2. Shifting the Exhibitionary Complex

Can we ever get beyond the essential conservatism of displaying works of art in conventional, dedicated spaces?

Sites of exhibition are the most visible elements of the infrastructure within which art curating is practiced today. We might set them out as a spectrum, an array, ranging from the traditional (in the minimal sense of having been around the longest) to the most recent, and from those thoroughly invested in landmark and location to those that presume mobility and transience. At one end, there is the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York: a mother-ship among megamuseums that—like its few comparators, such as the British Museum, London, and the Louvre, Paris—has recently included contemporary art within its treasure troves, appointed a specialist curator of twentieth and twenty-first century art (Sheena Wagstaff, who arrived from the Tate Modern), oriented its collection rooms toward making vivid the contemporary circumstances surrounding the creation of at least some of the items, and heralded, where appropriate, the continuing vitality of cultures that had previously been regarded as having reached their aesthetic highpoints at some time in the past. We could place at the other end of the spectrum venues that focus on the work of one artist or even, as is the case with The Artist Institute, New York, a slowly changing program of exhibitions of just one work of art at a time. Yet the real other is not concentrated versions of the same thing but the proliferation of open-ended curated projects, short and longer term, that seek to work from within the creativity already present in the everyday life of small, but constrained, communities. Between 2000 and 2005 Oda Projesi (Room Project), a collective formed by three women artists, staged thirty community arts projects in their apartment and the courtyard of a building in the Galata section of Istanbul, continuing their work since then in more mobile and virtual formats, as well as pursuing projects in the Kreuzberg section of Berlin. Since 2003 in Yangon, Myanmar, Networking and Initiatives in Culture and the Arts (NICA), founded by two artists, Jay Koh and Chu Yuan, has nurtured a variety of local possibilities and international connections for Burmese artists and spun off other independent arts spaces. Meanwhile, in East Liberty, Pittsburgh, the Waffle Shop is a community building, consciousness raising location, performance space, TV studio, and blog site, conceived and run by artists associated with Carnegie Mellon University, that also offers a full menu of edible waffles. A related project, the take-out restaurant, Conflict Kitchen, only sells food from nations with which the United States is in conflict.1

What are the exhibitionary venues that fill out the infrastructural spectrum between these two ends? Having begun with the universal history of the art museum that holds pride of cultural place in most metropolitan centers, we soon shift our gaze to the huge variety of more specialized collections—the period museum, the national collection, the geopolitical area or civilization museum, the city museum, the university gallery, the art school gallery, the private collection museum, the museum of modern art, the single artist museum, the museum of contemporary art, the one-medium museum, and spaces dedicated to large-scale commissioned installations. Continuous with these, in well served cities, are various venues that do not have collections as

their basis but are devoted above all to changing exhibitions: Kunsthalle, alternative spaces, artist-operated initiatives, satellite spaces, and the exhibition venues of art foundations (some of which have collections). Finally, we visit institutes of various kinds that include exhibitions as one part of their research, publication, and educational activities, and check out temporary and online sites. With these last, and with many emergent quasi-institutions, the focus shifts from physical location and on-site continuity as the literal grounding to situations in which the event and the image prevail over place and duration. Each of these venues or operations has distinct features and purposes, and they often spring up in response to perceived shortcomings of already existing institutions. At the same time, traffic in ideas, objects, and people has always flowed between them. These days it is becoming very dense indeed.

To this long—and, it must be said, impressive list (how many other arts spin off new infrastructure so often, and so variously?)—we should add the growing interest of many commercial galleries, collector museums, and art fairs in certain kinds of public-oriented, “art historical” exhibitions. This has not displaced their basic commercial orientation, nor is it likely to, given the seemingly endless boom (at least at the top of the market), especially for contemporary art. With a narrower set of costs and far greater financial resources than most public museums, Gagosian Galleries has taken to presenting “museum-quality” shows of artists such as Piero Manzoni, Yayoi Kasuma, Pablo Picasso, and Lucio Fontana. Staged by in-house curators, these shows sometimes include among the works for sale a number of not-for-sale works borrowed, or loaned for a fee, from museums. In their Miami location, Mera and Don Rubell regularly present theme shows drawn from their collection: their focus, since 2000, on young artists from Los Angeles helped propel that city to its current return to prominence as an art center. Certain private collectors have always known that they can influence the development of art itself, not just the direction of the market, simply by the weight of their attention: Charles Saatchi is merely the most notorious recent example of the collector become museum director. There are many precedents, going back to the first large-scale private collections made available to select circles of invited viewers that were assembled during the seventeenth century by certain Italian cardinals and German princes. Closer to our times, and still very influential, are public museums oriented around the values of the original collector, such as the Menil Collection and the associated Rothko Chapel, Houston, which are constantly curated to promote relationships between “Art, Spirituality, Human Rights,” so dear to the founders, John and Dominique de Menil.

Some collectors are beginning to see that they can become not only museum directors and de facto curators but artists as well. Toronto foundation director Ydessa Hendeles curates exhibitions aimed at creating “an experience that precludes words” by establishing “new metaphorical connections” between artworks that she collects for this purpose. Since 2001 she has worked on *Partners (The Teddy Bear Project)*, a vast accumulation of found photographs that

---


In 2011 Hendeles was invited to curate an exhibition in the Chelsea space of the dealer Andrea Rosen. The only stipulation was that she include at least one of the Polaroid images that Walker Evans shot in the last year of his life (1973–74), which the gallery was licensed to sell. The result was The Wedding (The Walker Evans Polaroid Project), shown between December 2011 and February 2012. Subtitled A curatorial composition by Ydessa Hendeles, she used certain items from her own collection and borrowed others from museums and dealers: the final installation included eighty-three Evans Polaroids, including some from the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The Rosen Gallery consists of a narrow entrance area that opens on to a large central space topped by an impressive skylight mounted on a wooden frame and supported by steel beams. Hendeles cleverly negotiated the affective distance between this imposing environment and the modest Polaroids through selections that laid out a set of affinities.

