly of the moment.

Utilising the tiny space of the Scarpa garden (and its adjacent oval-shaped gallery) as a conduit for open works, the group brought visitors back more than once. The garden was a randomising event-structure, fostering the growth of “collective organisms” (as psychologist Elisa Ottaviani put it). Here were chance encounters where visitors could be surprised by relational art, might become “the involuntary protagonists of an artistic performance”, might enjoy “the offering of a piece of bread fresh from the oven”, or at the very least find a place to sit and breathe, all the while taking in the inspiring oxygen of “an artistic-economic experiment”.⁵⁴ Fantin recalls it this way:

Our space was often crowded not only because we had a very intense schedule but also because we often shared food, drinks and conviviality. It was a mix between an *agorà* where people could discuss and elaborate new projects and a familiar space where people can sit down and talk with some other visitors, artist or guards. Some crossed the space without even realising that it was an art space, but thinking it was a bar or an info point. Many others, exhausted from the biennale tour, sat down and often fell asleep.

Because we spent a lot of time in the space, we became

51

Should we notify Marina Abramović of trademark infringement problems at her 2010 MoMA retrospective under the same name? See Norese, *Oreste at the Venice Biennale*, n.p.

52

Nicolas Bourriaud, *Esthétique relationnelle* (Dijon: Les Presses du Réel, 1998), worked out originally in a set of essays published in *Documents sur l’art* in 1995, and put into practice in his exhibition *Traffic* at CAPC Bordeaux in 1996. The “relational” Oreste authors identifying themselves as “artway of thinking” are named Stefania Mantovani and Federica Thiene, and post an Italian internet domain in 1999: <artway@tin.it>. See Norese, *Oreste at the Venice Biennale*, n.p. Their current website is <http://www.artway.info/>, with documentation of the Venice intervention at their associated Flickr site.

53

Norese, *Oreste at the Venice Biennale*, n.p. The UK-based group is still extant; their current website is <http://www.foreign-investments.com/main/>.

54

“Collective organisms” in Ottaviani, “Oreste Sapiens-Sapiens”, *Oreste at the Venice Biennale*, 23. “Involuntary protagonists” in Agnes Kohlmeyer, “Who is Oreste, By the Way?” in *ibid.*, 18. Economics Professor Pier Luigi Sacco described Oreste as an “artistic-economic experiment”, in his contribution “The Economics of Oreste,” in *ibid.*, 27.

friends with the guards and talked to them about different issues without the preoccupation to explain them what was or wasn't "art". By the way, many meetings and conferences were held together with performances, concerts and poetry readings. Art proposals were fused in everyday life.⁵⁵

Thousands entered the Biennale for free by using the word "Oreste" at the entrance as a password. Guards were happiest when assigned to Spazio Oreste for their shifts. Artists found housing in the small apartment Oreste rented for international guests coming to participate, and many random visitors took advantage of the free internet connection available in the space.⁵⁶ Congratulating himself for giving space to such "an adorable initiative", Szeemann was ultimately humbled by its five months of ceaseless activity: "Oreste offered to the Biennale a nucleus of positive agitation. Thanks".⁵⁷ As Agnes Kohlmeyer put it, Oreste was "simply devoted to the peaceful sharing of experiences".⁵⁸

Epistemic Elisions

This idea of a "nucleus" for "agitation" and "peaceful sharing" echoes some of the intriguing psychoanalytic musings of Elisa Ottaviani, who worked with Cesare Pietroiusti to help Oreste theorise itself even before the Biennale opened. The "nucleus" originates etymologically with the biology of the kernel – the seed or nut whose shell defines it, yet must be burst, generatively, for the new organism that is its *telos*. In her discussions with Pietroiusti from April 1999, Ottaviani speculates that Oreste will be giving up its amorphous "phantasmatic body" by entering the biennial format. Visualising the effects of institutionalisation, Ottaviani pictures the bounding membrane inscribed around the group as "a 'skin' which can delimit and contain it, giving it a form". She warns that such a consolidation – such a commitment to a boundary – "will involve a sensation of loss [...] of mourning." (We can think of this as the affective life of the *pharmakos*, facing the impending sacrifice). Such anticipated losses could be turned to positive ends, Ottaviani theorised, by symbolically coding the early "nascent group state" (from the conference in Bologna, or the summer sessions in Paliano) as "group myth". The myth could then contribute to, and potentially control, the "process of symbolisation" set in motion by the international Biennale, its gallery, and its promotional apparatus.⁵⁹ Clearly, art history participates both in the making of myth, and in the diagnostics attached to the poisonous cure of the *pharmakon*.

In the end, how did "the skin" shape up? Was the Biennale "cured" of its market relations? In the 20-page booklet first published to guide visitors to Spazio Oreste at the Biennale, the group announced in English:

Who is Oreste? Nobody is Oreste. It is not a group that produces collective artworks. It is not a trade union for artists. It is not a non-profit organisation. Up to now it

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Emilio Fantin, email communication with the author, October 2017.

56

Norese reports the "extremely expensive" bill for the Internet, about \$800, partly because the Biennale wouldn't cover everything, but also partly because a guard had been secretly downloading porn from the Oreste computer (racking up high baud rates in 1999!); similarly, the apartment "worked well until something happened in the house". Email interview, November 2017.

57

Szeemann, "Oreste at the Biennale," in Norese, *Oreste at the Venice Biennale*, 28.

58

Kohlmeyer in Norese, *Oreste at the Venice Biennale*, 17.

59

Ottaviani, "Oreste Sapiens Sapiens," in Norese, *Oreste at the Venice Biennale*, 23.

has been a variable set of people, prevalently made up of Italian artists [...].⁶⁰

This set of negatives with one positive at the end matches the parallel disclaimer on the back of the much thicker *Oreste at the Biennale* publication from 2000: “Oreste is not a group that produces collective artworks, nor a not-for-profit organisation. It is a variable set of persons, mostly Italian artists”.⁶¹ Is this, as Stefano Vittorini argues, a “negative dialectics” that somehow jibes both with philosopher Gianni Vattimo’s nihilistic *pensiero debole* and with Bourriaud’s neo-liberal relational aesthetics?⁶² It would be hard to do both. Although some of the loosely corralled participants eagerly cite Bourriaud, equal numbers of the core Orestians developed intellectual objections to the French sociologist’s breezy aestheticisation of social networks and participatory art.⁶³ (Italian critic and curator Roberto Pinto was a more proximate vector for these participatory ideas, in any case).⁶⁴ The more left-leaning Vattimo is recalled only as a general part of Oreste’s context rather than an explicitly admired philosopher. Still, “weak thought” may indeed be a resource for comprehending Oreste at the Biennale.

Seemingly soft and unprotected, the “skin” of Oreste’s new public body lends itself to tender probing as we attempt to understand the epistemic import of the group’s anti-egotistical event structures. With his *pensiero debole* first appearing in Italian in 1983,⁶⁵ Gianni Vattimo counts as one of the most important of the left Heideggerians emerging in Europe during the post-war period. Generationally marked by postmodernism, his “weak thought” (originally more like “weak *ontology*”) was a much darker meditation than Bourriaud’s on where we might find ourselves after Heidegger’s announced *Entgotterung* (the decoupling of modern existence from the gods under the rule of the World as Picture). In this anti-modernist vein, Vattimo’s philosophy was hardly acquiescent with our generally commoditised existence in late capital (as Bourriaud’s sociology has been interpreted); yet it escaped the apocalyptic tone characteristic of late Marxian fulminating (*à la* Frederic Jameson or Jean Baudrillard). Described by its translators into English as “strangely disorganised” in its interdisciplinary reach, Vattimo’s weak thought refuses to act as the *kapo* or *magister*, navigating its “most delicate task” of finding another form of thinking that escapes from master narratives while working in the “crepuscule” or twilight of modernity.⁶⁶

There does seem to be a “family resemblance” here with Oreste’s insistently decentralised mesh of events, abandonment of the object, refusal of author names, and commitment to open work. Moreover, the humility of this position jibes well with the sacrificial cures of radical theatre and performative art identified with the *pharmakon*. Appropriately, the “weakness” Vattimo intends, as with Oreste’s openness, allows for the emplacement and becoming of *others’* speech acts, and allows *other* places to be imagined (the heterotopias lauded by Ottaviani).

60

Oreste alla Biennale, Booklet, 1999 online at <https://issuu.com/norese/docs/palinsesto>. Note that while the booklet provides an English translation of “*non è di nessuno*” as “Nobody is Oreste”, I have, earlier in this essay, pointed out that the “*di*” could also contribute to a translation as “Oreste is nobody’s”.

61

Norese, *Oreste at the Venice Biennale*, back cover.

62

Vittorini, “Come spiegare a mia madre” invokes *pensiero debole* as crucial for understanding Oreste; the author does not name Gianni Vattimo, but he is the philosopher who originated the concept of “weak thought”.

63

“I don’t agree with his [Bourriaud’s] analysis and historical record”. Email communication to the author from Emilio Fantin, October 2017.

64

Norese, email interview, November 2017.

65

Gianni Vattimo, *Il pensiero debole* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1983).

66

Peter Carravetta, “What is ‘Weak Thought’? The Original Theses and Context of *il pensiero debole*”, in *Weak Thought*, eds. Vattimo and Pier Aldo Rovatti, the authorized English translation of *Il pensiero debole* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1983), trans. and ed. Peter Carravetta (Albany: SUNY Press, 2012), 2.

Vattimo insists on being open to what happens, when it happens: “There are no transcendental conditions of possibility for experience [...] suspending our ties to historical-cultural, linguistic, and categorical horizons”.⁶⁷ This echoes theories of the event and experience developing around that same moment in separate works by Alain Badiou and Michel Foucault, particularly the latter’s important conversations on Marx with journalist Duccio Trombadori, published in Salerno in 1981.⁶⁸ Such deeply influential theories reinforce my concluding question: while Oreste as an operative entity seems to be over, can we be so sure that its infectious virions don’t continue? Implicit in this essay is my conviction that Oreste’s energies continue in the best of today’s social, collective, experiential, and eventful art.⁶⁹

There is much more to be said about Oreste’s hermeneutics, and about the implications of their ethical practices. Limiting myself to this synoptic overview, I have expanded on Vattimo’s “weak thought” primarily to note its resonance for fellow scholars of Oreste (such as Vittorini), rather than claiming it as some kind of “influence” on the collective. Similarly, my invocation of Deleuze (difference and repetition), Badiou (evental structures), and Foucault (on experience as transforming the subject) are cited because these theorists help us understand the force of the event in the art context. What I want to emphasise in concluding my brief history of Oreste is the absolute contemporaneity of what this handful of “mostly Italian persons” were up to in 1999. Recognising the event structures implicit in the biennial format, Orestians would become “sociable machinists of culture” (as media theorist Andreas Broeckmann celebrated them), engaging in “process-oriented communication and cooperation projects”.⁷⁰ But such constructive metaphors may hide the playful corrosions the group was capable of. Oreste’s networking and later publishing activity brought in compelling contemporary theorists to explain what they had done, amplifying whatever impact they could generate in print for that “urgent [...] internationally visible follow-up” to the lively presence in Venice.⁷¹ Those theorists, such as Broeckmann, saw how the “minor media” of charts, schedules, booklets, internet websites, bread-baking, live performances, software, and emails, when mobilised in a space of aggregation and conversation and amplified by the centuries-old medium of print, could take what was “a minority, a cloud” – by definition, amorphous and marginalised – and through patient accumulation and aggregation, propel something forceful. Citing Guattari and Deleuze, Broeckmann links Oreste with the “becoming-minor” that the two French philosophers imagined for postmodernity:

Whenever a marginality, a minority, becomes active
[...] it engenders a singular trajectory that is necessarily

67

Gianni Vattimo, “Dialectics, Difference, Weak Thought”, from Vattimo and Rovatti, *Il pensiero debole*, 13, as translated in Carravetta, *Weak Thought*, 40.

68

Alain Badiou, *Being and Event* [1988] trans. by Oliver Feltham (London: Continuum Books, 2005); Michel Foucault, “How an ‘Experience Book’ is Born”, in Foucault, *Remarks on Marx: Conversations with Duccio Trombadori*, trans. R. James Goldstein and James Cascaito (New York: Semiotexte, 1991): 30-45. While the Semiotexte edition of *Colloqui con Foucault* (Salerno: 10/17 cooperativa editrice, 1981) is flawed — including spelling Trombadori’s name wrong in the title! — it remains an essential touchstone for English-speakers, not fully replaced by the more timid translation in the authorised *Dits et écrits*.

69

Norese: “As any other form of biological life, Oreste died in spring, or summer, 2001. I believe in metempsychosis”. Fantin: “I think that the Oreste experiment is not over, it continues in different contexts as for example in this interview, and it constitutes a very special training ground in which new concepts can be elaborated, reinforcing the potential for our collective consciousness in term of constantly activating a dialectic between ‘I’ and ‘we’”. Email interviews, November 2017 and October 2017, respectively. Many of the artists involved in Oreste went on to form *Viaindustriæ*. A documentation of their activities from 2007-2017 can be found in the exhibition catalogue *Manufatto in Situ: 10 paesaggi/ 10 landscapes*, ed. Emanuele De Donno (Foligno: VIAINDUSTRIAE publishing, 2017).

70

Andreas Broeckmann, “Sociable Machinists of Culture,” in Norese, *Oreste at the Venice Biennale*, 10.

71

Minutes, October 1999.

deterritorialising because, precisely, it's a minority that begins to subvert a majority, a consensus, a great aggregate. [...] here, this point, this object, begins to proliferate [...], begins to amplify, to recompose something that is no longer a totality, but that makes a former totality shift, detotalises, deterritorialises an entity.⁷²

Less well documented is that Deleuze himself was informed in this theorising by radical theatre producer Carmelo Bene (linked in scholarship to that 1995 *Oresteia*). Bene intended to destabilise classical myth in his productions, rendering them “minor” and hence open to a “figure of minority conscience latent in everyone”.⁷³ We might see Oreste as operating in precisely this way.

Did Oreste deterritorialise the Central Pavilion on which it perched for those five feverish months in 1999?⁷⁴ For a while, yes – this “adorable” nucleus bloomed with multiple languages and initiatives, persuading curator Carlos Basualdo it had invented “a possible site of agency for a subject that would not be flexible as in today’s capitalistic worker, but that neither would be rigid and massive, as in the traditional romantic artist, or in the equally rigid communitarian attempts of thirty years ago”.⁷⁵ It is this condition of the subject that emerges as Oreste’s most important contribution. In the recent reminiscence of Emilio Fantin:

I think that Oreste can be seen not only as an experience of “engineering an alternative” for spaces, infrastructures and modalities in art contexts, but also as an experience in which emerges the intuition of a new dimension of the “subject”. What anyone could have gotten from this experience is the capacity to lower her/his own ego in order to switch from the idea of individual “subject” to the idea of a singular-plural subject – to quote J. L. Nancy. This issue animates the debate about commons and community which nowadays represents a possibility for improving our philosophical, social and economic vision and our way to live together.⁷⁶

Whether the seed released by Oreste was utopian or corrosive, it sprouted and contributed to a contemporary ecosystem of discursive and collective potential. The point of an historical inquiry such as this one is to reanimate the possibilities and assess where they might still lead.

Oreste’s “positive nucleus” (through which the plural subject might burst) would be imitated, but without its organicism. Similarly nucleating activity became codified in more architectural terms by the next generation of curators: as a “platform” for social energy, political discussion, and dispersed knowledge production (Okwui Enwezor’s 2001 *documenta 11* with its thematic and geographically-far-flung *Platforms* is emblematic). Oreste marks one point of entry to this development, its *Spazio* imaginary constituting a spatial cousin to those much more ambitious

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Guattari and Deleuze on “becoming-minor”, as cited in Broeckmann, “Sociable Machinists”, Norese, *Oreste at the Venice Biennale*, 11.

73

See Carmelo Bene and Gilles Deleuze, “Un manifesto di meno”, in *Sovrapposizioni*, (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1978), 90, as translated in Valentini, “The *Oresteia*”: 64.

74

I am using the contemporary name for this structure, although at the time it was known as the *Padiglione Italia*, as noted above.

75

Carlos Basualdo, “A Location for Utopia: A Brief Note”, in Norese, *Oreste at the Venice Biennale*, 10.

76

Emilio Fantin, email communication with the author, October 2017. The reference is to Jean-Luc Nancy, *Être singulier-plural* (Paris: Éditions Galilée, 1996).

Platforms that nonetheless risked becoming the formalism of a new millennium.⁷⁷ In 1999, however, one could not imagine projecting this from the ethics of the Orestians' anti-egoism, from their modestly documented achievements, or from their left theoretical commitments.

We can understand something crucial about twenty-first century biennial culture through Oreste's actions on the brink of the current century. By reflecting on how these local artists created a global network to localise an "artway of thinking" at the millennial turn, we can see both the promise and the ongoing difficulty of protecting the open work in globalised circuits. It is because of the biennials' links to event-structures, tourism, and apparatuses of knowledge-production, I've claimed, that the century-old machinery in Venice could produce and vitally participate in the longer-term epistemic shift we now inhabit – taking us from objects to experience, propelled by the ethics of the open work.⁷⁸ Beginning in the world's fairs and gradually transforming the art world, this shift forced an acknowledgment that the placement of an art object inside a world picture both changes the art, and the desiring viewer, highly leveraging both geopolitical representations and the subsequent significance of the art.

"Biennial culture" has been my shorthand to designate the practices and appetites fuelling artists' and viewers' commitments to *art as experience* – and correspondingly, biennials are the event-structures in which this taste has been cultivated, its aesthetic codified and defined. Oreste offered a uniquely utopian approach to this emergent aesthetics of experience, refusing the collapse into spectacle predicted by French post-structuralists such as Baudrillard (appropriating Debord), and resonating instead with the crepuscular efforts of Vattimo's weak ontology. For Norese, "...we were a lot of people who spent time to meet not only for taking decisions but also for the pleasure to meet. And to me, the images of these meetings are the real, concrete form of art of Oreste".⁷⁹ I have primarily been concerned with the trajectories of *art* and *artists* in this biennial circuit, but I am also after the desires of the *subject* constructed and pluralised by these workings of art. Oreste propelled an altogether unique imaginary of the subject-in-common, while resisting its consolidation as anything "universal". That history continues, in our retelling and repurposing of its aims.

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For which see Pernille Albrethsen, "Platform Formalism", originally published in *Nordic Art Review* (September 2003), once archived at 16beaver, New York-based website, <http://www.16beavergroup.org/mtarchive/archives/000873print.html>, where I accessed it March 2006. Also see Johanne Lamoureux, "From form to platform: the politics of representation and the representation of politics", *Art Journal* 64, no. 1 (2005): 64-73. For an interesting take by the organiser of "Platform 1: Democracy Unrealized" for Enwezor's Documenta, see Oliver Marchart, *Hegemonie im Kunstfeld. Die documenta-Austellungen dX, D11, d12 und die Politik der Biennalisierung* (Köln: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2008).

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See Jones (2016) for the longer argument.

79

Email interview, November 2017.

Author's Biography

Caroline A. Jones is Professor of art history in Architecture at MIT. She studies modern and contemporary art, with a particular focus on its technological modes of production, distribution, and reception, and interfaces with science. Dr. Jones has also curated exhibitions *Sensorium* (2006), *Video Trajectories* (2007), and *Hans Haacke 1967* (2011) at the MIT Visual Arts Center; solo-authored

publications include *Machine in the Studio* (1996/98), *Eyesight Alone* (2005/08), and *The Global Work of Art* (2016). She has edited or co-edited *Picturing Science, Producing Art* (co-edited, 1998), *Sensorium* (2006), and *Experience* (2016). She is currently researching bio-art and planetary symbiosis.

Maria Mimita Lamberti
International Exhibitions in Venice (1982)**Abstract**

“International Exhibitions in Venice” was written by Maria Mimita Lamberti in 1982 as part of a larger text “1870-1915: i mutamenti del mercato e le ricerche degli artisti” printed in Einaudi’s encyclopedic publication *Storia dell’arte italiana*. The text focuses its attention on the changes that occurred both in the art market system and in artistic expression between 1870 and 1915. Inserted in a companion volume on Italian twentieth-century art, it was intended to provide an understanding of the growing apparatus of exhibitions. The text’s precise use of archival documents combined with its original methodology has ensured that this excerpt continues to be used as a reference for those who study the Venice Biennale. Moreover, Lamberti approaches the Venice Biennale from multiple perspectives, highlighting the important fact that the Biennale is the result of many intercepting actors and forces in its history.

Keywords

Venice Biennale, Art Market, Corporazione, International Exhibitions, Critic’s Prize

Translation from Italian by

Sonia Hill

Translator’s note

To ensure that the text flows easily for non-native Italian speakers, translations have been added in parenthesis. All of the footnotes have been adapted to comply with the *OBOE Journal*’s stylesheet. In the case of archival documentation, the precise indication of boxes and folders has been omitted (as it was in the original text), as has other information, such as page numbers. However, we are able to confirm that all documentation references can be consulted at the Historical Archives of Contemporary Arts of the Venice Biennale (ASAC). References to artists and critics’ names have been maintained in accordance with the author’s style: with a surname and, where applicable, indicating only the initial letter of the first name.

International Exhibitions in Venice

Maria Mimita Lamberti

1. The origins of the Venice Biennale

The idea of giving Venice a permanent exhibition facility originated in a municipal context due to concerns about the city's economy, essentially tied to the tourist industry, and in the awareness of the lagoon city's role as a centre of art and culture, with a colony of artists attracted by Venice's unique characteristics circulating around it.

The crisis regarding the role played by Venice, which suffered from more deterioration in its outlying areas than other cities, had an immediate effect on various layers of society, particularly the group of painters tied to the city by the characteristics of the Venetian school. This school was associated with views and genre scenes of an urban rather than a pastoral variety,¹ often coinciding with images – so successful on foreign markets – of past traditions or of the lively working-class life of the *rii* (small canals) and *calli* (streets) (Giacomo Favretto's successful artistic production is a great example in both cases).²

This led to a shared interest in relaunching the legend of Venice, incorporating opportunities for the new contemporary art market within the traditional antiquarian and artisanal fabric, with a view to establishing and motivating artists while also attracting a new form of discerning tourism.³ As early as

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As a result, the choice of subjects based in Chioggia or the inland areas was seen as revolutionary. As in the case of Luigi Nono or the head of the Ciardi family, Guglielmo. See, *Mostra di Luigi Nono 1850-1918*, exh. cat., ed. Guido Perocco (Sacile: Palazzo Flangini-Biglia, August 1 – September 15, 1964); Guglielmo Ciardi 1842-1917, exh. cat., eds. Luigi Menegazzi and Elena Bassi (Treviso: Ca' da Noal, September 10 – November 6, 1977).

2

The combined presence of themes from modern life and eighteenth-century recollections in the canvases of Favretto, who died in 1887 and was celebrated with particular feeling due to his death coinciding with the national exhibition underway in Venice at the time, is apparent in Molmenti's description of his studio and the eulogy read by Domenico Morelli ("he made Venice admired [...] the Venetian life reflected in his imagination became entirely beautiful"), in Pompeo Molmenti, *Giacomo Favretto* (Rome: A. Malcotti e figlio, 1895).

3

The preface to the catalogue of the 1st Biennale sums up the objective of the exhibition as follows: "... an international show should attract the public more with the fame of the illustrious foreigners who will be competing there, it will provide all intelligent people who are unable to set off on long journeys with an opportunity get to know and compare the most diverse artistic styles, and it will enrich the intellectual legacy of young local artists, whose minds will be expanded by the work of their fellow artists from other countries", *Prima Esposizione Internazionale d'arte della città di Venezia 1895*, exh. cat., (Venice: Giardini di Castello, April 22 - October 22, 1895), 4.

the Municipal Resolution of April 19, 1893, the project stood out from other similar Italian initiatives (such as the Triennali, held in Milan since 1891 and in Turin since 1896) that were built upon old systems in order to resolve the decline in the quality of the annual shows, held in frenetic succession throughout the peninsula. The promoters drew inspiration from the example set by Munich, which involved a mid-European cultural area that was both geographically and culturally close to that of Venice:

For many years, Munich became an active centre in the art trade thanks to its international exhibition; a centre and school for the numerous artists who set up home there [...] ⁴

The exhibition had to capitalise on the incentives it offered artists, that is to say the prizes, which were really profitable investments:

[...] if major exhibitions, periodically repeated, have not always produced lasting advantages for the cities where they were held, that [...] only goes to show that without the enticement of appropriate and well-appointed prizes, upon which the artist can seriously count when embarking upon works worthy of recompense, there is no point hoping for the kind of progress that was once funded by patrons and rich corporations, who spent generously on the fine arts. ⁵

Various municipal institutions must have responded generously to this appeal, not least the association of hoteliers, ⁶ while the consultation committee, composed

half by citizens known for their professed interest in art and for their extensive business experience and the other half by artists freely voted in by their colleagues living in Venice, ⁷

came up with the suggestion of an international show (thrown into question by the flop in Rome in 1883), with a high-quality selection process to ensure the exemplary nature of the works on display:

[...] these exhibitions of ours also contribute to its [Venice's] financial growth by attracting many more foreigners and through their ability to gradually turn it [the city] into one of the most important centres in the art market. However, in order to achieve these results, it is important for the Venetian exhibition to have a stamp all of its own, something that makes it really

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Minutes of the Municipal Council of Venice, Resolution of April 19, 1893.

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Ibid.

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The international prizes for 1895 included a prize of 10,000 Lire allocated by the Municipality of Venice, three prizes of 5000 Lire from the government, the province and the Cassa di Risparmio, one prize of 2500 Lire from the Municipality of Murano, to which we can add two national prizes (5000 Lire from the municipalities of Veneto and 1600 Lire from the municipalities of the Province of Venice) and two reserved for Venetian artists (5000 Lire from Prince Giovannelli and 2500 Lire from the teachers' association).

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Minutes of the Municipal Council of Venice, December 1, 1893. The committee, in addition to the secretary Fradeletto and various artists living in Venice (Bezzi, Dal Zotto, De Maria, Fragiaco, Laurenti, Marsili, Sezanne), also included scholars such as the novelist Castelnovo, noblemen such as the Count and Senator Papadopoli and various businessmen.

stand out from all those that have followed on from each other in Italy so far. Let's be clear: the public is tired of the usual hodgepodge shows [...] it is indispensable that the sense of awe, exertion, and sometimes even tedium, produced by the jumble of works, is replaced by the firm sense of admiration that a careful and wise selection of exquisitely original works can trigger in us.

This led the committee to come up with two criteria: namely, that the most illustrious painters and sculptors would be directly invited to take part in the exhibition and that a section of it would be reserved for foreign artists.⁸

Having appointed the writer and Member of Parliament Antonio Fradeletto as secretary and Riccardo Selvatico, Mayor of Venice, as chairman, the new organising committee, made up entirely of artists from Venice and incorporating a number of members of the consultation committee,⁹ did away with rumours of localism by excluding "artists from Venice, the Veneto or Italian artists living in Venice"¹⁰ from direct invitation. These artists would instead be required to submit their works to the admissions jury. The idea of promoting the show as part of the celebrations to mark the twenty-fifth wedding anniversary of the Italian King and Queen testified to this ambition to make the exhibition a national event, ensuring the presence of the sovereigns in Venice at the height of the social calendar by means of successful publicity and a promotional stroke of genius (there were also plans for discounted railway tickets).

2. Venice 1895: the 1st Biennale

The various sections of the patronage committee for the 1st Biennale comprised "the most respected names on the European art scene,"¹¹ seeking a level of prestige that limited the official choice of works to be invited to Venice from the outset. This was also the case for the composition of the committee for the Italian section, whose eight members testified to an attempt to accompany the usual traditional names (Morelli, Maccari, Monteverde) with potential links with the northern European art world (Boldini and Pasini with their Parisian connections, Dell'Acqua who had now moved to Brussels), while Carcano and Michetti featured as the leaders of two

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From the committee report in the Minutes of the Municipal Council of Venice, March 30, 1894.

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As well as the above mentioned Bezzi, Dal Zotto, Fragiaco, Marsili and Sezzane, the organising committee also included the painters G. Ciardi, L. Nono, Tito and Zezos.

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See Article 5 of the regulation: "Because of a sentiment that will be easily appreciated, the organising committee is abstaining from sending special invitations to artists from Venice, the Veneto or Italian artists living in Venice, who will therefore have to subject themselves to the verdict of the Admissions Jury", *Prima Esposizione Internazionale*, 11. Despite this scruple, Venetian painters were always favoured both in the admissions process and in sales. For example, at the Biennale in 1899, 61% of the works sold were by Venetian artists, compared to 30% cent by Italian artists and 19% by foreigners, according to the data provided by Ugo Ojetti in "Le quattro esposizioni veneziane," *La Lettura*, I, no. 5 (May 1901): 383.

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Minutes of the Municipal Council of Venice, July 23, 1894. For example, the French section was patronised by Carolus-Duran, Dubois, Henner, Moreau and Puvis de Chavannes, just as the Dutch section included names such as Israels and Mesdag, the German section had Liebermann and Austria-Hungary had Munkácsy; the patronage committee occupied the place of honour in the catalogue, where each member had a photograph next to a brief introduction.

separate artistic areas: Lombardy and the South.¹² What's more, if we look at the geographical distribution of the selected artists, the importance of calibrating the committee according to regional divisions is apparent, despite being overlooked: a national painterly style was yet to arrive, nor did the need for comparison with established European trends raise the average standard much in Italian exhibitions.

As a result, the persistence of peasant scenes and landscapes painted from life dominated the Italian section. It also goes without saying that there were some clumsy attempts at "symbolic" art translated into images of cloying allusiveness: such as the *Parabola (Parable)* by Laurenti (a diptych that features figures representing the different phases of human life as they climb up to a balcony and then descend from it on the other side),¹³ or *La Fortuna (Fortune)* by Ettore Tito, a fleshy and blindfolded woman pushing a colossal wheel, with a shabby old woman and a beautiful young mother having been bowled over by it and clinging on to its rim.¹⁴ Giacomo Grosso's *Supremo Convegno (Last Meeting)* spiced up the meanings that could be attributed to an imaginative lament of lovers over the coffin of Don Giovanni with five female nudes in the style of the most risqué salon art, attracting the condemnation of the Patriarch of Venice and clamorous public success.¹⁵

Indeed, the popular vote for the conferral of the prize saw Grosso's large painting in first place with 547 votes (out of 2401), far ahead of the 185 votes for the second-place work by Michetti.¹⁶ There were only a very small number of votes for Morbelli's *Per 80 Centesimi (For 80 Cents)*¹⁷ and Segantini's *Ritorno al Paese Natio (Return to the Native Land)*,¹⁸ which both used Divisionism and got two votes apiece,¹⁹ while Previati's *Il Trasporto di una Vergine (Transport of a Virgin)* with its

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The committee for promoting the Italian section maintained this composition, with the exception of Boldini, Dell'Acqua and Morelli, and with the addition of the sculptor Gallori for the two subsequent Biennali. Only in 1901 was more importance attributed to the admissions jury made up of members elected by the administration and by regional panels elected by the artists: for the 1st Biennale, however, the admissions jury, with limited duties given the prevalence of invitations, was made up of the painters Carcano and Delleani and by the sculptor Rivalta.

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The diptych by the painter from Ferrara can be seen in the centre of the room in the photo published in *L'Illustrazione Italiana*, October 13, 1895, no. 41, now photo n. 10 in Giandomenico Romanelli, *Ottant'anni di allestimenti alla Biennale* (Venice: La Biennale di Venezia, 1977); the Latin motto *Celeres gaudentibus horae – afflictis lentae* (time passes slowly for those who are sad, but fast for those who are happy) on the gilded plinth transports the worldly scene into an idealised dimension.

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The canvas, since destroyed, is described in great detail in the review by Mario Pilo, "L'arte odierna europea alla prima esposizione biennale di Venezia", *La Gazzetta Letteraria* (September 14, 1895): 4.

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The painting, which was blasphemous because the scene unfolded in a church, led the Patriarch of Venice to ban his flock from visiting the exhibition, while a specific committee of scholars, including Antonio Fogazzaro, Panzacchi and Giacosa, was called upon to decide about the possibility of removing it from public view. For similar but opposing reasons, the canvas was purchased by an American company that intended to send it on a tour of the United States, with a commercial aim that was not unusual at the time. However, the work was lost forever during its long journey across the ocean.

16

F. P. Michetti presented *La figlia di Jorio (The Daughter of Jorio)*, which then went to the Nationalgalerie in Berlin. The subject matter was commented on in the catalogue by a short explanation of the meaning of the scene (the female sinner passing by the idlers as they mock and desire her), with the warning: "It's advisable for viewers to stand at a certain distance from the painting, to grasp the effects that the rough surface destroys entirely when seen close up".

17

Now in the Museo Borgogna, Vercelli.

18

East Berlin, Nationalgalerie.

19

The very interesting information on the counting of the votes can be deduced from the jury's report in *Risultato completo della votazione pel conferimento del premio popolare* (Venice, Archivi ASAC). As regards the popular vote, Grubicy quite rightly observed: "Meanwhile, the voting [...] far from being restricted to two or three days, should start when the exhibition opens, so as to gather many thousands of votes and not those few, easily alterable ones [...]. Notable significance would certainly be added to a work that received several thousand votes when seen by a large crowd of voters. Except that – let's be clear – a test such as this, rather than being considered a measure of the work's aesthetic value, with respect to art and its progressive evolution, should only serve to document the artistic taste of that particular public during the given period [...] The works chosen by the public, rather than being judged, would be converted, for the scholar and for history, into as many judges of public taste". Vittore Grubicy De Dragon, "La giuria e le premiazioni alla 1^a Esposizione Internazionale d'arte della città di Venezia", *L'Idea Liberale*, no. 37 (1895).

overt idealism got just three votes,²⁰ as did Sartorio's scholastic tondo – more in the style of Rossetti than Botticelli – the *Madonna degli Angeli* (*Madonna of Angels*).²¹ And yet, despite going unnoticed at the Biennale, art that followed the aristocratic line of thought was the only style to find an adequate comparison in a foreign section – the British one – with the works of Burne Jones, Leighton, Millais and Alma Tadema. This was also true of sculpture, both in the Renaissance-revival and academic sense of *Rinascita* (*Rebirth*) by Ximenes,²² and in the Art Nouveau style of the *Bellezza della Morte* (*Beauty of Death*) by Bistolfi.²³

Sartorio made the most of the opportunity to write a shrewd and informed review of painting in Britain, which was published in the *Convito*,²⁴ placing the Pre-Raphaelite movement at the origins of modern art and describing it as a reworking of the Italian formal legacy taken back to nature, within a repertoire leading all the way through to the Venetian sixteenth century.²⁵ Once again, this line of educated aestheticism and nationalism rooted in the museum, perpetuating the artistic values of tradition and race,²⁶ would resonate in the words of D'Annunzio, pronounced at the end of the Venetian event and then incorporated with transparent (and heroicising) autobiographism in *The Flame*.²⁷

The jury responsible for awarding the prizes, on the other hand, was made up of five art critics, with the only Italian being Adolfo Venturi.²⁸

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Better known by the title *I Funerali di una Vergine* (*Funeral of A Virgin*), the canvas, recorded in a Milanese collection in 1927, is reproduced under no. 825 in *Archivi del divisionismo*, ed. Teresa Fiori (Rome: Officina edizioni, 1968).

21

The tondo, reproduced in the catalogue, has a composition and certain iconographic details (such as the unusual age of the child, who is nude but very different from the usual putto) that Michetti perhaps recalls when placing his wife and son Sandro into poses as models for his *L'Offerta* (*The Offer*) of 1896: albeit in a rustic key, the small painting by Michetti responded to the celebratory need of an elegant milieu, catering to the court women who had commissioned it as a gift for Princess Elena. The re-reading of Sartorio's courtly archaism could therefore not be out of place, like certain polishes and small descriptive details similar in style to those of the Pre-Raphaelites (the olive branches, the rich frame of Savoy knots by the Florentine carver Frullini) that make it quite an atypical work for Michetti, placed between the *Daughter of Iorio* and *Gli Storpi* (*The Cripples*).

22

Now in Rome, Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna.

23

This plaster sculpture was from the group for the tomb of Ingegner Grandis, Borgo San Dalmazzo (Cuneo).

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Giulio Aristide Sartorio, "Esposizione di Venezia. Nota sulla pittura in Inghilterra", *Il Convito*, II (1896): LVIII–LXIII.

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"While Rossetti and Burne Jones immediately recall the Tuscan spirituals, or the classics, the symbolism of Watts appropriates the forms of Venetian decadence" *Ibid.*, LXIII.

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Sartorio also wrote out an authentic programme: "The return started by the English to the forms of the Italian Renaissance, is logical in a modern way: through the great international exhibitions their collections shine with a light that is so spiritually ours, that we Italians truly have to remind ourselves that this treasure of light has not come from us [...] no moment was ever more propitious than this one to state two things about ourselves: our vitality and our sentiment of effective Italianicity". Giulio Aristide Sartorio, "Nota su D.G. Rossetti pittore", *Il Convito*, IV (1895): 285–286.

27

The discourse, pronounced in October 1895 at the end of the Biennale, was intended by the poet to focus on the work of Michetti, see the letter from D'Annunzio to Manzi transcribed in *Rassegna Italiana*, (June 1932): 500–501. Instead, perhaps influenced by the Venetian conversations with Angelo Conti, it became a hymn to the soul of Venice and the magnificence of its art comprised "between the youth of Giorgione and the old age of Tintoretto", in a symbolic and aestheticising key, as demonstrated by its first title, *L'Allegoria dell'Autunno. Omaggio offerto a Venezia* (*Allegory of the Autumn. Homage to Venice*), and even more so by the reworking of the text in the novel of 1898, where the main character Stelio Effredna improvises that same discourse in the Sala del Maggior Consiglio, in the Palazzo Ducale, stating "the ascendant virtue of the ideals handed down from the fathers" before a crowd fascinated and seduced by the Great Creator.

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In addition to Venturi, the members were Lange from Denmark, Muther from Germany, the art writer Robert de La Sizeranne, chaired by William M. Rossetti from Britain, brother of the Pre-Raphaelite painter. It was therefore a group of writers or art historians, "preferably those who combine a broad education with the most dynamic and lively sense of modernity", according to the memo sent from Fradeletto to the mayor of Venice, July 25, 1895 (Venice, ASAC).

It accepted an equal distribution, without technical preconceptions,²⁹ unanimously selecting Michetti's large tempera *La Figlia di Jorio* (*The Daughter of Iorio*) for the 10,000 Lire international prize from the Municipality of Venice and Segantini's *Il Ritorno al Paese Natio* for the government prize of 5000 Lire.³⁰ This rightly reiterated the European standard of these two artists, who had already made names for themselves abroad (it is significant that both canvases found buyers on the German market),³¹ although the interpretation of the two works is very dated in Venturi's report. Indeed, the series of studies of heads and the very layout of Michetti's painting, which used photographic framing, revealed the artist's research into moving figures and the crisis taking place in painting, and was betrayed by the dry and thorny technique, which was new to the artist, going well beyond the "human drama rendered with sincerity and immense realistic power" mentioned by the jury.³² While the report describes Segantini's painting as an "elegy for very tender simplicity" that "renders the nature of things with both care and vigour through its lines," moving away from painterly details towards an illusionistic rendering, moreover distorted by the poor positioning of the work,³³ Segantini on the other hand, in a letter to his wife, attributed an almost magical value to it, perceiving it as a necessary step between visual reality and ideal message, through the total engagement of the viewer.³⁴

3. The critics' prize in 1897

The Venice Biennale's organising committee should be credited with modernising exhibition techniques, starting with the empiricism of the attempts to publicise the initiative year after year. While the 1st Biennale attracted considerable numbers

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Grubicy defended the workings of the jury against the accusations made by Macchi, observing that the prizes as a whole did justice to the various contemporary technical trends, "to the detriment of the aesthetic criteria of the highest nature", Grubicy, *La giuria e le premiazioni*, 12.

