

Stages #6

# The Biennial Condition

TEMPORARY ART

Liverpool  
Biennial

# Introduction: The Biennial Condition



Lara Favaretto, *Momentary Monument – The Stone*, 2016. Installation view at Welsh Streets, Liverpool Biennial 2016. Photo: Mark McNulty.

#### *Liverpool, April 2017*

This issue presents the proceedings from Liverpool Biennial’s 2016 conference *The Biennial Condition: On Contemporaneity and the Episodic* that took place in Liverpool in October 2016.[1] Drawing directly on the conference, it brings together the curatorial thinking behind the 2016 Biennial with ideas from Aarhus University’s research project *The Contemporary Condition*. [2] It aims to reflect on biennials both as the privileged site for the production of contemporaneity in art and exhibition making, and as episodic instances of contemporary art on a global scale.

Liverpool Biennial 2016 was curated as a story in several episodes, with various fictional worlds sited in galleries, public spaces, disused buildings and online, taking the idea of simultaneity as opposed to linear narration as the grounding principle of the exhibition structure. Assembled by a Curatorial Faculty comprising Sally Tallant, Dominic Willsdon, Francesco Manacorda, Raimundas Malasauskas, Joasia Krysa, Rosie Cooper, Polly Brannan, Francesca Bertolotti-Bailey, Ying Tan, Sandeep Parmar and Steven Cairns, the exhibition took viewers on a series of expeditions through time and space, drawing on Liverpool’s past, present and future. These journeys took the form of six ‘episodes’ presented simultaneously across multiple sites in Liverpool: Ancient Greece, Chinatown, Children’s Episode, Software, Monuments from the Future and Flashback. Many of the artists made work for more than one episode, some works were repeated across different episodes, and some venues hosted more than one episode.[3]

Like the conference, this journal takes this idea of ‘the episodic’ beyond the specificity of the biennial itself, and considers the wider issue of how the transnational biennial format represents the world as an amalgamation of different cultures, operating episodically across times and places, in the dynamic relation between the local and the universal. In this sense biennials can be seen to engage with notions of contemporaneity, a key concept to envision the temporal complexity that follows from the coming together of different times. How do we begin to rethink these deep structures of temporalisation that render our present the way it is, not only with respect to processes of globalisation but also in the light of

micro-temporality, planetary computation, and artistic practices?

This journal features diverse contributions that attempt to address these questions, from a range of curators, artists and researchers. Part of the Liverpool Biennial 2016 Curatorial Faculty, Raimundas Malasauskas and Francesco Manacorda discuss how the exhibition was designed using polyphony, multiverses, contingency, time travel and repetition as display mechanisms and narratological tools. Building on much of his previous work, art historian, art critic and artist Terry Smith explores biennial exhibitions in terms of what he calls 'contemporary composition'. [4] Artistic Director of European Capital of Culture Aarhus 2017 and the 2014 Biennale of Sydney, Juliana Engberg reflects on biennials as 'occurrences' and through the logic of topology in which constituent parts can be seen to be interrelated. As well as providing the cover image for the journal [5], artist duo Elmgreen & Dragset make a visual contribution through documentation of their 2009 curated project *The Collectors*, to reflect their biennial experiences: from participating as artists to curating the upcoming 15th Istanbul Biennial 2017. [6] Curator Elisa Atangana reflects on her experience of the Kampala Art Biennial 2016 and the issue of mobility as a marker of social change. In a transcript of her conference talk, Marina Fokidis discusses Documenta 14 held in both Athens and Kassel in 2017, and how the sharing of different pasts, presents and futures impact upon the agency of the biennial form. Lastly, in a glossary form that reflects the object of study of their research project The Contemporary Condition, Geoff Cox, Jacob Lund, Anne Kølbaek Iversen and Verina Gfader introduce twelve key concepts (contemporary contemporary; chronophobia; random access memory; real-time; presentism; arrested movement; migration; algo-rhythm; pre-acceleration; iconomy; time stamp and loop). [7]

Taken as a whole, the contributions to this journal do not suggest a unified reading or narrative, but rather a coming together of diverse positions that draw upon experiences of encountering contemporary art and the complexity of its temporal conditions, in which biennials play no small part.