In the first room visitors were greeted by a model of a cooper’s workshop crafted in France in the nineteenth century set on a child’s table manufactured by Gustav Stickley around 1904. The center of the main space was dominated by a monumental birdhouse made in England in 1875 from mahogany and wire, around which were arrayed, pew-like, wooden child’s settles based on a design by Stickley. The Polaroids lined each wall of the main space, their subdued grays, blues, and greens offering mute witness to the existence elsewhere of the buildings or architectural details that Evans recorded. Imitation architecture...
squared off against reproductions of absent architecture, leaving an emotional gulf between them.

The gap was filled by imagery of movement, of living things, albeit elusive ones. The cardinal points of the main room were marked by four pairs of images from Roni Horn’s Bird series shot between 1998 and 2007 that show close-ups of birds seen from behind, their folded wings betraying no signs of their identity, except as singular, and singularly beautiful, creatures. We now understand why the first room contained two photographs: Eadweard Muybridge’s 1887 record of the running flight of the adjutant bird and Eugène Atget’s photograph, taken around 1900, of a shop front, an old boutique on the Quai Bourbon, Paris. In the doorway of the latter we glimpse the blurred shadow of a young girl. Is it she who has imagined these spaces? Is it her house of memory, her dream world, into which we have been invited?

In the explanatory booklet (designed somewhat like a child’s notebook), Hendeles is quite explicit about her process:

In my practice, my approach is to develop a site-specific work, conceiving and executing each show as an artistic embodiment of the particular exhibition space. I start with the context and search for ways to develop a relationship with it that is expressed through layered metaphorical connections. I use an artistic process to create a site-specific curatorial composition that interweaves narratives from disparate discourses using disparate elements. These elements are in no way aligned art historically, and I regard each as a fundamental component of the composition that bears no substitution, not even from the same body of work.4

A clearer statement of the contemporary convergence of artistic and curatorial impulses and constraints is difficult to imagine. Every key artistic idea since conceptualism and minimalism is amalgamated into a seamless, pure, J. K. Rowling-kind of “curatorial composition.” That this statement comes from a collector who sees no boundaries between any place on the spectrum is typical of our times. Nor is it a surprise that Hendeles’s projects excite the interest of young curators more than most other models out there.

THE EXHIBITIONARY COMPLEX

How does this Houdini-like identity-swapping of roles across the spectrum relate to the idea of “the exhibitionary complex”—as described by Bennett, historicized by Lorente, and theorized by Duncan and Wallach, among many others—that undergirded the growth of modern art, linked it to the modernizing city, provoked the avant-garde into existence, and subsequently sustained modernism for many decades?5 These authors identified the system that was initiated most influentially for Europe and its cultural colonies by the addition, in 1818, of an annual showing of new works to ongoing displays of works from the permanent collection at the Luxembourg Palace, Paris. Entrants to the Museum of Living Artists were chosen by members of the Academy, a professional organization led by artists that
operated under the patronage of the Emperor and later the state. Works deemed worthy of entering the national collection were passed on to the Louvre Museum ten years after the artist’s death, while others went to provincial museums, to storage, or were returned to the artist’s estate. Artists sold works from these annual exhibitions or direct from their studios. By the mid-eighteenth century in England a number of independent auction houses had been established and commercial galleries began appearing throughout Europe in the 1890s. This apparently competitive, but mostly cooperative system is the core of the multimuseum and gallery spectrum that we have inherited. Role swapping has been endemic since the beginning, especially as the system was adopted in city after city throughout the modern world. This is still occurring, as new art distribution centers are created; China during the 2000s is a striking example, with the Arab states in the Middle East the most recent.

Yet the framework is changing, leading us to ask why, and what would change for the better look like? If French artists in the early nineteenth century faced the problem of how to effectively distribute their work and solved it by institutionalizing, proliferating, and varying the venues for doing so, artists in the Middle East today are small players in local art worlds that seem primarily dedicated to selling works drawn from all over the world to targeted buyers from their region and to anchoring large-scale real estate projects. In the longer-established art centers, the issue for curators is rather different. If the selecting, collecting, and exhibitionary ensemble, however chameleon-like in its capacity to change, tends, like all institutional structures, to prioritize self-perpetuation, slow down time, and incline toward the securities of repetition, are sets of practices, such as those that Lind labels “the curatorial,” examples of emergent, more inventive, and more critical alternatives? Or are they the latest supplement to a structure quite capable of generating its own transformations—as it has done in the past, is doing now, and will do for the foreseeable future?

A third, pivotal element pushes itself into this mix: the repeated mega-exhibition, or biennial, now so widespread as to have become an institutional form in itself. We may situate it, logically, in between concrete institutions, such as museums, and supplementary ones, such as Kunsthalle and online sites. Indeed, biennials have evolved into internally diverse displays that occasionally, but regularly, spread themselves out across the range of exhibitionary venues of the city that hosts them, occupying each site, making each site different from what it normally is, while also connecting them, at least for the duration. Biennials, therefore, may be considered structural—they have become fundamental to the display of contemporary art. For historical art, the parallel is the blockbuster. Since Treasures of Tutankhamun, which toured England, Europe, Japan, and the U.S. between 1972 and 1979, attracting millions, blockbuster exhibitions have become so regular a part of museum programming that they, too, may be considered structural. The major museums seem to be incorporating the mega-exhibition into themselves: they have become so large, so internally various, so full of attractions, and so
crowded that we might regard these institutions themselves as megamuseums.

Our galleria-like infrastructural array might, therefore, be seen as concentrating its energies into three realms: the institutional, the alternative (or the supplement), and the link. These are the forms taken by its urge to territorialize. At the same time, as we have shown, there is an incessant urge on the part of each type of venue and each exhibition format to imitate the vital practices of the others, to absorb some of their enabling energies (in the case of institutions), to counter them with previously unimagined activity (in the case of the alternatives), and to embody projective versions of both (in the case of the biennial). Stasis is always vitiated by change; storms are vital to the regular patterning of the weather. To fully grasp the settings in which curating is done, we need to keep in mind the interplay between the art system’s slow moving yet constant regeneration of structures and its fast moving proliferation of artworks and exhibitionary ideas.

In this section, I will reflect further on this interplay by thinking first about museums, then about biennials. What has been happening to both, and what do the changes mean for curating? We have come to a pass in which the museum seems no longer to be the limit setter, perhaps not even the default, for contemporary art and contemporary curating. Biennials have become the major vehicles of contemporary art, yet their very success has brought problems for curators, their primary custodians, not least the challenge of constant reinvention. Are these the indicators of infrastructural shift? I will explore these

issues while continuing to ask: What kinds of contemporary curatorial thought are in play in each instance?