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The other three international prizes went to a pastel by Liebermann, to the Danish Paulsen, and to Whistler for *The Little White Girl* of 1868. The two national prizes went to the marble *Derehitta* (*Destitute*) by Trentacoste (Trieste, Museo Revoltella) and to the *Ritratto della Signorina E. [rrazuriz]* (*Portrait of Miss E. [rrazuriz]*) by Boldini (Paris, formerly in the Collection of M. Rothschild) – Boldini actually refused the prize that was for just 1600 Lire. The Venetian artists picked by the jury were Fragiaco, with the painting *Tristezza* (*Sadness*), and Silvio Rotta, for *Morocomio* (*Madhouse*) (Rome, Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna).

31

La Figlia di Jorio, purchased by Count Blanc, German ambassador, for 22,222 Lire, was sent, according to Jacobitti, to Dusseldorf; it ultimately entered the Nationalgalerie in Berlin, before being returned to Italy during the Fascist era. It is now in the provincial council chamber of Pescara. The painting by Segantini, purchased by the Berlin businessman Koenigs for 10,000 Lire, entered the same German public collection in 1901.

32

See Marina Miraglia, *Francesco Paolo Michetti fotografo* (Turin: Einaudi, 1975) plates 32–34, and in the text "[...] the main figure of the *Daughter of Iorio*, [...] that of Mila of Codro, whose first intuition was triggered by an instant camera, is checked photographically in the studio with a skilful recording operation that stops the movement of the walking figure, freezing it into a posed photograph", (29). Vittorio Pica also noticed, cursing it, the use of the instant camera for the "jumping movement of the feet" of Milan in the painting by Michetti, in Vittorio Pica, *L'arte europea a Venezia* (Naples: Pierrro, 1895), 150.

33

Segantini complained of this in a letter to Pellizza (May 23, 1895): "I am on my way back from Venice, where I was able to observe the ugly trick played upon us with our keys of red and blue, and the unique placement in the exhibition, because of the light radiating on the painting and the lack of space to see", in *L'opera completa di Segantini*, eds. Francesco Arcangeli and Maria Cristina Gozzoli (Milan: Rizzoli, 1973), 188.

34

From an undated letter to his wife, written before the painting was sent to Venice: "I believe that charm that I am trying to convey through the work, capturing the mind of the onlooker through the eyes, so that he no longer thinks of himself and his affairs, but stands there absorbed, thinking about ideals, can found here, more than in any of my earlier works, because I observed the effort made by those who saw it to tear their eyes away from it". Ibid.

of journalists,³⁵ the primary role played by the press as a means of advertising was recognised the following year by offering a prize for the best critical studies. The initiative, which led to articles and books being written on the Biennale, also helped to improve the quality of the contributions, resulting in the new figure of the contemporary art critic, until then recruited on an occasional basis from among reporters, scholars and those in the sector and employing a mixture of languages and judgements borrowed primarily from literary criticism.

The big names included in the jury of 1897, tasked with presenting a prize to contemporary art critics, reflected the disparity of interests to which the new discipline was to be linked: Corrado Ricci was a classical art historian, Enrico Panzacchi was a university professor of literature and Camillo Boito was a legend who had gone from architecture to defending the arts in the columns of the *Nuova Antologia* and in government committees. This authoritative and steady committee soon found that it was necessary to pinpoint exactly what should be expected of a critic, precisely because of the low standard of the journalism to be examined, the disparity of the judgements of taste and the sloppy style.³⁶ The ideal standard established by the jury countered all this with its theory of educated and balanced criticism, versed in good writing and aware of the educational objective. In fact, it recalled

that the most esteemed and widely read critics, both among us and abroad, have always been those who, not content purely with educating the eye, have succeeded in endowing themselves with a broad wealth of historical, philosophical and literary knowledge, so as to combine technical authority with the higher authority of thinkers and the more genial authority of writers.³⁷

This strategy, modelled on the canons of good education,³⁸ revealed the rejection of all militant criticism that supported a specific school or artistic movement, thus targeting the very heart of the contemporary issue: critics should not side with artists or enter into disputes, but instead educate the public with calm and composed judgement, in keeping with great and noble principles. On the basis of these criteria, the prize went to Primo Levi who, writing under the transparent pseudonym, L'Italico, had sought to align the examination of schools of art with traditional characteristics of ethnic/historical culture, in an evident proposal of national and – in the case of Italy – regional values.³⁹ The younger Ojetti and Pica,

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According to the report produced by the press committee, the journalists present at the 1st Biennale could be broken down as follows: 77 local reporters, 95 Italian and 28 foreign correspondents, 180 Italian journalists and 34 foreign journalists. These figures led to the conclusion: "There were therefore five hundred newspapers that covered the event, not just with brief mentions, but with repeated critical articles, written by competent authors" (Venice, ASAC).

36

"Reading such a large number of articles and books, not repaid on the majority of occasions by much novelty or sharpness of observation, proved long and tiresome, just as it was an arduous task to pick the candidates for the prize, as there was not a clear-cut difference between eminent critics and other mediocre and poor ones. The degrees of merit, which in some cases were very slight, meant that we were perplexed for some considerable time about the relative value of the best", *Relazione della giuria pel conferimento dei premi ai migliori studi critici sulla II Esposizione Internazionale d'Arte della Città di Venezia* (Jury's Report, Venice ASAC, 1897): 3.

37

Ibid.: 4.

38

"Nor, ultimately, have we overlooked one aspect of criticism itself, which can be described as *moral*, namely politeness. The shocking mockery for those who have worked albeit mediocrally, rude censorship, public offence for many artists who have applied themselves to the quest for an idea and a beauty that escaped them or have fallen before infinite difficulties, demonstrate a presumption to which we do not intend to acquiesce even indirectly [...] Even worse when discourtesy is used against artists who have managed, through long and conscientious work, to acquire great fame". Ibid.

39

Primo Levi won the prize of 1500 Lire with the two introductory articles published in the *Tribuna di Roma* and with the reviews for the *Nazione di Firenze* and the *Giornale di Sicilia* of Palermo. Ibid., 8.

with their modernist tendencies, had to content themselves with joint second prize, although the jury acknowledged the former's pleasing style and "sense of modernity" in his interpretation of symbols and psychological aspects,⁴⁰ while in the case of the latter the prize was awarded for his accurate historical information.⁴¹ However, Pica was stigmatised for his desire to place himself on the front line, following the northern European model of critics who took sides against the public and defended innovative artists such as the Impressionists (whom Pica himself would promote years later at the Biennale with persistent publicity, which was opposed and ignored).⁴² This was precisely what he was reproached for in the name of a professor-like criticism, *au dessus de la mêlée*:

Pica has the aristocratic preconception, so to speak. He likes to feel he belongs to the "small number of art connoisseurs, so often destined to disagree with the majority of the public." This stripping of all value from the popular sentiment, generally loyal to styles from the past or those that have been in use for some time, is one of the causes of his excessive readiness to orient himself towards the most new and unexpected formulas. More than anything else, [he] is fascinated by attempts at novelty and daring [...] nor can we support him when he shows that he attributes no importance to the *novelistic, poignant, sentimental* subject, thus separating art excessively from life, almost always restricting himself to examining the way in which life is pictorially felt and represented. Let's be clear: criticism has to keep itself far removed from inopportune digressions and rhetoric, but it also has to show itself to be a work of art in some way.⁴³

In reality, as well as a specific lack of preparation (as noted by the jury's spokesperson in 1899, Adolfo Venturi),⁴⁴ criticism also faced the problem of identifying a target audience to address, using less generic channels of information and adopting more accurate recording methods for verbal transpositions. A typical example of this new means of circulation in Italy was *Emporium* magazine (1895 onwards),

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The articles published by Ugo Ojetti in the *Resto del Carlino* were collected together in the book *L'arte moderna a Venezia*, Voghera 1897. Ibid., 10.

41

"The reviews by Mr Vittorio Pica, which appeared in the *Marzocco di Firenze*, the *Pungolo parlamentare* of Naples and *La Vita Italiana* of Rome, and collected in the book *L'arte mondiale a Venezia* (Naples: Pierro, 1897), are generally sincere and coherent. He also shows himself, more than any other, accurate and orderly in his historical information". Ibid., 11. A more hagiographical than critical profile for Pica was written by Ugo Piscopo, *Vittorio Pica. La proto avanguardia in Italia* (Naples: Cassitto, 1982).

42

The most widely discussed chapter in Pica's book is in fact the one entitled "Impressionists, Divisionists and Synthetists", which substantially reused a text from 1883, borrowed from Huysmans and Zola; for the account of Pica's promotion of French Impressionism see Maria Mimita Lamberti, "Vittorio Pica e l'impressionismo in Italia," *Annali della Scuola Normale Superiore di Pisa*, series III, V, no. 3 (1975): 1149–1201.

43

Jury's Report: 11–12.

44

"But the lack of preparation is huge [...] as revealed by many erroneous references to art of the past and the inaccurate recollections of historical works. The primary foundations are therefore lacking, without which it is impossible to immediately grasp modern aspirations; one hears but does not understand the language of art. We say this because of the wish for critics to rise to the heights targeted by art, to accompany it fraternally and embrace it in an indissoluble bond with the public". *Relazione della Giuria pel conferimento dei premi ai migliori studi critici sulla III Esposizione Internazionale d'Arte della Città di Venezia* (Jury's Report, Venice, ASAC, 1899). The jury of 1899, made up of E. Ferrari, P. Molmenti and A. Venturi awarded first prize to Ugo Fleres, second to Diego Angeli and joint third prize to Ojetti, Pica and Thovez).

which entrusted the success of its educational formula to the excellent quality of its illustrations.⁴⁵ However the underlying problem of contemporary criticism regarded relations with artists who were aware of changes to the traditional structure (in which the critic, according to a text by Boito, had to put himself forward as a “middleman” between the artist-producer and the public-consumer).⁴⁶

Precisely because of the growing importance of the different means of publicising figurative culture, the argument put forward by artists attacked critics as manipulators who built a barrier between artworks and the public, while their progressive change of role, from artisans to scholars, provided artists with the tools they needed to state their intentions themselves, drafting programmes and manifestos.

The risk faced by traditional critics, as interpreted by the Venetian jury, was one of effectively being superseded. Ugo Ojetti proposed responding to this in 1901, when he wrote his decalogue of the *Diritti e Doveri del Critico d'Arte Moderna (Rights and Duties of the Modern Art Critic)*:⁴⁷ illustrating the changing times, it is significant to note that this text, purged of the harshest attacks against artist-critics, also featured in the report on the critics' prize at the 4th Biennale, which was written by Ojetti himself in 1903. The mediation of critics, enriched by a psychological sensibility for the individual-artist, has to go beyond technical renewal, using “gentle affability” to convince the public of the need for art in society, “knowing that the notion of beauty is relative and necessary, not freely chosen.”⁴⁸ It has to guarantee the validity of figurative research on a social level, subtracting it from the autistic partiality of the specific language in a clear-cut break with common taste.

Artist-critics paradoxically recalled, in their most abstract structures, exponents of positivist criticism, from Pilo to Morasso,⁴⁹ as a means to immediately place their own work into a sociological background and historical perspective.⁵⁰

45

On the success of *Emporium*, based on the British *The Studio*, one of the many accounts in a letter from the young Cena to the painter Anton Maria Mucchi, dated January 1896: “As regards the *Emporium*, it's a beautiful magazine. I bought several issues and I count on getting all of last year when I can. Beautiful reproductions of British painters”, Giovanni Cena, *Opere*, vol. V: “Lettere scelte” (Turin: Edizioni L'impronta, 1929), 27. Vittorio Pica became editor of *Emporium* in 1900, giving it a moderate modernist line with the notes entitled “Contemporary artists” and its interesting features on European graphics.

46

“[...] whereas in every kind of negotiation an understanding between two people – the producer and the consumer – is required, almost always involving a third party, the broker; whereas, in our case, the producer is the artist, the consumer the buyer, who is a member of the public, and the broker the critic, showing off the quality of the goods to the public; in consideration of all this, who is it who does not see how the disagreement of tendencies between the artist, critic and public must necessarily produce the effect of stagnation in the art trade”. Camillo Boito, “La mostra nazionale di Belle Arti in Venezia”, *Nuova Antologia*, series III, XII, no. 21 (November-December 1887): 53.

47

“The work of art today is, between the artist and the viewer, simply the needle on a set of scales: in one dish is everything that the artist has seen, felt, thought, wanted [...] in the other dish, that which the capable viewer sees, feels and thinks before that given work of art [...] The weight, the measurement, the needle on the set of scales do not indicate anything on their own: terms of comparison are required – that is to say the soul of the creator and the mind of the viewer. The basis of modern art criticism – from the sociological criticism of Taine and then of Guyau to the specifically psychological criticism of Hennequin – lies here”. Ugo Ojetti, “Diritti e doveri del critico d'arte moderna”, *Nuova Antologia*, series IV, XCI, no. 720 (December 16, 1901): 734.

48

From the *Relazione della Giuria pel conferimento dei premi ai migliori studi critici sulla V Esposizione Internazionale d'Arte della Città di Venezia* (Jury's Report 1903, Venice ASAC): 4. The jury was formed by Giacosa, Molmenti and Ojetti, and awarded the prizes to De Frenzi, Soulier and the young Sarfatti.

49

Mario Pilo, lecturer in aesthetics in Bologna and author of various positivist essays, reviewed the Biennale in the *Gazzetta Letteraria* but never wanted his essays to be included in the competition. Mario Morasso, mentioned in 1899 and winner of second place in 1901 behind Pica, collected his writings published in *Marzocco* in the book entitled *La Vita Moderna nell'Arte* (Turin: Fratelli Brocca Editore, 1904), applying an aesthetic theory that heroicised modernity to the Biennale of 1903.

50

The derivation of futurist dictates from Pilo and Morasso, primarily apparent in the writings of Boccioni, deserves a separate discourse, after the initial contributions from Sanguineti and Bergman; a useful contribution to this regard is Virgilio Vercelloni, *Macchinolatria and modernolatria di Mario Morasso* (Bologna: Centro Duchamp, 1972).

4. The organisation of artists at the 3rd Biennale.

In 1897, the Venetian jury, accused by Segantini of being “falsely international”,⁵¹ had multiplied the awards, splitting the large sums between several artists. However, given the lack of any works that really stood out, the joint prize proposed by Boldini had helped to keep a bigger number of competitors happy, with underlying favouritism for the Venetians who, on paper, had reserved only the Liebermann prize for themselves, unlike what had happened at the 1st Biennale.⁵² Competing against Italians and foreigners, the Venetians Tito, Milesi, Marsili and Zezzos (the latter two were also members of the exhibition organising committee) all won awards, as if to validate their qualification as a school on a European level.⁵³

While such unanimity did not seem free from favouritism, the second suggestion from the prize jury, namely the conversion of the prizes into purchases “to the benefit of national and local art galleries,”⁵⁴ during the very year that Prince Giovannelli’s donation founded the Galleria d’Arte Contemporanea in Venice,⁵⁵ was destined to revive the dispute on the Italian art scene. Without this premise it is impossible to understand the changes in the Biennale’s regulations for 1899 and the entire matter of the *Corporazione dei Pittori e degli Scultori Italiani* (Guild of the Italian Painters and Sculptors), which exploded like a bomb in January of that year.⁵⁶

After an underground intrigue, a certain number of Italian artists, concerned about the lack of international resonance being achieved by national representatives (especially because of imminent preparations for the *Exposition Universelle* in Paris in 1900), formed an association complete with a statute containing fourteen articles, “for the purpose of giving more drive to the Italian art

51

So claims the letter sent by Segantini to the Venetian committee and published in the *Gazzetta degli artisti* II, no. 34 (September 1, 1897), in the “Tribuna degli artisti” column; in the text, Segantini discussed the representative nature of the nominated artists M. Rico, Van der Stappen, Jerace and Boldini, particularly attacking the spokesperson, Marco Calderini.

52

In 1895, two prizes were awarded to Venetians: the 5000 Lire prize from Prince Giovanelli and the 2500 Lire prize from the teachers’ association, while the prize founded by the painter Liebermann for 1897 was for 2500 Lire.

53

The 10,000 Lire prize from the Municipality of Venice was split between Ettore Tito for *Sulla Laguna* (*On the Lagoon*) and Milesi for *Lo Sposalizio* (*The Marriage*), while the *Età Felice* (*Happy Age*) group by the sculptor Marsili shared the 5000 Lire government prize with Zorn. Zezzos was awarded the international prize of 2500 Lire from the Municipality of Murano. The Liebermann prize, reserved for Venetians, instead went to V. Bressanin. The only Italian prize winners from outside Venice that year were the sculptor Romagnoli (with half of the 5000 Lire from the Cassa di Risparmio) and the painter Antonio Mancini, who received 1600 Lire from the municipalities in the province of Venice (the same prize rejected by Boldini the previous year).

54

“The advisability of converting the form of recompense in the future, from a prize to a purchase, to the benefit of national and local art galleries, where the honour of the distinctions received would be much more lasting and ever more evident, while the juries would also be freed from the thankless task of establishing almost categories and degrees of merit”, specifying that “the Jury believes that this progress in the nature of the recompenses would also be in the interest of future shows, with many renowned artists perhaps being more inclined to take part, who currently abstain in consideration of the prizes themselves, not being willing to suffer the fate”. *Relazione della Giuria per le premiazioni*, (Jury’s Report, August 6, 1897, Venice, ASAC).

55

The letter with which Prince Giovanelli expressed his wish for the foundation of a contemporary art gallery in Venice, donating a collection of artworks to it, including *Fioritura Nuova* (*New Blossom*) by Laurenti, was published in the *Gazzetta degli artisti* I, no. 27 (May 15, 1897).

56

The entire affair of the *Corporazione*, which was almost an early trade union but run by a group of already established artists, has not yet been studied. The only source that sums up the matter is the anonymous article “L’arte italiana e la *Corporazione degli artisti*”, *Nuova Antologia*, 164, no. 653 (March 1899): 146–166.

movement and upholding the country's traditions."⁵⁷ The regulations tended to ensure a uniform public presence, while not aspiring to a school style, and included strict common rules about the registration of new members:⁵⁸ the association may have been inspired by the Secession⁵⁹ or the *Champ de Mars* exhibition organised by Meissonier as an antithesis to the Salon.⁶⁰ However, in addition to its typical mediaeval-style flavour,⁶¹ the Italian *Corporazione* did not so much aspire to hold its own autonomous exhibitions as to exert an influence over public exhibitions, proposing its collective works as a unit and banning members from taking part in exhibitions that ruled out this request.⁶² The first paragraph of the statute declared this intention:

The *Corporazione* participates collectively in all major exhibitions of fine arts held in Italy and outside, if the exhibition committees grant it all those moral and material facilitations that it will be opportune to request for the purpose of developing the restorative concept conceived by the *Corporazione*.⁶³

The names of the first members, elected in an almost clandestine fashion from lists drawn up after the exhibition in Turin in 1898, also included numerous Venetians, while Venice was home to the central board (assigned to Bezzi, Tito and Marius

57

The statute was sent in the form of a press release to various newspapers; we find them, for example, published in their entirety by Guglielmo Ferrari, "Corporazioni dei pittori e degli scultori," *La Stampa*, January 11, 1899. Ferrari, who like most critics was hostile to the initiative, also criticised the "title page of the statute, printed with sixteenth-century affectation", while the anonymous article writer of the *Nuova Antologia* complained about the "heavy shower of apostrophes and ironies, that held nothing back, not even the beautiful etching reproducing the Leonardesque symbol of perfect balance, which acts as a frieze for the statute of the *Corporazione*, with a motto of resistance and battle *hostinato rigore*" (*L'arte italiana*, 147).

58

While the articles of the association underscored that "the *Corporazione* can, and indeed wishes, to increase the number of its members," the seventh paragraph specified "any artist who [...] with one or more works has demonstrated his unique artistic merit can aspire to join". The acceptance proposal had to be signed by three members and approved with 4/5 votes. An interesting example is the proposal put forward in 1900 by Bistolfi, delegate of the *Corporazione*, to Morbelli and Pellizza, who did not achieve membership (Fiori, *Archivi del divisionismo*, 159).

59

So much so that "the most authoritative artists of the German Secession, Liebermann, Stuck, Uhde", who "had perceived the similarity of the Italian movement with what had already taken place in their country, although they failed to discern all the mistakes that made ours less broad and less practical," sent a warm greeting to the *Corporazione* (*L'arte italiana*, 159).

60

The French example was cited in the letter of defence from Gustavo Uzielli, "La *Corporazione* dei Pittori e Scultori italiani", *Il Marzocco* III, no. 51 (January 22, 1899).

61

The example of the medieval guild, understood as a last supper of the pure, transpires in particular in the fifth paragraph of the statute: "If due to chance conditions of the spirit any member of the *Corporazione* should produce a work inferior to his own qualities and to his artistic means, it will be the duty of the other members to advise him, for his own dignity and for the good of the *Corporazione*, not to submit said work to the exhibition for which it was intended". Thus it was realistically commented on in the *Nuova Antologia*, see *L'arte italiana*, 153–154: "Certainly whoever formulated or suggested the article, is not a vulgar spirit. Although dictated in an Italian that cannot exactly be described as fifteenth-century, it would seem to have been conceived by some amorous compulsive reader of the papers of the good century. That advice, sincerely given and docilely received, that presumed abdication to the most legitimate outpourings of love in obsequence to a common ideal, [...] recalls the heartfelt humility to which the articles of association of certain ancient brotherhoods aspired".

62

See Article 2 of the statute, in the unabridged text, published with great aplomb in a full page spread in the *Gazzetta degli artisti* IV, no. 84, (January 7, 1899).

63

Ibid.

Pictor):⁶⁴ hence the first discontent in the lagoon city, where those excluded from the *Corporazione* immediately founded an even more fleeting *Associazione degli Artisti Italiani* (Association of the Italian Artists).⁶⁵ It also led to concerns regarding a mafia-style manoeuvre designed to institutionalise national artistic supremacy in Venice.⁶⁶ The hostile response from Florentine artists published in the *Marzocco*, which even saw an open letter from V. Corcos to Minister Baccelli,⁶⁷ described the initiative as follows:

We believe this is the first time that some artists who declare themselves to be excellent have come together to form a league of resistance, like humble workers, not for the triumph of any particular ideal (because the names of the sect members indicate diverse and even opposing styles), but in order to exercise a kind of boycott on the exhibition market.⁶⁸

Meanwhile, with the forced resignations of *Corporazione* members from the admissions jury,⁶⁹ the administration of the Biennale had to take responsibility for the exhibition, stating that not only the *Corporazione*, but also the Roman group *In Arte Libertas*, could exhibit in their own rooms with their own person in charge of the display.⁷⁰

64

Alongside the entirely Venetian central council, the *Corporazione* delegates were Bistolfi, Boldini, Carcano, Morelli, Sartorio and Trentacoste. The list published as a note in the *Nuova Antologia* included thirty-four names of painters and sixteen of sculptors, all of a certain reputation but of very different styles, as demonstrated by the names of Signorini and Tito Lessi among the Tuscans. Twelve artists did not accept the nomination, while four, including Morelli, resigned after accepting it. The indecision of Segantini was significant, and after an acceptance snatched from him by Fradeletto (see the letter, December 31, 1898, in Fiori, *Archivi del divisionismo*, vol. I, 381–382), which came second to his various European commitments, he dissociated himself from the *Corporazione* with a letter published in the *Marzocco* where he compared the fears aroused in him by that enterprise with the hope for a different “impulse to unite strong and innovative souls,” calling upon “young brothers” from all over Italy who “in the sign of love and ideal brotherhood” given by the study of nature, would become “the primitive spirits of the new art” (Giovanni Segantini, “Una lettera”, *Il Marzocco*, III, no. 52, January 29, 1899).

65

The signatories of the circular of January 5, 1899, with which a permanent association for exhibitions was to be founded as opposed to the *Corporazione*, were all Venetians, from Bortoluzzi to Chitarin, Dal Zotto, U. Nono, see *Gazzetta degli artisti* IV, no. 84 (January 7, 1899): 2. The *Associazione* wrote its charter on January 12, emphasising its willingness to help “young people who have intellect and love of art” (no. 86, January 21, 1899), but ended up renouncing exhibiting in Venice in a separate room “thus putting itself on an equal footing with all Italian artists” (no. 87, January 28, 1899); linked to the contingent and functional occasion purely as a response to the *Corporazione*, the *Associazione* disappeared without a trace.

66

“The new Congregation may aim to obtain a good place at the next Exhibition in Venice to assert Italian art in the face of foreign art, and the Exhibition Committee will nod, but [...] thus] any other Exhibition in Italy will be demolished in order to concentrate all Italian artistic movement at the biennials [...] Now it seems to us that if Venice wanted the primacy of the arts, it could have obtained it with ordinary means [...]” (Ferrari, “Corporazioni”: 2). Stella, still in favour of the *Corporazione*, recalled instead how it had been “conceived by non-Venetian artists” after the Turin Exhibition of 1898, and how Venice found itself “occasionally, and for its next exhibition” to be “the field in which the battle has taken place” (*Gazzetta degli artisti*, IV, no. 86, January 21, 1899).

67

Il Marzocco III, no. 51 (January 22, 1899).

68

From the editorial “La *Corporazione* dissolvitrice”, *Il Marzocco*, no. 50 (January 15, 1899).

69

Resignations were handed in by Fragiaco, Rotta, De Stefani, Bezzi, Ciardi and Marsili, in compliance with a current of opinion set out in an editorial, “Per l’arte solo” (*Il Marzocco*, no. 52, January 29, 1899), with very explicit accents: “Much can be given to the malicious to quibble about when it is known that the great majority of the artists belonging to the Exhibition Organising Committee are members of the *Corporazione*, which was founded precisely the year in which the prizes were taken away, and those sums set aside for purchases [...] and that many members of the *Corporazione* and members of the Committee almost have the fate of the Exhibition in their hands because of having been abroad to invite the most illustrious artists, and therefore being in direct communication with them”.

70

As regards the complex structure of the display committee, the result of an evident compromise, see *Terza Esposizione Internazionale d’Arte della Città di Venezia. Catalogo illustrato*, exh. cat., (Venice: Giardini di Castello, April 22 - October 31, 1899).

The admissions jury, reduced to three foreign members,⁷¹ therefore felt the need to explain its free and impartial workings in a letter dated April 7, published at the beginning of the catalogue: it referred to the new regulations, especially Article 11 that said the decision had to be based “never on the technical style of the work, but on its intrinsic value”. The works accepted by the jury (176 out of 571, that is to say around 31% of the works submitted) had to be marked by an asterisk in the catalogue to distinguish them from works by invited artists.⁷² In actual fact, the *Corporazione*’s rooms did not stand out from the average production of the time, despite the ambitious statute seeming to oblige their members to produce masterpieces,⁷³ and especially because the most prestigious *Corporazione* members, such as Michetti and Sartorio, exhibited separately in the new “solo shows” established from the 3rd Venice Biennale onwards.

Alongside the Favretto retrospective and the room devoted to Lenbach, Michetti’s solo show featured around 200 studies. With the exception of the painting *L’Offerta (The Offer)*,⁷⁴ these were all works that had been sold *en masse* to the German businessman Ernst Seeger⁷⁵ and already exhibited in Berlin and Vienna.⁷⁶ The collection testified to around twenty years of work by the painter who, having emptied his workshop for the sum of around 300,000 Lire so as to ensure his wealth,⁷⁷ ended up abandoning painting after the failure of the *Storpi (Cripples)* and the *Serpi (Serpents)*, prepared feverishly for the Paris Exposition Universelle of 1900.⁷⁸ Michetti’s exhibition could therefore not be anything other than a predictable success with the public and, if it was repetitive, it also marked the breaking point between one of the few internationally successful artists and the Italian system of the market and the institutions. This break was also marked by the absence of Segantini.

In the other Italian solo show, Sartorio (who also had two pastels in the In Arte Libertas room) presented forty-eight drawings and pastels, together with the triptych *Le Vergini Savie e le Vergini Stolto (The Wise Virgins and the Foolish Virgins)*⁷⁹ and the huge diptych *La Gorgone e gli Eroi. Diana d’Efeso e gli Schiavi (The Gorgon and the Heroes. Diana of Ephesus and the Slaves)*.⁸⁰ The triptych, in the elaborate carved frame, produced between 1891 and 1893 for Count Primoli,

71

C. Meunier from Belgium, J. Lavery from Great Britain and F. Thaulow from Norway.

72

See *Terza Esposizione Internazionale d’Arte*, 11–13.

73

So said the editorial of the *Gazzetta degli artisti* (IV, no. 94, March 18, 1899,) adding that “the *Corporazione*’s charter has remained a dead letter”. After the exhibition opened, the name changed to the less ambitious “*Corporazione di pittori e scultori italiani*” (Guild of (and not of the) Italian painters and sculptors), thereby doing away with the claim that it represented Italian art as a whole. The organisation gradually faded away, after refusing to exhibit at the Paris Exposition Universelle of 1900 and its lukewarm success at the exhibition in Munich (for which we know that Fattori also joined. See Gino Damerini, “La critica della critica”, *Gazzetta degli artisti* VI, no. 12 (July 30, 1900).

74

Owned by the princes of Naples, see footnote 21.

75

Ernst Seeger, a businessman from Berlin who had purchased all the material in Michetti’s studio in 1896, enjoyed excellent relations with the Biennale, as demonstrated by the loan of his collection of Japanese objects exhibited in Venice in 1897 (*Catalogo illustrato*, 84–86).

76

See *Gemälde und Studien von Francesco Paolo Michetti*, exh. cat., (Berlin, December 21, 1898 – January 31, 1899) and with the same title, Vienna, February 12, 1899.

77

Its sale as a block for 300,000 Lire was commented on as follows by Michetti to Ojetti: “You will find there [in Berlin] all my work of twenty years. The walls, the crates, the tables of my studio are empty. *I’m starting again from scratch*”. Ugo Ojetti, *Francesco Paolo Michetti e la mostra di Berlino*, 518.

78

The two large temperas, painted over the course of one month, were not liked in Paris, although for reasons of opportunity Michetti won the gold medal (like Balestrieri, Joris, Morbelli, Morelli and Tito). On these two works see Michele Biancale, “*Le serpi e gli storpi* di Francesco Paolo Michetti”, *Bollettino d’arte del Ministero della Pubblica Istruzione* (May 1927): 481–507.

79

Now in Rome, Galleria Comunale d’Arte Moderna. For a brief account of the painting see the catalogue *Da Canova a De Carolis* (Rome 1978), 79–80.

80

Rome, Galleria Nazionale d’Arte Moderna.

marked a “farewell to the Pre-Raphaelite faith”,⁸¹ as was also apparent in the elegant aristocratic *senhal* (various Roman noblewomen had posed for the painting, including Maria di Gallese D’Annunzio) and in the link with the sophisticated patron who had chosen the subject matter as a wedding gift. The diptych, on the other hand, was, as the artist later recalled, “the result of his duel with classical art”,⁸² developed during his visits to European museums and completed in Weimar where Sartorio had taught for the last four years. “Fatally attracted by the forms of the Italian Renaissance”,⁸³ the author had

intended to mythically express two aspects of the profound vanity of human existence. On the one hand is the Gorgon, who has the captivating form of Beauty and is Life and Death at the same time, because she creates and beats heroes. On the other is Diana of Ephesus, of the hundred breasts, as the nourisher of men and their fantasies. “Men, says the poet, are made of the same substance as their dreams”, and they are represented here as sleeping, holding the symbols of their ambitions in their hands.⁸⁴

The design was openly symbolist, aiming to propose a heroic myth in classical forms once again, looking to the Renaissance “in the same way that Renaissance artists were attracted by classical art”,⁸⁵ and that is to say with a strong contemporary presence (unlike Pre-Raphaelite nostalgia). While critics, from Pilo to Angelo Conti,⁸⁶ appreciated Sartorio’s extraordinary talent as a draughtsman but judged the work to be fragmented and blurred, praise instead came from the Superior Council of Fine Arts that purchased the painting and preparatory studies for the Galleria Nazionale d’Arte Moderna in Rome, causing ripples. Partly because of the vast size of the two canvases, official favour for Sartorio’s new style seemed to lead to future government commissions, just as Conti had hoped that “in the future, for the chosen artists” there would not just be the usual exhibitions, “but commissions for large decorative art”.⁸⁷

The subsequent large cycles by Sartorio, such as the decorations for the exhibitions in Milan and Venice⁸⁸ and the frieze in Parliament,⁸⁹ responded to this hope for a Renaissance revival (at least in intent) and for opportunity and patronage, making the artist the most “authentic interpreter” of that “D’Annunzian” world,⁹⁰ designed to give a classical dignity to the aspirations of the “Third Italy.”

81

To use Sartorio’s words commenting on his study of Dante Gabriele Rossetti, “Le confessioni e le battaglie di un artista”, *Il secolo xx*, VI, no. 8 (August 1907): 624.

82

Ibid.

83

Ibid.

84

From the introductory text in *Terza Esposizione Internazionale d’Arte*, 72.

85

Sartorio, *Le confessioni e le battaglie*, 624.

86

See Angelo Conti, “L’Esposizione di Venezia. Il dittico di Sartorio”, *Il Marzocco*, IV, no. 20 (June 18, 1899).

87

See Angelo Conti, “L’Esposizione di Venezia”, *Il Marzocco*, IV, no. 13 (April 30, 1899).

88

In 1906 at the Exhibition in Milan, Sartorio produced the frieze for the Lazio room, while the following year he painted the cycle *La Luce, Le Tenebre, L’Amore, La Morte* (*Light, Shadows, Love, Death*) for the central salon of the Biennale.

89

For the frieze ordered in 1908 and completed in 1912, see Luigi Serra, “Il fregio di G.A. Sartorio per la nuova aula del Parlamento”, *Emporium*, XXIX, no. 169 (January 1909): 71–76.

90

Fortunato Bellonzi, “Note sull’arte e sulla cultura di G.A. Sartorio”, *Studi Romani*, IX, no. 6 (November–December 1961): 657, reworking the ideas already present in Fortunato Bellonzi, “Sartorio e l’ultimo Ottocento romano”, *Notiziario d’arte*, no. 9–10 (September–October 1961): 126–129.

5. The Biennali from 1901 to 1907.

The real reasons that led Fradeletto to update the Italian section, establishing the regional rooms in 1901, derive from the lessons that had been learned and were linked to the failure of the attempted *Corporazione* (which was unifying in its own way). The reactions of those excluded from the self-appointed “national” group had amalgamated around the artistic circles, while the old academic centres and market places discussed the new primacy that Venice had brought to north-eastern Italy thanks to the exhibition. The idea of regional shows (guided by local juries, partly elected by the artists themselves)⁹¹ silenced the adversaries, ensuring that the various groups were given equal dignity but also speculating upon the permanent validity of schools of nineteenth-century origin, decreeing their provincial dimension.

Fradeletto set matters out very plainly in the circular of 5 May 1900. The chosen exhibition formula for regional groups aimed to

- 1) support conciliation between the various groups of artists, preventing the revival of that friction that if it did not damage us, certainly made life more bitter last year,
 - 2) meet their legitimate need, taking into due consideration the rightful objections in opposing newspapers,
 - 3) demonstrate greater openness towards the other Italian regions, showing that our Exhibition is not, as was claimed, “Venetian” and “foreign” [...]
- I will briefly list the advantages of this proposal: Italy would finally feature more worthily and in all the variety of its artistic approaches. Each region would present itself with its own particular character, by now consecrated by local and historical traditions. All the regions would be treated equally.⁹²

The official circular, signed by the administration, expanded upon these concepts, proposing to counter the foreign examples with the “spontaneous gifts of the race”:

The promoters of the Exhibition in Venice therefore intend to seek out and gather together the most dynamic elements of the country’s ingenuity; to inspire them to action; to shine an equal spotlight on that which our Art is organically capable of; to rouse the great natural and historical centres where it is traditionally present, to reaffirm themselves in the pertinacious and perhaps indelible variety of their approaches and characters.⁹³

Critics responded enthusiastically to this line of thinking, anticipating the positive outcome of the possibility to assess the actual value of the regional groups during

91

“The artists will be distributed in the following regional groups: Emilia, Lazio, Lombardy, Neapolitan, Piedmont, Sicily, Tuscany, Veneto. The works belonging to each of these groups will be examined respectively by juries made up of five members (artists and art critics), two of them will be elected by the artists of the region” *Regolamento per la costituzione e pel mandato delle Giurie* (Regulation 1901, Venice, ASAC); those entitled to vote must have taken part in a national or international exhibition, a rule deriving from the regulations of the fleeting *Associazione* of 1899 (Cf. footnote 65).

92

Regulation 1901, Venice, ASAC.

93

Circular Agli Artisti Italiani (To the Italian Artists), Venice, ASAC.

the exhibition. Mario Pilo,⁹⁴ and above all Ojetti, accepted the postulate that all dialects were of equal dignity:

As in literature, so in painting the ethnic differences between one region and the next remain alive among us and as typical as dialects. Between Laurenti and Esposito, between Calderini and Fragiaco, between Telemaco Signorini and Sartorio, between Michetti and Mentessi, between Bezzi and Morbelli there are deeper and more continuous differences than those that originate in individual temperaments. Truly the country and the race have shaped their souls, their vision and their technique, in such dissimilar ways that they seem, to those who do not read the names, painters from different countries.⁹⁵

The report by the admissions jury was instead supposed to deal with the actual conditions. With the works in front of them, they were supposed to reconcile the regulations (“proceed with absolute and not relative severity”) with the opportunity for “inevitable participation” among all regional groups.⁹⁶

The number of regional contributions was not only modest, but failed to live up to expectations, inasmuch as the few attempts at modernisation contradicted the physiognomy of the traditionally conservative regional school. Power was firmly in the hands of the local consortia, which survived in defence of their privileges, as claimed so emphatically by Giovanni Cena.⁹⁷ By continuing to feature regional rooms until 1910, the Venice Biennale contributed to freezing the contribution from Italian artists into a repetitive formula, rewarding the division into local schools of a nineteenth-century stamp and fostering continuity as compared to the innovative break that came in the international sections, whether for good or evil, due to Symbolism and “northern” Impressionism.⁹⁸ Indeed, the solo

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Mario Pilo, ‘Di bene in meglio,’ *La Gazzetta Letteraria* (September 1, 1900): 4.

95

Ugo Ojetti, “Le quattro esposizioni veneziane”: 397.

96

In its report, the jury, formed of P. Fragiaco, D. Trentacoste and P. Levi, justified its embarrassment as follows: “In short, we found ourselves faced with a situation that often differed according to the artistic virtue of the region and its capital, and, faced with the dilemma of ‘proceeding with absolute and not relative severity’ and of a decidedly unequal competition not just in terms of numbers but also of merit, we felt that instead of totally excluding this or that region we should favour the criterion of restricted, but inevitable participation [...] This explains that certain inequality of appreciation that can be attributed to our work [...]” (in *IV Esposizione Internazionale d’Arte della città di Venezia. Catalogo illustrato*, exh. cat., Venice: Giardini di Castello, April 24 - October 31, 1901, 13).

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“Do we draw a different and original strength from the individual differences of our regions? This Exhibition does not prove it. In every region there are those who are worried about technical research, objective reproducers of external nature, restless people, thinkers: even the landscape artists are more likely to make a joint effort to conquer light and air than to portray the characteristics of the native soil. Artists migrate from region to region, they live in exile for some time. The various centres do not conserve special energies: they could be and were in fact for the elderly: no longer for the new generation. They were not even – and here lies the problem – closed and discordant provinces, promoters and protectors of rivalries. Every great centre has its artistic societies and local Circles and Administrations, intended solely to provide periodic subsidies to artists, on condition that they always remain the same, quiet, mediocre, alien to every revolution: the luckiest of these centres still enjoy purchases by the Government or the Royal Family. The artists thus receive their annual salary. A network of interests is formed. Innovators, alone for whom art is prevented from stagnating and rotting, are suppressed or banished – jealously kept in check even after death. Example: Fontanesi”. Giovanni Cena, “L’Esposizione veneziana,” *Nuova Antologia*, 179, no. 707 (June 1901): 505.

