

BIENNIALS ON THE FRINGE

The proliferation of biennials dotted around the globe is questioning the supremacy of the mainstream Western centres, and blurring the notion of the centre and the fringe. Nowadays it is the on the fringes that the most forward-looking discourses are being generated. The Havana Biennial, for example, came into being to furnish an arena for exhibiting the work of Third-World artists, to show that they had a voice of their own and that they had no need for the the First World's validation/exclusion systems. And indeed that Biennial has become an obligatory landmark on the international scene. The Johannesburg Biennial arose partly to exorcise the traumas of apartheid. The Istanbul Biennial puts itself forward as a meeting point between East and West, and in that specific context art is an instrument for defending secular values, international stances and democracy. The one in Santa Fe in New Mexico takes place on "the fringe of the centre", since it is held in the United States, but in the most remote spot, farthest removed from the great metropolitan centres. Other biennials arise from the desire cities feel to promote their image, to claim their spot on the map of cultural prestige, and the events become a tourist attraction of sorts. Whatever the situation, it is clear that biennials are springing up because museums do not suffice to meet the need for assertion and transformation that is present in contemporary art. Museums act rather as guarantors of memory, of the pre-established. Biennials act on the present and are committed to the future pathways of the arts.

The multicultural dialogues pursued in the new biennials are part of a broad movement featuring on the one hand criticism and revision of the dogmas of Modernity, and on the other rich exchanges between different traditions of thought. The West has always needed to absorb the Other in order to renew itself, to enrich itself through the raw materials thus obtained. When Gauguin travelled to Tahiti or Picasso and the artists of

the early avant-garde turned back to Iberian or African art, they were going in search of a primitivism that would free them from the rigid outlooks of the prevailing aesthetic schools. However, they did this from a colonial standpoint, since they appropriated the wisdom of others for themselves, in order to enrich their own art. Nowadays, artists from India or China are calling for the right to explore Western traditions, and produce their own interpretations of Pop Art or other movements and styles. There is an interplay of mutual fascination that is evolving towards forms that are increasingly hybrid and global, and we are thereby building the idea of a common area with slightly varying climates.

In my view, biennials are the antithesis of itinerant exhibitions. A biennial takes place at a very specific point in time and space, and must specifically fit in with that time and place. All the biennials I have directed have sought to get through the white walls of the museum, to leave its pristine protection behind and to go out in search of interaction with the social milieu. In New Mexico, I could not ignore the fact that the Santa Fe SITE Biennial (1999) was being held very close to Los Alamos, the place where the laboratory that produced the first atom bomb was set up. Nor could I side-step the tensions between the three primordial cultures (Indian, Hispanic and Anglo-Saxon) that intermingle there. I could not overlook the force of the landscape and the silence of the desert, with all that can be learnt from that silence. All those aspects were present in the biennial, but not just in the Biennial's museum space: they were there too in many other locations. We had the use, for example, of the former dance hall of the San Jose de Galisteo Association; the cemetery of the community of the church Our Lady of Guadalupe; the local television station of Santa Fe (to put on the videos by Pipilotti Rist); and even the little airport of Los Alamos, where the aircraft bringing the Manhattan-project scientists landed, shrouded under a heavy security blanket.

At the 5th Istanbul International Biennial (1997), I used historic venues (such as the Topkapi palace and the Basilican Cistern) alongside other civil venues such as the train stations and the Ataturk International Airport, since I was playing with the idea of Istanbul as the door between East and West. Nowadays the entry and exit doors for migrations and symbolic and economic exchanges include airports, train stations and bus stations, in addition to the places that are imbued with cultural history and that have now become fodder for tourists hungry for theme parks and for places that exude meaning. I called the 5th Istanbul International Biennial "ON LIFE, BEAUTY, TRANSLATIONS AND OTHER DIFFICULTIES" because I was interested in exploring how artists treat the relationship between art and life, how they go beyond classic ideas of beauty and invent new forms, new values and new perceptions of the real. I was also exploring how works are conceived as texts that need to be translated, and how all these relations are established with quite a few tensions and difficulties.