THE EXPERIENCE MUSEUM

In recent times the status of the museum as a site of permanent collection is gradually shifting to one of the museum as theater for large-scale traveling exhibitions organized by international curators and large-scale installations organized by individual artists. Every exhibition or installation of this kind is made with the intention of designing a new order of historical memories, of proposing new criteria for collecting by reconstructing history. These traveling exhibitions and installations are temporal museums that openly display their temporality.6

Boris Groys’s remarks in his book *Art Power* highlight the modern transformation of the art museum from that of repository of a collection to site of exhibition, its transmogrification from a place that held history in stasis, presenting it as a stilled panorama, to one in which everything—including the collection rooms—has the status of an event in the process of happening. As he goes on to say, contemporary art may be distinguished from that which prevailed during the modern era precisely in its core commitment to radical temporality: it makes every element in the situation utterly and only temporary.

In the modernist tradition, the art context was regarded as relatively stable—it was the idealized context of the universal museum.
Innovation consists in putting a new form, a new thing, into this stable context. In our time context is seen as changing and unstable. So the strategy of contemporary art consists in creating a specific context that can make a certain form or thing look other, new, and interesting—even if this form has already been collected. Traditional art worked on the level of form. Contemporary art works on the level of context, framework, background, or of a new theoretical interpretation.7

This is an acute description of key aspects of the situation—not least because in late modern and contemporary circumstances, and in line with a history I will sketch in the next essay, when it comes to the radical renovation of exhibition forms, curators have mostly followed artists.

Museums everywhere use these strategies to “contemporize” their offerings. A spectacular instance is Tate Modern’s framing, since 2000, of its collections of modern art with both spectacular (in the Turbine Hall) and less in-your-face, but still agenda-setting works of contemporary art (in the entrance and exit rooms of each of the themed floors). On a quite different scale, and far away, the idea of the temporary exhibition is recast in projects such as One Day Sculpture. Curated by David Cross and Claire Doherty, it consisted of twenty installations, performances, events, or demonstrations, each mounted for twenty-four hours, in twenty different places across the two islands of Aotearoa New Zealand, during an eight-month period from August 2008. This was an innovative way of splitting the difference between a place-bound medium


7 Ibid., 40.
and a cultural setting saturated by multiple and fragile temporalities. No surprise that productive tensions between these two factors shaped each of the twenty exhibits.8

In my description of the three currents that predominate within contemporary art, I highlight how each was hatched within, latched onto, or coevolved with the disseminative forms most suited to its needs. Thus remodernism prevails at universal art history survey museums when they address contemporary art and it drives the desire of museums of modern art to remain contemporary, as it does those museums of contemporary art (the majority) that see their role as updating audiences on the continuous output of art (rather than grappling with the challenges of contemporaneity). Retro-sensationalism is the preferred mode for the private museums of those collectors who identify with its maverick-in-the-citadel attitude—famously Charles Saatchi, Eli Broad, and François Pinault. Their enterprise is echoed, on a smaller scale, by many of those newly arrived to riches in Russia, China, the Middle East, and elsewhere. For example, the Museum of Old and New Art (MONA) that opened in Hobart, Tasmania, in 2010, to house the collection and present the lifestyle of gambler David Walsh. Emergent during the wealth concentration enabled since the 1980s by the widespread embrace of neoliberal economics, the new collectors have been drawn to spectacular art and to high-profile public presentations of their collections, whether as part of well-known museums (Broad at the Los Angeles County Museum), grand renovations of older structures (Saatchi at the Duke of York’s Headquarters, Chelsea, London, and Pinault at the Palazzo Grassi and the Customs House, Venice), or by carving out art parks in the jungle (Bernardo Paz at Instituto Inhotim, Minas Gerais, Brazil).

The second current, which I call the transnational transition, has found its ideal vehicle in the biennial.9 Local-international exchange is built into the biennial form, as is the regular repetition of the temporary survey exhibition. Thus the biennial has suited Western institutions that wish to sample art from everywhere else, yet not necessarily collect it: Venice, São Paulo, Sydney, the list goes on. (Pittsburgh, beginning in 1896 and thus the second biennial, has consistently collected from its Carnegie Internationals.) In mirror reversal, it suits artists from elsewhere who wish to sample art from the West, but not necessarily reproduce it. Havana, beginning in 1984, remains the leading instance of this (unaligned, Third World) perspective. As well, the biennial offers international standard models for art producing locales that wish to build and maintain permanent infrastructure. At the same time, it substitutes for the grand exhibition in locales that either do not wish or are unable to present them as a matter of course. This has been a winning combination for the global trafficking in art.

Museums are not the preferred disseminative modes for the under-the-radar proliferators whose activities constitute the third current in contemporary art. Nor are biennials. Preferences are for the Internet, direct interactivity, alternative spaces, and temporary settings—all constantly changing, all entirely experimental. Museums of any kind are OK, if they are interesting for

---

8 I explore Tate Modern’s contempozizing strategy in What is Contemporary Art?, chap. 4. See David Cross and Claire Doherty, eds., One Day Sculpture (Bielefeld: Kerber, 2009).

9 “Transnational” is a term adopted by all sides of these equations: it is, for example, favored by the Guggenheim for its Abu Dhabi project.

For whatever immediate purpose, but are not special in the sense that helping to shore up their continuity has any priority. While they remain, in the public mind at least, the singular gatekeepers for what counts as art, they seem increasingly openhanded—at times, frantic—about what they will encourage into their portals. Meanwhile, third current prosumers care less about their output being labeled as “art” and more about whether it is of interest to their peers. Some curators, consciously turning away from the art world’s fawning dependence on the 1%, actively seek to add artistic energies to social changes that are occurring in new contexts, such as the Occupy movements. Most curators working today are aware that the most interesting, rapid, and perhaps the most profound kinds of change in their field of practice are happening inside the three currents I have identified and along the fault lines between them.