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In his criticism of the regional division, Diego Angeli, when maintaining the need for schools to exhibit, as in the case of the Roman school in its quest for the sentiment of nature (“Le Regioni italiane,” *Il Marzocco*, VI, no. 21, May 26, 1901), had dismissed the two modernist temptations for our painters with the blunt statement: “the homeland of Mantegna and Tintoretto cannot see through the eyes of A. Bocklin or A. Zorn” (“L’Esposizione di Venezia: A. Fontanesi,” *Il Marzocco*, May 5, 1901).

exhibitions of 1901 repeated the warning of the “status quo”, flanking the Fontanesi retrospective with that of Domenico Morelli, and the two solo shows of Luigi Nono, the surviving champion of *favrettismo*,⁹⁹ and of Previati, an excessively fervent producer of symbolic suggestions, as Vittorio Pica noted in the presentation in the catalogue.¹⁰⁰

During the next Biennale, in 1903, there was an opening for the decorative arts within the framework of regional divisions, with a plan for rooms that presented artworks and furnishings within a “harmonious and dynamic whole”, almost a “small Gallery of an intelligent collector”.¹⁰¹ The results went down well with the public and heralded new commercial initiatives,¹⁰² contributing to establishing the regional versions of the modern style as revivals of local traditions, in the Renaissance Revival style of the “*dolce stil novo*”.¹⁰³ The artist-decorators, in the introductions to the rooms, demonstrated that they had met the desires of the promoters who had granted them “total freedom”, simply warning them that

albeit in the certainty of the new, they did not remain deaf to the calls of tradition, because it is our belief that Art develops and changes with organic continuity and that in vain can one presume to revive it by ripping it with arbitrary violence from its age-old roots [...]¹⁰⁴

The comparison with plant organisms, recurrent in the floral decorations of the rooms,¹⁰⁵ was here bent to the exercise of “decorative rhetoric” as Pica observed, in the recurrent “dream, so pernicious to our fathers and grandfathers, of Italian primacy”.¹⁰⁶

Despite crystallising subjects into neo-traditional formulas, the interest in decorative art, in which Venice followed the example of the Turin Exhibition of 1902,¹⁰⁷ once again raised the question of professional outlets for artists during a period of crisis when they would attempt to identify new clients, diversifying the intended destinations of their products. While “the traditional barriers between what is on show and what acts as an ornament become increasingly weak and blurred [...] with ‘everything on sale’ [...]”,¹⁰⁸ the easel painting suggests its placement in a busy setting, one that is also created to reiterate its prestige and emphasise its timeless qualities, turning to tradition and emblematic allusiveness (as demonstrated by the recurrent motif of laurel or the abuse of Latin mottos). In this

99

See the praise given by Antonio Stella, “Quarta esposizione internazionale della città di Venezia”, *Natura e Arte*, file 16 (1900–1901): 230.

100

IV Esposizione Internazionale d'Arte, 146–50.

101

“Mostre regionali d'arte pura e d'arte applicata,” *Quinta Esposizione Internazionale d'Arte della Città di Venezia. Catalogo illustrato*, exh. cat., (Venice: Giardini di Castello, April 22 - October 31, 1903), 19.

102

A comparison of the sales catalogues shows that the increase in sales could primarily be attributed to the black and white sections, the medals and the furnishings.

103

See Rossana Bossaglia, *Il liberty in Italia* (Milan: Mondadori, 1968), 2–3.

104

Quinta Esposizione Internazionale d'Arte, 21.

105

In the Piedmontese room, designed by Grosso, we find a frame and a plinth sculpted with pines and chestnuts, a motif of orchids in the Emilian room, ivy and oleanders for Lombardy, and also “the mild Tuscan olive,” “the fruitful orange groves so emblematic of the south of Italy”, *ibid.*

106

Vittorio Pica, “Rettorica decorativa,” *L'arte mondiale a Venezia nel 1903* (Bergamo: Istituto Italiano d'Arti Grafiche, 1903) and now in Paola Barocchi, *Testimonianze e polemiche figurative in Italia: L'Ottocento dal Bello ideale al Preraffaellismo* (Florence: G. D'Anna Editore, 1972), 191–193.

107

For the decorative art show in Turin see Francesca R. Fratini ed., *Torino 1902, polemiche in Italia sull'arte nuova* (Turin: Martano, 1970).

108

Romanelli, *Ottant'anni di allestimenti*, 10.

light, the Sala del Ritratto Moderno (Modern Portrait Room) was very interesting, once again putting forward the primary task of the production of traditional images, which had been thrown into question by new methods of reproduction. Cesare Laurenti's idea to surround the room with a large ceramic frieze, from Nicola Pisano to Tiepolo, was rightly associated by Morasso with Leonardo, when, "to celebrate the virtue of painting, he compares the glorious duration of his figures with the rapid fading and disappearance of living beings."¹⁰⁹ In other words, tradition was used as a guarantee for the eternity of art, almost validating the quality of the contemporary product.

The other innovation at the 5th Biennale, the Reject Room, established due to the protests that followed the rejection of 823 out of 963 works, responded to a corporate demand (many names are the same as in previous Venetian disputes),¹¹⁰ and not, as one might think from a more recent standpoint, to the needs of non-conformist movements. As De Carolis scornfully observed:

This year, after the exclusions, we witnessed a movement that I would describe as being of solidarity, something that resembles the league and announces the strike. Like workers, artists unite, form assemblies, promote uprisings, threaten a boycott. Here too we find ourselves faced with the weakness and impotence that seeks strength in numbers, and it would not be surprising to see the future organisers of exhibitions descend to agreements with organised masses of artists.¹¹¹

The painter, writing these lines in *Leonardo*, kept with tradition in defending a different concept of art and self, as a depository of a knowledge "far from the common people", not to "be confused with all the other pointless things of our modern life", picking up the themes of the D'Annunzian bard in honour of whom he changed his signature to De Karolis. And yet even this defence of his role to the bitter end was affected by the same crisis behind the corporate initiatives of professional painters: just think of De Carolis's activity as an engraver and woodcut printmaker for literary works¹¹² and his activity as a fresco painter for public commissions (with visible gaps between the theory and practice of this difficult technique),¹¹³ both alternative solutions to the hard-won outlets for easel paintings.

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Quinta Esposizione Internazionale d'Arte, 85.

110

In the report by the organising committee it is stressed "that while it is possible to succeed in discerning without hesitation the maximum and minimum values among hundreds of works, it becomes extremely difficult even for the most enlightened and experienced Jury when faced with intermediate values, however remarkable" (*ibid.*, 28). The high percentage of Venetian artists admitted in the second instance includes the names of Brass, Bortoluzzi, Castegnaro, Giuseppe Ciardi, Chitarin and G. Stella. The only work of a certain notoriety was *Il Suono del Ruscello* (*The Sound of the Stream*) by E. Longoni.

111

Adolfo De Karolis, "L'Esposizione di Venezia," *Leonardo*, I, no. 9 (May 10, 1903).

112

Above all, for the period 1901–1904, the illustration of the tragedies of D'Annunzio, *Francesca da Rimini*, *La figlia di Jorio* and *La fiaccola sotto il moggio*, see "Lettere inedite di Gabriele D'Annunzio al pittore Adolfo De Carolis", *Abruzzo*, II, file 2 (1964): 309–26, and Cornelio Di Marzo, "Lettere di D'Annunzio a De Carolis per le illustrazioni delle tragedie", *Rivista italiana del dramma*, no. 4 (July 1939): 3–11.

113

The decoration of the Salone del Consiglio Provinciale in Ascoli Piceno (1907) would be followed by that for the Aula Magna of the University of Pisa (1916–20) and the Salone del Podestà in Bologna (1921–28). Due to the decay of the frescoes, the decorations by De Carolis have been documented thanks to sketches and cartoons in the exhibition *Adolfo De Carolis in Pisa: studi e disegni per l'Aula Magna*, catalogue edited by R. Monti, Pisa 1977, and in *Adolfo De Carolis: la sintesi immaginaria*, edited by F. Solmi, Bologna 1979, alongside to the squares torn from the side walls and the corbels of the ceiling.

Average work returned to the room, aspiring to official recognition without questioning the judgement criteria, clearly encoded in Article 5 of the regulations that said to accept “every technique and every school”, rejecting however “all forms of vulgarity”.¹¹⁴ The rules for the admissions jury were set out in detail in Article 10, which specified which works could not aspire to Venetian dignity:

Mere studies are therefore excluded, unless they serve to illustrate some important work on display – fragmentary and insignificant reproductions from life – also excluded are works that aim to draw attention with means extraneous to the nature and office of art – all those works in short that do not have either fullness of aesthetic value or, despite some deficiency, singular merits of research and originality.¹¹⁵

The innovations of subsequent exhibitions would not go beyond granting new spaces to decorations by Chini or Sartorio,¹¹⁶ next to which they could admit collective exhibitions on a theme and hybrid displays such as the Stanza del Sogno (Dream Room) of 1907.¹¹⁷ However, they still refused to admit new trends (a great example was the reluctance to accept the consolidated historical phenomenon of French Impressionism).¹¹⁸ As a result, younger artists could recognise themselves in the criticism of the Biennale published from 1909 in the Florentine *La Voce*, where, attacking the art organisation system (and namely the exhibition as a moment of unity between official artists, critics and “excellent public”),¹¹⁹ Soffici asked:

Why not abstain from taking part in the certain scandal of exhibitions [...] in order to restrict yourself to a friendly or sympathetic group and present yourself

114

From the new regulations published in *Quinta Esposizione Internazionale d'Arte*, 13–18.

115

Ibid., 14.

116

For Sartorio, see notes 88 and 89. Galileo Chini, designer of the Tuscan Rooms of 1903 and 1907, decorated the dome of the first room in 1909 with figures inspired by the “Matters of Art”, while for the central room of 1914 he developed Klimt’s lesson in kaleidoscopic panels with naturalistic and abstract motifs (now in Rome, Galleria d’Arte Moderna).

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The international room named “Art of Dreams” was to feature works “that in some way expressed an ideal” and was entrusted to De Albertis, Nomellini, Previati and Chini, who also designed the exhibition. The sporadic foreign presence, from Crane to Stuck, was not enough to raise the tone of the room, where there was no adequate reflection on the great European moment of symbolism, leaving much room for the members of the Tuscan group “La Giovane Etruria” led by the creators of the room, Chini and Nomellini. An example of a negative judgment on the room can be seen in Arturo Lancellotti, *Le Biennali veneziane dell’anteguerra* (Alessandria: Casa d’Arte Ariel, 1926): 53–56. The young Boccioni instead judged it in his diary “the most interesting of the exhibition” (Umberto Boccioni, *Gli scritti editi e inediti* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1971), 242.

118

After the sporadic presences of Monet, Pissarro, Renoir, Sisley and Raffaelli in 1903, in 1905 and before the Renoir exhibition of 1910, Vittorio Pica, when starting to publish his important studies on the Impressionists in the *Emporium*, complained about having “several times expressed the wish privately and publically that the executive committee of the Venice Biennali [...] would organise] a comprehensive French Impressionist exhibition [...] Unfortunately, material difficulties or prior engagements have thus far prevented my wish from coming true”, Vittorio Pica, “Auguste Renoir”, *Emporium*, XXIV, no. 144 (December 1906): 408.

119

Silvio Benco, “Il Giudizio del Piccolo della Sera di Trieste,” *La Voce*, I, no. 48 (November 11, 1909), seized “by the holy desire to punch someone”, attacks “the organisation of art”, “constituted by the official artists, old or new academicians; by the official critics, preservers of tradition, common places and consecrated glories; finally by the excellent public, happy to have signed an insurance contract of their taste with the company of official artists and official critics. When you hear people talk about ‘public taste’ don’t forget that this taste is subject to an administration...”

thus to the public that, only on the basis of this pact, will be able to take it in and – who knows? – perhaps understand? These and many other similar questions could be asked of the true artist, if it were necessary, but such an artist keeps himself to himself [...] and it rarely happens that one comes into contact with him talking about an exhibition, especially one such as this. Because the exhibition in Venice is one of the most unpleasant that you can see [...] the Exhibition, I say, is not and will never be other than a market—and one of the most repugnant kind—a duck market.¹²⁰

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Ardengo Soffici, "L'Esposizione di Venezia", *La Voce*, no. 46 (October 28, 1909).

Author's Biography

Maria Mimita Lamberti is an Italian art historian, curator and prolific author. She wrote and curated exhibitions on artists including Davide Calandra, Felice Casorati, Beppe Devalle, Piero Gobetti and Mario Sturani, but also about art critics such as Lionello Venturi. She curated the Italian edition of Vincent van Gogh's *Lettere ad un amico pittore* (Letters to a friend painter, 2006) and

translated Henri Matisse's *Scritti e pensieri sull'arte* (Writings and thoughts about art, 1979 and 2003). In 2006 she curated with Maria Grazia Messina, the exhibition *Metropolis: la città nell'immaginario delle avanguardie, 1910-1920*. She was Professor in History of Contemporary Art at the University of Torino.

Camilla Salvaneschi**The Magazine *la biennale*: Articulating a Model
for Periodicals Published by Recurring Exhibitions****Abstract**

The first biennial that published a magazine was the Venice Biennale. The magazine *la biennale di Venezia* was published from 1950 to 1971. It was conceived as an institutional instrument, to keep the audience of the show informed about the activities of the Biennial during the year. The magazine had the mission to engage in the activities organized by the institution, and discuss and examine all the disciplines at the core of the Biennials program, which meant not only art, but also cinema, fashion, music and theatre. The magazine *la biennale* pursued the same international intents as the exhibition, becoming a site of network and exchange between different nations, as well as a medium to foster local and international critical dialogue. During the almost twenty years of its existence the publication evolved from informative instrument, which included lists of artworks sold during the editions of the biennial, alongside lists of new acquisitions of the biennial's archive, into a container for critical thought and theory.

Keywords

Venice Biennale, Rivista La Biennale, Umbro Apollonio, Art Magazines, Art Periodicals

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The Magazine *la biennale*: Articulating a Model for Periodicals Published by Recurring Exhibitions

Camilla Salvaneschi

When the Biennale was in its 55th year of existence, it finally succeeded in realizing one of the projects, which had been in different periods encouraged, but which for different reasons could not be realised: that of giving life to a periodical that was the official body of the institution.¹

These were the words that in the year 1950 Giovanni Ponti, the president of the Biennale² used to announce the launch of the Biennale's new periodical publication: *la biennale di Venezia*.³ *Rivista trimestrale di arte cinema teatro musica moda dell'ente biennale*.⁴ The magazine ran from July 1950 until 1971 and during its lifetime pursued the same international intentions as the exhibition. It aimed to become a site of network and exchange between different nations, as well as a means of fostering local and international critical dialogue. The magazine *la biennale*, throughout its two distinct periods under the directorship of two different editors, Elio Zorzi and Umbro Apollonio, exemplifies the shift from the magazine of the exhibition as promotional tool into a means of research and practice actively participating in the making of the exhibition and contemporary art at large.

1

In a letter from Ponti to the President of the Istituto Federale delle Casse di Risparmio delle Venezie, a Venetian banker, dated January 31, 1953. Unless explicitly cited otherwise, all references and quotes from the documents about the magazine *la biennale*, come from the Serie 4.13 Rivista "la biennale" 1950-1971 (corrispondenza), Archivio Storico Arte Contemporanea – hereinafter La Biennale di Venezia – ASAC, s. 4.13, R.L.B., corrispondenza. All texts, notes, documents, articles are translated by the author, unless otherwise noted.

2

Giovanni Ponti, "Inizio*", *la biennale*, no. 1 (July 1950): 4.

3

For consistency throughout this article, I have chosen to keep the title of the magazine *la biennale* in lower case, as presented on the cover and first page of the magazine. The translation in English would read: *la biennale di Venezia*. *Quarterly Magazine of Art Cinema Theatre Music Fashion of the Biennial Institution*.

4

On the magazine *la biennale*, see Giovanni Bianchi, "Riviste a Venezia negli anni cinquanta: 'La Biennale' ed 'Evento'", and Giuseppina Dal Canton, "Riviste d'arte a Venezia negli anni sessanta: 'la biennale di Venezia' e 'la vernice'", in *Riviste d'Arte fra Ottocento ed Età Contemporanea*, ed. Gianni Carlo Sciolla (Milano: Skira, 2003), respectively 251-270 and 271-281. See also Francesca Castellani, "Keywords on *la biennale*: The strategies of a journal in the Rodolfo Pallucchini years", in *Starting from Venice: Studies on the Biennale*, ed. Clarissa Ricci (Milano: et al., 2010), 179-184.

I will propose a reading of the magazine *la biennale* looking at its deep links to the Biennial institution, and how their histories intertwined for the entire lifespan of the magazine.⁵ By identifying the features that distinguish art magazines from recurring exhibitions and illuminating their commonality I hope to explore how they communicate, relate, and affect each other. First of all, the magazine and the biennial are key players in the art world capable of legitimizing contemporary art, and secondly they are both periodical and characterised by composite temporalities. These two major similarities make it worth comparing and relating the features that define the two, even before seeing how they combine in the publication of what I argue is the exhibition magazine.

Since *la biennale* may be seen as the first example of this specific magazine, it can provide information about the origins and characteristics of the genre, which stems from both the promotional print materials published by art institutions and the contemporary art magazine. Thus, I will engage with questions such as: Could *la biennale* be considered the ancestor of the exhibition magazine and what are its features? What is the relationship between the magazine and the exhibition, in this case the Venice Biennale? How has it evolved in time?

Finally, I will look at the context that led to the launch of *la biennale* and how it worked to legitimise its institution and respond to its own contemporaneity. It evolved from a promotional tool into a critical organism, able to renovate itself – sometimes anticipating changes that the Biennale itself needed to undergo – and eventually published and conducted thorough research on the artistic and cultural fields, just as much as the most recent periodical projects foregrounded by Documenta and other recurring exhibitions.

During the boom of biennials in the 1990s,⁶ recurring exhibitions such as Documenta and Manifesta, began publishing magazines as well as the expected exhibition catalogue.⁷ By launching their own magazines, these recurring exhibitions reinstated the important and direct link with their audience that characterised the relation between the first periodicals published by art academies in the eighteenth century Germany, soon after they originated in the form of literary pamphlets in the French Salons.⁸ In this context, magazines were initially a print platform for the discussion of art and exhibitions and primarily concerned with keeping conversations flowing across time and space between the art critics and

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The exhibition was declared *ente autonomo* (autonomous agency) by the City of Venice in 1928. See Enzo di Martino, *History of the Venice Biennale: 1895- 2005: visual arts, architecture, cinema, dance, music, theatre* [1995], trans. Barbara Trotto and Susan Candy (Venezia: Papiro Arte, 2005), and di Martino, Paolo Rizzi, *Storia della Biennale 1895-1982* (Milano: Electa, 1982). See also Maria Mimita Lamberti, "International Exhibitions in Venice" [1982], *OBOE Journal* I, no. 1 (2020): 26-45.

6

For an analysis of the proliferation of biennials all over the world, see Anthony Gardner and Charles Green, *Biennials, Triennials and Documenta: The Exhibitions that created Contemporary Art* (London: Wiley and Blackwell, 2016); and Elena Filipovic, Marieke Van Hal, and Sloveig Ovstebo eds., in *The Biennial Reader* (Ostfildern: Hatje Kantz, 2010).

7

There is a small number of perennial exhibitions who have published a magazine. Catherine David published three issues of the journal *documenta X documents* before and during Documenta X; for Documenta 12, in 2007 three issues of the *Documenta Magazine* were published, and for the 14th edition Adam Szymczyk appropriated the Greek magazine *South as a State of Mind* transforming it into the *documenta 14 Journal* for four issues. In 2003, the itinerant Manifesta Biennial, launched the *Manifesta Journal*. Another European example is *Stages*, published since 2012 by the Liverpool Biennial, while *Noon: An Annual Journal of Visual Culture and Contemporary Art* was published between 2009 and 2016 by the Gwangju Biennial.

8

Amongst the first pamphlets that appeared during the French Salons is *La Correspondance littéraire, philosophique et critique*, a biweekly cultural newsletter distributed between 1753 and 1790. It was written and produced by Friedrich Melchior, Baron von Grimm, and included contributions from Denis Diderot. To access the *Correspondance Littéraire* see <https://artfl-project.uchicago.edu/content/grimms-correspondance-litt%C3%A9raire>, accessed September 2018.

the audience.⁹ Since then, the serial art magazine gradually evolved into one of the key arenas for the critique of contemporary art and its legitimisation.¹⁰ However, from the twentieth century onwards, they began to provide new opportunities for artists preserving the traces of ephemeral meetings and conversations. Artists were able to correspond and collaborate over distances, to circulate their work and ideas more easily with an increasingly international art world, not strictly tied to the art museum or gallery. The magazine reached its peak as an artistic form first in the 1920s when it was adopted by a number of avantgarde movements and then again between the 1960s and 1970s. At that time the innovative curatorial practices of the dealer Seth Siegelaub recognised that the printed page was becoming an important space to showcase an artist's work. It had become the perfect alternative space for the dematerialised practices of conceptual artists, many of whom had adopted the medium to make their work accessible to a larger audience.¹¹ Furthermore, Siegelaub foresaw the magazine's capacity to become a primary site of information on and for art and a favored medium for the circulation and dissemination of artworks, for its ability to transcend space and time.¹²

By its nature, the magazine is a medium in constant flux and evolution since each issue is followed by another one. Its instrumental role as a network site remains unaltered. It is capable of creating and circulating local and international critical dialogue, mediating debates and discussions with the public, and bestowing both artistic and institutional legitimization.¹³ Recently, through the emergence of curatorial discourse and discursive exhibitions, the magazine has also become a platform for research around contemporary art, curating and the exhibition. Siegelaub's exhibition practices could be seen as anticipating this shift, which saw the magazine become a site of research and information for artists and curators alike, similar to the catalogue. However, unlike the catalogue, it has been privileged for its cheaper aesthetic and facilitated distribution which led to the birth of a new genre of art periodicals, published by recurring exhibitions, such as biennials and triennials and which I call here, the exhibition magazine. The relation between the exhibition magazine and its institution is already doubly potent, since both magazines and recurring exhibitions are periodic formats and, as will be discussed throughout this article, share a distinct relationship to contemporaneity and time. The exhibition magazine, because of the shorter interval between issues, has its origin in the idea of promoting the institution and keeping the audience engaged during the two (or more) years of pause between one edition of the exhibition and the following.

The exhibition magazine has also become an important vehicle for curators to document the process of making the exhibition. In the case of a periodic

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According to Habermas the role of the art critic as "spokesmen for the public", is to lead the viewers to think critically and engage in debates in the public sphere. Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere an Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger with Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1989).

10

On the evolution of the art magazine see, Trevor Fawcett and Clive Phillpot, *The Art Press: Two Centuries of Art Magazines*. Essays Published for the Art Libraries Society on the Occasion of the International Conference on Art Periodicals and the Exhibition 'The Art Press' at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London (London: Art Book, 1976); Gwen Allen, *The Magazine* (London and Cambridge MA: Whitechapel Gallery and MIT Press, 2016); *Artists' Magazines. An Alternative Space for Art* (Cambridge MA and London: MIT Press, 2011); "Art Periodicals and Contemporary Art Worlds (Part I): A Historical Exploration", *Art Margins* 5, no. 3 (October 2016): 35-61; "Art Periodicals and Contemporary Art Worlds, Part 2: Critical Publicity in a Global Context", *Art Margins Online* (October 22, 2016), <https://artmargins.com/art-periodicals-and-contemporary-art-worlds-part-2/>, accessed December 2018.

11

Allen, *Artists' Magazines*, 15.

12

Ibid., 202. On the practices of conceptual artists see, Lucy R. Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972* (1973; repr., Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); and Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson eds., *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999).

13

Ibid., 24. See also "Network: The Art World Described as a System", *Artforum* 11, no. 1 (September 1972), 28-32; reprinted in Lawrence Alloway, *Network: Art and Complex the Present* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1984), 4-5.

exhibition it takes between two to several years to see the exhibition in its final stage. In *Thinking Contemporary Curating* Terry Smith points out that the catalogue of a show is sent to a printer several months before the opening night, leaving a gap that “deprives the curator of a chance to learn from the exhibition itself and share that knowledge with the visitor [...] When writing in the catalogue the curator can state only a belief about the subject of the exhibition. No claim to be able to share its *exhibitionary content* can possibly be made”.¹⁴ There may not have been a “widely shared solution” to this inherent conundrum but the exhibition magazine, adopted by a number of curators in the last few decades and whose origin may be found in *la biennale*, might be in itself a possible answer. The magazine has been adopted by only a small number of recurring and widely known exhibitions,¹⁵ like the Venice Biennale, Documenta or Manifesta, but by tracing their most significant features it may be possible to articulate a model for this type of publication and understand its role within the wider context of exhibition practices.

On the Relation Between Magazines and Recurring Exhibitions

Before entering into the core analysis of *la biennale*, I would like to examine the periodical nature of both magazines and recurring exhibitions, which is arguably where their dialogue begins.

Allen describes the magazine as “a type of periodical: it is issued at regular intervals, and exists serially across a span of time”.¹⁶ A similar definition can be applied to the recurring exhibition since they also take place at regular intervals (every two years in the case of a biennial, every three with a triennial, or every five in the case of documenta) and exists serially across a span of time.¹⁷ Both magazines and recurring exhibitions are determined by periodical recurrence and innovation which allow them to enter into direct contact with the specific concerns of the present, but the complexity of the magazine and the biennial’s temporalities may extend from the past to the future, although they exist in the “now”, and specifically react to the present moment. They herald multiple temporalities, considering their past, foreseeing their future, and existing in the present.¹⁸

In 1976, John A. Walker stated that “because of their periodicity, [art magazines] are single issues devoted to contemporary art which provide ‘snapshots’ of art at particular moments. The back runs of such magazines themselves constitute a history of art, albeit an unrefined one,”¹⁹ meaning that when looking back at these magazines one should always consider not only the works captured in the pages of the magazines but also the excluded ones. The recurring exhibition, like the magazine, also provides a snapshot of art at a specific time.²⁰ Walker’s explanation of the magazine’s contemporaneity echoes Lawrence Alloway’s earlier definition of the Venice Biennale as an “entity in time.”²¹ The ability of recurring

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Terry Smith, *Thinking Contemporary Curating* (New York: Independent Curators International, 2013), 45.

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There have been cases of smaller biennials who have launched a magazine as part of their program. An example is the *Athens Art Review*, established in 2007 for the first Athens Biennale.

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Allen, “Introduction”, *The Magazine*, 12.

17

See Terry Smith, “Biennials within the Contemporary Composition”, *Stages*, no. 6 (April 2017), www.biennial.com/journal/issue-6/biennials-within-the-contemporary-composition, accessed May 2019.

18

Ibid.

19

John A. Walker, “Art periodicals since 1945”, in *The Art Press*: 45.

20

Terry Smith, “Biennials within the Contemporary Composition”.

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Lawrence Alloway, *The Venice Biennale 1895-1968. From Salon to Goldfish Bowl* (London: Faber and Faber, 1969), 14. On the Venice Biennale as entity in time, see also Vittoria Martini, “The Evolution of an Exhibition Model. Venice Biennale as an Entity in Time”, in Federica Martini and Vittoria Martini, *Just Another Exhibition* (Milan: Postmediabooks, 2011), 119-138.

exhibitions to capture art in a specific here and now has contributed to their becoming one of the defining forces in the contemporary art world since the 1990s, as emphasised by Gardner and Green.²² Therefore, studying both art magazines and recurring exhibitions means studying contemporary art in the moment in which it is made, documented, defined and legitimised.

The exhibition magazine embraces both formats since it is a periodical publication born under the umbrella of a recurring exhibition. In this case, the legitimizing power is siphoned back into the parent recurring exhibition. The “snapshots” captured by the exhibition magazine are not only of art, but also of the recurring exhibition in the process of its making, so the magazine documents, defines and legitimises its publisher, the exhibition. Also the archival nature of the magazine²³ becomes crucial while building an understanding of the particular task given to the exhibition magazine, i.e. the ability to historically document contemporary art and the exhibition. As argued by Rosa Martinez, curator of the 2005 edition of the Venice Biennale: “A [biennial] looks beyond the present and into the future [...] Biennials are the most advanced arena for this expanded field precisely because they do not function like museums. Museums are temples for the preservation of memory [...] Biennials are the context for the exploration and questioning of the present.”²⁴ Indeed, recurring exhibitions are ostensibly more concerned with the present and the future rather than with the past, and so often distinguish themselves from the archival practices that are more common for museums, although the establishment of archives, and the growth of publications – magazines, guidebooks, Readers and catalogues – might suggest the opposite. This might be indicative of an anxiety about their own memory and desire to construct a history for themselves. But if the recurring exhibition is attempting to defy its own ephemerality (suggested by the launch of successive exhibitions) it seems an odd solution to adopt the magazine, which is also in itself ephemeral, despite the relative permanence of the printed medium. On this matter, Allen observes that, when subject to artists’ experimentation, “the magazine served as an archive, capturing ephemeral events and conversations in the more permanent medium of print, it was also a document that was itself highly transitory and unfixed, capturing the informal, unguarded quality of the dialogue between artists that had inspired it”.²⁵ So, if the same applies to the recurring exhibition and curatorship, can it be said that the exhibition magazine similarly helps capture the “down time” between the successive exhibitions? It certainly offers a different, more organic and polymorphous way to narrate the recurring exhibition. Indeed, by capturing the intervening time it informs the audience about the upcoming show; its development, the themes discussed, the curators’ choices, the artists, and any other component the editor-curators²⁶ wish to share.²⁷

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See Gardner and Green, *Biennials, Triennials and Documenta*, 3.

23

On the relation between magazines and archives, see Camilla Salvaneschi, “Contemporary Art Magazines: The Archive in the Archive”, in *International Perspectives on Publishing Platforms: Image, Object, Text*, ed. Meghan Forbes (New York: Routledge, 2019), 151-173.

24

Rosa Martinez interviewed by Carolee Thea, *FOCI: interviews with 10 international curators* (New York: Apex Art Curatorial Program, 2001), here cited from Caroline A. Jones, *The Global Work of Art: World's Fairs, Biennials, and the Aesthetics of Experience* (Chicago: University of Chicago press, 2017), 88.

25

Ibid, 178.

26

I use the combination of editor-curator to exemplify how the once two distinct roles have recently become intertwined. See Isabelle Graw, “In the Grip of the Market? On the Relative Heteronomy of Art, the Art World, and Art Criticism” in *Contemporary Art and its Commercial Markets. A Report on Current Conditions and Future Scenarios*, eds. Maria Lind and Olav Velthuis (Berlin: Stenberg Press, 2012), 183-208.

27

With the flourishing of museum and curatorial studies, a range of journals and magazines around the same topics were launched. Periodicals, like the *Journal of Curatorial Studies*, *The Exhibitionist*, *On Curating.org*, explore the role of the curator, the discipline of curating and how it relates to exhibitions.

Finally, as entities in time, magazines and recurring exhibitions are both largely driven by two competing motivations: the first privileges constant flux and evolution in order to respond to the present whilst the second attempts to create and order a history. To epitomise our contemporaneity, magazines and recurring exhibitions must simultaneously understand the present, envisage the future and preserve their past. Although both formats already do so separately, it is interesting to look at what happens when the hybridization of the two formats occurs in the case of the exhibition magazine.

The Birth of *la biennale*: The Magazine as Official Promotional Tool of the Institution

The genesis of the exhibition magazine may be found in *la biennale*, edited between 1950 and 1971 by the Venice Biennale. *la biennale* is arguably the result of a cross-pollution between two different models of magazines. It contains traces of both the magazine published by institutions like art academies, museums, or galleries, and the contemporary art magazine, which provides critical thoughts and information around the latest trends in contemporary art.²⁸ The former model descends from the periodicals of eighteenth century Germany. *The Art Press: Two Centuries of Art Magazines*²⁹ offers an analysis of these early examples, which were for the most part sponsored by art academies and principally concerned with providing news and information. Their mission was to facilitate the reception of art and, as Allen argues, were “geared towards an upper-middle class audience interested in art as pastime or decoration”,³⁰ an audience made of politicians, diplomats, nobles, but also artists, collectors, dealers, and historians. The second model of the exhibition magazine is the contemporary art magazine. While in general, this type of magazine, for its many different formats and features escapes a single definition, the contemporary art magazine that influences the exhibition magazine participates in multiple ways in sustaining the artworld, becoming a space to display and circulate contemporary art theory and criticism, while being intertwined with the art market. Both typologies have a strong connection with their public, the institutional magazine for its need to inform the audience about the ongoing activities, and the contemporary art magazine to inform art professionals about artists, exhibitions and events happening locally and internationally.

Before *la biennale* launched in 1950, there had already been an attempt to maintain the publication of a magazine. This attempt, in the late 1920s,³¹ was coterminous with the founding of the Biennale’s archive: *Archivio Storico delle Arti Contemporanee* (Historic Archive of Contemporary Arts).³² It was a bimonthly newsletter titled *La Biennale. Bollettino dell’Esposizione internazionale d’arte nella*

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See also Walker’s definition of the art magazine: “a magazine which is about art. These are meta-linguistic in character; they consist of writings about art and reproduction of artworks,” in “IV MAGAZINE ART: The Conflation of Art and the Magazine”, *Studio International*, special issue on “Art Magazines”, 192, no. 983 (September-October 1976): 118.

29

See *The Art Press*. For further accounts on the birth of the first periodicals see also Peter Brooker and Andrew Thacker, *The Oxford Critical and Cultural History of Modernist Magazines* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

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Allen, *Artists’ Magazines*, 17.

31

After the declaration of the Biennale as autonomous institution in 1928, Giuseppe Volpi di Misurata, President of the Biennale’s commission, transformed the Venetian institution from solely art-oriented to multidisciplinary. He launched the annual International Festival of Contemporary Music in 1930. In 1932 the first edition of the *Mostra Internazionale d’Arte Cinematografica* (International Film festival) took place, and finally, in 1934 the International Theatre Festival was opened. The expansion in such heteronomous fields, alongside its important role in promoting Italian art, led the Biennale to become one of the major Italian tourist attractions. See Di Martino, *History of the Venice Biennale*, and Di Martino and Rizzi, *Storia della Biennale 1895-1982*.

32

The archive was established by Domenico Varagnolo in 1928.

città di Venezia (La Biennale. Bulletin of the International Art Exhibition in the city of Venice) that focused on contemporary art. The *Bollettino*'s major promoters were Domenico Varagnolo, founder of the archive, Antonio Maraini, who took the position as Secretary General in 1927 and strongly sustained the editorial ventures of the Biennale, and Elio Zorzi,³³ head of the Biennale's Press Office. In a letter to Varagnolo, Maraini expressed his absolute confidence in the bulletin project: "success will assist us, because a contemporary art magazine in Italy does not exist and is strongly desired".³⁴ This confidence was partly inspired by the fact that it would have risen "under the auspices of an institution that would posit it immediately on the market with an infinite cultural value".³⁵ Since it was intended as an instrument to document, collect, and record the activities of the Biennale its primary goal was to bring the Institution worldwide recognition.³⁶ Internationality was key, so the contents were published "in each one of the languages of the different countries represented in the pavilions, for the part that concerned it".³⁷ This multilingualism was adopted later on by *la biennale*, which included summaries of each article in English, French, and German at the beginning of each issue. While the *Bollettino*'s project counts less than a year of publication, its idea was adopted and published in a similar form in 1934 by the Biennale's Archive as the *Bollettino dell'Archivio Storico dell'Arte Contemporanea. L'Arte nelle Mostre Italiane. (Bulletin of the Historical Archives of Contemporary Art. Art in Italian Exhibitions)*. Similarly, it documented the solo shows held by Italian artists and the prizes won in Italy and abroad. It was sent to museums, galleries, and art academies all over the world, and created an international network of institutions for the Biennale and its artists, the development of which was certainly a great advantage for *la biennale*. The bulletin was suspended between 1941 and 1950, but it was fundamental in opening the roadway for the magazine, which would continue to host the *Bollettino* in a dedicated section.³⁸

In 1950, two decades after the launch of the *Bollettino*, *la biennale* was born. It was a quarterly magazine which had to serve as a tool of information and propaganda, focused on the Biennale and its manifestations. It was edited by the Biennale's Press Office and initially directed by Zorzi. It is no coincidence that the magazine came into being in the 1950s. The decade represents a moment of great cultural and artistic ferment in Venice, partly thanks to the manifestations promoted by the Biennale. As Venice became a vibrant cultural centre, able to participate in the national and international cultural scene, so did the Biennale and its magazine.

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Elio Zorzi, was a journalist and writer, expert in Venetian history and periodicals. He held the position of Head of the Press Office from the end of the First World War to 1955, the year of his death.

34

Letter from Maraini to Varagnolo, December 1, 1928. *la Biennale di Venezia – ASAC*, s. 4.13, R.L.B., Carte Capo Ufficio Stampa Elio Zorzi, b. 01, Venezia Opuscoli (1928-1946).

35

Ibid.

36

Letter from Maraini to Zorzi, Florence, November 15, 1928. *la Biennale di Venezia – ASAC*, s. 4.13, R.L.B., Carte Capo Ufficio Stampa Elio Zorzi, b. 01, Venezia Opuscoli (1928-1946).

37

Ibid.

38

On the *Bollettino* published in *la biennale* in the 1950s see Bianchi, "Riviste a Venezia negli anni cinquanta", 260-261. The contents consisted of reports on the number of visitors, press releases, alphabetical lists of exhibition reviews, list of the exhibitions held in Italy, list of exhibitions abroad where Italian art was being shown, lists of prizes, the acquisitions of the archive, and reports on the sales of artworks. The latter was also a list in alphabetical order, disclosing the buyer, the name of the artist, their nationality, the artwork's title, and technique. In the 2nd issue of *la biennale*, the *Bollettino* published a chronicle of the Biennale's Institution and the list of the National Participations.

Inextricably Linked: The Magazine, the Institution and the Audience

Since its launch *la biennale* was a luxury magazine with a large format, glossy paper, a bulletin curated by the Biennale's archive and printed on removable inserts, and a steadily increasing and impressive number of colour reproductions. Moreover, the magazine presented a modern and elegant design, advertisements of luxury products and other Venetian tourist attractions. The opening editorial of the magazine, interestingly signed not by the editor but by Ponti, the President of the Biennale, read:

I always thought that the Biennale ought to be in contact with the public, not only through the news released by the Press Office, but directly, through its own publication. The audience needs to be informed, to be continuously updated on the multiple activities of the Biennale, and of its various manifestations, not only when they take place, but also when they are in project phase; [...] hence it ought to be, called to participate directly in the life and activities organised by the institution [...] This direct contact between the public and the scholars/intellectuals, and in particular, with the Biennale itself, is now entrusted to this magazine, which will boast the well-known and ancient title of the exhibition, and which will be published every three months. We hope that the magazine will have a long and lasting life, and that ultimately, it will support the efforts of the organisers of the many events of the Biennale.³⁹

In this letter “*Inizio*” (beginning), Ponti summarises the Biennale's intents, aims and hopes for the magazine. It is clear that *la biennale*'s purpose was to keep the audience engaged in a conversation around the many activities of the Biennale's calendar. It foregrounded the conversational and boundless nature of the magazine, and its ability to maintain a conversation with a larger and widespread public.

This letter of intent shows that the audience was the main element taken into account for every decision concerning the magazine. It had to be updated on the activities of the Biennale directly, engaged in a conversation in and around its manifestations, even when they were still in progress. This anticipated a practice which became more common with curatorial discourse.⁴⁰ The magazine became a tool to keep the audiences' interest alive during the intervals between one exhibition and the next, as well as a means to anticipate the upcoming exhibition. This audience, elite and cultured in character, was made up of artists, intellectuals, diplomats, politicians, and aristocrats, and was described in the first issue in an article by Irene Brin “*Le Biennali nel bel mondo*” (The Biennials in the High Society). It gives an account of the various exhibitions of the Biennale. Right at the top of the article is a photo of the first exhibition of 1895, capturing King Umberto I and Queen Margherita in attendance.⁴¹ Other images in the article portray noble and political Italian figures, with the quite evident intent of highlighting and showing the institution's prestige.