I called the third Santa Fe Biennial "LOOKING FOR A PLACE" for several reasons. Firstly, because art is undergoing a number of shifts that question its meaning in the context of contemporary symbolic production. The work of art is no longer that autonomous object that is removed from

the real and that speaks to us of an ethereal, universal beauty. That ethereal, universal beauty was being represented until recently by abstraction, but today, from a postcolonial standpoint, we can read the abstraction and the minimalism as ideological impositions coming from Western aesthetic paradigms. Art is losing its traditional sacred place and is rousing to the task of building bridges that contaminate it with social, political, sexual and ethnic realities, and in so doing it reformulates and reinvents these notions. Nowadays, migratory movements, globalisation and the new technologies are making us lose our sense of place in the old sense - place as a physical domain in which beliefs, history and differences with respect to the "others" were all amalgamated. The national-religious sentiment that some groups so virulently wish to restore is mortally wounded, and in its desperation it uses death and exclusion as survival strategies. Meanwhile, transnational capitalism is sweeping away frontiers between countries in order to be able to carry on spreading its tentacles. That is one of the reasons why I invited GREENPEACE activists to take part in Santa Fe. They are perfectly well aware that there is a common area to defend, over and above local particularities and essences, while they are engaged in combating the interests of world capitalism.

At the EVA 2000 Biennial in Limerick (Ireland), under the title "FRIENDS AND NEIGHBOURS", we used over ten different venues. From the municipal gallery to a pub, from a car park built on the site of the oldest bacon factory to an uninhabited Georgian house that the artists totally transformed with their interventions. At that Biennial, an open section for young Irish people was combined with a section for international guests. I brought them together to prompt new dialogues among them all. Indeed, in international biennials, generation-based and "national" presentations have become obsolete. Generation-based presentations are now the province of historicist criteria that are only of interest to traditional museology. Being able to cast away these categories that package, classify and label is a liberating exercise. It shows that there are constants and lines of search that unite artists of different ages and from different countries. The primordial criterion running through international biennials today is transverse hybridisation, and artists are presented who, regardless of their age or place of origin, work on incisive discourses and propose new approaches to thinking their way through reality and its contradictions. Art has opened up along many geographical, aesthetic and conceptual lines. For that reason, "Friends and Neighbours" encouraged artists from different generations, from several countries and involved with diverse aesthetic tendencies to get together, celebrating the dispersion of energies and the multiplicity of narratives that are encountered in the contemporary scene.

The outmoded nature of national presentations is evident in the Venice Biennial, in which the intervention of politicians and government civil servants is ever more pathetic as they impose their outright lack of judgement and their lack of awareness of current approaches on obedient officers and artists. This anachronism was also apparent at the Sao Paulo Biennial, where - so far at least - "national" presentations have coexisted with other sections that are more open and fluid, such as the "Roteiros" section in the 1998 Biennial. The contrast between the two formulae shows

that the nineteenth century model of national pavilions has very little to offer now on the threshold of the twenty-first century, and that in addition to rethinking and supplementing the function of the museum, biennials also serve to reinvent the role of the curator. Curators cease to be authoritarian, inward-looking experts and become radar beacons for detecting new forces at work in art, acting as privileged catalysts for sparking off relations between artists, institutions and the public, and as agitators that foster the critical transformation of the world in which they live. It was my awareness of these functions that drove me to organise the First Kathmandu Biennial (Nepal), a biennial that will stress the analysis of the economic and social contradictions of this country, an event in which artists will act as spurs for social awareness and community relations rather than as pure creators of objects.

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Director of the Barcelona Biennial (1988-1992)

Co-curator Manifesta 1 European Biennial (Rotterdam, 1996)

Artistic director of the 5th Istanbul International Biennial (1997)

Curator of the 3rd International SITE Santa Fe Biennial (New Mexico, USA, 1999)

Curator of the 4th EVA 2000 Biennial (Limerick, Ireland)

Curator of the Barcelona Triennial (2001-2004)

Artistic director and promotor of the 1st Kathmandu Biennial (Nepal)