THE MUSEUM QUESTION

Terry Smith

Taking these changes together—they are, after all, occurring contemporaneously—we might ask: Are they threatening to make ruins out of all kinds of museums and exhibition spaces, no matter where they fall within the spectrum? If so, is the best response one of defiant resistance, total acceptance, or calibrated change mixed with carefully chosen continuity? If the latter, precisely which elements should go into the blend and how should they be blended? Has the move from “temple” to “forum,” from being “about something” to being “for somebody,” gone too far, or nowhere near far enough? Of cultural administrators and museum directors, perhaps more so than that of curators. But these roles are shifting now, especially as a generation of curators who have found their vocations within the shape-shifting spectrum that I have been describing take on higher positions within arts institutions.

One extremely popular response has been to turn museums into centers of culturainment (ugly word, awful phenomenon). Carsten Höller pinpoints the context:

“We’re in the middle of the “rule of populism.” All the big museums all over the word are showing contemporary art. Contemporary art galleries are opening everywhere and becoming larger. In the 1970s contemporary art was a specialist domain—not many people were interested in it. Now it’s impossible to open a lifestyle magazine that does not contain something on contemporary art. Today, though, it’s necessary to go out of the museum, to avoid the mainstream to produce new, more radical concepts. The museum has done its job, and, as an artist, the benefit you get from making more and more museum shows is decreasing. It’s not possible to make things in a museum that are radical enough to have a powerful influence, because the important things have already been done. And that’s not only pertinent to art shows and museums. It’s something you see in many domains in society, including science, where all the big discoveries have already been made.”


He should know. Along with others, such as Maurizio Cattelan, he is an expert supplier of contemporary art as entertainment—it was the entire object of his New Museum exhibition in late 2011, as it was of Cattelan’s contemporaneous show uptown at the Guggenheim. He is wrong, however, about there being nothing “big” left to discover. We are just beginning to grasp the depth of complexity within contemporaneity and how to live with it.

Höller paints a picture of the triumph of the conformist contemporary—a nightmare scenario. Of course, it is extremely pleasant for most of those involved, as seductive as the “death rooms” in *THX 1138* (1971), George Lucas’s first, and in many ways best, film. This mood is captured in Neil Cummings and Marysia Lewandowska’s video *Museum Futures: Distributed* (2008), which features an interview between an archivist and the director of the Moderna Museet, Stockholm, set in 2058, the centenary year of the museum. Their exchange reviews a “history” of the Museet up to that time, with the years between now and then imagined as a struggle between open inventiveness and managerialism during which the museum is put partially into the marketplace to become a quasi-private, quasi-public institution. One becomes gradually aware that the managers have absorbed institutional critique into their official language while never having become at all critical. It is as if a time-transported Andrea Fraser is interviewing her double.12

At The Now Museum conference, held in New York in May 2011, Reina Sofía director Manuel Borja-Villel remarked, “Museums are more popular than ever before, but most of them are more banal than ever before.” (There are, of course, many kinds of banality: for example, that of the lowest common denominator of taste and that of the conformist parrot of high fashion.) Borja-Villel traced a three-stage history, or evolution, from the exclusivist modern museum (which used white cube transparency and immediacy to display a linear art history to a specialist and a generalized public), through the inclusive postmodern museum (which mixed styles, mediums, and chronologies and used marketing to sell multiculturalism as a product to audiences), until now, at a moment of crisis for societies and museums, when there is a need to rethink the presumptions about property and patrimony embodied in collections and to treat them instead as an “archive of the commons.” This archive should be displayed, he believes, as a repository of other narratives, from oral ones to multiple modernities, as stories of belonging, with works of art treated as relational objects, that is, objects to which people can relate in a variety of ways.13

In a setting as vast and varied as the Reina Sofía, itself a minicity, one already experiences something like this incessant interplay between deinstitutionalization and reinstitutionalization. More broadly, for the past thirty years, unevenly across art worlds around the globe, we have been experiencing the contemporaneity of the three types of museum that Borja-Villel outlines. These exhibitionary venues register the three currents in art that I have distinguished. Museums across the spectrum busily strive to adapt to the unfolding of each current, while also showcasing instances of the complex interactions between them.
At the Museum of Modern Art, New York, in recent years, a quite different approach has been attempted. Updated in 2010, its Mission Statement declares its primary goal as remaining “the foremost museum of modern art in the world,” but then goes on to add “and contemporary” to every subsequent use of “modern” in the more specific bullet points about how it will remain at the forefront. In its public advertising, MoMA pitches itself, in every respect except for its brand name, as a museum of contemporary art. An advertisement in the New York Times (November 18, 2011, C27) has this header: “MoMA Contemporary Galleries 1980–NOW Over two hundred new works in all mediums ALWAYS NEW ALWAYS ON VIEW.” These messages overlaid or bordered an image of picture frames in which the titles of these works were given:

(16mm film transferred to video [black and white, silent]) Deadpan, Steve McQueen (pantyhose and sand) R.S.V.P.1, Senga Negudì (video [color, sound]) Histoire(s) du Cinema (Chapters 1A and 1B), Jean-Luc Godard (candies, individually wrapped in silver cellophane [endless supply]) Untitled (Placebo), Félix González-Torres (glass, painted steel, distilled water, plastic, and three basketballs) Three Balloons 50/50 Tank (Two Dr. J. Silver Series, One Wilson Silvershot), Jeff Koons (refrigerator, table, chairs, wood, drywall, curry, and lots of people) Untitled (Free/Still), an interactive installation of vegetarian Thai curry served free of charge in a gallery, Nov 17–Feb 8,

12:00–3 P.M., except Fridays: 4:00–7:00 P.M., Rirkrit Tiravanija (clay, wood, wire, styrofoam, plastic, cast iron, fabric, aluminum, synthetic polymer paint, ink, paper, and brass wire) Bleekmen, Huma Bhabha (plywood, shoes, animal fiber, thread, and sheepskin) Atrabilious, Doris Salcedo

In other words: This is what you can expect to see when you come to the museum now. And: How more contemporary can you expect us to be? Subtext: Do you really want us to be more contemporary than this?