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Ponti, “*Inizio*”, 4.

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Terry Smith, “Discourse,” in *Talking Contemporary Curating* (New York: Independent Curators International, 2015), 13-36.

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The Biennale was founded in 1895, but the first idea for “a national biennial exhibition of art” dates back to 1893, when the City of Venice set funds for the exhibition in order to contribute on a cultural level to the celebrations, taking place all over Italy, of the silver anniversary of King Umberto I and Queen Margherita di Savoia. Cfr. Alloway, *The Venice Biennale 1895-1968*, and Mimita Lamberti, “International Exhibitions in Venice”, and Jones, *The Global Work of Art*.

The collectors also played a crucial role for the magazine's initial intent of legitimizing the Biennale. Until its renovation in 1973, the Biennale could be seen as an hybrid between an art fair (there was a sales office in charge of the sales at each exhibition) and the recurring exhibition itself.⁴² Some of the Biennale's collectors were invited by the head of the sales department Ettore Gian Ferrari,⁴³ under Zorzi's request, to write about their acquisitions and collections. Contributions include Domenica Jean Walter's "*I quadri che vorrei portare con me*" (*The paintings I would like to have with me*), published in the second issue (October 1951); Peggy Guggenheim's "*Come è nata la mia collezione*" (*How my collection was born*), in the fourth issue (April 1951), and "*La Raccolta di Cavellini*" (*Cavellini's collection*) by Achille Cavellini, published in 1954. The idea of inserting contributions by collectors into the pages of the magazine, shows not only an in-depth understanding of the potentialities of the magazine within the art market, but also the comprehension of the collector's role in sustaining the artist's profession.⁴⁴

The magazine was not, however, solely intended for an audience concerned with the figurative arts. It was to cover all the various fields of the Biennale, such as cinema, dance, theatre and, initially, also fashion.⁴⁵ The interdisciplinary character of the recurring exhibition had to be reflected by its magazine and appeal to multiple audiences, whose interests would always span across the various fields. In order to show the multidisciplinary approach, the editorial board was composed of members from each of the Biennale's disciplines,⁴⁶ to one or more of which each issue was dedicated. The cover changed with each issue, depending on the manifestations ongoing, or on the assigned prizes. For instance, the cover of the first issue [fig. 1] presented the work *Il Barcaiolo* (*The Boatman*) (1930) by Carlo Carrà. His work put a visual emphasis on the figurative arts, due to the fact that the first issue was published in conjunction with the 25th Art Exhibition.

The choice of Carrà for the first cover was also because he was part of the editorial board of the magazine and he won the Great prize in 1950.⁴⁷ The disciplines were also listed in the full title of the magazine which read *la biennale di venezia. Rivista trimestrale di arte cinema teatro musica moda dell'ente biennale* (*la biennale. Quarterly Magazine of Art Cinema Theatre Music Fashion of the Biennial Institution*). The subtitle of the magazine changed several times during the lifespan of the magazine, and while it initially comprised all the disciplines at the core of the Biennale's institution, it would later become *Rivista trimestrale dell'ente autonomo "la biennale di Venezia"* (*Quarterly magazine of the autonomous institution "la biennale di Venezia"*).⁴⁸ The interdisciplinary approach was supposed to ferment interest for the largest audience possible, but a letter from the publisher of the mag-

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On the origin and context of birth of the Venice Biennale's exhibition model see Caroline A. Jones, *The Global Work of Art*, and "Biennial Culture: A Longer History" in Ricci, *Starting from Venice*, 28-49.

43

On Ettore Gian Ferrari and the history of the sales office see Clarissa Ricci "Breve Storia dell'Ufficio Vendite della Biennale di Venezia 1895-1972. Origini, Funzionamento e declino", *Ricerche di S/Confine* 8, no. 1 (2017): 1-20, <http://www.ricerchedisconfine.info/VIII-1/RICCI.htm>, accessed January 2019.

44

See letter to Comm. Carlo Frua De Angelis from Elio Zorzi, November 3, 1950. La Biennale di Venezia - ASAC, s. 4.13, R.L.B., Carte Capo Ufficio Stampa Elio Zorzi, b. 01, Venezia Opuscoli (1928-1946).

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Fashion, initially included with a column edited by Misia Armani, was abandoned with the 5th issue published in August 1951.

46

The first editorial board of the magazine was active until 1953. Every member would consult around their specific field and the board would change when new directors or secretaries were appointed. See Bianchi, "Riviste a Venezia negli anni cinquanta", 255-256.

47

Ibid., 255.

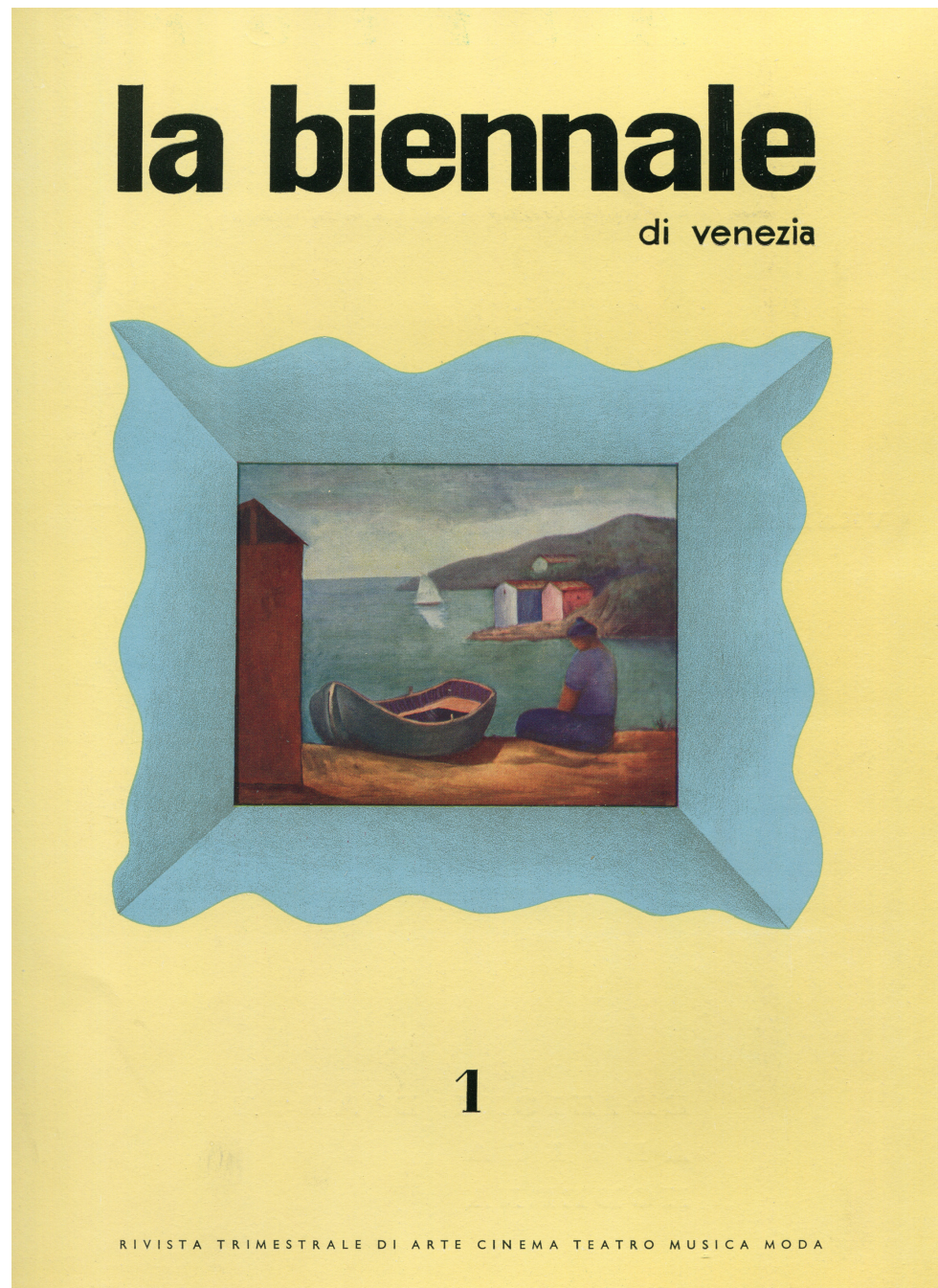
48

From the first to the 5th issue the magazine was subtitled *Rivista trimestrale. Arte cinema teatro musica moda*; with issue 5 (October 1951) *Rivista bimestrale. Arte cinema teatro musica*; issue 22 (September-October 1952) *Rivista trimestrale. Arte cinema musica teatro*; issue 30 (January-March 1958) *Rivista dell'Ente Autonomo "la biennale di Venezia"*. *Arte cinema musica teatro*; issue 40 (July-September 1960) *Rivista dell'ente autonomo "la biennale di Venezia"*; issue 55 (December 1964) *Rivista trimestrale dell'ente autonomo "la biennale di Venezia"*.

azine, Vittorio Alfieri⁴⁹ says otherwise. He laments the low sales of the magazine after the first year and blames “the very structure of the magazine, not specialised to arouse the interest of artists and critics, and too expensive and luxurious for the general public”.⁵⁰

fig. 1

Cover of the first issue of the quarterly magazine of the Venice Biennale, *la biennale di Venezia* (July 1950).
Courtesy: Archivio Storico della Biennale di Venezia - ASAC.



49

Vittorio Alfieri was the owner and director of the Venetian publishing house Alfieri Edizioni d'Arte, which was the first publisher of the magazine *la biennale* (1950-1955). It was also the publisher of the Biennale's catalogues of 1948, 1950 and 1952. Alfieri and the Biennale, stipulated a five year contract that ended in 1955: "the convention May 1, 1950 the publisher Alfieri (Venice) takes on the role to publish, print and distribute, at its own expenses, the magazine *La Biennale di Venezia* which has the aim of publishing all the events of the institution, and simultaneously carrying out tourist propaganda. The direction and editing of the magazine are held by the Biennale". Document dated 1955, edited by the Biennale, and summarizing the five years with Alfieri as publisher. *la Biennale di Venezia* – ASAC, s. 4.13, R.L.B., corrispondenza, b. 06 (1950-1956).

In *la biennale*'s editorial letter Ponti also refers to the frequency of the magazine "which will be published every three months."⁵¹ The periodicity of *la biennale* changed several times, shifting from quarterly to bimonthly, occasionally forced to condense two issues into one. However, the temporal gap was always shorter than that of the Biennale's exhibitions and *la biennale* encouraged the reader to engage all year long with the institution. Nonetheless, in the first years, *la biennale* was quite criticised by both readers and its publisher, who complained for the delays and the irregular publication schedule, unable to provide precise updates on the events promoted and thus at times incapable of showing a lively institution even when its doors were closed.⁵²

New Editorial Policies: *la biennale* as a vehicle for international network and critical dialogue

During the first years of its existence, the magazine *la biennale* fulfilled its role as the institution's official organ of promotion. As early as 1952, Rodolfo Pallucchini began pushing for the transformation of the magazine, strongly convinced that *la biennale* had already sufficiently established itself in the public realm to become a critical authority in the artistic and cultural fields. This is one of the first occasions in which the editors viewed the magazine as a space for critical debate, not simply concerned with the promotion of the institution. This realization led to the publication of special issues focusing on the work of a single artist or movement, often analysed from the multiple perspectives at the core of the Biennale's institution. In 1953, a double issue (n. 13-14, April-June 1953) dedicated to Picasso appears. The issue was published simultaneously with an exhibition of the artist's work in Rome, at the Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna.⁵³ It was a completely Italian issue with contributions by Apollonio, Argan, Branzi, but also Pallucchini, and Malipiero who wrote about the relation between Picasso and music, and artists such as Carlo Carrà, Enrico Prampolini, Gino Severini, and Renato Guttuso. Although this was a step towards the magazine becoming a space capable of hosting a broader analysis of contemporary culture, it should not be forgotten that its first aim was to serve the Biennale's needs. The Picasso issue was published in conjunction with an exhibition in Rome, but in 1948 and 1950 respectively, twenty-five and thirteen of Picasso's works were shown at the Biennale. The issue was strategic since it attempted to create a network with another Italian institution, whilst legitimising the critical-artistic authority of the Biennale in identifying trends in the artistic field and exhibiting them.

In the 19-20th issue (April-June 1954), dedicated to the 27th Biennale a change has not been registered yet. Pallucchini confirms that the magazine remained consistent with its initial mission: "[...] *la biennale*, which is now four years old, bringing both an informative and critical contribution on what the 27th Biennale is presenting, keeps faith to its mission, as it was defined since the beginning by Giovanni Ponti: a continuous update on the facts of art, a turn of the horizon from this Venice, that periodically is at the centre of the world's attention with its figurative arts exhibition".⁵⁴ During his editorial tenure, it was largely

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Letter from publisher Vittorio Alfieri to Zorzi, May 21, 1951. *la Biennale di Venezia* – ASAC, s. 4.13, R.L.B., corrispondenza, b. 06 (1950-1956).

51

See footnote 42.

52

See exchange of letters between Pallucchini and Zorzi, letter from Pallucchini to Zorzi, Venice January 28, 1952; letter from Zorzi to Pallucchini, Venice February 2, 1952, in *la Biennale di Venezia* – ASAC, s. 4.13, R.L.B., Professor Pallucchini, b. 08 (1952). See also letter from Pallucchini to Ponti, October 10, 1953, in *la Biennale di Venezia* – ASAC, s. 4.13, R.L.B., Rapporti con le tipografie.

53

The exhibition was titled *Picasso*. It collected 200 works produced between 1920 and 1953, and was held at the Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna in Rome (May-June 1953).

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Pallucchini at the time was the Vice President of the magazine. He wrote the editorial letter, dated June 8, 1954, published in *la biennale*, no. 19-20 (April-June 1954).

Zorzi's strong ties to the press office and subsequent focus on the magazine as a producer of propaganda which prevented it from transforming into a critical organism.

la biennale's shift would gradually begin in 1957, with the 28-29th double issue, a few years into Umbro Apollonio's editorship,⁵⁵ and after a year-long interruption of the publication during which its structure was reviewed and renovated.⁵⁶ Apollonio had been part of the editorial team since the magazine's first issue, and was a regular contributor. Apollonio was also director of the Biennale's Archive, position that he held from 1949 to 1972.⁵⁷ In the 28-29th double issue Apollonio wrote "*La Biennale e la critica*" (The Biennale and criticism) in which he illuminates the Biennale's need for change (and perhaps strategically also uses the Biennale as a stratagem to explain the changes he would make in the magazine):

The Biennale like any other public institute that wants to resist the wear of time, has to modify, from time to time, its structure, in order to meet the exigencies, imposed by experience and the passing of age. It has to keep faith to its delicate function of serving the artistic chronicle.⁵⁸

Most of his words might be used to discuss the magazine. As above mentioned, both the magazine and the biennial can be seen as "entities in time", and both need to understand and adapt to their period. It is probably from this very moment that the editor becomes aware of the magazine's possibilities as a space for criticism and reflection, both on the Biennale and on the magazine itself. It is not just a mirror of the institution, but a tool for self-understanding capable of analysing the Biennale's own potentialities and criticalities. This excerpt was published right before 1958 and remarks that the discussion around the institution's need to change had begun. The debate about how it could update itself in order to be able to respond to contemporary demands of art and culture continued, with interruptions, until 1968, when the conference "*La Nuova Biennale. Contestazioni e Proposte*" (The New Biennale. Critiques and Proposals) was held.⁵⁹ This was the time of the culmination of the student protests, and, departing from the academy, it had included some of the most prominent artistic and cultural events in Italy and abroad, including the Venice Biennale.⁶⁰ The Venetian institution in 1968 was still regulated by the fascist

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In 1955, after Elio Zorzi's death, the role of editor was assigned to Umbro Apollonio who held the position until the end of the publication in 1971.

56

For information concerning the agreements between *la biennale* and its publishers see Bianchi, in particular 251-254.

57

Apollonio was an art critic, who besides directing the magazine of the biennale and its archive, was also curator of several exhibitions of the Biennale and director of the 35th Venice Biennale in 1970.

58

Umbro Apollonio, "La Biennale e la critica", *la biennale*, no. 28-29 (June-September 1957): 6-7.

59

See *la biennale*, no. 64-65 (January-June 1969). The conference was held between November 15-17, 1968 at Ca' Giustinian in Venice. It was organised by the City of Venice. Another conference was organised earlier, in September 1968 by the magazine *Metro*, edited by art critic and publisher Bruno Alfieri. The conference, with speakers such as Giulio C. Argan, Gillo Dorfles, Ettore Colla and Germano Celant, was titled "*Proposte per la Biennale. Una tavola rotonda, un progetto*" (Propositions for the Biennale. A round table, a project) and by its very title was meant, according to Alfieri, to "stimulate reactions and ideas". See Bruno Alfieri, "*Proposte per la Biennale. Progetto*," in *Metro*, no. 15 (1968): 55. See also Vittoria Martini, *La Biennale di Venezia 1968-1978. La Rivoluzione Incompiuta* (PhD diss., Luav University and Ca' Foscari University, Venice, 2010-2011).

60

On the "*Biennale della contestazione*" (Biennial of Protest) and on the history of the Venice Biennale see Di Martino, *La Biennale di Venezia 1895-1995*. See also Stefania Portinari, *Anni Settanta. La Biennale di Venezia* (Milan: Marsilio, 2018), 17-117 and Vittoria Martini, *La Biennale di Venezia 1968-1978*.

statute issued by a Royal Decree-Law of 21 July 1938,⁶¹ and it was only in 1973, that the institution was actually reformed.⁶²

The 30th issue (January-March 1958) of *la biennale* registers another change. For the first time the magazine was officially published by the institution. Until that moment the Biennale's editorial office was only in charge of content, while production, publishing, distribution and sales were outsourced to the publisher.⁶³

With Apollonio's reform of the magazine and the decreased emphasis on the informative character of the publication, the "*Bollettino*" ceased but would be revived a few years later in the 36-37th issue (1959) in a column titled "*Osservatorio*" (Observatory), on the national and international contemporary art scene. The magazine's new role was outlined in a draft invitation letter for potential contributors, in which Apollonio explains how the new *la biennale* would distance itself from what the magazine used to be:

The magazine is not meant to be a means of propaganda of the various events of the Biennale, but a publication which makes known and discusses the problems of contemporary art history in all its aspects: figurative, drama, music, film and architecture. It is our constant care to avoid giving the magazine a purely informational character, but to place it on a level of deeper critical values, contemporary artistic phenomena, or those immediately precedent, are not dealt only with information or exalted celebration, but with the severe methods of historical investigation, from the point of view of cultural influences and linguistic structures, and also with relation to the poetics of the work of art.⁶⁴

Apollonio's editorial approach completely distanced itself from the informative and propagandistic approach of his predecessor, Zorzi. As an "historian of contemporaneity"⁶⁵ who was able to understand present trends and often anticipate them, Apollonio, was able to open *la biennale* up to a range of renowned national and international contributors, such as critics, art historians, and scholars with different backgrounds and enquiry methods, who gave life to debates around art criticism and its methods, contemporary art, aesthetics and judgement.⁶⁶ Since the 30th issue, on the cover were published the names of the contributors to the issue, emphasizing their role and making them more visible to the audience. The number

61

On the history of the Venice Biennale's statute see Giorgio Di Genova, *Periplo delle peripezie del cosiddetto ente autonomo La Biennale di Venezia*, (Rome: Officina edizioni, 1972); Marilena Vecco, *La Biennale di Venezia, Documenta di Kassel - esposizione, vendita, pubblicizzazione dell'arte contemporanea* (Venice: Franco Angeli, 2002).

62

On July 8, 1971 the reform law was approved by the parliamentary committee of Palazzo Madama. This law was definitively approved by the Parliament on July 26, 1973. The law is reported in *La Biennale di Venezia: Annuario 1975, Eventi 1974* (Venice: La Biennale di Venezia, 1975), 15-22.

63

Letter from Apollonio to Massimo Alesi, dated June 13, 1957: "given the unhappy initiatives with two publishers and the continuous discussions that this system causes, for which many times the institution itself is questioned [...] I would propose to study the possibility that it was the same biennial the publisher of the magazine, limiting itself as entrusting its distribution and sale to some publisher: a similar system was used for the 28th biennial catalog", in *la Biennale di Venezia - ASAC*, s. 4.13, R.L.B., corrispondenza, b. 07 (1956-1966).

64

Draft letter for International contributors, signed by Apollonio, in *la Biennale di Venezia - ASAC*, s. 4.13, R.L.B., corrispondenza, b. 07 (1956-1966).

65

Dal Canton, *Riviste d'arte a Venezia*, 273.

66

See Sergio Bettini, "Arte e Critica", *la biennale*, no. 30 (January-March 1958): 3-12; and "Possibilità di un giudizio di valore sulle opere dell'arte contemporanea", *la biennale*, no. 56 (March 1965): 3-17.

of contributions per issue was reduced to give its authors greater space for analysis and discussion.

Sustaining its new role, *la biennale* published surveys with in-depth readings of international and national artists, and began dedicating covers to international artists.⁶⁷ Historical surveys brought new light to great artistic movements such as futurism (no. 36-37, July-December 1959) which would be featured in the 30th Biennale in 1960. One of the most successful issues was on realism. The cover of the issue, published in 1962, reproduced a detail of Renato Guttuso's *Vecchio che legge il giornale nella strada* (*Old man reading the newspaper in the street*) (1960).⁶⁸

During the second half of the 1960s, articles and essays on the relationship between the arts and communication theories, and the methods of art criticism were published. Worthy of mention is Umberto Eco's "*Teoria della comunicazione e arti visuali*" (Theory and communication of the visual arts) published in 1966.⁶⁹ In this issue, the subtitle of the magazine changes into "*Rassegna delle Arti Contemporanee*" (Contemporary Arts Review), emphasizing the focus on the contemporary arts.

From the end of the 1950s to the mid-1960s, the magazine reached its apex as a vehicle for international network and critical dialogue, now on a par with other prestigious contemporary international art magazines. It is interesting to note that *la biennale* reduced those 'high class advertisements' mentioned in the press release of the magazine's launch, such as commercial products and tourist attractions,⁷⁰ and used advertising as a strategic connector. With Zorzi, advertising was meant to show the cultural elite that Venice was a tourist and cultural attraction, while Apollonio was interested in an audience of intellectuals and cultural affiliates who could discuss the latest artistic and critical developments. For this reason, *la biennale* started exchanging advertising space with other European magazines, which fostered the creation of an international network. Some of the magazines included *Kunstwerk*, *Art International*, *Magnum*, *Zodiac*, *Werk*, *Aujurd'hui*, *Journal de L'amateur d'Art*.⁷¹ A similar strategy had already been adopted during the avant-garde, when artists' magazines would exchange advertisements in order to promote each other and create a network of connections.⁷²

The end of *la biennale* and posthumous development of the exhibition magazine

By the mid-1960s, after these exciting and fruitful years, the magazine was already reaching the end of its life. The folding of *la biennale* was linked to the crisis that hit the Biennale and led to a complete restructuring and renovation of the institu-

67

See Hans Richter's cover on issue no. 54 (September 1964).

68

See *la biennale*, no. 46-47 (December 1962).

69

See Umberto Eco, "Teoria della comunicazione e arti visuali", *la biennale*, no. 60 (December 1966): 5-6.

70

The Biennale was initially established, not only for the celebration of the silver anniversary, but also with the hope of boosting the economy of the city in a time of terrible decline so it is somewhat expected that its official promotional organ, i.e. the magazine, would also advertise the city's grandeur and its touristic attractions. See Alloway, *The Venice Biennale 1895-1968*, and Mimita Lamberti, "International Exhibitions in Venice".

71

See document "Rivista la biennale di Venezia. Scambio di pubblicità con altre riviste", in *la Biennale di Venezia* – ASAC, s. 4.13, R.L.B., corrispondenza, b. 11 (1958-1970).

72

On the strategy of exchanging advertisements in avant-garde magazines, see Meghan Forbes, "Advertisement As Collaboration In the Central European Avant-Garde Magazines," *Post. Notes on Modern and Contemporary Art Around the Globe* (MoMA), published on March 22, 2016. https://post.moma.org/content_items/769-advertisement-as-collaboration-in-the-central-european-avant-garde-magazines, accessed June 2019.

tion at the beginning of the 1970s. Alloway reports a conversation with Apollonio, who pointed out that:

In 1968 it was becoming necessary for the Biennale to do more than be informative. The massive presentation of great numbers of works from different countries is the foundation of the show. This function of data-assembling had been the proper course after the Second World War, but he regarded it as basically fulfilled.⁷³

An attempt to confront the problems surrounding the Biennale motivated the conference *La Nuova Biennale*, held in November 1968. Artists, thinkers and critics, including Sergio Bettini, Wladimiro Dorigo,⁷⁴ and Apollonio, were called to debate the Biennale's need to abandon its old structures and methods. The acts were published in the issue 64-65 (January-June 1969), which in many ways marked another shift in the magazine. The frequency had already slowed down since the 63rd issue (January-March 1968) and the magazine was becoming an annual publication. Issue 66 (September 1970) was, according to the magazine's administrator Douglesse Grassi, the very last edited issue of the magazine: "because of technical difficulties, and the pending reorganization of the Biennale, it is not possible to guarantee the regular periodicity of the magazine. Thus, it will be published once a year, in the form of a "book" and will be normally dedicated to a single theme in order to constitute a monographic volume".⁷⁵ The last issue (no. 67-68, December 1971) followed the model of issue 64-65 and published the acts of the conference "*Arte e Didattica*" (Art and Didactics), held in May 1970, as part of the research activities organised for the 35th Art Exhibition. In 1971 the Biennale still had constitutive problems to solve; the new statute would be approved only in 1973 by the Italian Parliament. In 1972 the archive's directorship passed into the hands of Wladimiro Dorigo who focused almost entirely on the archive's organization and documentation of the Biennale's activities. In 1975, after four years of silence, the magazine was resurrected, with a new title, subtitle and format, for another four years as the *Annuario dell'ASAC* (ASAC's Almanac) before ending in 1979. It was a "Yearbook" linked to the archive, publishing the events of the previous year and once again privileging the informative and documentary character of the publication rather than the critical one.

In only two decades *la biennale* proved itself able to adapt to the changes of its time, sometimes even anticipating the changes that needed to occur within the Biennale itself, evolving from a mere instrument of promotion into a platform for the contemporary debate of art and culture. With its shift, *la biennale* succeeded in furthering an ancestral model that would define the features of the exhibition magazine and those magazines born out of other institutions of the art system. It shows the magazine's ability, during a twenty year lifespan, to understand the changes dictated by contemporaneity and those in public taste.

Both editorial periods of the magazine, under Zorzi and Apollonio, launched editorial initiatives still practiced by current exhibition magazines such as the promotion of an institution, contribution of curators, and creation of a space for the display and discussion of contemporary art and culture. These three commonalities are part of the attempt to transform the magazine of a biennial exhibition into a critical authority, and by doing so, contribute to turning the biennial itself into a platform able to simultaneously generate culture and legitimise it.

The history of *la biennale* shows the need of institutions to investigate and control the contents around the exhibition, to create their own means

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Alloway, *The Venice Biennale 1895-1968*, 22.

⁷⁴

Editor of *la biennale* with Apollonio from 1958.

⁷⁵

Letter by Douglesse Grassi to the subscribers of the magazine, dated 1972, in *la Biennale di Venezia – ASAC*, s. 4.13, R.L.B., corrispondenza, b. 16 (1969-1972).

of methodologically understanding and documenting the present and, finally, to produce new knowledge, fulfilling the magazine's and the exhibition's educational role.

Finally, the exhibition magazine evinces the exhibition's need to become an incubator of culture, knowledge and discourse, and to keep the audience interested all year long. Exhibition magazines crucially document and historicise the recurring exhibition and contemporary art at a specific moment in time and space. The analysis of the history of the exhibition magazine necessitates an understanding and study of the institution itself, the tension between the ephemerality of both the biennial and the magazine versus the institution and the archive, and their strategies of legitimation. Also, the relationship between art and its audience, which has guided some of the changes of *la biennale* (and, as we have seen, the Biennale itself), cannot be underestimated and encourages a discussion of the media's function and influence.

There are multiple perspectives from which to study magazines, since they have the potential to document the trajectories and shifts, radical or incremental, that occur in art history, curating, criticism and artistic practices, as well as the art market. This study requires all of these multiple perspectives, since the link between exhibition and magazine is inextricable, and the exhibition magazine remains first and foremost a vehicle to legitimise its institution, while responding to contemporaneity and the changes in the audience's taste.

Abbreviations

ASAC Archivio Storico delle Arti Contemporanee

s. Serie

b. busta

R.L.B. Rivista La Biennale

Author's Biography

Camilla Salvaneschi is a doctoral candidate in Visual Culture at the Università Iuav di Venezia and at the University of Aberdeen. Her dissertation analyses the art magazines published by periodic exhibitions such as documenta, Manifesta, and the Venice Biennale. Her research interests include the evolution of contemporary art magazines and art publications in the art and exhibitionary system. She is recipient of *e-flux journal*

fellowship (2020). Recent publications include the essays *Contemporary Art Magazines: The Archive in the Archive* (2019) and *Magnifying the Margins: Art Magazines in the Contemporary Art System* (upcoming 2020). She is collaborating with *ARTMargins Online*, and is co-founder and editor of *OBOE Journal On Biennials and Other Exhibitions* (2020).

Martina Tanga**Flipping the Exhibition Inside Out: Enrico Crispolti's
Show *Ambiente come Sociale* at the 1976 Venice Biennale****Abstract**

In 1976, art historian and curator Enrico Crispolti – charged with organizing the show, *Ambiente come Sociale*, for the Italian Pavilion at the Venice Biennale – radically rethought the exhibition form. In an unconventional move, he strategically chose not to house any artworks within the confines of the gallery space. Instead, he sprawled documentary photographs, videos, texts, pamphlets, and audio recordings on tables like the products of field research. The artworks themselves were site-specific and located elsewhere in various towns and cities across the country. Adhering to the Biennale's overarching theme of environment and decentralization, Crispolti championed artists working in Arte Ambientale (environmental art), who were making art located in the urban context and social reality. Yet, Crispolti turned the institution's theme inside out: while visitors came to its center to see the art, they were thrust outwards towards the peripheries, and outside in the city, where the actual artworks were sited. The ingenuity of this action, and the re-conception of what could constitute installation art, is evident when Crispolti's exhibition is compared to Germano Celant's 1976 Biennale show *Ambiente/Arte*, a diachronic art historical study of this new art medium. While Celant presented self-referential examples based on formal qualities, Crispolti exponentially broadened the boundaries of installation art to include the environment, urban context, social questions, and political contingency. This paper examines Crispolti's curatorial strategy as it aligned, but also critiqued, the Biennale as a cultural institution. Furthermore, it frames the exhibition as a medium for artistic innovation, particularly in the definition of environment and installation art.

Keywords

Arte Ambientale, Ambiente, Institutional Critique, Enrico Crispolti, Exhibition Design

Flipping the Exhibition Inside Out: Enrico Crispolti's Show *Ambiente come Sociale* at the 1976 Venice Biennale

Martina Tanga

Just six months before the 37th Venice Biennale was scheduled to open in July 1976, art historian, critic and curator Enrico Crispolti was unexpectedly called to organise the exhibition that represented Italy in this multi-national art world presentation.¹ Internal politics at the institution – which lead to the resignation of the cinematographer Maurizio Calvesi and author Silvano Giannelli from the visual arts commission – fortuitously resulted in an opportunity for Crispolti.²

Not many curators would have had an exhibition concept, and a method to implement it, at such short notice. Crispolti, however, with his ear close to the ground, had been working tirelessly throughout the 1970s with artists – such as Ugo La Pietra, Franco Summa, Riccardo Dalisi, and the collective Humor Power Ambulante – supporting and promoting their projects that were participatory, temporary, and explicitly sited in the urban environment. Necessity is the mother of invention and Crispolti, in an accelerated timeframe, seized the chance to reconceive the exhibition as a creative medium in order to introduce to Biennale audiences artistic experiments occurring in Italy's streets and piazzas.

The resulting exhibition, *Ambiente come sociale* (Environment as Social), July 18 – October 10, 1976, was innovative both in its content and form. Crispolti brought artists, who, for the most part, skirted spaces of institutional display – such as galleries and museums – to the art establishment, specifically the Venice Biennale. These artists typically chose to inhabit a peripheral position *vis-à-vis* the art economy, operating in the social, urban environment. This enabled them to gain greater artistic autonomy from commercial and elitist structures that pervaded the institutional art system and to attain the freedom to engage directly

1

The painter Raffaele De Grada was also on the commission and in charge of the Italian Pavilion. He worked together with Crispolti on *Ambiente come Sociale*. De Grada's original exhibition idea centred on the theme "Habitat". After Crispolti was commissioned to curate the exhibition in the Italian Pavilion in January 1976, De Grada took a secondary position and let Crispolti take the lead on the exhibition concept, content, and execution.

2

Stefania Portinari, "La Biennale di Venezia 1976: Ambiente/Arte," in *Anni settanta. La Biennale di Venezia* (Venice: Marsilio, 2018), 266. See also Maurizio Calvesi, "Polemica sulla Biennale," *Corriere della Sera*, July 1, 1976, 3 and "Commissioni, dimissioni di S. Giannelli and M. Calvesi," Historical Archives of Contemporary Arts, Venice (ASAC), FS, AV, b. 225. Among other things, Calvesi resigned over the fact that he thought the general theme "Ambiente" was too vague, and he wanted a historical show about the history of the Biennale.

3

Martina Tanga, *Arte Ambientale, Urban Space, and Participatory Art* (New York: Routledge, 2019).

with urban audiences.³ Crispolti's decision to bring these artists to the Biennale – a site, in many ways, at the centre of the art world – was bold.

The question of how to present these artists' work authentically drove Crispolti to reconceive the exhibition form. Embracing the notion of decentralisation – the recalibration of power from the centre to the periphery – as an exhibition strategy, Crispolti did not show *any* original artwork in the Biennale galleries, and only displayed documentation of site-specific and ephemeral interventions that had taken place elsewhere across the country.⁴ While mounting an exhibition composed of documentation of large-scale, site-specific artworks was not new – already in 1969, curator Willoughby Sharp had used such methods when showcasing Land Art in the show *Earth Art* held at the Johnson Museum at Cornell University⁵ – Crispolti embedded his choice within the context of the Venice Biennale. His presentation went to the heart of the Biennale's recent institutional crisis, which originated in 1968 when protests charged the organisation of being elitist and anti-democratic.⁶ Capitalising on the Biennale's predicament, Crispolti fashioned the exhibition as a form of institutional critique; a creative practice typically carried out by artists to highlight the role museums, galleries and other sites of display have on the presentation of art. The work undertaken by practitioners of institutional critique is one of decentring in that they seek to shed light on latent power disparities. Crispolti's curatorial program, additionally, needs to be understood in relation to broader definitions of decentralisation, a loaded word in the art of politics of 1970s Italy. Crispolti, therefore, leveraged his ability to examine the redistribution of power to challenge the hierarchies internal to the Biennale and the art establishment. *Ambiente come sociale* was of the moment and, without missing a beat of the chants on the streets, Crispolti intended to “bring into the context of the Biennale issues and experiences *in vivo* and debate them, in order to make the Biennale itself to be an instrument of creative presence in the current socio-cultural debate”.⁷

Unfortunately, Crispolti's efforts for *Ambiente come sociale* have received scant critical attention.⁸ This might have been because the 1976 Biennale was extravagantly large, with many new initiatives and special exhibitions.⁹ With so much going on, the organisers did very little to promote Crispolti's show.¹⁰

4

For an analysis of Enrico Crispolti's decentred curatorial projects and philosophy during the 1970s see Enrico Crispolti, *Arti visive e partecipazione sociale* (Bari: De Donato, 1977). For philosophical and political theories of decentralisation see: Cossutta, Armando. *Decentramento e Partecipazione: L'iniziativa dei Comunisti per l'attuazione della Legge sui Consigli di Circoscrizione* (Roma: Editori Riuniti, 1977) and *I Consigli di Quartiere* (Roma: Editori Riuniti, 1973).

5

The Johnson Museum was, at the time, called the Andrew Dickson White Museum of Art. See Andrew Dickson White Museum of Art, *Earth Art*, exh. cat. (Ithaca, NY: Andrew Dickson White Museum of Art, Cornell University, 1969). Sharp included actual artworks made of earth in the galleries and site-specific artworks scattered around Cornell's campus. While some artists used conceptual practices drawing on documentary material, the exhibition presented actual artworks on site. Prior to Sharp's *Earth Art*, artist Robert Smithson curated the 1968 exhibition at the Dwan Gallery in New York titled simply *Earthworks*. This exhibition included documentary material of large-scale outdoor works by fourteen artists, including Herbert Bayer, Robert Morris, and Claes Oldenburg. This exhibition included site-specific artworks, like Morris's *Untitled (Dirt)*, as well as documentary photographs of artworks sited elsewhere. See Suzaan Boettger, “This Land Is Their Land”, *Art Journal Open* (April 19, 2013), artjournal.collegeart.org/?p=3566, accessed March 2020.

6

Enzo Di Martino, *The History of the Venice Biennale: 1895-2005: Visual Arts, Architecture, Cinema, Dance, Music, Theatre* (Venice: Papiro Arte Venezia, 2007), 60-64.

7

“Intendo così portare dentro il contesto della Biennale il problema ed esperienze nel vivo del loro dibattersi, in modo da permettere alla Biennale stessa di farsi strumento di reale e creativa presenza nel dibattito socioculturale attuale”. Crispolti, *Arti visive e partecipazione sociale*, 309-310.

8

Portinari, “La Biennale di Venezia 1976”, 260.

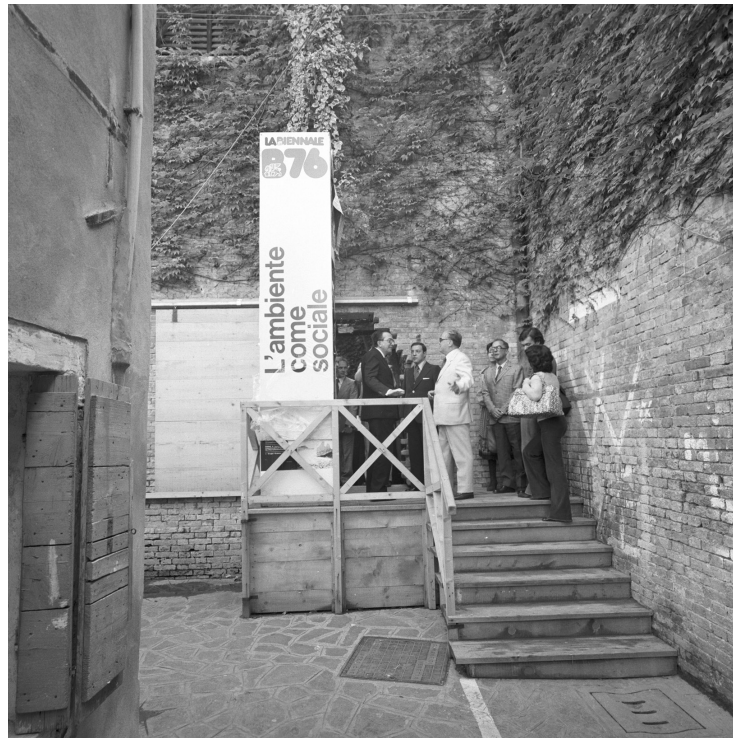
9

Apart from the central exhibition curated by Germano Celant, there were numerous special exhibitions, including: *Spagna avanguardia artistica e realtà sociale 1936-1976*; *Il Werkbund – 1907 alle origini del design*; *Il razionalismo e l'architettura in Italia durante il Fascismo*; *Europa-America: Centro storico-suburbio, 27 architetti contemporanei*; *Ettore Sottsass: un designer Italiano*; *Design: Cinque Graphic Designers*; *Design: Le forme del vetro*; *Man Ray, testimonianza attraverso la fotografia*; and finally *Attualità Internazionali '72-'76*.

