Thinking with Large-scale Exhibitions about Space, History, and Art

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REFERENCES

The documenta 14 Reader, Cassel : documenta : Museum Fridericianum ; Munich : Prestel, 2017. Sous la dir. de Quinn Latimer, Adam Szymczyk
documenta 14: Daybook, Cassel : documenta : Museum Fridericianum ; Munich : Prestel, 2017. Sous la dir. de Quinn Latimer, Adam Szymczyk

That large-scale recurrent international exhibitions structure our experience of contemporary art and play a determining role in its relationship to the market and the museum (as well as their own entanglement with each other), that the exponential increase in the number of biennials, and their expansion and geographical dispersion over the last thirty years is characteristic of the current recomposition of the art “world” - all these observations are commonplace nowadays. But the difficulty remains: how can we think with them, what do they teach us? Several anthologies have laid the groundwork, connecting the increase in biennials and the explosion of the polarised Cold
War world, insisting on the importance of historical studies, appealing to researchers and not only to the actors of the events. Classifications of biennials in light of the “global” turn in contemporary art are multiplying. The publications reviewed in this article show how dynamic this field of reflexion is, as well as its concerns and uncertainties: How should the space of art be conceptualised today, in an age of accelerated or “global” physical and digital circulation? How should national narratives and simple instrumental juxtapositions be avoided in writing its history? Has art itself become global and if so what would its characteristics be?

The book by Caroline A. Jones is driven by the ambition of defining the condition of artworks today and producing its historical and philosophical genealogy, thus travelling over the course of three centuries and several continents, in order to describe the accelerating effect biennials and international art fairs had, according to her, in the process that transformed works from objects into experiences. Far from giving a linear historical account, Jones tries to circumscribe an epistemological condition, which enables her to back Descartes’s theories through the works of Olafur Eliasson and to insist on the importance of “trans” thought (not in the sense that queer theory might give it but as an opportune way of referring to the circulations-translations-displacements-exchanges between different countries, cultures, persons and artworks). Her book, which is written with verve and, quite often, humour, has the undeniable quality of being reflexive, of clarifying and affirming its methodological and ideological choices: a rare position, which encourages its readers to closely follow the course and the organisation of the arguments. But the emphasis placed on theoretical construction ends up being tiring, with its repetitions and reminders of the key-words of this new doxa (“blind epistemology”, “world picture”, “critical globalism”). In many ways, this work is (another!) answer to Clement Greenberg’s modernist theory, which the author devoted one of her previous books to. The global artwork she describes is no longer an artisanal object destined for a viewer’s gaze but rather an experience set in the event’s temporality, engaging its audience in a poly-sensorial way (“blind epistemology” replaces Greenberg’s optical perception). Point by point, this definition refutes “medium specificity”, all the while maintaining the importance of a strictly artistic finality: “I intend ‘globalism’ here not to refer to a passive condition or context, but an aesthetic operation. It is analogous to ‘modernism’ in its construction, in that I want it to designate the response of creative artists, who through stylistic and formal operations in their media, distinguish their art from industrial, technological, and mediatic processes.” Yet, just like “modernism”, Caroline A. Jones’s “globalism” has a tendency to essentialism and simplification. Despite the impressive bibliography and several stimulating developments (for instance on Harald Szeemann and Philip Morris, on the political importance of différend, on anthropophagy as aesthetic operation beyond the Brazilian context), the book is as “global” as its title suggests, sometimes rushing over its subjects, sometimes leaving out details or, on the contrary, historical contexts that are wider than particular case studies. However, it remains intellectually provocative, raising the great question of establishing the connections between the histories of biennials and artworks.

Contrary to Caroline A. Jones, Panos Kompatsiaris only examines two events, very closely and over the course of a very short period: the 7th Berlin Biennale, in 2012, and the 3rd Athens Biennale in 2011. In order to maintain a critical distance with his subject, he adopts an anthropological approach, refusing the “curators’ perspective” on biennials, whose hold on the subject he deplores (p.12), as well as the very term of “biennalisation”,...
which evens out the heterogeneity of practices, places and contexts. Using sociological and ethnographical surveys and a coherent corpus of theoretical references, Kompatsiaris analyses what is at stake in these two biennials, where political and artistic action are both central, in the context of the European economical and social crisis (in this respect, the book offers an unexpected genealogy of the dual documenta 14, split between Germany and Greece). The book bears the marks of the doctoral thesis it is based on, but several of its conclusions are convincing: for example the observation that the art biennial has become “an interdisciplinary site of knowledge production, education and social engagement” rather than a site of visual display (p. 186), or his choice to analyse them as events that are by definition contradictory and polysemic, without absolutising or essentialising them.