Elsewhere, I have tracked, month by month from its reopening in November 2004, MoMA’s struggles with its core wish to continue to be the defining museum of modern art in the world while at the same time remaining open to, even being at the forefront, but not quite at the cutting edge, of collecting, exhibiting, and interpreting contemporary art. I identified some of the factors preventing the successful performance of this double act: the presumption that the only contemporary art worthy of consideration was that which evidently extended the innovations of twentieth century modernism, the token inclusion of a small number of artists outside the modernist mainstream and from cultures outside of Europe and the U.S., the territoriality of departments based on traditional artistic mediums, the infrequent showing of art using new and digital media, the constant foregrounding of the museum’s own history, and incessant curatorial deference to precedence and institutional sanction.
Since then it has been fascinating to watch the museum wrestle with these self-imposed and increasingly anachronistic limitations and find ways of modifying them, with varying degrees of success. There is support for research, archiving, and publication involving aspects of the art of other regions: Eastern Europe, China, Japan, Venezuela, and Argentina, to date. This has taken the form of a series of anthologies of documents, though rarely, as yet, exhibitions. A brace of contemporary curators have been appointed in recent years. Their impact can be seen in some of the temporary exhibitions and in the changing installations of the collection shown in the second-floor galleries. Slowly, spasmodically, but one hopes inevitably, these galleries are shedding their modernist residues, gradually becoming contemporary spaces. (At least in the first rooms: to date, this sense is rarely sustained around the entire suite of galleries.)

The Saatchi Gallery, London, for all of its fast-schedule exhibiting of current art, its clever educational programming, and sexy website, remains a profoundly conservative operation, a kind of museum of retro-sensationalism in frenzied (yet in effect freeze-frame) motion. Its founder, Charles Saatchi, recently announced that he was fed up with the self-aggrandizing, pig-ignorant, money-grubbing spectacularization of the international art world, which has become, in his words, “the sport of the Eurotrashy, hedge-fundy Hamptonites; of trendy oligarchs and oligarchs; and of art dealers with a masturbatory level of self-regard.” Any reader of *The Art Newspaper* can fill in the names. Most would include his among them. Saatchi’s view of curators betrays one basic reason for the conservatism of his gallery:

For professional curators, selecting specific paintings for an exhibition is a daunting prospect, far too revealing a demonstration of their lack of what we in the trade call an “eye.” They prefer to exhibit videos, and those incomprehensible, postconceptual installations and photo-text panels, for the approval of their equally insecure and myopic peers.16

Presumably he does not see as curatorship his personal approval of every purchase added to the collection, his firm policy settings for the
exhibition programs of his galleries, his walk-around review of the hangings, or his oversight of publicity. For him, the wealthy amateur—inspired by a genuine love of art and possessed of a pure “eye”—transcends the callow collectivism of professionals.

The New Museum, New York, founded in 1977 as a gallery devoted entirely to contemporary art—in explicit contrast to MoMA—has, since moving into its new building on the Bowery in 2007, tended toward showing mainly work from the first and third currents, with isolated elements of the second thrown in. It often does so in three layers—historical, contemporary, and online—usually presented on three separate floors. I celebrate its Museum as Hub initiative, which, while it might seem to the fleeting visitor like just another floor, is a clearly delineated space devoted to the museum’s strong commitment to connecting itself to art spaces around the world. Begun in 2006, it explores possibilities for new art, events, and exhibitions via residences and exchange programs between the museum and a small number of partners in Seoul, Mexico City, Cairo, and Eindhoven. It is no accident that the museum’s second Triennial, The Ungovernables, was curated by Eungie Joo, director and curator of education and public programs, who also directed the Museum as Hub, which was the catalyst for the Art Spaces Directory, a resource that profiles four hundred art spaces in ninety-six countries.17

I am not advocating a three-floor museum, each level tracking how one of the currents is unfolding through the present and how its past might be understood, its future imagined. (That would be an ethnographic museum, one that offered, from some point in the future, and inevitably shaped by its own anxieties, an archaeological profile of this present.) The “exhibitionary complex” of most cities with any degree of art infrastructure already does something like this—implicitly, in a prefigurative way. Better that contemporaneity is experienced spatially and contingently, rather than give the mystifying illusion that it is accessible, in its entirety, at one site. If it were, would it not, in such a place, at such a moment, instantly freeze up, become past history? Does such a modernist fear still haunt contemporary conditions?

I share Borja-Villel’s hope that big public art museums are evolving in the direction that he indicates, toward open-hearted archives of the commons, but we also have to recognize the powers of recuperation, spectacle, and recursion that Höller identifies when it comes to museums of such scale. As well, we need to be aware of the powerful persistence of national cultural elites and acknowledge that, in many parts of the world, “the commons” is itself a highly contested space. In some repressive situations, it exists only as a dream; in others, such as the Middle East, it is turning into transformative action (and provoking extreme reactions). Throughout South America today people’s movements are becoming governments, rather than taking government—with, so far, less extremely repressive reactions than those that followed the Cuban Revolution of 1959. Even in the United States, where consumerist comfort squares off in an uneasy alliance with fearful citizenship, spontaneous
Combustion is proving more and more possible—as we have seen as the Occupy movements have spread throughout the country.

A sidebar of the transnational transition is the current convergence between art and ethnography museums. For some of the latter, in Europe especially, as the West surrenders its presumptions of superiority, contemporary art has become the one best hope for their continuation. In Cologne early in 2011 one could visit *Afropolis* at the Rautenstrauch-Joest Museum (of Ethnography), an engrossing exhibition in which displays of daily life in six African cities were anchored, and, in fact, dominated, by specially commissioned installations by artists from each city. In comparison, an exhibition of Contemporary Australian Aboriginal Art at the nearby Wallraf-Richharz Museum (of Art) seemed aestheticized by being presented almost entirely without context, despite its promising title, *Remembering Forward*. Both kinds of museum were subjecting themselves to certain modes of aesthetic deinstitutionalization while at the same time using traditional display frameworks to try to tame the cuckoo that they had invited into their nests. Meanwhile, at the Kolumba Museum in Cologne, Peter Zumthor’s superb renovation of the St. Columba church site enables a display that mixes, with considerable elegance and restraint, modernist and contemporary art with religious artifacts to create spaces that, while resonant with an unspecific, rather amorphous spirituality, are constantly interrupted by aesthetically arresting artworks. (Those more spiritually or religiously inclined will of course have different experiences in such spaces.)