The exhibition entrance, as we can see from this documentary photograph, was through a back door on the Calle Paludo, and there was little signage within the Giardini for the exhibition [fig. 1]. Not only was it hard to locate geographically, but the show also suffered from critical invisibility, as it was omitted from the English press packet.¹¹ It is no surprise, then, that it received minimal coverage.¹² Moreover, *Ambiente come sociale*, based entirely on projected images and ephemeral material, was hard to document, and installation photographs yielded very little information when it came to aesthetic display and experience. All of these factors are obstacles to scholarship. Speculating further, none of the artists in the exhibitions have achieved renowned status, and their work from 1970s Italy is just now beginning to be studied.¹³ Nevertheless, Crispolti's exhibition is an important early example of curatorial practice as institutional critique. Its decentralised strategy, applied to many different facets of exhibition organising, has much to offer with regards to democratising the experience of art.

fig. 1

Entrance to exhibition *Ambiente come sociale*, Venice Biennale, July 18 – October 10, 1976. Pictured entering the exhibition: Prime Minister Giulio Andreotti with journalist Floris Luigi Ammannati
© AAF – ArchivioArte
Fondazione Cassa di Risparmio di Modena, Fondazione Modena Arti Visive



Ambiente

The term *Ambiente* (Environment) pulls together various dimensions of understanding space in terms of art, politics, and the social context. It was the overarching theme for the whole Venice Biennale, titled *Ambiente, Partecipazione, Strutture*

10

Sara Catenacci, "L'ambiente come sociale alla Biennale di Venezia 1976: note di un libro mai realizzato", in *In corso d'opera: Ricerche dei dottorandi di Storia dell'Arte della Sapienza*, ed. Michele Nicolaci, Matteo Piccioni, and Lorenzo Riccardi (Rome: Campisano Editore, 2015), 321.

11

Patrizia Regorda, "Biennale di Venezia 1976: la sezione Italiana "Ambiente come sociale" (MA thesis, Università degli Studi di Pavia, 2004), 87.

12

Catenacci, "L'ambiente come sociale alla Biennale di Venezia 1976", 320. Most of the national press critiqued the 1976 Biennale for focusing on quantity rather than quality of exhibitions and directed specific critiques toward the exhibition *Attualità '72-'76*. What little was written up about *Ambiente come sociale* focused on the fact that it was an ideological exhibition only about social issues, and completely missing aesthetic innovation. See Regorda, *Biennale di Venezia 1976*, 60–62, and 90.

13

Tanga, *Arte Ambientale, Urban Space, and Participatory Art*, 5–6.

Culturali (Environment, Participation, Cultural Structures), selected by the visual arts commission¹⁴ led by architect Vittorio Gregotti.¹⁵ They chose it because it was considered broad enough to be interpreted in different ways, nationally and internationally; the idea of environment was linked to trends in installation and land art within Italy and other countries.¹⁶ Gregotti hoped to present a cohesive exhibition across the pavilions, and many nations showcased art that aligned with the theme. For instance, the participatory artist group Collectif d'Art Sociologique, exhibiting work in the French Pavilion, projected cinematographic footage onto historic buildings in Venice.

Richard Long's work, shown in the British Pavilion, also engaged with the environmental theme by installing rocks inside the gallery, along with photographs of other rock sculptures, such as *A Line in Ireland* (1974) and *A Line in the Himalayas* (1975). The American Pavilion likewise chose to show artists who responded to the theme *Ambiente*, such as Robert Irwin and Jim Roche. Broadening the implications of the term, the Swiss Pavilion showcased works of Ernst Aklin and Ernst Buchwalder that addressed ecological issues.

In Italy, *Ambiente* helped define the type of artwork – now called *Arte Ambientale* (environmental art) – Crispolti had been promoting across the country: temporary, often participatory, and sited specifically in the urban space.¹⁷ A movement that had been gaining traction since the beginning of the 1970s, it had various manifestations in exhibitions like Luciano Caramel's *Campo Urbano*, held in Como in 1969; *Interventi sulla città e sul paesaggio*, held at Zafferana Etnea in 1970; and most prominently in *Volterra '73*, curated by Crispolti in Volterra, Tuscany, in 1973. Environmental art was still inchoate in Italy, and at this time it was referred to in different ways, such as “arte sociale” (social art), “arte partecipata” (participatory art), and “arte urbana” (urban art).¹⁸ Indeed, it was the Biennale's general theme – already chosen in 1975 before Crispolti was called to curate the Italian Pavilion – that helped give this art movement its name. Combining *ambiente* (environment) with *sociale* (social) for his title, Crispolti began to define an art practice that involved the expansion of aesthetic projects outside museums and galleries and into streets and piazzas.

This type of site-specific art engaged with the urban environment as a space of social relations.¹⁹ Crispolti only later defined “Arte Ambientale [as] part of an urban context, where there are people, where you have an architectural context. It [was] active in that it hoped to change the space in which it [was] situated.”²⁰ Moreover, the art was intimately tied to its urban site, to its diversity, anthropological patrimony, social actuality, and political contingency.²¹ Participatory to varying

14

Members of the 1976 Venice Biennale Visual Arts Commission included: Eduardo Arroyo, Enrico Crispolti, Raffaele De Grada, Pontus Hulten and Tommaso Trini.

15

Vittorio Gregotti was the Director of the Visual Art and Architecture section, 1974–1976.

16

Gregotti's understanding of the term *Ambiente* was interdisciplinary, as he came from an architecture background. Final approval of the theme was given on March 27, 1976. See Regorda, *Biennale di Venezia 1976*, 42.

17

Tanga, *Arte Ambientale, Urban Space, and Participatory Art*.

18

Luciano Caramel, “Towards the Seventies (Beyond the Sixties),” in *Arte in Italia negli anni '70: verso i settanta (1968–1970)*, eds. Luciano Caramel, Elena Di Raddo, and Ada Lombardi (Milan: Edizioni Charta, 1996), 25.

19

Alessandra Pioselli, “Arte, politica e territorio: esperienze nella Milano degli anni settanta”, in *Milano città d'arte: arte e società 1950–1970*, eds. Paolo Campiglio, Marilisa Di Giovanni, Cristiano G. Sangiuliano, and Alessandra Pioselli (Alessandria: Edizioni dell'Orso, 2001), 97.

20

“La land art non è attiva, è molto romantica. Cioè, la misura della land art non è la città, ma il deserto. L'Arte ambientale si inserisce in un contesto urbano, la piazza dove c'è la gente, dove hai un contesto architettonico che voi confrontare. C'è una idea attiva. L'Arte ambientale tende a modificare lo spazio dove è messa.” Enrico Crispolti, interview with the author, Rome, August 4, 2011.

21

Enrico Crispolti, “Preface”, *Praticare la città: Arte ambientale, prospettive di ricerca e metodologie d'intervento*, Massimo Bignardi and Enrico Crispolti (Naples: Liguori Editore, 2013), xiii.

degrees, it sought to engage citizens in the process of creation and, in turn, critical reflection. The goal of environmental art was to awaken urban inhabitants out of a state of passive conformity and into a new sense of civil and social consciousness. These artists' work, therefore, was necessarily based outside in the urban sphere, as the site where they could unfurl creative activity with a different modality from gallery-based art, firmly rooted in the social context.

Environmental art embraced a decentralised approach that could not have been more fitting to the Biennale's 1976 agenda. This year in particular, the institution was concerned with promoting democratic values and reaching working-class audiences beyond the famous exhibition venue of the *Giardini* (gardens). New initiatives involved programming in neighbourhoods around Venice and beyond.²² In other words, the Biennale wanted to extend beyond its institutional space – into the urban space – to reach broader public.

At the same time, however, positioned outside the traditional Biennale grounds, environmental artworks inherently critiqued the spaces of aesthetic display of the art establishment, in both museums and galleries, in ways that related to institutional critique. Asserting autonomy, environmental artists disengaged from the art institutional sphere to take up sociopolitical issues of the city, such as capital's territorialisation of urban space, the uncontrolled growth of cities, rampant land speculation, and the desperate need for working-class housing.²³ These issues were, perhaps, antithetical to typical art-world concerns, and environmental artists sought – each to varying degrees – to find value for their projects outside of the art world economy.²⁴

The crux of the matter is that their presentation at the Biennale reveals a dynamic tension between the institution – and its goals to decentralise and democratise – and environmental artists – whose projects sited in alternative locales were inherently critical of institutional spaces. The shifting contextual relationship between the artwork and its space of display – its location, but also narrative, politics, and framework – was complex, and challenged the traditional dichotomy of institutional critique. That is to say, at the 1976 Venice Biennale, critical artwork was presented at an institution that was itself going through a process of self-critique and sought to implement institutional change to make the Biennale more democratic, transparent, and accessible to a broader public.²⁵ This resulted simultaneously in an alignment of art and institutions, as well as critical opposition, thanks to Crispolti's innovative exhibition strategy. He cleverly brought the *issues* into the centre – in terms of the institution and discourse – but without compromising the criticality of artworks.

In *Ambiente come Sociale*, Crispolti organised examples of environmental art in a way that reflected the provisional nature of the art form itself.²⁶

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For example, the conference titled “Il decentramento culturale in Italia”, October 1-3, 1976. The meeting included sociologists, artists, trade union members, representatives of grassroots associations, and local organisations. The common objective was to debate how to include, in the circuits of cultural production, those individuals who had traditionally been excluded, and to question the role of cultural institutions in this process. See “Attività del Gruppo permanente di lavoro per i convegni”, reprinted in *Annuario 1977: Eventi del 1976: La Biennale di Venezia* (Venezia: La Biennale di Venezia, 1977), 426.

23

See, for example, Martina Tanga, “Riappropriazione Dell'Ambiente: Ugo La Pietra's and Franco Summa's Urban Interventions” in *Arte Ambientale, Urban Space, and Participatory Art*, 106-141.

24

In general, curators and promoters of art practicing in the 1970s – Germano Celant or Achille Bonito Oliva – did not embrace social political art, like environmental art, into the mainstream art scene.

25

See Martina Tanga, “Institutional Reinvention: The Venice Biennale during the 1970s”, in *Untying 'the Knot': The State of Postwar Italian Art History*, eds. Marin Sullivan and Sharon Hecker (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2018), 207-228.

26

Crispolti was called in to organise the exhibition in January 1975, just five months before the Biennale was scheduled to open. Sara Catenacci's essay “*L'ambiente come sociale* alla Biennale di Venezia 1976: note di un libro mai realizzato,” in Nicolaci, Piccioni, and Riccardi, *In corso d'opera*: 317-324, documents the political context around the commissioning of Crispolti's exhibition with Raffaele de Grada.

Working with designers Ettore Sottsass and Ulla Salovaara, he exhibited interventions that had taken place in cities across Italy as research findings, filling four large galleries of the Central Pavilion with documentary material in the form of projected photographs, videotapes, artists' interviews, and other ephemeral material. Environmental art was not introduced as a fully formed, codified, and unified aesthetic movement; rather, Crispolti expressed an art practice that was evolving. The flexibility of the term itself was reflected in the exhibition design, with temporary walls to which documents and images were hastily tacked and elements that could be changed out at a moment's notice.

As an organizing structure, Crispolti showed documentation of artworks in five diverse "hypotheses" of aesthetic interventions within the urban sphere: Hypothesis and Reality of Urban Conflict, Individual Urban Re-appropriation, Spontaneous Participation – Political/Poetical Action, Participation with/through the Local Entities, and Hypothesis of Social Relations through the State Entities.²⁷ These hypotheses allowed groupings of similar art practices to draw out themes in the different approaches to environmental art. Displayed as research, Crispolti implied that these classifications were tentative and in flux, and, as the curator, his role was to synthesise these urban art interventions and present them as documentation to the public.

It is unclear how Crispolti communicated these hypotheses within the exhibition space; as we shall see, he organised this material in a nonsequential and nonlinear narrative. The independently published accompanying exhibition catalogue, however, is much more structured; it elucidates Crispolti's conceptualisation of these categories and provides information on each artist. For instance, Crispolti described how the artwork under the title "Hypothesis and Reality of Urban Conflict" revealed social conditions within the city.²⁸ For example, setting up a palpable tension between the urban environment and the often aggressive geometric shapes of his sculptures, artist Mauro Staccioli used a formal vocabulary to create charged confrontations with viewers.²⁹ Temporary – albeit constructed from heavy-duty concrete and iron – Staccioli's sculptures functioned as ephemeral instruments of perceptual inquiry and critical reflection.³⁰

Crispolti articulated what he described to be a flexible way of intervening in the urban social sphere in the grouping titled "Individual Urban Re-Appropriation".³¹ Here, he focused on the work of designer and architect Ugo La Pietra, who engaged with the city through conceptual ethnographic projects that sought to uncover latent power relationships. His object of study was Milan's urban working class and he documented instances of their creativity in photographs and schematic drawings. In the catalogue, La Pietra's interventions are represented by images of recent projects, such as *I gradi di libertà (Degrees of Freedom)* from 1969–1972, in which he recorded the non-conforming footpaths carved by inhabitants of massive working-class housing complexes, detailing their perambulations in *fotomontaggi* (photo-collages). For La Pietra, these were instances where inhabitants were reappropriating their lived spaces by becoming conscious of their agency to navigate them.

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"Ipotesi e realtà di presenza urbane conflittuale, Riappropriazioni urbane individuali, Partecipazione spontanea— azione poetica/politica, Partecipazione in rapporto con/attraverso l'ente locale, Ipotesi di rapporto sociale attraverso l'ente statale". Translation by the author.

28

"Un momento di 'avvertimento' ideologico che intende proporre al sociale urbano una sollecitazione rivelatoria, rompendo dunque un equilibrio fittizio in una prospettiva problematica diversa: suggerisce cioè emotivamente un diverso ordine di ragioni, una diversa consapevolezza della realtà della condizione sociale urbana". Ibid., 6.

29

Crispolti, *Ambiente come sociale la Biennale 1976*, 6. Also included in this grouping was the work of Nino Giammarco and Francesco Somaini.

30

Mauro Staccioli, "Artist Statment", in Crispolti, *Ambiente come sociale la Biennale 1976*, 9.

31

Also included here was the work of Gruppo Salerno 1975, Fabio De Sanctis, and Gruppo Coordinamento (Carlo Maurizio Benvenuti, Tullio Catalano, and Franco Falasca).

Crispoliti invited a more active form of audience engagement in the third hypothesis, titled “Spontaneous Participation – Political/Poetical Action”.³² He chose artists who worked in the public arena to create unrehearsed actions that sought to dialogue with citizens, meant to produce moments of creative freedom as an alternative to the “conditioning” present in everyday life.³³ He highlighted the work of Franco Summa, based in Pescara, as he interwove his projects with the urban environment and often collaborated with the local community. In the catalogue, Summa highlighted an intervention carried out with Pescara’s local art students, titled *Una bianca striscia di carta* (*A white strip of paper*) from 1973. The students held up large white sheets in Pescara’s main square, forcing inhabitants to walk around them, making them aware of the city’s spaces. Summa sought to redesign the city with simple elements – in this case paper – and to transform urban spaces, allowing citizens to relate to and reconsider the topographical context of social life.³⁴

Similarly involving citizens in the active production of art, the Neapolitan group Humor Power Ambulante (Peripatetic Humor Power), formed in 1975 and comprising Marta Alleonato, Carlo Fontana, Ernesto Iannini, Annamaria Iodice, Claudio Massimi, Silvio Merlino, Roberto Vidali, and Giuseppe Zevola, organised participatory performances in urban space with simple but intimately poetic artistic acts. For instance, they coordinated events that involved selling stones warmed by the artists’ hands or Neapolitan raindrops for luck. With irony and wit, the group politicised everyday life to contribute to a new sense of the human condition.³⁵ Zevola, in particular, referred to the group’s practice as a type of urban performativity. Both Summa and Humor Power Ambulante activated the city’s inhabitants in projects through spontaneous collaboration, as a way of making them more aware of their lived context.

In the last two hypotheses – “Participation with or through the Local Entities” and “Hypothesis of Social Relations through the State Entities” – Crispolti focused on instances where artists had collaborated with inhabitants in grassroots urban initiatives. He emphasised in the catalogue – explicitly making references to the regional electoral outcome on June 15, 1975, and the national parliamentary elections on June 20, 1976—that this was a unique moment, as the country seemed to have finally gained a democratic perspective.³⁶ In both of these elections, the *PCI - Partito Comunista Italiano* (Italian Communist Party) achieved unprecedented visibility.³⁷ Crispolti cited as an example of such an initiative the *Operazione Roma Eterna*, based in the Testaccio neighbourhood of Rome.³⁸ All of the projects highlighted in Crispolti’s groupings were site-specific and represented in the first three rooms as documentation.

Structurally, Crispolti did not organise these different hypotheses in linear succession in the exhibition layout. On the contrary, Crispolti’s narrative flow – or *percorso comunicazionale* (communication pathway) – was like concentric circles of a spiral: at each ring, there was more information the visitor could discover

32

Included in this section was the work of Eduardo Alamaro and the Cooperativa Artigiana e Pronto Intervento of Pomigliano d’Arco, as well as the work of Vincenzo de Simone in the school G. Pascoli di Cicciano, Naples, Crescenzo del Vecchio, Riccardo Dalisi, and Laboratorio di Comunicazione Militante.

33

Crispoliti, *Ambiente come sociale la Biennale 1976*, 16.

34

Franco Summa, email to the author (September 26, 2013).

35

Humor Power Ambulante, “Untitled”, in Crispolti, *Ambiente come sociale la Biennale 1976*, 22.

36

Crispoliti, *Ambiente come sociale la Biennale 1976*, 32.

37

See introduction in Giacomo Sani, “The Italian electorate in the mid-1970s: Beyond tradition?” in *Italy at the Polls: The Parliamentary Elections of 1976*, ed. Howard Rae Penniman (Washington: American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, 1977).

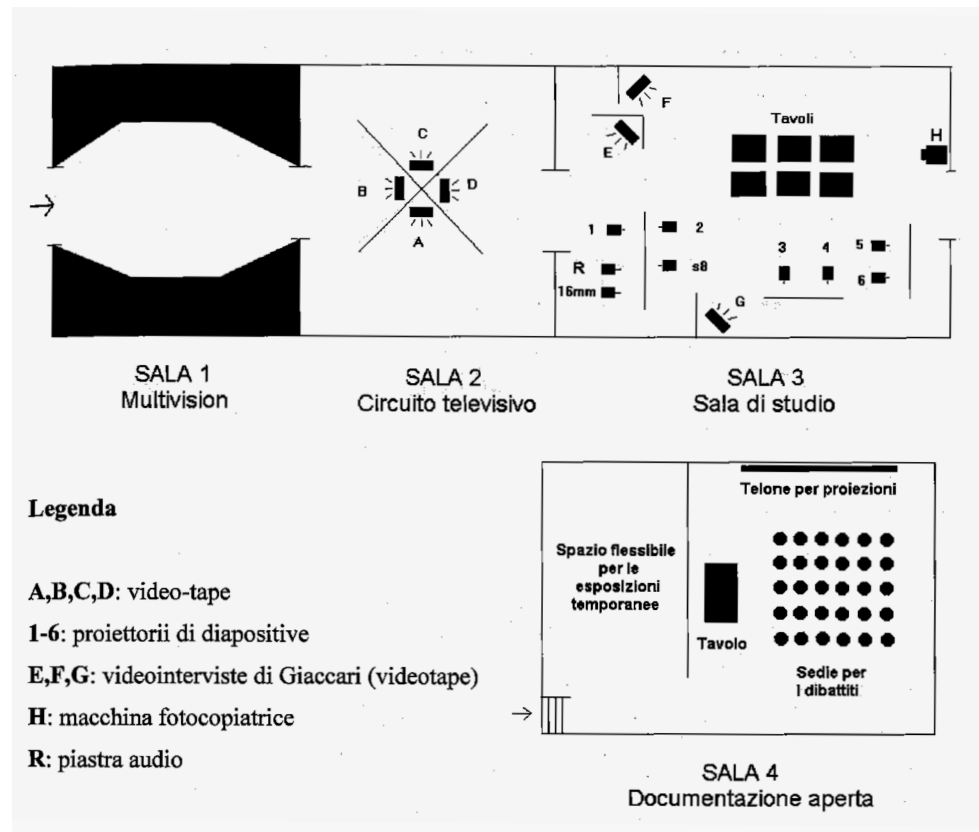
38

Sara Catenacci, “Un esperimento di rifondazione co-operativa: Operazione Roma Eterna, 1974–1976,” in *Arte fuori dall’arte Incontri e scambi fra arti visive e società negli anni Settanta* (Milan: Postmedia Books, 2017), 277–86.

[fig. 2]. In other words, Crispolti conceived the layout in alliance with environmental art and its ideological project – the exhibition was about the interpretive processes of information and the creative solicitation of the visitor.³⁹ In practice, all five hypotheses were shown in the first room, *Sala 1* (Room 1), which served as an introduction. With media designer Umberto Santucci, Crispolti curated what might have been perceived as an expansive room, comprising six continuously alternating projected images, or *multivision*. Visitors found themselves completely immersed in a space that was fast paced and engaging.⁴⁰ Summa, one of the artists, recalled that “Crispolti presented my urban environmental artworks with a series of colour slides that proceeded in automatic sequence (there were several Kodak Carousel projectors that were projected at the same time)”.⁴¹ Through these images of environmental art projects, visitors could travel in urban space, visitors could travel to different sites – from Milan to Palermo – simultaneously as the projectors cycled through their inventory of photographs. There was also an audio component of urban sounds, electronic notes, and short musical excerpts.⁴² It must have been at once dizzying and exciting to be transported to familiar and unknown locales.

The following room, *Sala 2* (room 2), consisted of four television screens set facing outward in a cross-like configuration with walls diagonally dissecting the space. In the spiral flow of the exhibition, this space was meant to deepen visitors’ knowledge of the hypotheses and introduce them in more depth to

fig. 2
Design for the Italian Pavilion,
Exhibition *Ambiente come
sociale*, Venice Biennale, July
18 – October 10, 1976.
© L'Archivio Enrico Crispolti



³⁹

See Regorda, *Biennale di Venezia* 1976, 81.

⁴⁰

Catenacci, “L’ambiente come sociale alla Biennale di Venezia 1976”, 320; Crispolti records the content of the room as: “informazione multivision sui cinque aspetti di ricerca documentati (livello di sintesi informative)”. See Crispolti, *Ambiente come sociale la Biennale* 1976, 2.

⁴¹

“Le mie opere d’arte ambientali urbane erano presentate con una serie di diapositive a colori che procedevano in sequenza automatica nella sala delle proiezioni, (vi erano diversi proiettori Kodak Carousel che proiettavano in contemporanea)”. Franco Summa, email to the author, May 22, 2019.

⁴²

Regorda, *Biennale di Venezia* 1976, 84.

different environmental interventions. Visitors could linger here and view documentary footage or videos of artists' work, like Riccardo Dalisi's *Esperienze al Traiano* (*Experiences at the Traiano*), Ugo La Pietra's *Monumentalismo* (*Monumentalism*), Franco Summa's *Un arcobaleno in fondo alla strada* (*A rainbow down the street*) [fig. 3], or Giuliano Mauri's *Intervento presso la Palazzina Liberty, Milano* (*Intervention at the Palazzina Liberty, Milan*).⁴³

In both the first and second rooms, Crispolti relied heavily on *multivision* for the show, bringing artworks situated elsewhere into the Biennale galleries with the effect of immersing visitors in an environment that connected to the outside. He might have been inspired by the significant exhibition *Artevideo e multivision* at the Rotonda Besana in Milan in March 1975, curated by Tommaso Trini, where the exhibition space consisted almost entirely of videos and projected

fig. 3
Franco Summa, *Un arcobaleno in fondo alla strada*, 1975,
acrylic paint on the ground
Image courtesy of the Artist.



images.⁴⁴ As a direct influence, Crispolti cited the exhibition *Avanguardia e cultura popolare* at the Galleria d'Arte moderna di Bologna, 1975, which also included projected images.⁴⁵ Crispolti was looking to create an experience outside the canonical terms of art consumption, an explicit critique of the traditional modes of display of the Biennale.

In the third room, Sala 3, Crispolti laid out ephemeral materials – such as exhibition catalogues, artists' statements, written texts, drawings, photographs,

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On screen 1 were: Nino Giammarco, *Volterra '73*; Ugo La Pietra, *Per oggi basta e Monumentalismo*; Gruppo Salerno '75, *Gessificare, Venezia 1976*; Fabio De Sanctis, *La Traversata delle Alpi*; and Riccardo Dalisi, *Esperienze al Traiano*. On screen 2 were: Eduardo Alamaro, *Al quartiere Traiani e in laboratorio a Pomigliano d'arco*; Vincenzo De Simone, *Teatrini di campagna*; Franco Summa, *Un arcobaleno in fondo alla strada*; and Humour Power Ambulante, *A Bagnoli*. On screen 3 were: Giuliano Mauri, *Intervento presso la Palazzina Liberty, Milano*; Giuseppe Sciola e moralisti sardi, *San Sperate, Paese museo*; Collettivo Autonomo Pittori di Porta Ticinese, *Interventi al Parco Vetra, in via De Amicis, in via Lenassini, al Pallido*; and Laboratorio di Comunicazione Militante, *Strategia d'informazione*. On screen 4 were: *Operazione Roma eterna, esperienza al Testaccio e all'Ostiense, Rapporti all'Ostiense, Progetto per un libro figurato; Riappropriazione del Mattatoio*; and Gruppo M. Fiorentino, *ICAP, Piano di Zona n. 61, Corviale*. See Regorda, *Biennale di Venezia 1976*, 85.

44

The Rotonda della Besana is also known as the Complesso di San Michele ai Nuovi Sepolcri. For a review of the exhibition, see Tommaso Trini, "Artevideo e multivision", *D'ARS*, no. 75 (July 1975): 12–21.

45

Crispolti, *Arti visive e partecipazione sociale*, 294.

and other types of documentary materials on six large tables [fig. 4]. In this installation photograph, we see a dozen visitors sitting and reading, standing and casually observing, and generally absorbing the material on display. Around these tables were more television screens showing videotapes with artists' interviews, created by Luciano Giaccari, bringing the artists' voices directly into the exhibition space.⁴⁶ Projectors showed additional images. Summa remembered that in this space, he pre-

fig. 4
Sala 3, Research Tables,
Ambiente come sociale, curated
by Enrico Crispolti, Venice
Biennale, July 18 – October 10,
1976.
Courtesy: Archivio Storico della
Biennale di Venezia - ASAC



sented “photographic enlargements of [his] works along with a large-format album (70x50 cm) with study sketches for the interventions”.⁴⁷ In this deep research space, visitors could make photocopies of any of this material thanks to a free photocopy machine near the far end of the room.⁴⁸ The public could create their own personal catalogues of the exhibition from this readily available information. The spirit of this space was free, and accessible information could be shared at will.

In the last room, Sala 4 (Room 4), Crispolti conceived of the most radical presentation of what an exhibition space could be. He installed a completely fluid and ephemeral component to the show, which he called *Documentazione aperta* (Open Documentation).⁴⁹ Here, he organised additional programming to create a forum for open-ended debates and exchanges of information that would bring socio-urban issues into the gallery [fig. 5].⁵⁰ This space saw a frequent changeover of content; each temporary display, like *La riqualificazione della zona 1 a Milano*

⁴⁶

Crispolti describes Sala 3 (Room 3) as “tre canali video con interviste di protagonisti, film di azioni, alcuni tavoli con ulteriori documentazioni, documenti stampati e fotografici.” Crispolti, *Arti visive e partecipazione sociale*, 294.

⁴⁷

“C'erano dei pannelli con riportate ingrandimenti fotografici delle mie opere insieme ad un album di grande formato (cm. 70x50) con fogli-busta trasparenti in cui erano inseriti i miei schizzi di studio per gli interventi e anche una delle magliette SENTIRSI UN ARCOBALENO ADDOSSO che nel corso dei giorni della mostra fu rubata da un visitatore”. Franco Summa, email to the author, May 22, 2019.

⁴⁸

Catenacci, “L'ambiente come sociale alla Biennale di Venezia 1976”, 320.

⁴⁹

Crispolti describes Sala D (Room 4) as “materiale video, filmico, fotografico e stampati relative ai diversi argomenti di ‘documentazione aperta’.” See Crispolti, *Ambiente come sociale la Biennale 1976*, 2.

⁵⁰

Crispolti, *Ambiente come sociale la Biennale 1976*, 44.

(*The Requalification of Milan's Zone 1*), lasted about ten days.⁵¹ This provisional space consisted of papers and photographs that appeared to have been quickly affixed to the makeshift walls, chairs arranged haphazardly in the centre of the room so that they could be easily rearranged to accommodate group discussions, and signage that could be displaced to make way for either people or objects coming into the gallery.

This area was Crispolti's most innovative contribution to reconceiving the exhibition as a site of debate, and the core of his decentralizing exhibition strategy. In this space, the artist group A/Social shared their social and participatory

fig. 5

Documentazione Aperta
Courtesy: Archivio Storico della
Biennale di Venezia, ASAC



work from the psychiatric hospital Frullone in Naples, which blurred the boundaries between art and activism. The artist Enzo Mari led a presentation of the sculptural monument to Roberto Franceschi, a student of Milan's Boccioni University shot point-blank by the police on January 23, 1973. This collective initiative involved two dozen or so artists in protesting the extreme violence overtaking the nation through the integration of art in public space.⁵² Additionally, *Documentazione aperta* highlighted a number of grassroots activities in institutional structures and redevelopments of city centres. Most importantly, this section drew attention to legislation on the public funding of artworks, known as the “*legge del 2%*” (Law of 2 percent), which stipulated that 2 percent of every state-funded building had to be put toward a public art project.

What made Crispolti's exhibition appear so cutting-edge was its placement next to Germano Celant's show, *Ambiente/arte: dal futurismo alla body art* (*Environment/Art: From Futurism to Body Art*), also in the Central Pavilion. These two exhibitions were physically adjacent, and their shared subject, *Ambiente*, invites comparison not only in terms of content but also exhibition methodology. Exploring

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The programming for “Documentazione aperta” was as follows: 14–25 July: *Un'esperienza nell'ospedale psichiatrico “Frullone” di Napoli: a/social group*; 28 July–8 August: *Esperienze di animazione nelle scuole primarie*; 10–19 August: *La riqualificazione della zona (centro storico) a Milano*; 22–31 August: *L'esperienza del Monumento a Franceschi, a Milano*; 3–12 September: *L'operazione Palazzo di Arcevia: ipotesi di comunità esistenziale*; 15–26 September: *L'ecomuseo: l'esperienza del “Cracap” le Creusot, e il lavoro di Carlo Pomi a San Marino di Bentivoglio*; 29 September–10 October: *I risultati della legge del 2% suo rinnovamento, e problemi della committenza pubblica*; Settembre: *Dibattito sul piano regolatore particolareggiato di Venezia*.

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The artists who collaboratively created a monument to Roberto Franceschi included the coordinating group: Alik Cavaliere, Paolo Gallerani, Enzo Mari, Lino Marzulli, Fabrizio Merisi, and Pino Spagnuolo, as well as Mauro Staccioli, Francesco Somaini, and Tino Valeri.

this theme historically throughout the twentieth century, Celant's exhibition, I argue, adhered to the conventions of art history and museum orthodoxy, while Crispolti's exhibition extended into the sociopolitical realm with alternative means of display. In other words, Celant's exhibition inhabited a position of institutional centrality and tradition, while Crispolti's assumed a peripheral posture and embraced innovative possibilities.

Celant's *Ambiente/arte* offered a diachronic study of what is now known as installation art.⁵³ He was concerned with the breakdown of physical barriers between the object and its surrounding space, where art becomes an environment.⁵⁴ Critically, with the artworks on view, Celant addressed physical space, not social or political issues. He organised the show in two parts: a historical section that reconstructed primary examples of installation art in the early to mid-twentieth century and a contemporary section that centred on new site-specific installation art by thirteen contemporary artists. At the centre of the exhibition was Celant's aesthetic vision, a show that claimed Italian movements as central to the history of installation art.

The show's chronology began with Futurism and traced the relationship between art and its environment in movements such as Constructivism and de Stijl. Celant installed a total reconstruction of Piet Mondrian's 1923 *Salon de Madame B* as well as photographic reproductions of Kurt Schwitter's 1923–43 *Merzbau*, Duchamp's 1942 installation at the *First Papers of Surrealism* exhibition in New York, and Theo van Doesburg's *Café Aubette* from 1927. Visitors also encountered contemporary site-specific installations by artists including: Blinky Palermo, Daniel Buren, Dan Graham, Joseph Beuys, Sol LeWitt, Mario Merz, Bruce Nauman, Jannis Kounellis, Vito Acconci, Robert Irwin, Maria Norman, Doug Wheeler, and Michael Asher. The majority of the artists Celant included were well established in the contemporary art world by 1976. Kounellis, for example, brought live horses into the gallery space in the piece titled *Horses*, a work that had already debuted in 1969 at L'Attico gallery in Rome. *Ambiente/arte*, therefore, strengthened the practice of installation art in what was already an accepted art-making method.

While Celant's curatorial choice to allow artists to use these rooms as a live studio space was new to the Biennale, his exhibition form had an important precedent in Jennifer Licht's *Spaces* exhibition held at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), New York, from December 30, 1969, to March 1, 1970, which also included artist Michael Asher, as well as Larry Bell, Dan Flavin, Robert Morris, Franz Erhard Walther, and the Pulsa group.⁵⁵ This was an early exhibition of installation art, and given Celant's keen attention to the New York art scene, as is demonstrated by his line-up of artists in *Ambiente/arte*, it is reasonable to assume that Celant was aware of this show.⁵⁶ Further, there had been other similar recent exhibitions, such as *Figures/Environments* at the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, in 1970 and *Aesthetics of the Environment* at the Stedelijk van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, in 1971.⁵⁷ Celant's *Ambiente/arte*, therefore, institutionalised this once-radical medium by establishing it within a historiographic lineage. Moreover, Celant relied on conventions of display already accepted by curators and museums. As such, his exhibition remained confined by the boundaries of traditional exhibition practices. Crispolti, on the

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Celant's exhibition *Ambiente/Arte* is cited by Julie H. Reiss, *From Margin to Center: The Spaces of Installation Art* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1999), xxii, as a first important attempt to historicise installation art as a genre.

54

Germano Celant, "Ambiente-Arte", in *Settore Arti visive e Architettura, Ambiente, partecipazione, strutture culturali. Catalogo generale*, vol. 1, ed. Barbara Radice and Franco Raggi (Venice: Biennale di Venezia, 1976), 189.

55

Artists William Crosby, William Duesing, Paul Fuge, Peter Kindlemann, and David Rumsey made up the Pulsa group.

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Reiss, *From Margin to Center*, 87.

57

Regorda, *Biennale di Venezia 1976*, 47.

other hand, went far beyond tradition, bringing new artists into the foreground of the art establishment in a way that did not compromise their aesthetic autonomy. He integrated their institutional critique into his curatorial practice.

Decentralisation

As noted above, to successfully present environmental art at the Venice Biennale, Crispolti adopted a decentralised exhibition strategy. He not only made the daring decision only to show documentary material and not to display original artworks onsite – in comparison to Celant who recreated many of the installations in his exhibition without fully acknowledging the consequences of building these artworks in a different context – Crispolti also applied the power dynamics of decentralisation to the exhibition format and the social relationships that exist in a space of display. He levelled hierarchies between the curator, artist and viewer. In this regard, he practiced an audience-centred curatorial practice that was only later adopted by mainstream curators in the 1990s.⁵⁸

It was essential to Crispolti to present the artwork as ongoing research findings. The exhibition itself was meant not as a point of arrival for visitors, but one of departure.⁵⁹ In the galleries, the focus was not the unilateral experience of the viewer receiving information or absorbing an aesthetic experience, but a dialogical relationship with the material. Crispolti envisioned the space alive with debate and with the artists themselves – more so than their actual work – present. For Crispolti, the artists' role, therefore, was one of collaboration, and the power dynamic within the exhibition was non-hierarchical, democratic, and open ended. The intent of the exhibition was to provoke questions, not provide definitive answers.⁶⁰

Moreover, Crispolti applied the same rules to his role, effectively decentring the curator as well. He presented artworks under hypotheses rather than final formulations, leaving room for others – visitors or artists – to rearticulate and reinterpret. By levelling hierarchies within the gallery, Crispolti made space for reciprocal communication. This experimental social format long anticipated the relational art-making practices of the 1990s when the social component of the art experience became much more prevalent.⁶¹

The drive behind Crispolti's support for environmental art and his exhibition strategy must be understood in terms of political decentralisation, and its effects on the Biennale throughout the 1970s. The move towards the periphery in the art world paralleled the impulse to decentralise the nation's governmental and administrative structures after the fall of Fascism, which resulted in the legal regionalisation of the country into twenty distinct entities in 1970.⁶² This process was part of the effort to democratise the nation and give greater decision-making power – such as municipal boundaries, urban and rural police forces, health and hospital assistance, local museums and libraries, urban planning, tourism and

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Curators such as Marcia Tucker and Mary Jane Jacobs. See for example, Paul O'Neill *Curating and the Educational Turn* (London: Open Ed., 2010).

59

Crispolti, *Arti visive e partecipazione sociale*, 292.

60

Ibid., 295.

61

Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (Paris: Les Presses du réel, 2002); Claire Doherty, *Contemporary Art: From Studio to Situation* (London: Black Dog, 2004); and Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London: Verso, 2014).

62

Article 116 of the 1948 Italian Constitution and acknowledges regional power in relation to legislation, administration, and finance to: Sardinia, Sicily, Trentino-Alto Adige/Südtirol, Aosta Valley, and Friuli-Venezia Giulia. In 1970, under Article 131, Article 132, and Article 133, the other fifteen regions were established. The constitutional mandate was carried out almost immediately in the five "special" regions, as they were areas that threatened separatism. The creation of the fifth special region, Friuli-Venezia Giulia, was complicated by the Trieste dispute with Yugoslavia and was postponed until 1964.

hotel industries, and regional transportation networks – to regional administrations, rather than being beholden to the centralised bureaucracy of Rome.⁶³ The constitution, written in 1948 under the nation's fledgling democracy, had stipulated the division of the country into twenty areas, conceived as sub-governmental administrative territories.⁶⁴ It was a decisive shift from the historical centralisation of Italian governmental power that was solidified under Mussolini. However, the legal realisation of the regions did not occur until twenty years later. The new law gave regional governments superior legal status, more money, more civil servants, and, most important, directly elected assemblies.⁶⁵

Many leftist thinkers saw potential for the regions to become laboratories for a revised governmental system based on direct participation.⁶⁶ Additionally, they considered the centralisation of the government as a vestigial link to Italy's recent fascist past.⁶⁷ Fear of hierarchical power structures was still present in the 1970s as the *DC - Democrazia Cristiana* (Christian Democratic Party) maintained many fascist governmental and administrative structures long after the demise of Mussolini's government.⁶⁸ Thus, the process of political decentralisation was more than merely streamlining Italian public policy; it was about firmly breaking with the country's authoritarian past and implementing a democratic present.

Likewise, demands to democratise Italy's cultural institutions reached an apex in 1968. Recognised as the longest-running biennial exhibition in the world, the Biennale was a target. At the exhibition that year, one placard read, "The Biggest and Worst Exhibition in the Biennale is the Police", and another described the exhibition as "the Biennale of the Bosses".⁶⁹ Protesters – who included artists, writers, curators, critics, and cultural producers – labelled the Biennale as an arena for wealth that vaunted the commodification of culture. What's more, it was charged with operating as still a fundamentally fascist institution, dependent upon and managed by governmental and political parties rather than as an autonomous art entity. As the only art institution in the country to respond to such charges, the Biennale undertook a comprehensive reform and, in 1973, legitimated a new statute, a document that had been unchanged since the Mussolini era.⁷⁰ This gave the Biennale more autonomy from the government, which allowed it to make more democratic decisions and, crucially, elect its own leadership.⁷¹

63

Robert Putnam and Raffaella Nanetti, *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 25.