International events often generate their own historicisation. At least two 2017 publications examine the history of documenta. Klaus Siebenhaar’s short informative book didactically retraces the different occasions on which it was held, usefully providing researchers with visitor statistics or participation demographic data, thus supplementing the online archives of documenta. The special issue devoted to documenta published this year by ONCURATING.org, edited by Nanne Buurmann and Dorothee Richter is more polemical and decentered, problematising specific aspects or years, insistently questioning the very study of these biennials as historical objects and noting, in their historicisation, the disconcerting absence of a history of display, of artworks-in-display.

As for publications produced by documenta itself, what can they teach readers who were not, previously, visitors? The documenta Reader, edited by Adam Szymczyk and Quinn Latimer shares certain traits with the challenge set out by Catherine David and Jean-François Chevrier twenty years earlier on the occasion of documenta X: to overwhelmingly include texts that do not deal with art, in order to display “a political context for the interpretation of artistic activities at the close of the twentieth century”, “a polemical attempt to isolate specific strands for artistic production and political endeavor [...]”.

The 2017 Reader does not comment on its editorial choices, but opts, de facto, for literary, philosophical and artistic engaged texts, multiplying voices from different places, languages, positions and stances. And when Adam Szymczyk writes in the first person in the introductory essay, he only does so in order to exemplify an extremely critical position regarding “[...] the neocolonial, patriarchal, heteronormative order of power and discourse, which is precisely the hegemonic order supporting the neoliberal machine today [...]” (p. 26). Whereas the 1997 historical project examined the past half-century, the 2017 project opens up the narratives of asynchronous spaces and temporalities of various lengths, covering the colonial period, its territories and its prolongations, with a special attention given to misunderstandings, dissension and crisis situations. The reproduction of a series of documents of power that determine relationships with the Other, the “documents of Empire/documents of decoloniality”, inserted between the texts and the portfolios, mirrors this spatiotemporal dynamic in the book itself. Debt is one of the themes that recurs throughout the Reader, via the figure of Marcel Mauss, whose gift/counter-gift theory feeds the hopes of alternative (economical, historical) models. The complicated and even complicit relationship that contemporary art, and particularly its international events networks, entertain with the neoliberal economic system is at the heart of the reflexion on biennials. In this book, the emancipatory project is left in the hands of the readers, amplifying the ambiguity in the title, Reader, at once an object (the compilation of texts) and a subject (the person reading the book), who is
encouraged to actively read, resist, create counter-knowledge. This withdrawal of the editors’ voice is however questionable, as it precludes access to some of the content, artworks in particular. Conceptualising history as intertwined narratives is also the aim of Daybook, another documenta 14 publication that replaces the traditional little guide to the artworks. The artists are of course present, but they take part in a superposition of temporalities: one temporality follows the chronological order, enumerating the 163 days the documenta lasts in place of page numbers; the other goes backwards, and is comprised of dates chosen by the artists, from the “future” (2058) to (biblical) “beginnings”. Among the publications that remain as the vestiges of the now-finished exhibition, this sequence of subjective dates, which blends personal experiences and political events, lets the reader meander in a stimulating yet disconcerting way, encouraging the search for the reasons of chance (for instance, why is the only date mentioned twice the assassination of Salvador Allende?).

Conceptualising time in the ways in which it can be “contemporary” without necessarily being of today is one of the preoccupations at the heart of Claire Bishop’s argument in Museologia radicale, that defends the idea of asynchronous thought that would move among temporalities, invalidating the very notion of anachronism. Paradoxically, according to Bishop, this alternative thought is not within the domain of biennials, inasmuch as they fall under the category of consensual and relativist presentism, which is wary of any kind of historical commitment. Rather, it comes from museums (she examines the Van Abbe Museum in Eindhoven, Reina Sofia in Madrid, MSUM in Ljubljana), the only bastion against the privatisation of the art world and the prevailing spectacle. In the context of the disengagement of States regarding culture, permanent collections, rather than temporary exhibitions, might have become, according to her, the genuine spaces of experimentation.

NOTES

4. The importance given to transnational thought appears as a characteristic trait of our contemporaneity, which replaces the indeterminate interstitial state of “international” with the idea of movement. Cf. the concept of “trans-Pavilion” formulated by Christine Macel, the curator of the 2017 Venice Biennale in her essay « Viva Arte Viva Arte... », Viva arte viva : Biennale arte 2017 : la Biennale di Venezia 57, Venice : Venice Biennale, 2017, p. 16-31

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