In such situations we can see the operations of institutionalization, deinstitutionalization, and reinstitutionalization that is the “natural” life, the breathing in and out, of any institution or system. In orthodox managerial terms of reference, it is up to directors, boards, and managers at all levels to decide on the balance between these forces, one that ensures the growth (or at least survival) of the institution by enabling a comforting degree of continuity, while inviting in calibrated doses of disruption, which is then incorporated into a narrative of reinvigoration, adaptation, and regrowth. All of this would be easy to manage if the social locus of the museum and the pattern of change in society at large were relatively constant. But they are not; they are becoming less so, everywhere. In Cologne, for example, the programs of the three museums just mentioned are markers in an ongoing ideological contestation that is city wide, regional, and often national, in its dimensions. This is to be expected in any city of any size.

THE BIENNIAL IDEA

What of the biennial, tsunami-like in its recent ubiquity? Claire Bishop opens her review of the 2011 Venice Biennale with this comment:

Who would have thought, eight years ago, that the biennial as an exhibition form had peaked? In hindsight, it appears that Okwui Enwezor’s Documenta 11 in 2002 and Francesco Bonami’s “Dreams and Conflicts: The Dictatorship of the Viewer” in Venice the following year may have marked the outer limits of what is possible in these sprawling endeavors. Enwezor’s and Bonami’s shows seemed to confirm that the biennial, with its global reach and its comparative freedom from institutional red tape and historical baggage, provided a unique opportunity to experiment freely with curatorial arrangements (international teams, shows within shows, artist-curated shows) and exhibition structure (geographically dispersed satellite programs; conferences, symposia, and publications), and to seek out practices that museums were too provincial or cautious to embrace…. The idea that these biennials were constituting an alternative public sphere, one in which visual culture offered compelling propositions for a world in disarray, imbued the exhibitions with an energizing sense that the stakes were high.18

Not so anymore, at least not in Venice. The past three Biennales have been laid out in zones that echo at least two of the currents constituting contemporary art. In the Central Pavilion, we find a reach for a “universal” theme within contemporary art (some version of Art in General) that usually implodes into a melancholy remodernism, but retro-sensationalism has mostly been avoided (except when offered in quick and easy doses, as last year in Cattelan’s ubiquitous pigeons, entitled Others, themselves an expanded version of his 1997 installation, then entitled Tourists). A “global” glance outwards at the world from the Euro-American center usually prevails at the Arsenale. Transnational transition in various “official” forms appears in the National Pavilions (that divide between aspiration to enter the Central Pavilion and indignant opposition

Venice is, of course, the primogenitor of all biennials. Its history as a theater on which the world’s art—on analogy to international trade fairs and expositions—showed itself to itself, every two years, is routinely acknowledged, yet has not been explored in satisfactory historical detail or been thoroughly contextualized. It is arguable that the biennial format was not categorically revised until the São Paulo Bienal (1951), documenta 1 (1955), and the Bienal de la Habana (1984). Each, in their different ways, inaugurated a more limited, regional version of international–local exchange. In each case, again distinctively, regional emphasis aimed to manifest an ideological perspective: São Paulo to connect art in South America (Brazil especially) to Europe and the United States; documenta 1 to make Kassel a site for the symbolic internationalization of German art after the Nazi era and to contrast West German abstraction to the Socialist Realism that prevailed across the nearby border; and Havana to offer a base for artistic connection within Latin America and the Caribbean, as well as to reach out laterally to other “non-aligned” nation states around the world. As Carlos Basualdo observes, “In all these shows, however, diplomacy, politics, and commerce converge in a powerful movement, the purpose of which seems to be the appropriation and instrumentalization of the symbolic value of art.”

He goes on to suggest that the proliferation of biennials in the past thirty years—which itself seems to constitute either a second wave or a new phase in their history, one now coming to an end—has occurred “completely in tune” with the global integration of markets and the worldwide dissemination of information about localities everywhere, along with resistances to such globalizing forces. The tension between the homogenizing and anti-homogenizing forces of globalization itself is captured in the biennial, with its simultaneous foregrounding of both international and local art and its highlighting of the complex relays between them. We might add that the same is true of the museum that enlivens its dutiful displays of its collection and of local art with imported blockbuster shows from famous museums elsewhere. These generalities seem valid enough, but more work needs to be done to ground them with historical precision.

For example, in some cases, if one looks at the capacity for long-term planning, budget size, and levels of personnel management, many biennials have matched and often exceeded the capabilities of the local museum. This is particularly so outside of the Euro-American context—the São Paulo and Mercosul biennials in Brazil, for example—where operations move from small


20 Lawrence Alloway, The Venice Biennale 1895–1968: From Sahn to Goddard Bowl (London: Faber and Faber, 1969). For minihistories from contemporary perspectives, see also the introductions to the catalogues of most subsequent editions.


working staffs during the off years to employing hundreds in the year of the biennial.

Yet Basulado’s worry arises at a deeper level: that of the museum’s role as an “objective” guarantor of artistic value, a house of judgment supposedly separate from the commercial greed of the art market.

The symbolic value created initially by museums—as a concealed affirmation of the exchange value of objects and artistic practices—is ultimately transformed by biennials into pure utility. Perhaps this was (and in some cases, may still be) the (ultimately naïve) reasoning of many institutions that founded biennials. And in some cases, such reasoning may be partly justified.24

But, he argues, the convergence between the biennial and the museum on this level is more apparent than real. Works shown at biennials tend to be less tied to market and collector tastes and dictates, more critical in character, more adventurous as to medium, and more likely to be drawn from other expressive and symbolic mediums such as cinema, design, and architecture (in a word, more contemporary). And biennials require greater and more immediate immersion in dense and diverse interpretative discourse than do the usual run of exhibitions at museums. (Ditto.) This has certainly been the case in the history of biennial exhibitions to date. The question is, for how long will it remain so?