64

The regions in alphabetical order are: Abruzzo, Basilicata, Calabria, Campania, Emilia-Romagna, Friuli-Venezia Giulia, Lazio, Liguria, Lombardia, Marche, Molise, Piemonte, Puglia, Sardegna, Sicilia, Toscana, Trento-Alto Adige, Umbria, Valle d'Aosta, Veneto.

65

Sidney Tarrow, Peter Katzenstein, and Luigi Graziano, *Territorial Politics in Industrial Nations* (New York: Praeger, 1978), 29.

66

See, for example, Filippo Barbano, *Regioni e domanda sociale* (Torino: Stampatori, 1978) and Ettore Rotelli, *Dal regionalismo alla regione* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1973).

67

Franco Levi, "Regioni e Pluralismo," in *Le Regioni tra Costituzione e realtà politica* (Torino: Edizioni della Fondazione Giovanni Agnelli, 1977), 23.

68

Raffaella Nanetti, *Growth and Territorial Policies: The Italian Model of Social Capitalism* (London: Pinter Publishers, 1988), 40.

69

Lawrence Alloway, *The Venice Biennale, 1895–1968: From Salon to Goldfish Bowl* (London: Faber, 1969), 26.

70

Mussolini finalised the Statute for the Venice Biennale on July 21, 1938, under law no. 1517.

71

For recent scholarship on the Venice Biennale's institutional transformation, see Vittoria Martini, "Come la Biennale di Venezia ha istituzionalizzato il Sessantotto" in *Arte fuori dall'arte, incontri e scambi fra arti visive e società negli anni Settanta*, ed. Cristina Casero, Elena Di Raddo, and Francesca Gallo (Milan: Postmedia, 2017), 203–208.

After the new statute, the 1976 Biennale was an opportunity to show the world how much the institution had changed.⁷² Indeed, in the opening paragraphs of the 1976 Venice Biennale official catalogue, the president Ripa di Meana asserted that the institution had been turned from a fossil to an energised and forward-thinking organisation.⁷³ It was in this historical context that the Biennale, like Crispolti, chose to promote decentralisation – politically and artistically – as a theme, practice, and methodology.

By decentralisation, the Biennale organisers meant the reaching of new audiences, especially the working class. They assembled a select committee headed by sociologists Giovanni Bechelloni and Franco Rositi to study the question of cultural decentralisation.⁷⁴ For instance, the institution coordinated a series of colloquia and debates on this theme.⁷⁵ The Biennale's culminating efforts crystallised in a major conference titled *Il decentramento culturale in Italia* (Cultural Decentralization in Italy) organised in Mirano, a small city outside of Venice, October 1–3, 1976. The meeting included artists, trade union members, representatives of grassroots associations, and local organisations. One of the main issues raised during this gathering was how to understand the process of decentralisation as more than merely moving out from the centre.⁷⁶ Ripa di Meana delivered the closing remarks, in which he emphasised that the Biennale, as an institution, must provide both the stimulus and support for decentralised initiatives.⁷⁷ Overall, the Biennale organisers wanted to highlight institutional social responsibility and turn the institution into a platform where societal issues could combine with aesthetic production.

In addition to the conference, other decentralised cultural activities took place in Mirano from July through October 1976 with the collaboration of the Biennale and Mirano's Centro per Iniziative Culturali (CIC, Center of Cultural Initiatives), adding new depth and breadth to the Biennale's capabilities. The Venetian theatrical group Brigà, working together with local inhabitants, organised a show on the writings of Angelo Beolco better known as Ruzzante – a playwright and actor who lived in the region in the sixteenth century. His writings, grouped under the name *Sprolico*,⁷⁸ which means speech or prayer in the local dialect, portray peasant life and celebrate the marginalised *campesini* (peasant farmer)

72

In fact, there were Biennale events in 1974, but that year was not given a Roman numeral, as is customary, nor were there national pavilions, and no catalogue was produced. While themes of democracy and decentralization were implemented in 1974, in effect, the exhibitions, organised to support Chile and critical of Pinochet's military takeover, had a very different sensibility than the official 1976 Biennale. See Lorenzo Capellini and Alberto Moravia, *Cronache della nuova Biennale: 1974–1978* (Milano: Electa, 1978).

73

Carlo Ripa di Meana, "Introduction", in *Environment, Participation, Cultural Structures: General Catalogue* (Venezia: Alfieri edizioni d'arte, 1976), 9.

74

"Attività del Gruppo permanente di lavoro per i convegni", reprinted in English in *La Biennale di Venezia: Annuario 1978: Eventi del 1976–77* (Venice: La Biennale di Venezia, 1979), 437.

75

Ibid., 437.

76

"Si sono posti fin dall'inizio il problema degli interlocutori istituzionali con i quali affrontare il decentramento: mondo sindacale, associazionismo, cooperativismo, quello dei canali attraverso i quali operare se non si vuole intendere il decentramento come banale operazione itinerante a partire da un centro propulsore e se non ci si accontenta di un semplice spostamento orizzontale delle manifestazioni o della valorizzazione di spazi abbandonati". (From the outset, the problem has been posted of who are the institutional interlocutors to deal with decentralisation: trade unions, associations, groups, channels through which to operate if we do not intend to understand decentralisation as a banal itinerant operation emanating from the centre, if we are not satisfied with a simple horizontal manifestation or the enhancement of abandoned spaces). *La Biennale di Venezia: Annuario 1978*, 405.

77

Ibid., 426.

78

Angelo Beolco, [tre Orationi Di Ruzzante (angelo Beolcho) Recitate in Lingua Rustica Alli Illustris. Signori Cardinali Cornari & Pisani. Con Vno Ragionamento Et Vno Sprolico, Insieme Cō Vna Lettera Scritta Allo Aluarotto Per Lo Istesso Ruzzante, Etc.], Ff. 31 (Venice: Appresso G. Bonadio, 1565).

ridiculed by wealthy and powerful Venetians for being simpletons.⁷⁹ The theme of these individuals' transformation into modern workers had a timely relevance given the visibility of Italian workers' struggles throughout the 1970s. The play highlighted the importance of dialects and the celebration of local traditions in their contextual setting, themes that were central to the politics of decentralisation. This is just one example of the many initiatives implemented during the Biennale that sought to cross new frontiers in addressing elitism and reaching new audiences.

In many ways, Crispolti's exhibition *Ambiente come sociale* bolstered the Biennale's goal of decentring its role as a site of the production of culture. Unconventionally, the institution welcomed the avant-garde experiments occurring in the nation's peripheries. However, Crispolti kept a critical stance *vis-à-vis* the institution and, thanks to his novel exhibition strategy embracing the temporary, the haphazard, the volatile, and the contingent, audiences looking to see and experience art at the Biennale were sent right back out into the city streets and piazzas through photographs, videos, and other documentary media. In keeping the galleries empty of actual artwork, Crispolti left a void at the Biennale's institutional centre. This was a calculated choice, flipping the exhibition inside out to get visitors back *out there*, to experience the artwork *in situ* for themselves in the social environment where it really mattered.

Crispolti's exhibition and the Biennale institution were, for the 1976 presentation, allied in embracing decentralised practices, valuing a non-hierarchical structure, and promoting the ideals of democracy. Environmental artists and the Biennale organisers were both reacting to the nation's fascist past and the structures that the regime had institutionalised for cultural production. However, while Crispolti's artists had been operating on the margins, since the beginning of the decade, to critique the centrality of the nation's institutions, the Biennale joined this effort only in 1976. Due to a shift in the internal organisation as well as the national politics, this striking confluence would not recur in the subsequent Biennale of 1978. A series of new crises in leadership and domestic terrorism forced a retreat to orthodoxy.⁸⁰ The institution withdrew to a non-political position as social engagement became associated with increasingly violent and radical stances. Crispolti, however, continued to champion environmental art, and practice curation as a form of institutional critique throughout the 1970s.

79

La Biennale di Venezia: Annuario 1978, 442.

80

The new political formula of the *Pentapartito* and the influence of three figures in particular – Bettino Craxi, Giulio Andreotti and Arnaldo Forlani – ushered Italy into the 1980s, and a stifling of social problems at the heart of 1970s activism. The New Left suffered considerable defeats as the country became more conservative. See Paul Ginsborg, *A History of Contemporary Italy* (London: Penguin Books, 2011), 410–412.

Author's Biography

Martina Tanga is a curator and art historian, with an interest in art that engages with social concerns, feminism, and the built environment. She is a specialist in Italian twentieth-century Italian art, and her book, *Arte Ambientale: Urban Space, and Participatory Art*, released by Routledge Press, examines radical artistic practices

sited in Italy's 1970s urban landscape. She held positions at the Worcester Art Museum, deCordova Sculpture Park and Museum, and is currently at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Tanga earned her BA and MA in the History of Art from University College London and a PhD in the History of Art and Architecture from Boston University.

Clarissa Ricci**Towards a Contemporary Venice Biennale:
Reassessing the Impact of the 1993 Exhibition****Abstract**

This paper argues that *Cardinal Points of Art*, directed by Achille Bonito Oliva has been decisive in the formation of the contemporary Venice Biennale. The 45th Venice Biennale, (1993) was memorable for many reasons: the first exhibition of Chinese painters in Venice, its transnational approach, and because it was the last time the *Aperto* exhibition was shown. Nevertheless, this was a complex and much criticised Biennale whose specific characteristics are also connected to the process of reform that the institution had been undergoing since the 1970s. The analysis of the exhibition starts with the examination of this legacy and continues by questioning Bonito Oliva's curatorial contribution in order to define the specific features which helped to shape the contemporary Venice Biennale.

Keywords

Venice Biennale, Aperto, 1993, Achille Bonito Oliva, Nomadism, Coexistence, Contemporaneity

Towards a Contemporary Venice Biennale: Reassessing the Impact of the 1993 Exhibition¹

Clarissa Ricci

Introduction

The format of today's Venice Biennale is the result of a long intellectual and political negotiation. To understand how it emerged in its current form, as an international platform for contemporary art, it is crucial to reconsider the 1993 Biennale.

The conspicuous but fragmentary studies on the Venice Biennale don't allow an overall understanding of the 45th Venice Biennale, which has often been analysed in the light of specific episodes but never in its totality.

Mentions of this exhibition are often made when referring to the Chinese exhibitions in Europe in the 1990s, since a large group of young painters exhibited at the *Giardini* (gardens) that year or because it was the last edition of *Aperto*, the emergent art section established in 1980 by Harald Szeemann and Achille Bonito Oliva which attracted a lot of interest from the press. More recently the exhibition has been indicated as a reference point by Maria Hlavajova and Simon Sheikh in their introduction to *Former West* and has been discussed for its transnational orientation.

New archival findings,² as the documents on the cancelled exhibition of *Winds of Art*, or the examination of minutes and correspondence has shed light on many important aspects which allow a deeper understanding of this complex exhibition.

This account begins by contextualising the Venice Biennale in order to understand the historical and curatorial frameworks within which it has taken shape. This examination is based on a plethora of archival findings which define the scenario in which the innovations and propositions of 1993 were made. The second part of the paper analyses the curatorial contribution of the Director of the Visual Art Department, Achille Bonito Oliva, and evaluates his role in transforming the Biennale.

1

This paper relies on the archival research conducted for the author's PhD thesis and broadens its scope, investigating a specific edition of the Biennale which was part of the transformation of the institution from a proto-fair type format into a contemporary platform for the arts. This latter research was assisted by a Getty/ACLS Postdoctoral Fellowship in the History of Art from the American Council of Learned Societies, generously supported by the Getty Foundation.

2

Archival research was conducted at the Biennale's Historical Archive (ASAC). All the abbreviations used in the footnotes are listed at the end of the paper.

After investigating the reception of the 45th exhibition, the final part of the paper outlines what elements of the 1993 exhibition contributed to the remodelling of the Biennale into a contemporary art platform.

1. Reforming the Biennale

Founded in 1895, a year before Pittsburgh's Carnegie International, the Venice Biennale is the longest running biennial in the world. Over the next 120 years, it transformed from a proto-fair³ into a contemporary art platform, and there are specific historical moments which can be used to mark its continuous, but inconstant, endeavours to adapt and rejuvenate.

In the period following the Second World War, the student protest in 1968 was the most notable moment. When the Biennale opened in June that year, artists covered their works.⁴ Meanwhile, outside the Giardini, students were clashing with the police. However, the tumultuous events of 1968 were also backed by the Biennale staff and local politicians, and led to the first major reform since Fascism.⁵ This reform forced the institution to reflect on its role and democratised its governance,⁶ but it was an "unfinished revolution"⁷ because it failed to free the Biennale from political interference.

The second main transformation of the institution took place in the 1990s, during a significant political and economic crisis that shook the whole of Italy and that forced the Biennale to accelerate the reforms which had been left incomplete since the 1970s. The devaluation of the Lira in 1992 caused the temporary withdrawal of Italy from the European Monetary System (EMS).⁸ The consequences of increased taxation, together with policies to curb public spending, was accompanied by corruption scandals known as "Tangentopoli" (Bribesville), and together this caused the First Italian Republic to collapse.⁹ While this epochal shift was occurring, the Biennale was losing its international impact. Its national pavilions were viewed by some as anachronistic¹⁰ and visitor numbers had dropped

3

Until 1972 the Venice Biennale sold artworks and acted also a proto-fair. Cf. Clarissa Ricci, "Breve storia dell'Ufficio Vendite della Biennale di Venezia 1895-1972. Origini, funzionamento e declino", *Ricerche di S/Confine*, VIII, no. 1 (2017): 1-20, <http://www.ricerchedisconfine.info/VIII-1/RICCI.htm>, accessed December 2019.

4

The opening was held on the June 18, 1968. Chiara Di Stefano "The 1968 Biennale. Boycotting the exhibition: An account of three extraordinary days", in *Starting from Venice. Studies on the Biennale*, ed. Clarissa Ricci (Milan: et. al, 2010); Vittoria Martini "The Evolution of an Exhibition Model. Venice Biennale as an Entity in Time" in Federica Martini and Vittoria Martini, *Just Another Exhibition* (Milan: Postmedia books, 2011), 119-138; Stefania Portinari, *Anni Settanta. La Biennale di Venezia*, (Milan: Marsilio, 2018), 17-117.

5

The Biennale was reformed in 1973 (Law n. 436, July 26, 1973). Cf. Wladimiro Dorigo, "Lineamenti bibliografici generali sulla Biennale di Venezia", in *Annuario 1975, Eventi del 1974*, ed. Archivio storico delle arti contemporanee (Venice: La Biennale di Venezia, 1975), 707-716; Nancy Jachec, *Politics and painting at the Venice Biennale 1948-1964: Italy and the Idea of Europe* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), 36-38; Marla Stone, "Challenging Cultural Categories: The Transformation of the Venice Biennale under Fascism", *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, 4, no. 2 (1999): 185.

6

"Democratic" was the adjective used to describe the institution in the new charter of 1973: "Democratically organised institution of culture" (art. 1, Law n. 436, July 26, 1973). Practically this was mirrored in a large board of directors made of nineteen members.

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See Vittoria Martini, *La Biennale di Venezia 1968-1978. La Rivoluzione Incompiuta* (PhD diss. luav University and Ca' Foscari University in Venice, 2011). All translations hereafter, unless otherwise noted, are by the author.

8

Salvatore Rossi, *Aspects of Italian Economic Policy from 1992-93 Crisis into 2008-2009 Crisis*, Università Roma Tre, Rome March 5, 2010, https://www.bancaditalia.it/pubblicazioni/interventi-vari/int-var-2010/en-rossi-050310.pdf?language_id=1, accessed October 2019.

9

Carol Merzshon, *Italian Politics: Ending the First Republic* (London: Routledge, 1995).

10

There is a long debate around the anachronism of the national pavilions in Italy. Cf. John Russel "Ciao with friendship", *Studio International*, no. 913 (July-August 1959); Bruno Alfieri, "Biennale portfolio", *Metro: An International Review of Contemporary Art*, no. 15 (1968): 41 and 55.

to 100,000.¹¹ Reform became essential to secure the Biennale's future.

The closure of the 44th Venice Biennale of 1990, directed by Giovanni Carandente, coincided with the end of the mandate of the fourth board of directors (1987-1991).¹² Nevertheless, the political crisis made it impossible for the Italian Government to make new nominees. The board continued to operate throughout the first half of 1992 on a deferred basis.¹³ In this situation, renovating the institution by 1995, its centenary, became the main goal.¹⁴ In order to provide enough time for this, the exhibition was shifted from 1992 to 1993. On May 22, 1992, just before the board's deferral year expired, Achille Bonito Oliva was nominated, though not without disagreement, Artistic Director of the Visual Art Department.¹⁵ Although he was given only a short time to conceive the exhibition, Bonito Oliva made a tremendous effort to make it grand, both in terms of size and relevance. He thought and behaved as if the 1993 Venice Biennale was the first step in a larger project that would usher in a new era with the 1995 centennial anniversary. Because directorial appointments were for four years, he thought he would be working on this too.¹⁶

The first project presentation of the 45th Biennale *Punti Cardinali dell'Arte* (*The Cardinal Points of Art*) was made to the board on June 26, 1992.¹⁷ Bonito Oliva proposed an exhibition that would revolve around two goals: making the Biennale a permanent artistic and cultural laboratory, and strengthening its relationship with Venice:

We need to conquer a permanent activity, in order to guarantee a continuous relationship between the Biennale and the city.¹⁸

The tone was bold, but the board was enthusiastic. As a matter of fact, none of his proposals were new. The statement above can be understood only in relation to the history of the Biennale's postwar reformation process.

When the Biennale re-started after the Second World War in 1948, it was evident that the institution needed a different organizational structure to guarantee it the cultural autonomy it lacked during the Fascist Regime. Alongside governmental planning, the temporary commissions¹⁹ in charge of the Biennale in

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In 1988 visitors were 90,125; in 1990 125,000. Enzo Di Martino, *La Biennale di Venezia: 1985-1995. Cento anni di Arte e cultura* (Milan: Bruno Mondadori, 1995), 86.

12

The 4th Venice Biennale Board of Directors was formed by: President: Paolo Portoghesi; Vice President: Ugo Bergamo; General Secretary: Raffaello Martelli; Advisors: Ulderico Bernardi, Ludina Barzini, Gianni Borgna, Luca Borgomeo, Paolo Ceccarelli, Enzo Cucciniello, Umberto Curi, Ottaviano Del Turco, Sandro Fontana, Fabrizia Gressani Sanna, Bruno Marchetti, Stefania Mason Rinaldi, Luigi Mazzella, Gianluigi Rondi, Giorgio Sala, Augusto Salvadori, Dario Ventimiglia.

13

Minutes of the LIV Board of Directors Meeting (January 31, 1992): 1, La Biennale di Venezia - ASAC, FS, VCA, b. reg. 30.

14

A commission to write the reform was created. Cf. Draft law, Folder "President", XIV Board of Directors Meeting (October 29, 1993) in La Biennale di Venezia - ASAC, FS, dep, b. 127: 1.

15

The result of the first day of discussions (Minutes LVIII of the Board of Directors Meeting, May 4, 1992, La Biennale di Venezia - ASAC, FS, dep, b. 112) was a head-to-head between Germano Celant (7) and Achille Bonito Oliva (6). In the following meeting it was clear that Celant for bureaucratic reasons could not be nominated, thus, in the third vote Bonito Oliva was nominated director of the Visual Art Department with 10 votes out of 12. Minutes LIX Board of Directors Meeting (May 22, 1992), La Biennale di Venezia - ASAC, FS, dep, b. 112.

16

Since the 1973 reforms, most Artistic Directors were appointed for four year. During the 1980s this tradition continued, i.e. Maurizio Calvesi was director of the Visual Art Department in 1984 and 1986, and Giovanni Carandente in 1988 and 1990.

17

Minutes LX Board of Directors Meeting (June 26, 1992), in La Biennale di Venezia, ASAC, FS, dep, b. 113: 26-66.

18

Ibid., 27.

19

After the Second World War the Italian Government replaced the representative of the National Fascist Party with representatives of the government. Cf. Footnote 12 in Nancy Jachec, *Politics and painting at the Venice Biennale 1948-1964* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), 58.

the immediate aftermath of the war attempted to fine-tune the exhibition's cultural goals. For the first postwar biennials, Rodolfo Pallucchini, Director of the Visual Art Department from 1948 to 1956, looked to those original "Biennale principles"²⁰ that inspired the founding committee in 1893. Returning to these guidelines helped to dissociate the institution from its Fascist legacy while also giving it a framework within which a new statute could be developed.

The questions surrounding the Biennale's role were made even more pressing as new biennials were starting to develop, making increased competition a real concern. During the conference to promote a new statute in 1957, art historian Sergio Bettini warned his colleagues that "Venice could be overtaken by concurrent similar national and international exhibitions, e.g. Menton, Madrid and São Paulo".²¹ Competition was made even greater in the 1970s when the quinquennial exhibition *documenta*, founded in Kassel in 1955, started to gain greater relevance as a platform for contemporary art.²²

Regardless, it was only in 1973 that major reform was made. The first article of the new charter declared the Biennale's mission as offering "documentation, research and experimentation"²³ by promoting "permanent activities" such as events, exhibitions, conferences and publications. The Biennale was imagined to be a place of constant and continuous cultural production in which all of its sections (music, theatre, cinema, visual art, permanent activities) were superintended by the Historical Archive (ASAC).²⁴

During the first decade after the reform, this goal was attempted several times but never really fulfilled. As late as the *1987-1991 Piano Quadriennale* (Quadrennial Plan)²⁵ – the cultural programme of each mandate – the board members declared that, in continuity with the previous plan, they aimed to accomplish the goals expressed in Article 1 of the charter by improving the permanent activities section.²⁶ If this showed the resilience of the Biennale's attempts to accomplish its reforms, it also demonstrated that they were failing to get anything done.

The Italian critic and curator Bonito Oliva had several assignments at the Biennale between 1978 and 1990,²⁷ most notably as curator, together with Harald Szeemann, of the first *Aperto* exhibition in 1980, and he was very familiar with the board's main concerns. Therefore, in accordance with the Biennale's project of becoming a place for permanent cultural production (in Bonito Oliva's terms "conquering for the Biennale the everyday"),²⁸ the curator started the Biennale's

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Rodolfo Pallucchini, "Introduzione alla XXIV Biennale", in *Ventiquattresima Biennale di Venezia*, (Venice, May 1 - September 30, 1948), exh. cat. (Venice: Serenissima, 1948), XII-XVI.

21

Sergio Bettini, in *Atti del convegno di studio sulla Biennale*, proceedings of the conference held at Ca' Loredan, Venice, October 13, 1958 (Venice: Arti Grafiche, 1957), 30.

22

Anna Cestelli Guidi, *La 'Documenta' di Kassel. Percorsi dell'Arte contemporanea* (Milan: Costa & Nolan, 1997).

23

article 1. [...] it is a democratically organized cultural institute and its object is the promotion of permanent activities and the organisation of international events relating to documentation, information, criticism, research and experimentation in the fields of the arts, whereby full freedom of ideas and forms of expression is guaranteed [...], Law No. 438 of July 26, 1973. New regulations of the autonomous body "la Biennale di Venezia" in *Archivio storico delle arti contemporanee, Annuario 1974 Eventi 1975*, 31.

24

The Historical Archive of Contemporary Art existed since 1928.

25

Piano quadriennale 1987-1991 (Venice: La Biennale di Venezia, 1989).

26

"3.2. Le attività permanenti" in *Ibid.*, 7-8.

27

In 1978 Achille Bonito Oliva was commissioner of the Italian section; in 1980 he was part of an advisory committee of the Biennale; in 1990 he curated a collateral event on Fluxus (see footnote 85).

28

Minutes LX Board of Directors Meeting (June 26, 1992): 27.

activities in the winter of 1992, long before the exhibition's opening date, which was usually in June. The first event to be launched was an educational project; a school for curators in partnership with the École du Magasin, the first of its kind to be opened in Europe.²⁹ This was followed by the *Production, Circulation and Conservation of Artworks*, a conference held at Fondazione Cini (December 11-12, 1992) which gathered museum directors and curators from all over the world³⁰ and helped to attract the attention of the press in order to validate Bonito Oliva's directorship. Seeking to demonstrate the international reach of the Biennale, Bonito Oliva himself travelled to all corners of the world to promote the exhibition³¹ and nominated international personalities to serve in the advisory committee, including Richard Koshalek, Krud Jensen and Dieter Honnisch.³² The conference and the school for curators were part of a larger educational project that was meant to be the backbone of the Biennale's permanent activities. The initial project, which was only partially realised, also comprised events and shows throughout the exhibition's duration.³³

Because they were powered by the intellectual and managerial energies of Venetian entrepreneurs, the permanent activities were also Bonito Oliva's key tool in reinforcing the relationship with the city and in reconnecting the Biennale with its foundations. This re-connection was driven by the cultural politics of decentralisation in Italy in the 1970s³⁴ and, in practical terms, meant that the exhibition was extended out of the Giardini. Often artworks occupied squares and streets, e.g. *Sculpture nella città* (Sculptures in the city) (1972)³⁵ and special projects were organised to revitalise abandoned buildings, e.g. the rehabilitation of the "Saloni" (Zattere and Magazine del Sale).³⁶

However, the rhetoric of rebuilding relationships with Venice was also part of an attempt to solve the practical problems with the Biennale's venues. There were no longer enough buildings to accommodate the scale of the exhibition, and the existing structures were in a bad condition.³⁷ By the 1960s the Giardini had filled up and a heritage law made it impossible to build new pavilions.³⁸ At the same

29

The International Curatorial Programme of École du Magasin, Grenoble, was founded in 1987. It is the first school of this kind in Europe, anticipating the MA Contemporary Curating Art course at the Royal College of Art (RCA), London in 1992 and Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, New York, which was founded in 1990 as a research center and offered courses from 1994. The agreement of a joint programme of École du Magasin with the Biennale throughout the 1992-1993 academic year was formalised on November 15, 1992 (La Biennale di Venezia, ASAC, FS, dep., b. 115). Part of the curatorial program, directed by Adelina von Fürstenberg, was the participation of the students during the installation phase.

30

Draft Programme in La Biennale di Venezia, ASAC, FS, AVEB, b. 521/2.

31

Hou Hanru, "Bi-Biennali. Biennale and the Biennale de Lyon", *Third Text* 7, no. 24 (1993): 93-101.

32

The Advisory Committee (Comitato Consultivo) was formed by Richard Koshalek (Museum of Contemporary Art, Moca, Los Angeles), Krud Jensen (Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Humlebæk), Dieter Honnisch (Neue National Galerie, Berlin), Tommaso Trini (Italian art historian) and Mimmo Rotella (artist), in Minutes LX Board of Directors Meeting (June 26, 1992): 33-35.

33

Achille Bonito Oliva's first draft programme, Minutes LX Board of Directors Meeting (June 26, 1992): 31.

34

"Attività del Gruppo permanente di lavoro per i convegni" reprinted in English in *La Biennale di Venezia: Annuario 1978: Eventi del 1976-77* (Venezia: La Biennale di Venezia, 1979), 437. Cf. Martina Tanga, "Flipping the Exhibition Inside Out: Enrico Crispolti's Show *Ambiente come Sociale* at the 1976 Venice Biennale", *OBOE Journal* I, no. 1 (2020): 62-77.

35

Sculpture nella città (1972) was displayed both in the Palazzo Ducale's courtyard and in the main Venetian squares.

36

Annuario 1975. Eventi 1974, 589-595 and 848-851.

37

Giandomenico Romanelli, "Le sedi della Biennale", in *Ibid.*, 645-697.

38

Tiziana Favaro and Francesco Trovò eds., *I giardini napoleonici di Castello a Venezia: evoluzione storica e indirizzi = Historical Development of the Giardini di Castello and guidelines for maintenance and restoration* (Venice: Libreria Cluva, 2011), 59-60.

time, the number of national pavilions continued to grow, cramping the Central Pavilion which hosted exhibitions of pavilion-less countries.³⁹ Bonito Oliva also attempted to tackle this problem by giving the board a large list of possible venues in Venice for his numerous exhibitions.⁴⁰

In sum, the exhibition that Bonito Oliva proposed would incarnate a reformed Biennale. His presentation programme therefore gained the board's immediate consensus.⁴¹ At last it seemed possible to act on what for a long time had gone unheeded.

2. The Curatorial Contribution of Achille Bonito Oliva

Achille Bonito Oliva's main goal was to reinstate the Venice Biennale as an international cultural guide, a role which in those years seemed lost. This ambitious scope was already implicit in the exhibition's title, *Cardinal Points of Art*, which cast the Biennale as a kind of compass for contemporary culture. Bonito Oliva's mega project, formed of many and large sub-exhibitions, exceeded the budget of the Biennale,⁴² and, despite the fact that he was looking for sponsorships until the very last moment,⁴³ some parts of it were never realised. In fact, the exhibition that most closely corresponded with his concept was among those that were eventually cancelled: *Winds of Art*.⁴⁴ Organised together with the committee, and in particular with Italian art historian and commissioner Tommaso Trini, this show was planned to be split between the Central Pavilion at the Giardini and the Palazzo Ducale, and brought together artists of diverse eras and nationalities, from Eugène Delacroix to Anish Kapoor.⁴⁵ The display was not meant to follow a chronological order but was organised around parallel strands named after winds, for example "tornado" and "trade winds". This manner of organisation privileged complexity and curatorial choice over the presentation of artistic development. The central ideas of the exhibition – exchange both between and within cultures, and the migration of themes, styles and media over time and space – would be left implicit, unexplained by catalogue texts or wall panels. Similarly, the artworks were meant to be exhibited without captions in order to encourage each visitor to have a more direct experience of the artworks. This approach was sparked by the idea that it is not possible to tie art to a single theme: an exhibition can only follow or replicate maps and routes

39

National exhibitions were organized since the beginning of the Biennale, and called International Rooms. After 1907 these exhibitions, which were managed directly by the nations, moved into dedicated pavilions. After the Second World War, due to increased requests of spaces, those countries without a pavilion were hosted in the central exhibition venue at the Giardini. Cf. Clarissa Ricci, conference paper, for "The Politics of Display: Collateral Events and Pavilions at the Venice Biennale" (24 November 2017), University of Saint Andrews, organised by Dr Karen Brown, Kate Keohane, and Dr Catherine Spencer as part of the EU-LAC-MUSEUMS project, run by the Museums, Galleries and Collections Institute. Clarissa Ricci, "From Obsolete to Contemporary: National Pavilions and the Venice Biennale After 1993", *Journal of Curatorial Studies* (forthcoming) 2020.

40

The initial list comprises Magazzini del Sale, Cà Pesaro and Palazzo Fortuny, Chiesa di San Lorenzo, Punta della Dogana, La Misericordia, the former Ospedale Umberto I in Minutes LX Board of Directors Meeting (June 26, 1992): 36-38.

41

Minutes LX Board of Directors Meeting (June 26, 1992): 41-44.

42

Minutes of the III Meeting of the Board of Directors, (March 19, 1993) in La Biennale di Venezia, ASAC, FS, VMCA, b. 112: 140-170; Deliberation n. 25 (March 20, 1993; Prot. Gen. n. 95) in La Biennale di Venezia, ASAC, FS, DCD, b. reg. 63.

43

A month before the opening, Bonito Oliva wrote to the Biennale staff that he managed to find sponsorship for the exhibition *Il Suono Rapido delle cose*. Letter of Achille Bonito Oliva in La Biennale di Venezia, ASAC, FS, AV, b. 524: Deliberation n. 92 (May 13, 1993; Prot. Gen. n. 219), in La Biennale di Venezia, ASAC, FS, DCD, b. reg. 64.

44

Folder 4.2.1. "Venti dell'arte", in La Biennale di Venezia, ASAC, FS, dep., b. 116.

45

Draft project "Venti dell'Arte/Winds of Art", in La Biennale, ASAC, FS, AV, b. 567: 2.

between artworks.⁴⁶ The shift from a chronological approach to a focus on the “links, flows, people, ideas, and patterns that operate over, across, through, beyond, above, under, or in-between politics and societies”⁴⁷ follows a methodological and critical commitment that Bonito Oliva had already expressed in exhibitions he curated, above all *Contemporanea*, which was held in an underground park between 1973 and 1974.⁴⁸ In the exhibition catalogue, Bonito Oliva wrote against the linear chronology of what he called “linguistic Darwinism”.⁴⁹ He inverted the dates (1973-1955) in order to radically express the “inevitable partiality of [the critic’s] selective and discriminatory management of power”.⁵⁰ In his project for Venice, instead of looking for “lines of criticism”, he grouped artworks in “winds” emphasising peculiarities like gait, motion, and pace over those of style, media, or the artist’s nationality.

The cancellation of *Winds of Art*, which survived only partially in the exhibition *Points of Art*,⁵¹ was nevertheless fruitful since it allowed the 1993 Venice Biennale to focus on more recent and contemporaneous artistic production. *Cardinal Points of Art* thus became more than a title. It described a Biennale which aimed to interpret the “global complexity of art through many exhibitions which acted as tiles of themes, contexts, personalities of artistic creation”.⁵² Using the metaphor of the “mosaic”, Bonito Oliva assembled an event made of fifteen exhibitions each delegated to a group of curators which came together to form a complex picture. Even though the title *Cardinal Points of Art* sounded like a theme, Bonito Oliva emphasised that he wanted to deconstruct the partiality of unitary interpretations.⁵³ From a practical point of view, the expansion of the Biennale outside the Giardini and into the city of Venice was part of the Biennale’s aim of strengthening relationships with the city. From a curatorial point of view, it represented a rupture with the tradition of organising exhibitions by theme, which had informed the Biennale’s curatorial approach from the 1970s as a way to prevent the exhibition fragmenting.⁵⁴

46

Draft project “Venti dell’Arte/Winds of Art”, Ibid.

47

Pierre-Yves Saunier, “Transnational”, in Akira Iriye, Pierre-Yves Saunier eds., *The Palgrave Dictionary of Transnational History* (New York: Palgrave, 2009), 1047–1055, http://ieg-ego.eu/en/threads/theories-and-methods/transnational-history/klaus-kiran-patel-transnational-history#InsertNoteID_6, accessed March 2019.

48

Contemporanea was organized by Incontri Internazionali d’Arte, directed by Graziella Lonardi Buontempo. The exhibition comprised many events and was divided into ten sections (art, cinema, theatre, architecture, photography, music, dance, artist’s books and records, visual and concrete poetry, counterinformation). Bonito Oliva was curator of the art section. *Contemporanea* (Villa Borghese Car Parking, Rome, November 1973–February 1974), exh. cat. (Florence: Centro Di, 1973).

49

Achille Bonito Oliva, “Contemporanea (arte 1973-1955)”, in *Contemporanea*, 25; Bonito Oliva “La Transavanguardia italiana”, *Flash Art*, no. 92-93 (October/November 1979): 18.

50

Bonito Oliva, *Contemporanea*, 25. This approach was then theorised by Bonito Oliva shortly after in his main text *L’ideologia del traditore. Arte, maniera, manierismo* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1976) and in *Il passo dello strabismo. Sulle Arti* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1977).

51

Anish Kapoor, Enzo Cucchi, Jannis Kounellis, Francesco Clemente, Gino De Dominicis, Luciano Fabbro, Daniel Buren. Minutes of the III Meeting of the Board of Directors (March 19, 1993), La Biennale di Venezia, ASAC, FS, dep., b. 120; Clarissa Ricci, *La Biennale di Venezia 1993-2003. L’Esposizione come piattaforma* (PhD diss. luav University and Ca’ Foscari University in Venice, 2014), 47-54.

52

Achille Bonito Oliva (ed.), *XLV Esposizione internazionale d’arte: Punti cardinali dell’arte*, vol. 1-2 (Venice: Marsilio, 1993); Bonito Oliva ed., *Cardinal Points of Art: Theoretical Essays: XLV International Art Exhibition*, vol. 3. (Venice: Marsilio, 1994).

53

Bonito Oliva, *Cardinal Points of Art*, 10.

54

Lawrence Alloway, *The Venice Biennale, 1895-1968: From Salon to Goldfish Bowl* (New York: New York Graphic Society, 1968), 153; Vittoria Martini “The Space of the Exhibition. The Multi-cellular Structure of the Venice Biennale”, in *Pavilions. Art in Architecture*, eds. Robert Irland and Federica Martini (Brussels: Muette, 2012), 145-167.

This notion of an exhibition as a mosaic resembles the idea of “archipelago thinking” which Édouard Glissant had started to explore in his Caribbean texts⁵⁵ only a few years before and which Bonito Oliva was certainly acquainted with.⁵⁶ The fifteen exhibitions could be seen as a collection of islands, connected to each other by the city of Venice. Closer though to a mild situationist approach,⁵⁷ the mosaic metaphor was intended to suggest a kind of multiculturalism; the mixing of ethnic groups, languages and cultures within society. In Italy the debate around multiculturalism was introduced at a political level in the late 1980s and it gradually became more relevant as migrants started to land on Italian shores after the dissolution of the Soviet Union.⁵⁸ As Bonito Oliva declared,

It is no longer possible to recognise the purity of a national nucleus; instead we must acknowledge the positive contribution of a trans-nationality, of an intertwining of nations capable of producing cultural eclecticism and necessary interracial unity.⁵⁹

Such approach chimed with the core concept of *Molteplici Culture (Multiple Cultures)*⁶⁰ held in May-June 1992 in Rome. This exhibition, to which Bonito Oliva contributed a text which was a draft of the second part of his essay in the Biennale’s catalogue,⁶¹ was a model for the 45th Biennale’s format, and, in particular, for *Aperto '93*, as it delegated parts of the exhibition to other curators, allowing for an openness and complexity of views which was described by Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev as “a mosaic of psychological, ethical, moral, economic, political, ethnic subjects”.⁶² Similarly, the “multi-mosaic” assembled by Bonito Oliva in Venice stresses continuous movement. The “circular exchange of art culture”⁶³ becomes, in this Biennale, an operational metaphor, which Bonito Oliva explains using two keywords – coexistence and nomadism. These words are both catalysts of the exhibition’s methodological approach and interpretative tools for understanding contemporary art.⁶⁴

55

Édouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays*, trans. J. Michael Dash (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1989); Édouard Glissant, *Poétique de la Relation* (Paris: Gallimard, 1990).

56

This could be the case, considering Bonito Oliva knew Alighiero Boetti well, and Boetti was an admirer of Glissant. On the importance of Glissant to Boetti: “Édouard Glissant & Hans Ulrich Obrist”, in *100 Notes-100 Thoughts: DOCUMENTA 13* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2012).

57

Guy Debord, “Theory of Dérive”, *Internationale Situationniste*, vol. 2 (1958), trans. Ken Knabb, <http://library.nothingness.org/articles/all/en/display/314>, accessed December 2019.

58

Christof Van Mol and Helga de Valk, “Migration and Immigrants in Europe: A Historical and Demographic Perspective”, in *Integration Processes and Policies in Europe*, eds. Blanca Garcés-Masareñas and Rinus Penninx (Cham: Springer, 2016), 31-55.

59

Bonito Oliva, *Cardinal Points of Art*, 10.

60

Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, Ludovico Pratesi eds., *Molteplici Culture. Itinerari dell'arte contemporanea in un mondo che cambia* (Rome, May, 19-June, 19, 1992), exh. cat. (Rome: Edizioni Carte Segrete, 1992).

61

Confront “The System of Politics and Culture” in Christov-Bakargiev and Pratesi, *Molteplici Culture*, 55-57 with “The System of Politics” in Bonito Oliva, *Cardinal Points of Art*, 11-14. However the founding argument of this text was sketched in *Arte e sistema dell'arte. Opera pubblico critica mercato* (Pescara: Galleria Lucrezia de Domizio Durini, 1975).

62

Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, “Molteplici Culture” in Christov-Bakargiev and Pratesi, *Molteplici Culture*, 13.

63

Bonito Oliva, *Cardinal Points of Art*, 14.

64

Ibid., 12.

2.1. The Coexistence of Art

As with many other concepts utilised by Achille Bonito Oliva, “coexistence” has a broad and shifting meaning. Above all, the fifteen exhibitions of the 45th Venice Biennale, together with the national pavilions and the collateral events, are a response to the principle of spatial coexistence.

