

Afterword

Against the Domestication of Antagonism. Calling for a New Methodology for the Study of National Pavilions

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The fifth edition of the *OBOE Journal* emphasises the necessity for a fresh approach to National Pavilions studies. The examination of national pavilions has historically generated some unease among academics. Accusations of being geopolitically outdated often arise, as National Pavilions tend to evoke nationalism when they seek to honour a specific and partial cultural narrative of a nation and localism or provincialism when they concentrate on particular stories from a specific location. While the list of concerns could be extended, it might also be argued that the pavilion has always acted as a space for inspiration and reflection for artists, especially after its complex character and representative identity evolved following World War II, leading to groundbreaking projects like Hans Haacke's in 1993, which stands out as one of the most iconic examples.

Discomfort in addressing National Pavilions has not deterred scholars from pursuing valuable research avenues. For instance, the Swiss group Sik-Isea led by Beat Wyss has suggested a comparative study,¹ while Angela Vettese proposed in 2014 that we reverse our perspectives on pavilions,² viewing them as agents in the development of the Biennale. More recently, Stephen Naylor has been examining the National Pavilions of the Venice Biennale to investigate the progression of international contemporary art trends in the Asia-Pacific region.³ However, there remains a shortage of studies focusing on National Pavilions, with many still in preliminary stages. It is crucial to compare the outcomes of these studies, including insights from the fifth issue of *OBOE* and earlier research, to address the challenges of tackling a subject often diminished in the narratives surrounding the Venice Biennale, reduced to a mere aspect of the event.

The relevance of pavilions is just under our eyes. Whenever geopolitical events occur, we all look to the pavilions to observe how they will react. Every stance taken shapes the narrative that the Biennale itself presents. When the Biennale designated

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Beat Wyss, "Comparative Art History: The Biennale Principle", in Clarissa Ricci (ed.), *Starting from Venice: Studies on the Biennale* (Milan: et. al), 50-61.

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Angela Vettese, *I padiglioni nazionali della Biennale di Venezia come luoghi di diplomazia culturale/The National Pavilions of the Venice Biennale: Spaces for Cultural Diplomacy* (Venice: Monos, 2014).

3

Stephen Naylor, *The Venice Biennale and the Asia-Pacific in the Global Art World* (New York: Routledge, 2020).

the central area as Piazza Ucraina, it stood as a proponent of peace; however, the presence or absence of a pavilion has sometimes resulted from compromises or commercial dealings, as seen with the African Pavilion in 2007.

Nonetheless, the reflections emerging here do not aim to support or undermine the pavilions. We understand that they are the product of a complex interplay of particular situations, political agreements, cultural intentions, and diplomatic decisions in which artists and curators engage.

We believe though that the National Pavilions of the Biennale provide an advantageous focal point for studying exhibitions, serving as a connector where various disciplines – economy, politics, urbanism, and market – intersect.

Interactions at multiple levels and across different fields characterise large-scale exhibitions. Among the scholarly works on exhibitions that have attempted to integrate various dimensions, the Afterall monographs deserve particular recognition.⁴ These have made that methodological effort of not leaving a single narrative voice with the responsibility of telling a story and taking the various points of view: curatorial, artistic, social, and political. The National Pavilions also allow for the addition of historical depth and bring international relations into the theme in an even more accentuated way. Given that the study of exhibitions inherently links to interdisciplinarity, how can we effectively apply it? Is it merely about compiling information from other fields? Introducing varying perspectives?

We hypothesise that a more nuanced reflection can be developed, and new methodologies warrant consideration. For instance, what about applying intersectionality to the history of exhibitions? Or, analysing exhibitions through the lens of the system? As Andrea Fraser indicates, the emergence of the exhibition system fully intersects with related fields for varying purposes.⁵ These are warnings, as we should not overlook the need to dismantle the economic, epistemological, and exhibition-related frameworks and practices that perpetuate narratives in hierarchical ways.

This marks the first occasion that we are penning an afterword for one of our issues. Each issue is inherently incomplete, suggesting new paths for inquiry, contributing to a deeper understanding of biennials and other exhibitions, and paving the way for new discussions. However, in this instance, we also feel compelled to emphasise the necessity of being cautious about domestication.

Echoing the concern that Nanne Burman highlighted in her examination of documenta's rhetoric of being a democratic exhibition, our goal should be to “complicate the overly simplistic associations of large-scale exhibitions with democracy”,⁶ peace, tolerance, and generic internationalism, which overlook the various regimes of governmentality at play within curatorial frameworks and beyond. One objective is to warn against efforts to politicise exhibitions under the guise of an ethical representation that often merges diversity with democracy, potentially leading to a simplification of difference in the service of identity politics, which upholds essentialist views of cultural identity.

We therefore invite you to participate in future reflections in person or on the page. This job is for all of us.

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The Exhibition History series was launched in 2010 in association with Asia Art Archive, the Center of Curatorial Studies, Bard College, documenta Institut, and the Faculty of Fine Applied and Performing Arts, University of Gothenburg. List of publications at <https://www.afterall.org/projects/exhibition-histories/#About>, accessed December 2024.

5

Andrea Fraser, “The Field of Contemporary Art: A Diagram”, *e-flux Notes*, October 17, 2024, <https://www.e-flux.com/notes/634540/the-field-of-contemporary-art-a-diagram>, accessed December 2024.

6

Nanne Burman, “d is for...? documenta and the politics of (re)presentation”, *Field*, no. 18-19 (2021) <https://field-journal.com/issue-18-19/d-is-for-documenta-and-the-politics-of-representation/> accessed December 2024