Returning to my own argument, I would observe that curators have a relationship to this complex mix of elements distinct from that of artists, critics, or historians, on the one hand, and the demands and expectations of public officials, funders, and traditional museum professionals, on the other. While respecting the specific perspectives of all of these players and constantly negotiating between them, the curator must articulate a position that interrogates “local history and contexts,” though always in terms of their potentially productive relationships with the “horizon of internationalism” on which the biennial is based. This is a huge challenge to the contemporary curator, one that (presuming that my argument that biennials are now structural within the system has been accepted) faces him or her with a degree and kind of responsibility that parallels that of the museum director. Certainly the long-term planning, the size of the budgets, and tasks of personnel management are, in many cases, comparable. As well as being exhibition makers par excellence, curators of mega-exhibitions are required to become custodians of the biennial form itself. They tend, therefore, to assume the title Artistic Director, thus locating themselves on a par with the music director of an orchestra.

Taking a broader view, many of us have argued that, in recent decades, the biennial has frequently led in explorations of the implications of radically new forms of art making. Thus this statement by Rosa Martinez about her 2005 Venice Biennale:

A biennial… looks beyond the present and into the future… Biennials are the most
advanced area for this expanded field precisely because they do not function like museums. Museums are temples for the preservation of memory... Biennials are a context for the exploration and questioning of the present.25

This is classic modernist wish projection. More concretely, we are now reaping the benefits of twenty years of sustained assault, through the biennial form, on the “canonical mechanisms established in the historical narratives produced, almost exclusively, in Europe and the United States.”26 Despite the fact that museums often house biennials, I agree with Basualdo that “large-scale international exhibitions never completely belong to the system of art institutions in which they are supposedly inscribed” and that, therefore, “the range of practical and theoretical possibilities to which they give rise often turns out to be subversive.”27 This is highly significant, with enormous potential for the development of art and for its disseminative structures. Museums have taken note and have been quick to at least partially absorb some of the lessons of the biennial into their usual displays and regular programming. What has this done to the subversive potentials of the biennial format?

RETHINKING THE MEGA-EXHIBITION

Since 2000 the biennial has been widely seen as being in a crisis of overproduction, of having become stale in form (theme A, with subthemes a, b, c, and d; theme B, ditto; x number of artists, y number of works each, in z amount of rooms) and, as a result, in danger of being absorbed back into the traditional museum. 28 Eleanor Heartney, “Gwangju Report: Image Surplus,” Art in America 98, no. 11 (December 2010): 78.

Among the curatoriate there seems to have arisen a competition as to who could reconceptualize the biennial in the most inventive and influential way. “Of late, it has become a cliché for curators to announce bravely that they are dispensing with the conventional biennial structure, a tendency so pervasive that one begins to wonder where, outside of Venice, a conventional biennial might be found today.”28 Eleanor Heartney made this comment in connection with the 2010 Gwangju Biennale, noting that its early editions were curated by teams overseen by “big-name European curators, like Harald Szeemann and René Block,” while more recent editions fell to “younger, more geographically, philosophically, and ethnically diverse curators.”29 These have included Charles Esche and Hou Hanru who, in 2000, turned over curatorship to alternative spaces and artist’s collectives; and Yongwoo Lee who, in 2004, teamed “ordinary” people with professional curators. In 2008 Okwui Enwezor presented an exhibition of other exhibitions, recreating in part or whole a number of shows that had been presented elsewhere in the world during the previous year. While these innovations aimed at opening up the event to “the serendipity of unexpected choices,” Massimiliano Gioni’s 2010 edition, entitled 10,000 Lives, struck Heartney as “a carefully crafted exercise in curatorial control” that “embodied the museum ethos it was meant to overturn.”30 However accurate her characterizations (they are partial at best), they nonetheless illustrate my larger point about the contradictory friction between an open-ended format (such as the biennial) and a singular event (the clear curatorial statement, the definitive exhibition) that haunts the curating...
of contemporary art, whatever the site of the exhibitionary act.

There is, I think, a quantitative issue at play here. The sheer number of biennials (nearly two hundred) has made it impossible for even the brilliant curatorial model described above to pull off its self-imposed challenge of reinventing the exhibition each and every time. No wonder that São Paulo in 2008 and Bergen in 2009 decided to prioritize meetings and events that reflected on the history, relevance, and prospects of the biennial form itself over exhibits of works by international and local artists. That is to say, they invited attendees to reexamine an exhibition format whose success as a mode of global connectivity—arguably to the point where the “international” and “local” dialogue has become increasingly productive as an antinomy—was coming under threat due to local funding and political difficulties (themselves the outcome, largely, of the global financial crisis). There were, of course, significant back stories at both places. The São Paulo organization, with its relatively long history (since 1951), its relative success in consolidating cultural links with Europe and the U.S., and its promotion of local artistic ideas as of international relevance (notably “anthropophagy” in 1998, an initiative of curator Paulo Herkenhoff), had often demonstrated a capacity for reflective changes of direction, however fraught and contested. In 2008 the decision to show few (initially zero) artworks and to devote the entire exhibition to different forms of debate about contemporary art’s relationships to local society and international forces was derailed by the high-level security imposed on the venue in response to a graffiti attack on the main walls of the empty exhibition spaces.31

As elsewhere, the polemical tone was soon lowered. The 2010 Bienal at São Paulo explored a constellation of political/artistic “territories”: “The skin of the invisible,” “Said, unsaid, forbidden,” “I am the street,” “Remembrance and oblivion,” “Far away, right here,” and “The other, the same.” In 2012 we can expect an exploration of “The Immanence of Poetics.” Poesis is replacing politics everywhere as the retreat position in the international art world. Titles of this kind—mixed lists of lines of poetry, graffiti, book titles, text headers, and film subtitles—are becoming a familiar mode for naming clusters of curatorial themes. They signal the presence of disparate elements, “torn halves,” that do not add up, perhaps because that would imply totalities that no longer exist. This does not, however, take away the challenge of making meaning on more specific levels.

Applying “biennial processes” to the problem of rethinking the biennial is occurring throughout the system at the moment. For example, the Fondazione Antonio Ratti, Como, under the title “The Most Beautiful Kunsthalle in the World,” organized twenty-five meetings between 2010 and 2012 for art world players to debate “the diverse models of exhibition spaces and its characteristics; the relation between economy and art; the definition and identity of the figure of the curator; the publications of art and other questions related to all the aspects of doing and producing exhibitions.”32 Outcomes are as yet uncertain. The 2009 conference in Bergen, To Biennial or

---


Not to Biennial, led to an excellent resource book, *The Biennial Reader*. At the conference itself, the underlying issue was whether or not to institute a biennial in the city, given the plethora around the world, but the few in Scandinavia, the relative wealth of Norway, and its need to prepare for a post–North Sea oil future. The City Council recently announced that the Bergen Biennial Foundation would play a major role in developing the proposed Scandinavian Triennial for the city, and that “an aspect of discourse and knowledge production” would be inserted into its outlook.