The idea of artwork from different nations coexisting became a central principle which shaped all the exhibitions. As was typical in the Biennale in those years, the Central Pavilion was devoted to thematic exhibitions organised by the Biennale’s curators, exhibitions of Italian artists and to countries without a pavilion at the Giardini. Bonito Oliva, however, tried to free up space in the Central Pavilion⁶⁵ since the countries requesting space were increasing every year. It was with this in mind that Bonito Oliva put forward the “transnational proposal” in which he asked the countries with a built pavilion to host artists from nations without a permanent one.⁶⁶

However, spatial coexistence wasn’t simply the inevitable condition of the Central Pavilion, it was for Bonito Oliva “the choice of spatial and synchronic categories which would help to think of art as an order made of coexistences, and not a clear sequence”.⁶⁷ This principle of *Cardinal Points of Art* was exemplified in the display of the Central Pavilion which hosted, as was customary, the Artistic Director’s exhibition, together with the exhibitions of those countries without pavilions, and the Italian section *Opera Italiana*. The coexistence of these exhibitions, however, was not paratactic. Artworks and sections were not simply placed alongside each other. An example of this principle was visible at the entrance rotunda of the pavilion, which exhibited *Terremoto a palazzo (Earthquake at the palace)* (1981) by Joseph Beuys, a dramatic space containing broken glass and heavy trunks, alongside pieces of furniture that survived the 1980 earthquake in Naples. This entrance acted as an opening statement of the curatorial principle of structuring an exhibition through references, connections and proximities. The installation, with an egg perched precariously on trunks supported by drinking glasses, is a representation of the instability of life. Nevertheless, a more positive purport of the capacity of art to console and enrich was created by virtue of the artwork’s belonging also to the adjacent section in *Terrae Motus*, a project conceived by the gallerist and collector Lucio Amelio following the Naples earthquake. Beuys’ intervention, in fact, was part of both *Points of Art* and *Opera Italiana* which also corresponded to the pavilion’s exit, recalling even more the ideas of circularity and synchronicity, which are, for Bonito Oliva, fundamental to the notion of coexistence. Furthermore, at the back of Beuys installation was *Les Archives de la Biennale de Venise en 1938 (The Venice Biennale’s archives in 1938)* (1993) by Christian Boltanski, which assembled photographic documentation of the Biennale in 1938 including the visit of Adolf Hitler; this proximity emphatically marked a new era for the Biennale which was definitely overcoming its Fascist past.

The display of Beuys’ work at the beginning of the exhibition also reflects the artist’s significant role in Bonito Oliva’s curatorial thought. Ever since the publication of *Territorio Magico*⁶⁸ in 1971, the German artist was described by Bonito Oliva as a key player in the formation of contemporary art.⁶⁹ Thus, the installation acted both as a doorway and as a point of convergence for the many

65

This happened only in 1999 when the Biennale agreed to have more space at the Arsenale.

66

Minutes of the I Countries Meeting (Hotel Bauer, July 3-4, 1992), in *La Biennale di Venezia*, ASAC, FS, AV, b. 518.

67

Translation of the author, Minutes LXII Board of Directors Meeting (September 4, 1992), in *La Biennale di Venezia* ASAC, FS, dep., b. 62: 19-20.

68

Achille Bonito Oliva, *Territorio Magico. Comportamenti Alternativi dell’Arte* (1971), Stefano Chiodi ed., (Florence: Le lettere, 2009).

69

Ibid., 68-69.

aspects of contemporary art that Bonito Oliva wanted to highlight, in particular the nomadism – the second of Bonito Oliva’s keywords – which Joseph Beuys embodied. Even if Beuys’ moment of awakening following his encounter with nomad tribes in Mongolia is more fictional than real,⁷⁰ he nevertheless advocated the myth of the artist in search of the “elsewhere”, as a nomad of the world and of meaning in general.⁷¹

In other exhibitions “coexistence” translated more clearly into inter-disciplinarity. For example, in *Slittamenti*⁷², the coexistence of diverse disciplines allowed the authors to move within wide artistic realms where the writer William Burroughs and the philosopher Jean Baudrillard could exhibit their paintings, and the film director Pedro Almodovar could curate an exhibition of his favourite artworks.⁷³

Although the cross-references were not always successful, every room and every exhibition in Bonito Oliva’s Biennale was sparked by the logic of connections. The ‘points’ of art can be read as junctions between the artworks, different media, exhibition sections, people and situations in time which make art possible.

Through the fifteen exhibitions, “the coexistence of art” became not only a curatorial practice but also a principle of enquiry which aimed to grasp art’s capacity to trespass, to move from one terrain to another, to blur different languages and to allow the different sections of an exhibition to interact in a common cultural discourse. For this reason, part of the mosaic-exhibition was also the catalogue which collected an unprecedented number of essays by philosophers and theoreticians who introduced each exhibition.⁷⁴

This same rationale of coexistence informed *Aperto* ’93 at the Corderie of the Arsenale. Bonito Oliva paid special attention to this exhibition and wanted to make it the Biennale’s flagship.⁷⁵ There were certainly personal reasons behind this. Together with Harald Szeemann he had organized the first *Aperto* in 1980.⁷⁶ Following its success, the Biennale transformed it into a section devoted to young artists. In 1993, however, Bonito Oliva abolished the age limit of thirty five,⁷⁷ following a trend initiated with the last *Paris Biennial* (1985) in which he served as one of the commissioners.⁷⁸ The aim was both to establish his paternity over the exhibition, to reinstate its original scope and to make it a “cultural arena”⁷⁹ devoted

Table 1.

Venues map, 45th International Exhibition, The Venice Biennale, 1993 design by Martina Salvaneschi

Table 2.1/2.2

List of the fifteen exhibitions of the 45th International Exhibition, The Venice Biennale, 1993 design by Martina Salvaneschi

70

Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, “Beuys: The Twilight of the Idol, Preliminary Notes for a Critique”, *Artforum* 18, no. 5 (January 1980): 35-43; Peter Nisbet, “Crash Course: Remarks on a Beuys Story”, in *Joseph Beuys: Mapping the Legacy*, ed. Gene Ray (New York: DAP/Ringling Museum of Art 2001), 5-17.

71

Victoria Walters, “Joseph Beuys and EURASIA”, *Tate Papers*, no. 31 (Spring 2019), <https://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/31/joseph-beuys-eurasia>, accessed March 2020.

72

Slittamenti was divided in three venues, see table no. 2. For a more detailed description cf. Ricci, *La Biennale 1993-2003*, 88-89.

73

Bonito Oliva, *XLV Esposizione internazionale d’arte* (vol. 2), 680-712.

74

Bonito Oliva, *Cardinal Points of Art*, 10. Bonito Oliva already experimented with the catalogue as an exhibition site. Cf. Luigia Leonardelli, “Amore mio, ovvero il catalogo come pratica curatoriale”, *Ricerche di S/confine*, dossier no. 4 (2018): 32-41, <https://www.ricerchedisconfine.info/dossier-4/dossier4-2018.pdf>, accessed September 2019.

75

Minutes of the I Countries Meeting (July 3-4, 1992): 3.

76

Achille Bonito Oliva, “Aperto 80”, in *Biennale di Venezia, Visual Art Section 1980* (June 1 - September 28, 1980) exh. cat. (Venice: La Biennale, 1980), 48-49. Denis Viva, “Aperto 80. La pittura come novità” in *Crocevia Biennale*, eds. Francesca Castellani and Eleonora Charans (Milan: Scalpendi Editore, 2017), 280.

77

Aperto ’80 did not have an age limit of 35 years.





78

The 13th Paris Biennale was organized in the Grande Halle de la Villette by an international curatorial staff: Georges Boudaille (France), Kasper König (Germany), Alanna Heiss (United States) and Achille Bonito Oliva (Italy). *Nouvelle Biennale de Paris 85* (Paris la Grande Halle de La Villette, October 2 - November 10, 1985), exh. cat. (Paris: Electa/Moniteur, 1985); Cf. Also Georges Boudaille, “Parigi Sfida Kassel e Venezia”, *Il Giornale dell’Arte*, III (March 21, 1985): 1-2.

XLV International Exhibition of Art The Venice Biennale
Cardinal Points of Art
13 June/10 October 1993

Venues



-  **Cardinal Points of Art**
-  **National Pavilions**
-  **Collateral Events**
-  **Special Events**

OFF MAP
Monastero Mechitarista
San Lazzaro degli Armeni
Gipsoteca Antonio Canova
Possagno (TV)
Campo del Getto
Cavallino

Exhibitions**PUNTI DELL'ARTE
Giardini di Castello,
Central Pavilion****Project:** Achille Bonito Oliva**Exhibition committee:**
Adelina von Fürstenberg,
Tommaso Trini, Mario
Codognato, Thierry Ollat.**Artists:**
(*Grave/Nord*) Joseph Beuys,
Robert Morris, Per Kikerby,
Georg Baselitz. (*Fermo/Ovest*)
Christian Boltanski, Emilio
Vedova. Enzo Cucchi,Jannis Kounellis (Aureo/
Sud), Gino De Dominicis,
Lucio Fontana, Anish Kapoor,
Susanna Solano. (Araldico/Est)
Sigmar Polke, Daniel Buren,
Cy Twombly,
Francesco Clemente.**OPERA ITALIANA
TRANSITI E TRITTICI
Giardini di Castello,
Central Pavilion****Project:** Achille Bonito Oliva**Exhibition committee:**
TRANSITI Fulvio Abbate,
Viana Conti, Francesco Poli,
Vittorio Rubiu, Anne-Marie
Sauzeau, Aldo Tagliaferri,
Angelo Trimarco.
TRITTICI Jole De Sanna,
Corrado Levi, Demetrio
Paparoni, Loredana Parmesani,
Duccio Trombadori.**Artists:**
TRANSITI (*Parabilia*) Ugo
Carrega, Martino Oberto
Nanni Balestrini, Patrizia
Vicinelli, Eugenio Miccini,
Franco Vaccari. (*Transiti
Premonizioni: Emilio Villa e
Carla Lonzi*) Emilio Villa, William
Xerra, Corrado Costa, Carla
Accardi, Pino Pascali, Giulio
Paolini, Jannis Kounellis, Pinot
Gallizio, Lucio Fontana, Pietro
Consagra, Mimmo Rotella,
Salvatore Scarpitta, Mario
Nigro, Getulio Alviani, Enrico
Castellani, Luciano Fabbro, Cy
Twombly. (*Persona*) Fabio Mauri,Emilio Isgrò. (*Concessione
d'Immagine*) Gianfranco
Gorgoni, Paolo Mussat Sartor,
Plinio De Martiis, Claudio
Abate; (*Terrae Motus*) Andy
Warhol, Robert Mapplethorpe,
Silvio Merlino, Julian Schnabel,
Nino Longobardi, Carlo Alfano.
(*Fabrica Civica*) Carla Accardi,
Alighiero e Boetti, Renata
Boero, Isabella Ducrot, Giulio
Turcato. (Museum Luciano
Giaccari).
TRITTICI (*Imagina*) Cloti
Ricciardi, Carol Rama, Giosetta
Fioroni. (*Extroversa*) Marisa
Busanel, Antonio Recalcati,Aldo Mondino. (*Complessa*)
Luciano Fabbro, Hidetoshi
Nagasawa, Luisa Protti.
(*Oggettistica*) Salvatore
Scarpitta, Gianni Piacentino,
Piero Gilardi. (*Abstracta*) Sergio
Fermariello, Domenico Bianchi,
Remo Salvadori.**APERTO 93 -
EMERGENCY/EMERGENZA
Corderie dell'Arsenale****Project:** Achille Bonito Oliva**Exhibition committee:**
Helena Kontova (coordinator),
Francesco Bonami, Nicolas
Borraud, Antonio d'Avossa,
Jeffrey Deitch, Mike Hubert,
Thomas Locher, Kong Changan
(Lauk'ung Chan),
Robert Nickas, Rosma Scuteri,
Berta Sichel, Matthew Slotover,
Benjamin Weil.**Artists:**
(*After the Event* - Hubert)
Dawn Clements, Gianmarco
Montesano, Angelo
Papadimitriou, Alexis
Rockman, Mario Dellavedova.
(*Riavvicinamenti* - Kontova)
Milena Dopitová, Róza El-
Hassan, Zbigniew Libera,
Eva Marisaldi, Liliana Moro
e Bernhard Rüdiger, Eran
Schaefer, Maria Grazia Toderi,
VSSD, Dimitris Kozaris,
Premiata Ditta, Pipilotti Rist.
(*Il semplice scambio* - Bonami)
Maurizio Cattelan, Jessica
Diamond, Carter Kustera, Paul
McCarthy, Gabriel Orozco,
Charles Ray, Rudolf Stingel, Alix
Lambert, Kristin Oppenheim,
Rainald Schumacher. (*Reality
Used to be a friend of mine* -
Slotover) Christine Borland, Mat
Collishaw, Damien Hirst, Simon
Patterson, Vongphrachanh
Phanit, Steven Pippin,
Julie Roberts, Rirkrit Tiravanija,Sadie Benning, Paper Tiger
Television, Georgina Starr.
(*Can Art Still Change the
World?* - Deitch) Janine
Antoni, Renée Green, Kohdai
Nakahara, Kiki Smith, Noboru
Tsubaky, Nari Ward, Yukinori
Yanagi, Andrea Zittel, Cheryl
Donegan. (*Das Reale/ Die
Arbeit* - Locher) Biefer &
Zraggen, Meg Cranston,
Regina Möller, Hirsh Perlman,
Dan Peterman, Shade of Green,
Rolf Walz, Peter Zimmermann.
(*Indicatori* - D'Avossa) Pep
Agut, Bigert&Bergstrom,
Giorgio Cattani, Maria Eichhorn,
Carsten Höller, Kirsten Mosher,
Luca Quaranta, Sergio Sarra,
Marcelo Expósito.
(*Indifference and non-
Indifference* - Changan)
Kathe Burkhart, Cazzomatto,
Formento, Sossella, Michael
W. Joo, Anatoly Osmolovsky,
Nedko Solakov, Youshen
Wang, Wu Shan Zhuan.(Standards - Bourriaud)
Angela Bulloch, Cercle Ramo
Nash, Fabrice Hybert, Sean
Landers, Philippe Parreno,
Patrick Van Caeckenbergh,
Niek Van de Steeg, Nicolaus
Schafhausen, Kai Althoff, Lukas
Duwenhögger. (*News from Post
America* - Sichel) Laura Aguilar,
Daniel J. Martinez, Rosângela
Rennó, Doris Salcedo, Andres
Serrano, Rigoberto Torres,
José Antonio Hernández.
(*Forse...* - Scuteri) Filadelfo
Anzalone, Hany Armanious,
Samuel Kane Kwei, Mondo/
Mokoh, Bonnie Ntshalintshali,
TODT, Oliviero Toscani. (*An
Essay on Liberation* - Nichas)
Félix Gonzáles - Torres, Scott
Grodesky, Nancy Rubin, Julia
Scher. (*Vaporetti* - Weil) Henry
Bond, Sylvie Fleury, Dominique
González-Foerster, Lothar
Hempel, Roth & Stauffenberg.**PASSAGGIO A ORIENTE
Giardini di Castello,
Israel and Venice Pavilion****Exhibition committee:**
Virginia Baradel, Francesca del
Lago, Giacinto di Pietrantonio,
Li Xianting, Marco Meneguzzo,
Roland Sabatier, Kazuo
Yamawaki.**Artists:**
(Gutai) Jiro Yoshihara,
Sadamasa Motonaga,
Saburo Murakami, Shozo
Shimamoto, Fujiko Shiraga,
Kazuo Shiraga, Yosuo Sumi,
Atzuo Tanaka, Tsuruku
Yamasaki, Toshio Yoshida,
Mischio Yoshiara. (Gruppo
Ispezione Medermeneutica)Sergej Anufriev, Vladimir
Fedorov, Pavel Pepperstein,
Monastyrskij, Jurij Lejderman.
(Letterism) Isidore Isou, Gabriel
Pomerand, Maurice Lemaitre,
Roland Sabatier, Micheline
Hachette, Alain Satié, François
Poyet, Gérard Philippe Broutin,
Woody Roehmer, Albert
Dupont, Frédérique Devaux,Michel Armager, Virginie
Caraven e Jean-Paul d'Arville.
(Chinese Artists) Fang Lijun,
Liu Wei, Yu Hong, Wang
Guangyi, Li Shan, Yu Youhan,
Song Haidong, Ding Yi,
Feng Mengbo, Sun Liang,
Wang Ziwei, Xu Bing,
Zhang Peili.**MURI DI CARTA
Giardini di Castello,
Central Pavilion****Exhibition committee:**
Gloria Bianchino, Arturo Carlo
Quintavalle.**Artists:**
Man Ray, Daniel Schwartz,
Florence Henri, Walker Evans,
Dorothea Lange, Nino Migliori,
Mario Giacomelli, Luigi Ghirri,
Mimmo Jodice, Gabriele
Basilico, Fulvio Ventura,Karl Dietrich Bühler,
Mario Cresci, Giovanni
Chiaramonte, Olivo Barbieri,
Vincenzo Castello,
Cucchi White, Guido Guidi,
Francesco Radino e Paolo
Rosselli.

SLITTAMENTI Sala Guardi alle Zitelle, Palazzo Fortuny	Exhibition committee: Luca Massimo Barbero, Chiara Bertolla, Franco Bolelli, Vittoria Coen, Furio Colombo, Gabriella Di Milia, Gabriella Drudi, Corinna Ferrari, Jan Foncé, Enrico Ghezzi, Marco Giusto, Luigi Meneghelli, Heiner Müller, Giovan Battista Salerno, Fulvio Salvadori, Barbara Tosi, Giorgio Verzotti, Marisa Volpi.	Artists: Pedro Almodovar for Andy Warhol, Roy Lichtenstein, Robert Mapplethorpe, John Steinbach, Ettore Sottsass et al; William Borroughs, Wim Wenders, Jean Baudrillard, Pino Pascali, Derek Jarman, Luca Patella, Vettor Pisani, Mario Schifano, Vincenzo Agnetti, Bob Wilson, Enrico Ghezzi for	Mario Schifano, Bob Wilson, Peter Greenaway.
FIGURABILE: FRANCIS BACON Museo Correr	Exhibition committee: David Sylvester (director), Gilles Deleuze, David Mallor, Daniela Palazzoli, Lorenza Trucchi.	Artist: Francis Bacon.	
FRATELLI. FRANCESCO LO SAVIO E TANO FESTA Museo di Ca' Pesaro	Exhibition committee: Maurizio Fagiolo dell'Arco (supervisor), Francesca Alfano Miglietti, Massimo Carboni.	Artists: Tano Festa and Francesco Lo Savio.	
IL SUONO RAPIDO DELLE COSE CAGE AND COMPANY Granai delle Zitelle, Guggenheim Foundation	Exhibition committee: Alanna Heiss (supervisor), Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, Ludovico Pratesi, Angela Vettese.	Artists: Gianfranco Baruchello, John Cage, Giuseppe Chiari, Lucio Fontana, Sasper Johns, Daniele Lombardi, Sergio Lombardo,	Renato Mambor, Piero Manzoni, Walter Marchetti, Michelangelo Pistoletto, Luigi Russolo, Gianni Emilio Simonetti.
MACCHINE DELLA PACE Giardini di Castello, Ex-Jugoslavia Pavilion	Exhibition committee: Laura Cherubini, Paola Ugolini.	Artists: Mario Ceroli, Tony Cragg, Shirazeh Houshiary, Ange Leccia, Roman Opalka, Julian Opie, Panamarenko.	
LA COESISTENZA DELL'ARTE Ex vetrerie San Marco	Exhibition committee: Lòránd Hegyi (director), Paolo Balmas, Danilo Eccher, Luisa Somaini, Biljana Tomic.	Artists: Marina Abramović, Stefano Arienti, Herbert Brandl, Jiri David, Gianni Dessi, Braco Dimitrijević, Jiri Georg Dokoupil, Mirjana Dordević, Manfred Erjautz, Franz Graf, Herwig Kempinger,	Thorsten Kirchhoff, Peter Kogler, Felice Levini, Amedeo Martegani, László Mulasics, Nunzio, Piero Pizzi Cannella, Marjetica Potrč, Dubravka Rakoci, Hubert Schmalix, Tamás Trombitás, Manfred Wakolbinger, Die Damen.
VIAGGI VERSO CITERA. ARTE E POESIA Ca' Vendramin Calergi	Exhibition committee: Francesca Pasini, Giuliana Setari.	Artists: Marco Bagnoli, Bizhan Bassiri, Nicola De Maria, Günther Förge, Isa Genzhen, Rodney Graham, Bertrand Lavier, Mario Merz, Marisa Merz, Reinhard Mucha,	Mimmo Paladino, Giulio Paolini, Alfredo Pirri, Michelangelo Pistoletto, Thomas Schütte, Susana Solano, Ettore Spalletti, Haim Steinbach, Franz West.
DETTERRITORIALE Fondazione Bevilacqua La Masa	Exhibition committee: Giulio Alessandri, Virginia Baradel, Luca Massimo Barbero, Chiara Bertola.	Artists: Michele Anzenton, Gianluca Balocco, Maria Bernardone, Daniele Bianchi, Christiano Bianchin, Constantino Ciervo, Luca Clabot, Giuliano Dal Molin,	Maria Degenhardt, Riccardo De Marchi, Elisabetta Di Maggio, Marco Ferraris, Michelangelo Penso, Maria Grazia Rosin, Carmen Rossetto, Mariateresa Sartori, Ampelio Zappalorto.
ART AGAINST AIDS. VENEZIA 93 Peggy Guggenheim Collection	Exhibition committee: John Cheim, Diego Cortez, Carmen Gimenez, Klaus Kertess.	Artists: Carlos Accardi, Afrika, Curtis Anderson, Giovanni Anselmo, John Armleder, Charles Arnoldi, Richard Artschwager, Frank Auerbach, Donald Baedchler, Marco Bagnoli, John Baldessari, Miguel Barcelo, Matthew Barney, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Mike Bidlo, Ross Bleckner, Alighiero e Boetti, Jonathan Borofsky, Frédérick-Bruly	Bouabré, Louise Bourgeois, James Brown, Grisha Bruskin, Peter Cain, Alexander Caler, Saint Clair Cemin, Sandro Chia, Francesco Clemente, George Condo, Tony Cragg, Enzo Cucchi, Hanne Darbove, Richard Deacon David Deutsch, Braco Dimitrijevic, Jime Dine, Jiri Georg Dokoupil, Carroll Dunham, Pepe Espalieu, and many others.
IL CAVALLO DI LEONARDO Riva dei Sette Martiri	Supported by José Luis Brea.	Artists: Ben Yacober, Yannik Vu.	

to the most cutting edge artistic production, with a concentration on contemporary artistic discourse. Helena Kontova was nominated coordinator of the project and other curators were asked to collaborate [Table 2.2]. The result was thirteen exhibitions of ground-breaking art. This collaborative format, which characterised all of the Biennale's exhibitions, was to achieve great success in the following years. Most significantly it was the model for the 2003 Venice Biennale directed by Francesco Bonami, who was part of the *Aperto* '93 team. In contrast to the spatial cross-referencing of the Central Pavilion, the exhibitions at the Corderie were more distinct. However, the collaborative spirit sparked the whole project.

Coexistence therefore meant not only the spatial coexistence of artworks, viewers, exhibitions within the city, but also the metaphorical reconfiguration of different aesthetics when placed next to each other.

2.2. From nomadism to transnationalism

The artistic coexistence that Bonito Oliva insists upon is connected to another crucial keyword: nomadism, or what he calls the "horizontal movement" of artists. This term is very nuanced and its associations need untangling.

The concept of nomadism was used by the curator in his essays in the 1970s in order to describe avant-garde artistic practice. The word, even if it suggests the peripatetic movements of globalisation, is more closely related to the discourse of post-modernism. In particular the nomad becomes the central figure of contemporary social theory.⁸⁰ Marshall McLuhan, for example, puts forward the concept of the global village in which, thanks to technology, different forms of knowledge contaminate and intertwine with each other.⁸¹ According to this perspective, history and culture are essentially nomadic.⁸²

It is also possible to detect in Bonito Oliva's writing the influence of Deleuze and Guattari. Bonito Oliva specifically picks up the concept elaborated in *Anti-Oedipus* (1972)⁸³ and then furthered in a *Thousand Plateaus* (1980).⁸⁴ In these texts the movement of the nomad is described as horizontal, which allows it to resist and also to threaten the verticality of power.⁸⁵ The space in which the nomad moves resists normalisation and is therefore always a 'de-territorialisation' (a term which Bonito Oliva borrowed for one of his exhibitions *Deterritoriale*). Nomadism destabilises the hierarchical ordering of bodies and introduces chaotic movements whose patterns are only temporary and sometimes indiscernible. This close link to Deleuze and Guattari makes it clear why Bonito Oliva doesn't shift to the concept of migrant, since the movement of a migrant is from space to space while the movements of the nomad are distributed in an "open space".⁸⁶

Even though Bonito Oliva derived the concept of the nomad from

79

Bonito Oliva, *Cardinal Points of Art*, 17.

80

Tim Cresswell, *On the Move: Mobility in the Modern Western World* (Hoboken: Taylor & Francis, 2006), 19. Cf also Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Nomadology: the War Machine* (New York: Semiotext(e), 1996); Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at large: Cultural Dimension of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996); James Clifford, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Later Twentieth Century* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1997).

81

Marshall McLuhan and Bruce R. Powers, *The Global Village: Transformations in World Life and Media in the 21st century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968).

82

Gaetano Chiurazzi, *Il postmoderno. Il pensiero nella società della comunicazione* (Milan: Bruno Mondadori, 2002).

83

Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Capitalisme et schizophrénie. L'anti-Œdipe* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1972/1973).

84

Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* [1980], trans. Brian Massumi (London: Athlone Press, 1986).

85

Tim Cresswell, *On the move*, 50.

86

Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 380.

Deleuze and Guattari, the Italian curator left aside its political implications. It is definitely also influenced by Fluxus' understanding of the continuously changing nature of the artist's condition. Fluxus' international and interdisciplinary community – which Bonito Oliva emphasised in the title of his large 1990 exhibition, *Ubi Fluxus Ibi Motus* (Where is Fluxus There is Movement)⁸⁷ – broadened what was considered art and offered a practical example of international artistic nomadism.

It was the exhibition *Passage to the Orient* which embodied in particular the centrality of the concept of nomadism to Bonito Oliva's practice and, accordingly, he gave it a central position in the Biennale's display. *Passage to the Orient* greeted the visitor at the entrance of the Giardini with remakes of Gutai installations. *Mizu* (water) and *Akai Mizu* (red water) [fig. 1] by Sadamasa Motonaga, were tied riotously to the columns of the Central Pavilion. The exhibition also comprised works by Russian artists from the 1980s, the French group Lettrism, and the solo exhibitions of Shigeo Kubota, Yoko Ono and Jiro Yoshihara. Thanks to the help of Francesca Dallago, a large area was also dedicated to fourteen young Chinese painters including Fang Lijun, Liu Wei, Xu Bing, Zhang Peili.⁸⁸ This peculiar coexistence of diverse groups of artists was guided by the idea that, as Elémire Zolla makes explicit in the catalogue,

there are no differences, not even marginal, between those who try to express themselves artistically (whatever this term may still denote) here and in India, or China, or Japan [...] the avant-garde movements of this century do not have a nationality. [...] A painting does not reflect the historical movement, [...] it places itself outside history, in the single wholly unified globe.⁸⁹

fig. 1
Sadamasa Motonaga, "Mizu"
1956 (part of the exhibition
Passaggio a Oriente), Giardini
di Castello, 45th International
Exhibition, The Venice Biennale
© 1993 by Heimo Aga



⁸⁷

Achille Bonito Oliva ed., *Ubi Fluxus Ibi Motus 1990-1962* (Venice, May 26 - September 30, 1990) exh. cat. (Milan: Mazzotta, 1990).

⁸⁸

John F. Andrews, "Asia Art Archive Conference. Sites of Construction: Exhibitions and the Making of Recent Art History in Asia. Exhibition as Site—Extended Case Study (China 1993) Why 1993? Coincidence or Convergence?", *Yishu. Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art* 13, no. 3 (May/June 2014): 19-22.

⁸⁹

Elémire Zolla "The International Character of the avant-garde and the Japanese specificity", in Bonito Oliva, *Cardinal Points of Art*, 41.

It was under the influence of the two concepts of nomadism and coexistence that Bonito Oliva proposed to the pavilions' commissioners that they should "get out" of their narrow frontiers,⁹⁰ host artists of other countries, and put forward a trans-national interpretation of the pavilion.⁹¹ Most of the commissioners didn't react enthusiastically, revealing how keen countries still were to exhibit their works in separate showcases. After the culmination of years of debates around the need to abolish national pavilions, this "transnational" proposal actually gave new life to the principle of national pavilions. As Nam June Paik and Hans Haacke showed through their intervention at the German Pavilion that year, a transnational approach offered the possibility to "develop an alternative model of political structuring on a national level".⁹²

3. Reception of the XLV Biennale

In the conference gathered just after the 1993 exhibition to plan the Biennale's centennial anniversary,⁹³ a general dissatisfaction towards Bonito Oliva was expressed.⁹⁴ These objections, together with the different orientation of the new board of directors,⁹⁵ contributed to Bonito Oliva's failure to be appointed again as Artistic Director. For the first time the board nominated a foreign director to the Art Department, Jean Clair.⁹⁶ This decision, instead of marking a new era, aggravated the obsolescence of the institution. The French curator, who was highly respected in Italy, entered into conflict with the board on the organisation of the exhibition,⁹⁷ while the reforms were stalled in Parliament. The Centennial exhibition was well attended but not distinctive.⁹⁸ At this impasse, Germano Celant accepted the position of Artistic Director of the following Biennale in 1997. His "miraculous" realisation of an exhibition in six months, however, did not save the institution from being perceived as a lost chance in comparison to documenta X, curated by Catherine David. Moreover, that year the Biennale was competing with a plethora of other biennial type exhibitions: Skulpture Projecte, the second Johannesburg Biennial, and Manifesta in Rotterdam.⁹⁹ At the end of 1997, however,

90

Ricci, "From Obsolete to Contemporary".

91

Minutes of the I Countries Meeting (July 3-4, 1992): 2-4.

92

Lóránd Hegyi, "Preface", in *La Coesistenza Dell'arte: Un Modello Espositivo*, eds. Achille Bonito Oliva, Lóránd Hegyi, Marina Abramovic, exh. cat. (Venice: La Biennale di Venezia, 1993), 8.

93

"Quale Biennale dopo 100 Anni/Which Biennale after 100 years?" The conference was divided over several days in 1994: January 29 (Cinema), January 31 (Theatre), February 5 (Music), March 12 (Architecture), March 19 and 29 (Visual Arts), ASAC, FS, dep., b. 128.

94

An open letter against the nomination of Bonito Oliva was sent to the Biennale's President and was signed by fifty-one artists. Ricci, *La Biennale 1993-2003*, 110.

95

The new board started in January 1993 with Gian Luigi Rondi as President; General Secretary: Raffaele Martelli; Advisors: Barbiana Laura, Barzini Ludina, Bergamo Ugo, Borgomeo Luca, Cucciniello Enzo, Curi Umbero, Dal Co Francesco, Gentile Ada, Gentile Francesco, Giannuzzi Miraglia Anna Maria, Giugni Gino, Gressani Sanna Fabrizia, Lattuada Alberto, Marchetti Bruno, Mazzella Luigi, Rosada Bruno, Trevisi Paolo.

96

Minutes XIX Board of Directors Meeting (March 11, 1994), in *La Biennale*, ASAC, FS, dep., b.129: 12; 38.

97

The main problems were related to the decision to move the main part of the Biennale at Palazzo Grassi and to interrupt *Aperto*. Cf. Folder 1 (Exhibition Program, Gerard Regnier) in *La Biennale*, ASAC, FS, dep., b.132: 2 and Minutes XX Board of Directors Meeting (April 8, 1994), in *La Biennale*, ASAC, FS, dep., b. 133: 40-42.

98

Minutes LVIII Board of Directors Meeting (October 11, 1996) in *La Biennale*, ASAC, FS, VCA, b. reg 25: 28-30.

99

Pierre Restany, "Venezia-Kassel: l'ordine dei manager e i capricci dei sovversivi", *Domus*, no. 797 (October 1997): 101-116; Richard Shone, "Venice. Biennale and other exhibitions", *The Burlington Magazine*, CXXXIX, no. 1134 (September 1997): 651-653; Mireille Descombes, "Venise-Kassel, le match de l'été", *L'Hebdo*, July 27, 1997: 66-68.

the Biennale's fortunes changed. The reform draft, which had been blocked at the Italian Parliament for more than four years, became, in only a few weeks, a new charter.¹⁰⁰ The protagonist of this new phase of the Biennale's development was its president Paolo Baratta,¹⁰¹ who agreed a contract with the Nautical Ministry for the use of a large area of the Arsenale docks.¹⁰² This achievement was marked by the first Biennale of Harald Szeemann in 1999, *dAPERTutto*. Its great success gave the Biennale new credibility and repositioned it among the multitude of competing biennials.¹⁰³

This particular sequence of events made the 1993 Venice Biennale slip away from memory but other factors have also contributed to this exhibition's obscurity. Despite the fact that Bonito Oliva had gathered years of thinking at the Biennale and combined it in one of the largest exhibitions in its history, anticipating many features of today's Venice Biennale, and even if visitor numbers nearly tripled,¹⁰⁴ its reception was largely negative, especially after the highly critical review by Robert Hughes.¹⁰⁵ This prevented a mature and sustained consideration of the exhibition's relevance. The whole event was organized on a low budget and with a short deadline; therefore flaws and disorganisation were inevitably detected by the press and by visitors. One of the main criticisms of the exhibition was the inability of Bonito Oliva to offer a clear curatorial perspective.¹⁰⁶ The multiculturalism of the exhibition was seen as confused and was deemed to favour survey over analysis.¹⁰⁷ It was decried as the exhibition of "sex and death",¹⁰⁸ particularly because of the works exhibited in *Aperto*, such as the photographic series *La Morgue* (1992) by Andres Serrano, the auto-erotic sculptures of Kiki Smith (*Mother/Child*, 1993), the vagina wall photo (*Immagini di consumo di massa*, 1993) of Oliviero Toscani and Damien Hirst's cows in formaldehyde (*Mother and Child Divided*, 1993). These works were continually pointed to by the press as examples of excess or incomprehensibility; "a political and cultural despair that the Biennale has never previously exhibited".¹⁰⁹

Objections were also levelled at the size of the exhibition.¹¹⁰ It was one of the first examples of the mega-exhibition of the 1990s, comprising many venues scattered across the city. This is now the norm, but the Biennale of 1993 tripled the number of venues compared to the previous exhibition. The number of

100

The new charter differed mainly in the organisational structure, concentrating the institution's decisions in the president and an Administration Board. This structure was perfected in the transformation into a Foundation in 2004. Cf. Girolamo Sciullo "La Biennale di Venezia come società di cultura", *Aedon*, 1 (1998), <http://www.aedon.mulino.it/archivio/1998/1/sciullo2.htm>, accessed May 2019.

101

"Doppia promozione per Baratta", *Il Gazzettino di Venezia*, April 14, 1998.

102

Folder "Arsenale", in *La Biennale di Venezia*, ASAC, FS, CP, PB, b. 13.

103

Hans Belting, Andrea Buddensieg and Peter Weibel eds., *The Global Contemporary and the Rise of New Art Worlds*, (Karlsruhe, ZKM, September 17, 2011 – February 5, 2012), exh. cat. (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2012), 102-108.

104

Visitors at the Venice Biennale in 1993 were 270,000, Di Martino, *La Biennale di Venezia: 1985-1995*, 86.

105

Robert Hughes, "Incoherence at the Biennale", *TIME* (June 28, 1993): 67-68.

106

"Bonito Oliva's curatorial 'method' has been to jumble works together in the Italian pavilion under the title 'The Cardinal Points of Art' [...] this biennale is quite incoherent and achieves the near impossible feat of making what still passes for 'radical' creation look even weaker than it actually is", Hughes R, "Incoherence at the Biennale" (1993), 68.

107

Emanuela Caretto, "Multiculturale? Una parolaccia", *La Repubblica*, July 2, 1993, 31; Catherine Millet, "45e Biennale tout et n'emporte quoi", *Art Press*, no. 183 (September 1993): 64.

108

Geneviève Breerette, "Le malaise planétaire sur la Lagune", *Le Monde*, June 18, 1993, 17; Adam Gopnik, "Death in Venice", *New Yorker*, August 2, 1993: 66-73.

109

Tim Hilton, "The matter of life and death", *The Independent on Sunday* (June 20, 1993), <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/art-exhibitions-the-matter-of-life-and-death-a-spiky-new-show-in-venice-suggests-that-francis-bacon-1492756.html>, accessed March 2020.

110

Hervé Gauville, "Le marathon de Venise", *Libération* (June 14, 1993): 47.

represented countries also rose significantly. Most importantly, African countries like Ivory Coast and Senegal were hosted for the first time. Nevertheless, the persistence of national pavilions was also central to the criticisms, and was challenged by the new biennials.¹¹¹ The transnational project wasn't immediately perceived as ground-breaking, with the exception of the Austrian Pavilion.¹¹² Largely, Bonito Oliva's push towards a more global perspective was more attacked than praised. The exhibition was accused of showing an international homogeneity rather than a global complexity: "The trouble is that all the nomads seem to have gone to art school at the same oasis".¹¹³ This was a critique which the Venice exhibition shared with the 67th Whitney Biennial (1993),¹¹⁴ to which it was often compared for what Michael Kimmelman called its "political sloganeering and self-indulgent self-expression".¹¹⁵ Similar critiques regarding the lack of analysis and clear theme were also levelled at Jan Hoet for his choice not to title documenta IX (1992) and to the second Lyon Biennial (1993) for its failure to consider "the show as a whole".¹¹⁶ If the Lyon Biennial was much smaller than the Venice Biennale, the organisers were no less ambitious, naming their exhibition *Et tous ils changent le monde* (And They All Do Change the World).¹¹⁷

Regardless of criticisms, the 1993 Biennale was never totally forgotten. For example, Frederic Jameson¹¹⁸ discusses it as an example of a postmodernist biennial. When the 1993 Biennale took place, the exhibition scene was starting to explode. "Biennalisation"¹¹⁹ was warming up and, indeed, the same topics which informed the 1993 Venice Biennale also emerged in the new exhibitions of the 1990s. Manifesta, for example, also defined its exhibition practice through the concept of nomadism.¹²⁰

Over the last decade, scholars have started to explore the 1993 Venice Biennale because it was the first time Chinese artists were shown in Venice, even if there was no specific Chinese pavilion.¹²¹ This is part of the general increase in attention around Bonito Oliva's introduction of the concept of transnationality.¹²²

111

Thomas McEvilley, "Venice the Menace", *Artforum* XXXII, no. 2 (October 1993): 102.

112

Peter Weibel "The transnational Pavilion" in *Österreichs Beitrag zur 45. Biennale von Venedig 1993 = Austrian contribution to the 45th Biennale of Venice 1993 = Il contributo austriaco alla 45a Biennale di Venezia 1993*, eds. Andrea Fraser, Christian Philipp Müller, Gerwald Rockenschau (Wien Bundesministerium für Unterricht und Kunst, 1993), 7-20.

113

Adam Gopnik, "Death in Venice".

114

The 1993 Whitney Biennial was the 67th (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1993) by Thelma Golden, John G. Hanhardt, Lisa Phillips, and Elisabeth Sussman, in the series of annual and biannual surveys of art at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York City.

115

Michael Kimmelman, "Death in Venice (at the Biennale)", *New York Times*, June 27, 1993: section 2, 4.

116

"Et tous ils changent le monde", interview de Marc Dachy, *Art Press*, no. 183 (September 1993).

117

Hou Hanru, "Bi-biennale...", 98.

118

Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), ix; 419; 431.

119

Cf. Thierry de Duve, *The Art Biennial as a Global Phenomenon: Strategies in Neo-Political Times* (Rotterdam: NAI/SKOR, 2009); Elena Filipovic, Marieke van Hal, Solveig Øvstebø "Biennialogy", in *The Biennial Reader*, eds. Elena Filipovic, Marieke van Haland, Solveig Øvstebø (Ostfildern: Hatje Kantz, 2010), 15; Sabine B. Vogel, *Biennials: Art on a Global Scale* (Vienna: Springer, 2010); Bernard Lafargue, Louise Possant, *Le syndrome de Venise: la biennalisation de l'art contemporain* (Pau Cedex: PUPPA, 2011).

120

"Manifesta has a nomadic character", <https://manifesta.org/biennials/about-the-biennials/>, accessed November 2019.

121

Chinese artists were exhibited in *Passage to Orient*, cf. Exhibition list in table no. 2.

122

Marian Pastor Rocas, "Crystal Palace Exhibitions" in *Over Here: International Perspectives on Art and Culture*, eds. Gerardo Mosquera and Jens Fisher (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2005), 234-250; Royce W. Smith "Cultural Development? Cultural Unilateralism? An Analysis of Contemporary Festival and Biennale Programs", *Journal of Arts Management, Law and Society*, 36, no.4 (2007): 259-272; Maria Hlavajova, Simon Sheikh eds., *Former West. Art and the Contemporary after 1989* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2017).

4. Reassessing the Impact of the 1993 Exhibition

Assessing the impact of an exhibition is necessarily an open ended task as most of the time exhibitions are also incidental. As archival documentation showed, this was certainly the case. In addition, the analysis of the 1993 Venice Biennale reveals how few of Bonito Oliva's propositions were actually new and how many of them were simply extrapolated from the reforms of the 1970s. This awareness frustrates any interpretation of Achille Bonito Oliva as a heroic champion of contemporaneity.

Nevertheless, he was an incredibly energetic, far-sighted, if narcissistic, curator. Indeed, the references to Bonito Oliva's previous exhibitions and texts were noted by journalists who argued that this Venice Biennale was an autobiographical exhibition.¹²³ It was certainly the case that many of the exhibition's aspects can be traced to his previous productions. But Bonito Oliva isn't alone in his curatorial self-consciousness. Biennials, especially large scale events such as Venice, or documenta in Kassel, were and are considered to be an achievement in a curator's career and often become the testing ground of their thinking.

Nevertheless, the 1993 exhibition wasn't simply the fulfilment of Bonito Oliva's past projects, but a positive proposition which was latent in the Biennale's DNA. The curator's ability to distil the most important features of the Venice Biennale's unfinished reformation and to fine tune its cultural discourse on contemporary topics like globalisation (nomadism) and multiculturalism (coexistence) was strategically fundamental for the survival of the Biennale and allowed it to overcome the crisis of the 1990s.

Archival findings have shown that the most prominent contribution of Bonito Oliva's exhibition was its dynamic attempt at realising the Biennale's permanent activities, which meant giving the Biennale a wider reach both in terms of spatiality, allowing the exhibition to extend outside the Giardini, and temporality, increasing the exhibition's duration by nearly a year, making the Biennale an institution of constant interdisciplinary cultural production. Today's Biennale still markets educational and cultural events, such as the Biennale College, the Historical Archive, and the Ca' Giustian Conferences, all under the banner of "permanent activities".

Bonito Oliva was not only hoping to fulfil the reforms of the 1970s. The curator introduced curatorial concepts which rejuvenated the Biennale's format without disrupting it.

The first was the revision of the concept of the national pavilion.¹²⁴ From the student protests in 1968 and into the 1990s, critiques on the outdated model of national representation were very strong. With the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union, Europe and the world fundamentally changed, and some of the old national pavilions became politically problematic.¹²⁵ Despite the fact that only a few pavilions were attuned to the concept, the introduction of "transnationality" transformed the understanding of national representation. The "transnational" being something of a cliché in Italian politics and it wasn't used often by Bonito Oliva. Rather, it was mostly implied as the practical result of the concepts of "nomadism" and "coexistence". Nevertheless the term allowed the following exhibitions to adopt a more critical approach to "national representation". Brief examples¹²⁶ of this can be seen both in artistic interventions,

123

Philippe Daverio, "Vittoria ai punti", *Il giornale dell'Arte* (July-August 1993): 33.

124

Ricci, "From Obsolete to Contemporary".

125

For example in 1993 the former Yugoslavia pavilion was used for a Biennale exhibition *Macchine della Pace* because no agreement between the countries was made as the war in the Balkans was ongoing.

126

The list is much longer but these are clear examples of how national pavilions have become a means of enquiry around issues of national representation.

for example the works of Santiago Sierra¹²⁷ and Antoni Muntadas¹²⁸ for the Spanish Pavilion, in 2003 and 2005 respectively, and in curatorial propositions such as Bice Curiger's expansion of the concept of pavilions as spaces of negotiation in the "para-pavilions",¹²⁹ or the project of the Nordic Pavilion that same year.¹³⁰

Moreover, critically addressing "national representation" transformed one of the Biennale's weakest peculiarities into a point of distinction, guaranteeing differentiation from the growing number of competitors.¹³¹ The pavilions allow an ever increasing number of countries to colonise a section of the exhibition in order to show off their work, while collateral events have become a practical way to avoid the political limitations of this format.

However, the main feature of 1993 which contributed to the formation of the Biennale as a contemporary art platform was the move away from the thematic exhibition format. What was thought in the 1970s to give unity to the exhibition was disrupted in favour of an engagement with contemporary reality.¹³² As with the Whitney Biennial of the same year, this created a difficult reception. Even a proponent of Bonito Oliva's exhibition asked: "how can one of the best curators that we have [...] assisted by more than 200 people [...] not even manage to make an exhibition whose format is recognisable?"¹³³

The cancellation of *Winds of Art* increased the risk that visitors would miss the themes implied by the title "*Cardinal Points of Art*" and shifted the exhibition's focus onto the "emergent art" exhibited in *Aperto '93*. This was a shift that also affected Bonito Oliva's understanding of the exhibition. If at the beginning his methodological approach made use of expressions such as "mostra zapping" or "mosaic", towards the end, the term that prevails is "laboratory".¹³⁴

This change is relevant for two reasons. Firstly, it is connected to the history of the Biennale. Since the 1973 reforms, "laboratory" was often used to define the scope of the exhibition or as a synonym of "permanent activities". In 1975, for example, the institution was called an "international laboratory".¹³⁵ And secondly, because the term helps Bonito Oliva to reject the authoritative presentation¹³⁶ of new content in favour of the attitude of "reframing, capturing, reiterating and documenting"; characteristics of what David Joselit has called the "epistemology of search".¹³⁷ Using the term "laboratory", the exhibition becomes less of what Bonito Oliva described in 1972 as a "magic territory" in which art and viewer enter

127

Santiago Sierra, *Spanish pavilion. 50th Venice biennale = Pabellon de España, 50a Bienal de Venecia* (Venice, June 15- November 2, 2003), exh. cat. (Madrid: Turner 2003).

128

Antoni Muntadas and Bartolomeu Mari, *On Translation. I Giardini* (Barcellona: Actar, 2005).

129

Bice Curiger, "ILLUMInazioni", in *La Biennale di Venezia – 54 Esposizione Internazionale d'Arte. ILLUMInazioni = 54th International Exhibition of Art ILLUMInations* (Venice: June 4 - November 27, 2011), exh. cat. (Venice: Marsilio, 2001), 43.

130

Marta Kuzma, Pablo Lafuente and Jacques Rancière eds., *The State of Things* (London: Koenig, Oslo: Office for Contemporary Art Norway, 2012).

131

Angela Vettese, *The National Pavilions of the Venice Biennale: Spaces for Cultural Diplomacy* (Venice: Monos, 2014).

132

Bonito Oliva, *Cardinal Points of Art*, 9.

133

Vittorio Fagone, "Fatti, misfatti e lampadine", *il Messaggero*, July 1, 1993: 19.

134

Alain Elkann, "La mia Biennale, un capolavoro, intervista con Achille Bonito Oliva", *La Stampa*, July 12, 1993; Achille Bonito Oliva, "Come sei piccola..... America", *L'Espresso*, July 18, 1993: 98-10.

135

Annuario 1975, 9-11.

136

Iwona Blazwick, "Temple/White Cube/Laboratory" in *What makes a great Exhibition?*, ed. Paula Marincola (Philadelphia: Reakticon books, 2006), 118-133.

137

David Joselit, *After Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013).

into connection, and more a place “for investigating processes of meaning-making and for understanding wider developments within culture and society.”¹³⁸

The insistence on the exhibition as an active site, where a multiplicity of times, epistemological registers and media exist together in an interconnected and heterogeneous form, was confusing. Nevertheless, the ‘93 Biennale consolidated the idea that contemporary biennials should act as means of enquiry into social and political reality.¹³⁹ Another major example of this from the decade was 1997’s documenta X which used conferences and catalogue notes in order to make discursiveness and critical thinking pillars of the exhibition.

The ideas embodied in the 45th Venice Biennale were really destined to detonate a decade later. It was one of the first examples of a distinctively contemporary exhibition platform, a term which, in the words of Geoff Cox and Jacob Lund:

refers to the temporal complexity that follows from the coming together in the same cultural space heterogeneous cultural clusters [...] Across different scales, and in different localities.¹⁴⁰

138

Geoff Cox and Jacob Lund, *The Contemporary Condition: Introductory Thoughts on Contemporaneity and Contemporary Art* (Berlin: Stenberg Press, 2016), 32.

139

Rafal Niemojewski, “Venice or Havana: A polemic of the Genesis of the Contemporary Biennial” in *The Biennial Reader*, 88-103; Panos Kompatsiaris, *The Politics of Contemporary Art Biennials: Spectacles of Critique, Theory and Art* (London: Routledge, 2017).

140

Cox and Lund, *The Contemporary Condition*, 13.

Abbreviations

ASAC Archivio Storico delle Arti Contemporanee

FS Fondo Storico

dep. deposito

AV Arti Visive

b. busta

AVEB Arti Visive, Esposizioni biennali, mostre storiche e speciali [...]

VCA Verbali del Consiglio di Amministrazione (poi Consiglio Direttivo)

VMCA Verbali e altri Materiali del Consiglio di Amministrazione (poi Consiglio Direttivo)

DCD Deliberazioni del Consiglio Direttivo

CP Carte Personali

PB Paolo Baratta

Prot. Gen Protocollo Generale

Author’s Biography

Clarissa Ricci is Adjunct Professor at the the Università di Bologna. She was recipient of the Getty/ACLS Postdoctoral Fellow in Art History (2019-2020). Previously, she was entrusted by Iuav University in Venice (2017–2019) with researching the foundation of Arte Fiera and analysing the art market in Italy in the 1970s. She completed her PhD in 2014 with a thesis dedicated to the Venice Biennale displays (1993-2003) at the School of Advanced Studies in Venice

(SSAV) at Ca’ Foscari. She was a visiting scholar at Columbia University in New York City (2009-2010). She has written numerous essays and her research interests focus over the History of Exhibition and the formation of the Contemporary Art system of which *Starting from Venice: Studies on the Biennale* (Et al., 2011) was a starting point. She is co-founder and editor of *OBOE: On Biennials and Other Exhibitions*.

Vittoria Martini**How La Biennale as a Brand was Born: Venice as the Archetype of a Biennial City****Abstract**

“When discussing the Biennale, it is impossible to ignore the particular importance of Venice as its host city”. The history of the bond between Venice and the Venice Biennale has become an archetype for all those cities that, from the end of the 1980s, took part in the so-called ‘biennialization,’ namely the explosion of the phenomenon of biennials all over the world.

Historically, the image of a decadent Venice was used as a means of regenerating the city and bringing it into the modern world. Its poetic qualities contained a universalism which opened the city up for international consumption. This appealed to universal myth and its appropriation for commercial purposes underlay the development of the early Biennale. The history, beauty and architectural singularity of Venice – which were born out of political and economic necessity – became the distinguishing attributes of the “Patrimony of Venice.”

Despite the Venice Biennale has never changed its structure, mirroring a lost modern world with its national pavilions, it survived until the post-globalized world remaining at the centre of the art world, the place where the national/local identities still have a voice. The “Patrimony of Venice” is at the core of its success and Venice and its Biennale could be seen today as the archetype of a “brand” thanks to the specificity it preserved.

In this text I will analyse the history of the bond between the city of Venice and the Venice Biennale to outline the reasons of a successful “brand”.

Keywords

History of the Venice Biennale, Origin of the Venice Biennale, Experience, Archetype, Future of the biennials

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How La Biennale as a Brand was Born: Venice as the Archetype of a Biennial City

Vittoria Martini

No longer, as in times of old, O beautiful Venice,
Do warriors from beyond the Alps seek your help
in daring endeavors,
Nor do ambassadors ask you to preside over their
tangled contests,
Nor do rulers aspire to your precious friendship.
Today some loftier ideal drives a host of high
geniuses to you: art¹

The birth of a new biennial is no longer news: today, it seems perfectly normal to find one even in the most remote places on Earth. In general, when talking about a biennial, we tend to provide a short history of the origins of this exhibiting format, listing a series of generic facts which, more or less directly, led to the foundation of the Venice Biennale, in 1895. These facts, often passed on in anecdotal form, have ultimately toned down what is in fact a complex story, although often regarded as no longer relevant given its distance in time. More and more frequently, the origin of the most recent biennials is traced back to the boom at the end of the 1980s.² Locating their origin in a more recent time seems to better justify the worldwide spread of biennial shows. Yet the International Art Exhibition of the Venice Biennale, is not only still active after 120 years, during which it only exceptionally failed to organise its events, but continues to be an unmissable event, a key place for producing, exhibiting and discovering art, and an example of excellence in contemporary international art. The purported familiarity with its context of origin, coupled with a lack of adequate literature, led to the fading out of a history which

1

Vincenzo Natali, "Fascino", in *Prima Esposizione Internazionale d'Arte. Numero Unico Illustrato* (Venice: Luigia Alzetta/Zanco, 1895).

2

The most recent and relevant instance of this is Tony Smith, "Biennials: Four Fundamentals, Many Variations", *Biennial Foundation Magazine* (December 2016), <http://www.biennialfoundation.org/2016/12/biennials-four-fundamentals-many-variations>, accessed January 2018, and Anthony Gardner and Charles Green, *Biennials, Triennials, and Documenta: The Exhibitions that Created Contemporary Art* (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2016).

nonetheless is not only still relevant today, but also turns out to be an extremely productive archetype.³

While I was reflecting on these ideas, and on how to structure a text for the opening issue of a new magazine on biennials, I came across an article titled *How brands were born: a brief history of modern marketing*.⁴ It was written in 2011, and its author Marc De Swaan Arons – a global marketing consultant and brand expert – claims that, until 70 years ago, in order to set up a successful business, all you had to do was to come up with a quality product, and as long as the quality of that product was better than that of its competitors, you had nothing to worry about. But as a reaction to a world where quality gets standardised, brands began to emerge. The transition from simple product to brand happened around the mid-twentieth century, and is what pushed companies to find solutions that could differentiate them from their competitors. Between the 1950s and 1960s, major brands like Tide, Lipton, Kraft, Procter & Gamble, and Unilever excelled in marketing, and set a benchmark for all current brands. Normally, the companies that are born first, and hence manage to secure customer loyalty, are those that stand the test of time, thereby becoming “foundational brands”. It is in this very historical period that major companies began to focus on marketing in order to give the product an identity that could set it apart from its competitors. This is how brand marketing was born, by studying consumer targets. This led to the formulation of a “brand proposition”, or value proposition, which includes everything that is sold as part of the product, and makes up its “emotional value” – this is what creates a “buffer” against competitors. Knowledge of the consumer, along with a value proposition, creates the right “brand mix”. The notion of brand is therefore an abstract, complex one, which goes beyond that of a simple brand, since, unlike a trademark, a brand is not tangible. A brand contains the history of a product, customer experience, identity, a host of expectations, promises, and values which consumers, employees, competitors and shareholders perceive abstractly, without being able to quantify them. There are brands, such as Apple, which embody a way of life, and this is not really quantifiable – it is a symbolical value which results from knowing the mythology that grew around its founder, what it represents and its history. A brand can therefore be described as the whole range of perceptions that are activated in the mind of the consumer.

What I have said so far about the brand definitely seems to me an appropriate framework to approach a text in a magazine, entitled *Why Venice?*, or I would argue “why *still* Venice?”. In this text I shall argue that La Biennale di Venezia is one of the most highly ingenious and effective brands modern culture has ever produced, so much so that it has stood the test of time, has become the foundational brand for all following biennials, and created the most widespread exhibition format in our contemporary world – it has even gone as far as becoming an effective way of relaunching cities that are going through functional crises. What is, therefore, the exceptional brand mix, which *La Biennale di Venezia* has offered, and which allowed it to become the benchmark for art biennials worldwide?⁵

3

In her latest book, Caroline A. Jones brilliantly fills a gap in literature. In *The Global Work of Art* Jones describes the modern appetite for experiences and events, associated with the history of the world fairs and biennials, and goes on to claim that contemporary art itself today coincides with this culture. “This book would not have been written if biennials had not been replicated well beyond the originary instance in Venice [...] biennial replaced the vast expositions [...] and that by inheriting and building on an ‘international’ art audience, biennials have proved adaptable and resilient”, in Caroline A. Jones, *The Global Work of Art. World's Fairs, Biennials and the Aesthetics of Experience* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2016), 84.

4

Marc De Swaan Arons, “How Brands were Born: A Brief History of Modern Marketing”, *The Atlantic* (3 October 2011), <https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2011/10/how-brands-were-born-a-brief-history-of-modern-marketing/246012/>, accessed April 2020.

5

The definition is by Oliver Bennet, “A City’s Art Biennial can be like Watching an Army of Curatorial Truffle Pigs”, *The Guardian*, February 24, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2017/feb/24/city-art-biennial-curatorial-truffle-pigs-contemporary-architecture>, accessed April 2020.

“When discussing the Biennale, it is impossible to ignore the particular importance of Venice as its host city”:⁶ my starting point is this idea, simply and essentially expressed by Shearer West in one of the very few essays that carry out an in-depth analysis on the history of the origin of the International Art Exhibition. When an institution decides to launch a biennial in a specific city, what does it hope to achieve? “A biennial puts your city on the map and it’s great market”,⁷ says Rafal Niemojewski, director of the Biennial Foundation. It is worth noting that major capitals do not have a biennial, whereas the cities where biennials come into being are peripheral, and choose to invest on contemporary art to relaunch their economic growth. These cities must already have a modicum of potential (starting from a well-connected airport), a structure that can support a biennial, although it is not a permanent event and is “far cheaper than a big sporting event”.⁸ I will now enter into detail about the background against which the Venice Biennale emerged, so as to analyse the archetype of the biennial model in its complexity as an exhibiting structure connected to a city.

In the nineteenth century, Venice was searching for its identity as a city, and was looking for a new function after the fall of the *Serenissima* Republic, and the long decades in which it had been subject to foreign rule. Venice had retained its cosmopolitan spirit, despite being a less popular destination than Florence or Rome during the Grand Tour period, due to its ill-repute as a decadent city. It was precisely this atmosphere that attracted Lord Byron in 1816, when he was forced to leave London. For Byron, Venice was the ideal Romantic destination – the wild shores of the Lido, the libertine life in the sumptuous palaces on the Canal Grande, the Carnival festivals, the Island of San Lazzaro degli Armeni... The “gloomy gaiety”⁹ of Venice, as described in Byron’s masterpiece *Childe Harlod’s Pilgrimage* – amusements, funerals, splendor and decadence, all gave life to a new identity which influenced the imagination of John Ruskin, William Morris, William Turner, Charles Dickens, Henry James, Marcel Proust, Thomas Mann and Karl Baedeker who, since 1827, had been producing tourist guides, an essential tool for nineteenth century travellers. As late as the end of the century, anyone who came to Venice holding the red guide in their hands expected to find the places described by Byron. The Romantic age gave way to the Symbolist period with the death of Wagner, in 1883 in Venice, where he had written his famous second act of *Tristan und Isolde*. This led to an inevitable association between the decadence of the city and death, which became a literary *topos*: Nietzsche said that *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1891) was inspired precisely by the death of Wagner in Venice, while Gabriele D’Annunzio’s passionate novel *Flame*, set in Venice, was published in 1900 and in 1911 Thomas Mann wrote *Death in Venice*. Nostalgia, death, mystery, passion, eroticism and, for Nietzsche, an almost surreal place at the end of the world, outside of time, the place of melancholy *par excellence*.¹⁰ As Nietzsche writes, “all is now motionless, flat, dejected, gloomy like the lagoon of Venice”, the miasmas, the solitary beauty of the still, flat waters, out of which the sophisticated city emerges, where every single stone has a history, as Ruskin wrote. At the end of the century, the idea of decadence, in the words of Margaret Plant, carried strong sexual overtones, was very fashionable, and had sparked the creativity of Marcel Proust, Oscar Wilde, Robert de Montesquiou, James Whistler, Gustave Moreau, Edgar Allan Poe, and Arnold Böcklin. As Henry James observed, the true appeal of Venice lay in its

6

Shearer West, “National Desires and Regional Realities in the Venice Biennale, 1895-1914”, *Art History*, 18, no. 3 (September 1995): 405.

7

Oliver Bennet, “A city’s art biennial”, cf. footnote 5.

8

Ibid.

9

Letter CCLIV to Mr. Murray, (November 25, 1816) in *Letter and Journal of Lord Byron: With Notices of his Life*, ed. Thomas Moore (London: Murray, 1831), 249.

10

Cf. Margaret Plant, *Venice: Fragile City 1797-1997* (New Heaven and London: Yale University Press, 2002), 192-229.

decadence: the strong sense of history that emanated from every street corner, the preciousness of materials, the sharp contrast between beauty and decadence, power and downfall, magnificence and destitution.¹¹

After years of foreign rule and economic stall, and after having been annexed to the Kingdom of Italy in 1866, Venice soon managed to make up for its delay in modernisation. In 1846 the railway line connecting the city to the mainland had been inaugurated, but the heavy fiscal policy of the Habsburgs had hampered the development of entrepreneurial activity. Once free from the Austrian government, the city set as its most urgent priority to redesign its topography – a renovation of waterways and land roads was necessary in order to improve the salubriousness of the city in an epoch of cholera epidemics. It was already widely known that hygiene and health in cities were dependent on a sewage system, lighting and air circulation: starting in Paris with the Haussmann plan in 1858, cities began to move away from their medieval structure, and radically modernised their urban plans. In Venice, a series of main arteries were built through the heart of the city, in order to improve urban circulation and the passage of air and light. In 1883 a new public transport service, the *vaporetti* (ferry boats), was introduced. 1884 saw the end of building work for the aqueduct that conveyed water from the mainland, the rebuilding of the sewage system, the opening of a fish, fruit and vegetable market in Rialto, the enlargement of the cemetery, and the approval for the construction of new houses. As the economy recovered, the axis of trade – historically located in the Arsenale and San Marco – moved closer to the train station: the Canal Grande was used for boats that carried the goods bound for Rialto market, and ferries carrying citizens and tourists, and the Giudecca island became the new industrial harbour. The presence of a railway station led to the building of a commercial port around 1870. In 1884 the Mulino Stucky became operative, and in 1896 its premises were opened in the imposing neo-Gothic brick building on the Giudecca, which changed forever the city skyline. Again, close to the harbour and train station, in the same period, the Santa Marta cotton works were opened. From 1866 onwards, until the end of the Second World War, the Arsenale enjoyed a second life with the building of the Darsena Grande, where submarines and war ships for the new government were built. In 1867 Thomas Cook, the powerful travel agency, began to operate on the Venice territory, at a time in which infrastructure was starting to make the development of modern tourism possible. Venice was still perceived as exotic, mysterious, picturesque for its gondolas, its artefacts, and the faces of ordinary people who tourists could meet, more than in any other tourist city, while walking down the *calli* (streets).

Another factor, which should be added to this picture, is that, in the early nineteenth century, Venice had become a major centre for scientific research on hydrotherapy. In the second half of the nineteenth century, Venice became one of the most exclusive European resorts for water therapy and marine climate, at a time when these were very fashionable. It was in that period that many private palaces at the heart of the city were transformed into big hotels. In 1848, tourism in Venice began to play a central role in the city's economy.¹² In 1857 the first bathing establishment opened at the Lido.¹³ In 1872 the Società Bagni Lido was established, which was later taken over by CIGA - *Compagnia Italiana Grandi Alberghi* (Italian Company Great Hotels). In 1900, the company started building the first big luxury hotel of the Lido: the Grand Hotel des Bains, followed by the Excelsior Hotel in 1908. In 1904 the *New York Times* described the Lido as one of the most interesting tourist resorts, and the therapeutic bathing trend gave way to swimming as a source of pleasure and social life. At the end of the nineteenth century, Venice had become the place for physical experience.

11

Henry James, *Italian Hours* (London: Penguin Classics, 1995).

12

Paul Ginsborg, *Daniele Manin e la rivoluzione veneziana 1848-49* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1978), 46.

13

Giandomenico Romanelli, "Dalla laguna al mare: 'invenzione' del Lido", in *Lido e lidi. Società, moda, architettura e cultura balneare tra passato e futuro*, ed. Giorgio Triani (Venice: Marsilio, 1989), 99.

On the one hand, therefore, there was the widespread Romantic ideal of Venice, associated with its past, the picturesque, the Venetian way of life and its tradition. On the other hand, as Nietzsche had intuited, Venice seemed to be designed more for the man of the future, “a solitary felicitous island”, in the words of Margaret Plant, “an obduracy born of the toughness that forged the city remained as a historic dimension, still part of the present”.¹⁴

The decadent atmospheres that had become so fashionable, along with quality tourism, the modernisation of infrastructure and the general economic recovery, gave Venice a new identity and a new role. At the end of the nineteenth century, Venice was able to showcase itself as a cosmopolitan capital of contemporary art in the new Kingdom of Italy. On April 19, 1894, the City of Venice decided to hold an art exhibition “every biennium”, connected to a money prize to be awarded to the best work of art, and to donate “all proceeds to city charities”.¹⁵ It was immediately established that the exhibitions “should look beyond the boundaries of Italian art”. In the words of the catalogue of the first International Art Exhibition:

An international exhibition will have to attract the public mainly through the fame of the distinguished foreigners who will take part in it. It will provide all perceptive visitors, who are unable to embark on long journeys, with a way of getting to know, and compare, the most varied aesthetic trends, and will expand the intellectual knowledge of the young artists of our country, who will be inspired by the work of their brothers from other nations to create more ambitious projects.¹⁶

What is noteworthy about the planning of the exhibition is that the care for the display, and hence for the public’s experience, was the focus of attention right from the outset:

The public is weary of the usual chaotic exhibitions [...] it is essential that the sense of bewilderment, exhaustion, sometimes even boredom, caused by the accumulation of works, give way to the kind of unreserved admiration that a sober, skilful selection of exquisitely original works awakens in us.¹⁷

Benefit for a public charity, an international agenda and a didactic and educational mission for ordinary people and artists. These noble intentions and civil ambitions were part of a sophisticated strategy which would be called marketing today, aimed at a general economic relaunch of the city. In an 1894 report of the City Council, which discussed the nature of this future “permanent exhibiting structure”, we read that:

14

Margaret Plant, *Venice Fragile City*, 197.

15

D. Benassi [sic.], “Venezia e la Mostra Biennale d’Arte Come nacque l’idea”, in *Prima Esposizione Internazionale d’Arte. Numero Unico Illustrato* (Venice, 1895).

16

Prima esposizione internazionale d’arte della Città di Venezia. Catalogo illustrato (Venice: Visentini, 1895).

17

From the committee report in the Minutes of the Municipal Council of Venice, session of March 30, 1894, quoted by Maria Mimita Lamberti, “Le mostre internazionali di Venezia”, in *I mutamenti del mercato e le ricerche degli artisti*, in *Storia dell’arte italiana VII* (Turin: Einaudi, 1982), 102. Maria Mimita Lamberti’s text remains an essential bibliographic source to analyse the birth of the Venice Biennale. For an english translation of this essay see Maria Mimita Lamberti, “International Exhibitions in Venice” [1982], *OBOE Journal* I, no. 1 (2020): 26-45.

These exhibitions we organise will promote its [Venice's] economic growth by attracting even greater numbers of foreigners, and by gradually establishing it as one of the most important centres for art trade.¹⁸

The Council thus made an appeal for collaboration between all Venetian institutions, first and foremost the powerful association of hotel managers, urging them to “provide for [...] spending in the fine arts”.¹⁹ In 1893, the members of the Venice City Council had started approaching the problem by considering the existing exhibitions, which, in their opinion “have not always brought lasting advantages to the cities in which they were held”.²⁰ In order to reach this goal, they claimed, the Venice exhibition had to have “its own hallmark, a distinctive feature that sets it apart from the exhibitions that have followed each other in Italy”.²¹ It was then decided to introduce two requirements: “the most illustrious painters and sculptors”²² will be asked to form a committee, and a section should be devoted to foreign artists. What emerges from this lucid analysis of the necessary requirements for the new exhibition, which came last in an already crowded scene, is a sharp focus on the relaunch of Venice through the creation of a new type of market – that of contemporary art.

It was with the first 1895 exhibition that the design of the perfect show became reality. Leafing through the catalogue, we notice that the introductory text and the list of members of the Patronage Committee, are followed by the “*Abbonamenti*” (subscriptions) section, where visitors to the exhibition could learn about various types of subscriptions and pick the one most convenient for them, in conjunction with a special fare for the train ticket. At the end of the catalogue we also find the “*Annunzi*” (announcements) section, which contains advertisements for hotels, restaurants, cafés, pubs, seaside spas, antiquarians, photographers, knick-knack shops, liquor stores, addresses of physicians, dentists, hatters, lingerie shops, watchmaker’s shops, banks, jewellerys, forwarders – in short, everything a Biennale tourist might need. Besides, the cover of the *Numero Unico Illustrato dell’Esposizione d’Arte*, announced that during the exhibition there would be “serenades, regattas, sports matches and light shows, the bacchanal of the Redentore, an international fencing tournament, fireworks competitions, great theatre shows, concerts and other exceptional celebrations”.²³ Clearly, the target public being addressed here are precisely the kind of tourists who had emerged in the last two decades, who visited Venice for therapeutic purposes or to relax in a bathing resort. This type of tourist was educated enough to be interested in a contemporary art show and affluent enough to buy works of art, as part of a sophisticated system of entertainment and modern social life. This is confirmed by the significant fact that the exhibition venue was located in the Napoleonic gardens, the only area of Venice where history had been erased, and the only one not redolent of the myth of Venice.²⁴ Only a place that had absolutely no connection with the city’s encumbering past could host a project that looked to the future. Visitors to the exhibition could therefore enjoy the magnificent view of the San Marco basin while immersing themselves in the modernity of the show. Later, in 1934, it was the brilliant

18

Ibid.

19

Ibid.

20

Ibid., 101

21

Ibid., 102

22

Ibid.

23

Prima Esposizione Internazionale d'Arte.

24

Cf. Vittoria Martini, “A Brief History of How an Exhibition Took Shape”, in *Starting from Venice. Studies on the Biennale*, ed. Clarissa Ricci (Milano: et al., 2010): 67.

communicators of the Fascist government who officially changed the denomination of the “*Esposizione Internazionale d’Arte of the City of Venice*”, renaming it “*Biennale di Venezia. Esposizione Internazionale d’Arte*”, which, from that moment onwards, was commonly shortened to “*La Biennale*”.²⁵ The temporality inherent in its structure came to be the standard denomination for the whole exhibiting genre, which would start developing only twenty years later.

At the beginning of this text, I mentioned De Swaan Arons’s idea that understanding the consumer target, along with what is called a branded proposition, is necessary to create emotional value. In a 2014 article, the same author defines the notion of “total experience” that he associates with the launch of a brand.²⁶ This, according to the economist, is one of three elements that make up a highly effective brand, along with a “universal truth”, and being “More than a Business”. The “total experience” is “not about share of market anymore. It’s about share of consumer experience”²⁷ and still today the experience of a spectator of the Venice Biennale, is that of being guided, via contemporary art, to the least known places, those that are more off the beaten track of tourist Venice. To be able still to feel this sense of being lost in the city with the most tourists in the world today, remains a unique experience.²⁸ The Venice Biennale gave the city in which it was born a permanent exhibiting structure that could not be transposed to any other part of the world. Venice was included in the exhibition package from the very beginning, and vice versa. In one of the most ancient and fascinating cities in the world, tourists could learn about the latest trends in current artistic production. The International Art Exhibition was conceived as a promotional strategy for the city of Venice, and vice versa – today, the art Biennale invades the whole urban area, taking spectators from the Giardini to the heart of the city and plunging them into a total experience.²⁹ If for Apple the experience is the product, for the Venice Biennale the experience is the city.

The image of a decadent Venice was used as a means to regenerate the city, which was going through a profound functional crisis, and to drive it into the modern world. Its poetic qualities contained a universalist spirit, which opened the city up for international consumption. This appealed to a universal myth, and

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Marla Stone, *The Patron State. Culture & Politics in Fascist Italy* (Princeton [NJ]: Princeton University Press, 1998), 33. It is important to know that the change of denomination is only the conclusion of a series of reforms that, between 1928 and 1933, transformed the nature of the institution. Since then, this definition has been used ambiguously, taking for granted that “La Biennale” describes the art exhibition, although La Biennale di Venezia is in fact a multi-disciplinary institution, which comprises also Biennale Architettura, Biennale Musica, Biennale Teatro, Biennale Cinema, and Biennale Danza. For this reason in this text I refer to the “International Art Exhibition” which is still the current denomination of the art exhibition of the Venice Biennale.

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“...Our research shows that high-performing brands...[provide] what we call ‘total experience’... In fact, we believe that the most important marketing metric will soon change from ‘share of wallet’ or ‘share of voice’ to ‘share of experience’”, Marc de Swaan Arons, Frank van den Driest, Keith Weed, “The Ultimate Marketing Machine,” *Harvard Business Review* (July-August 2014): <https://hbr.org/2014/07/the-ultimate-marketing-machine> (consulted on April 2020). The notion of “experience” was introduced in the field of economics in 1998 by B. Joseph Pine and James H. Gilmore, two economists from Harvard Business School, who published an article entitled “Welcome to the experience economy”, 97-105. The following year, they published *The Experience Economy. Work Is Theater & Every Business a Stage* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 1999) which soon became a classic. Pine and Gilmore theorise the coming of a new economic era, that of experience, in which the product, good or service is no longer enough, because what the consumer wants is experience. For Pine and Gilmore, experience is the new economic value, and in this new era, every business is a stage on which to act out memorable events, for which an admission fee is required. Therefore, it is the value the individual attaches to the experience that determines the value of the offer, and experience is what lies at the basis of future economic growth.

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Marc de Swaan Arons, Frank van den Driest, Keith Weed, “The Ultimate Marketing Machine”.

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It is from the 1970s that the Biennale started to spread across the urban area, until it came to overlap with the very identity of the city.

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“At best, art biennials can positively transform our engagement with cities”, Oliver Bennet, “A city’s art biennial”. Cf. footnote 5.

its appropriation for commercial purposes underpinned the development of the early biennials. The history, beauty and architectural uniqueness of Venice – which were born out of political and economic necessity – became the distinguishing features of the “Venice heritage”. Although the Venice Biennale has never changed its structure, mirroring a lost modern world with its national pavilions, as a strong brand it survived until the post-globalized world, remaining at the center of an art world where the national/local identities still have a voice. The “Venice heritage” lies at the core of its success, and if today Venice and its Biennale can be seen as the archetype of a “brand”, it is thanks to the specificity it managed to preserve. This is the successful history of the bond between the city of Venice and the Venice Biennale, which reveals the secrets behind a successful brand.

But as a matter of fact, in the current economy, brand authenticity has never been more crucial to a business’ success and companies that have dedicated themselves to the greater good instead of solely to their bottom lines have seen a remarkable surge in support and revenue.

Ethical brands have risen to prominence in recent years as a market solution to a diverse range of political, social and, in this case most interestingly, ethical problems. By signifying the ethical beliefs of the firm behind them, ethical brands offer an apparently simple solution to ethical consumers: buy into the brands that represent the value systems that they believe in and avoid buying into those with value-systems that they do not believe in.³⁰

If we read the Venice Biennale through this lens of a leading brand, it comes directly to the issue of responsibility: brand responsibility is built on three pillars which are authenticity, courage and commitment to social good.

Authenticity encompasses continuity (a brand’s history), credibility (a brand that shows they’ve accomplished what they set out to do), integrity (a brand’s moral principles), and symbolism (a brand that adds meaning to people’s lives). We think of courage as something in the brand – or in its business practices – that disrupts the traditional system.³¹

We find a perfect resonance in a seminal essay written in 2011 by Carlos Basualdo, titled *The Unstable Institution*, a definition he coined to refer to periodic large-scale exhibitions, namely biennials. He writes:

Large-scale international exhibitions never completely belong to the system of art institutions in which they are supposedly inscribed, and the range of practical and theoretical possibilities to which they give rise often turns out to be subversive [...] in terms of the politics of exclusion historically enacted by the institutions of modernity, large-scale international exhibitions, as was the case with theatre in the High Renaissance, could perhaps be considered as “a force

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Carys Egan-Wyer, Sara Louise Muhr, Anna Pfeiffer and Peter Svensson, “The ethics of the brand”, in *Ephemera. Theory & politics in organization* 14, no. 1 (February 2014): I-II.

31

Cf. <https://we-are-next.com/collection/what-is-brand-responsibility>, accessed January 2020.

for the breakdown of class distinctions, even for democratisation".³²

So, if we read the Venice Biennale both as a leading brand and as a prominent international institution of culture, thanks to its "unstable nature", we realize that it has ethical responsibilities. This is for its very subversive cultural potential, precisely because it can propose themes that touch the uncomfortable international political and cultural contingency on the double level of locality and internationality, and it can do that through the discourses that artistic production opens, discourses which can reach a very large audience who will become a critical mass.³³

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Carlos Basualdo, "The Unstable Institution", in *What Makes a Great Exhibition?*, ed. Paula Marincola (Philadelphia: Reakticon books, 2006), 60.

33

To take a quick dip in the heart of its history, and just to make one example, it is worth knowing that after the 1968 boycott and the proclamation of the new statute that cleaned the institution from the fascist intervention of 1938, La Biennale di Venezia had proclaimed itself a democratic and anti-fascist cultural institution. Between 1974 and 1978, La Biennale had given itself a mission that was cultural and political: the exhibitions were strictly connected to the international political and cultural situation, and in a vision deeply linked to post-1968 ideology, it operated as an institution that would work for the "salvation" and "vivification of the city". It had an international glance on the state of the arts, offering a critical overview to open discussions, and it was the protagonist on the front line, militant, in the place where it was: the city of Venice with its many complex issues. Cf. Vittoria Martini, *La Biennale di Venezia 1968-1978. La rivoluzione incompiuta* (PhD diss. Cà Foscari 2012), <http://dspace.unive.it/handle/10579/1125>.

For example documenta, over the past decades, has played a leading role in taking the international discourse about art in new directions, establishing itself as an institution that goes far beyond a survey of what is currently happening, inviting the attention of the international art world every five years. The discourse and the dynamics of the discussion surrounding each documenta, reflects and challenges the expectations of society about art, cf. https://www.documenta.de/en/about#16_documenta_ggmbh.

Author's Biography

Vittoria Martini is an independent Art Historian. She extensively published on the Venice Biennale's exhibition and institutional history. She teaches History of exhibitions and she holds the seminar 'Writing for art' (with Giorgia Bertolino) at Campo, the course for curators run by Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo (Turin). Among her recent

publications, "Spain. Artistic avant-garde and social reality (1936-1976). Documenting the political reasons at stake behind an exhibition at the Venice Biennale", in *documenta studies* (forthcoming 2020); "1948|1968 The Venice Biennale at its turning", in *Making Art History in Europe after 1945* (2020).