Against this model of updating and regionalizing the standard “international” model, the history of Manifesta, the nomadic biennial, is instructive. It was launched from Holland, one of the key nations of Western Europe, precisely to engage the fragmentation of the borders of the European Union, at that time a newly formed yet largely notional entity. The errant itinerary of Manifesta, a fragile yet resilient quasi-organization, has accurately reflected the productive *errancy* at the heart of the enterprise of rethinking the idea of “Europe.” Since Rotterdam in 1996, Manifesta has been staged every two years in a different European city—Luxembourg, Ljubljana, Frankfurt, Donista-San Sebastián, etc.—by teams of curators from outside that city who have never worked together before, who are asked to spend the intervening years combing the continent for new art and to present it in whatever ways seem relevant to them. Iterations have deployed innovative formats ranging from museum exhibitions through the use of unusual sites all over each city to Internet sites. The Manifesta planned for Nicosia in 2006, which was to take the form of an art school that would conduct classes in both parts of the only divided city remaining in Europe, fell afoul of local regulations and political tensions. Since then it has been shown at Trentino-South Tyrol (2008), and Murcia in Spain in dialogue with North Africa (2010). In 2012 it will land at Limburg, Belgium, curated by Cuauhtémoc Medina, Katerina Gregos, and Dawn Ades.

On a global scale cultural connectivities are also changing, fast and drastically, as locales in Asia and the Middle East in particular institutionalize rapidly and the old cultural centers see the ghosts of entropy looming within their success with spectacle. In locales outside of the former West, regional connectivity has been sought for some decades, as we have seen most notably in Havana since 1984, from a *tercomondialist* perspective. In recent years, as the income divide becomes a yawning gap and concentrates in relatively few yet highly mobile hands, many Asian biennials, and those in the Middle East, such as the Saadiyat Cultural District at Abu Dhabi, seek to use high art as lifestyle cement within the formation of economic hubs for the top 1% in the region. On an intrastate scale, within large nations such as Brazil and China, internal cultural connectivity is a growing concern. It is coming to match their interest in connecting with “global” currents. Cultural policy, they might say, must face both ways.

If I am right that the biennial has become structural, then this recent history might indicate a certain ossification of the large-scale mega-exhibition, a lowering of its subversive potential.
TERRY SMITH

SHIFTING THE EXHIBITIONARY COMPLEX

Does it make sense to take the biennial form, rather than the concept of the specific exhibition for this place and at this time, as the crucial object of critical curatorship? Is this not to mistake a medium for a subject? Perhaps it also presumes that the biennial is perfectible, singular, when the success of the format as a vehicle for transitionality has for decades depended precisely on its node-like structure; its easily imitated parameters; and, on the local level, its unique (for the art-institutional ensemble) mix of flexibility, regularity, and reliable unpredictability. This confusion between open-endedness and singularity remains unresolved—it might be said to have proliferated.

We could keep going across the exhibitionary spectrum, noting the low-level warring between the institutionalizing, deinstitutionalizing, and reinstitutionalizing forces that shape each site and each actor. We could plot the ways in which each kind of institution and each kind of curator seeks to draw either reactive or enabling energy from one or more of the other actors while at the same time striving to create and maintain a distinctive, yet always transformable, profile. And we could chart the ways these interactions have unfolded through time, at different locations, and plot the connections between them. There would be value in this, as it would highlight the complexities within which curators actually work and bring out distinctive aspects of the different kinds of curating required by each kind of exhibition site, as well as recognize the constant, variable traffic between them. Would Marcia Tucker, founding director of the New Museum, have ever contemplated staging an exhibition such as Skin


Research into alternative art spaces underlies the small but sustained governmental support for them since the 1970s in certain European countries and in Canada and Australia. Documentation of, and arguments for, their pivotal importance regularly appear in reports to sponsoring agencies. For example, Sarah Thelwall, Size Matters: Notes towards a Better Understanding of the Value, Operation and Potential of Small Visual Arts Organizations (London: Common Practice with support from the Arts Council England, 2011). Over ninety artist-run initiatives are currently operating in Australia; see http://aripedia.org.au/index.php?title=List_of_Active_Artist_Run_Initiatives; and Georgie Meagher and Brianna Munting, eds., We Are Here (Sydney: National Association for the Visual Arts, 2012). These initiatives complement the dozen contemporary art spaces, most of which have been active promoters of experimental arts for over forty years; see http://www.caoa.org.au/content/Home/. A history of these kinds of quasi-institutional initiatives throughout the world, especially since the 1960s, would show that infrastructural activism has been with us for a while, but has only recently come to be valued within the art world as inherently creative, transformative, and essential. At the same time, the growth of neoliberal values within governments, and increasing economic uncertainty, means that support from shrinking public funds is becoming less and less likely.

Fruit (2010), drawn from the collection of one its trustees, Dakis Joannou, and curated by Jeff Koons, whose work Joannou assiduously collects? How does the programming at the Museum of Installation Art, London, differ from that at the Mattress Factory, Pittsburgh? An account that mapped out this field and tackled questions such as these would show, more than any to date, the pivotal role that alternative spaces, artist-run cooperatives, and supportive site-specific organizations (such as Artangel, London, Exit Art, New York, or Artspace, Sydney) have played since the 1970s in the growth and diversification of infrastructure for the visual arts. It would also show how much unsung groundwork undergirds what is emerging as a major activity for artists and curators today: infrastructural activism.

“The infrastructural” is rapidly replacing “the curatorial” as the problem to be grasped, the issue to which attention must be paid, and upon which energy must be expended.

Before we can clearly see how this issue is being tackled today, it is important that we understand the delicate symbolic dance between two figures: the curator as artist and the artist as curator. There is a considerable history to both models, a history that is constantly subject to simplification as a new relationship between these two emerges to set the present agenda. Let us put some history back into it and see what happens.