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[1] The Biennial Conference was organised by Liverpool Biennial and Aarhus University, in partnership with Liverpool John Moores University's Exhibition Research Lab and International Curators Forum (ICF). It took place 8-9 October 2016 at LJMU's John Lennon Art and Design Building.

[2] The Contemporary Condition is a research project at Aarhus University made possible by a grant from the Danish Council for Independent Research, which runs for three years from September 2015 to August 2018.

[3] <http://www.biennial.com/2016/exhibition/about>

[4] For an extending discussion of this concept, see Terry Smith, *The Contemporary Composition*, Sternberg Press 2016.

[5] Cover Image: Elmgreen & Dragset, *Traces of a Never Existing History/Powerless Structures*, Fig. 222, 2001. Wood, stainless steel, aluminum, perspex, paint, cement, vinyl profile lettering, fluorescent light 310 x 430 x 780 cm. Courtesy Galerie Klosterfelde. Exhibited at "Egofugal," Istanbul Biennial, 2001. Photo by Kim Nielsen / Muammar Yanmaz

[6] *The Collectors*- Danish and Nordic Pavilions - 53rd Venice Biennale, curated by Michael Elmgreen and Ingar Dragset, 7 June - 22 November 2009.

[7] These ideas are further developed in the parallel publication series The Contemporary Condition, edited by Geoff Cox and Jacob Lund, published by Sternberg Press.

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### Joasia Krysa

Joasia Krysa is curator, Professor of Exhibition Research and Director of the Exhibition Research Lab at Liverpool John Moores University, with a joint appointment at Liverpool Biennial. She was Artistic Director of Kunsthal Aarhus, Denmark (2012-15), and served as part of curatorial team for dOCUMENTA (13) and Liverpool Biennial 2016. She edited books *Systemics* (Sternberg Press 2017) and *Writing and*

*Unwriting Media Art History* (MIT Press, 2015), and published chapters, amongst others, in *The Routledge Companion to Art and Politics* (2015) and *Networks* (MIT Press/Whitechapel, 2014).

**- Chris, Where Have  
You Been? - I Don't  
Know!!!**



Andreas Angelidakis, *Collider*, 2016. Installation view at Cains Brewery. Liverpool Biennial 2016. Photo: Mark McNulty.

#### - Raimundas Malasauskas and Francesco Manacorda in conversation

What would be good to ask each other as co-curators of the Liverpool Biennial 2016, is what did and what didn't work. And then we can talk more in detail about the structure of the exhibition: the value of the episodic, simultaneity, and the idea of accumulation of knowledge produced by such a structure – the idea that you build up more knowledge of a single artist the more episodes you see.

I remember one visitor saying that his experience was that the more works by an artist he saw in different episodes, the more deeply he understood the work seen previously. So the episode in which the work was placed produced a progressive accumulation of knowledge. He was talking about Betty Woodman, and he was saying that he saw her fountain at Liverpool Dock and then *Kimono Ladies* at Cains Brewery, and that he understood her works better once he'd seen her mural at Tate. That was one of the best feedbacks of the exhibition.

I don't think the accumulative effect works for everyone, but it is remarkable that somebody had an experience of what we were trying to create in relation to the episodic as a differentgnoseological procedure, which we imported from the episodic structure of a television police or legal procedural drama. In those series you get to know the characters as you see them in different situations across your own time. For example, in *The X Files*, you accumulate knowledge of and develop an affective connection to Mulder and Scully as you see them investigating different cases. Every episode, there's a different problem and you grow into the knowledge of the character. In that sense, I think that we captured something with the idea that you show five, six, seven, eight works by the same artist in different contexts, which provides a different knowledge path than seeing a retrospective where the sequence of works either coincides with the artist's bio or is based around clusters of works. That's how we thought of the whole exhibition structure at the beginning, positing that there are different worlds with the same characters – whether we consider the characters to be artworks or artists – and the same artwork by the same artist could be read and experienced differently in different settings.

The reason why I find the episodic interesting isn't necessarily because of the TV series, but because

we already live, due to technology, in separate worlds that we can enter at any minute. You can have a conversation with somebody via text message in Hong Kong while you're also in a meeting in Liverpool. It's not necessarily a new thing, but the idea that we can jump from one world to another is made easier and more visible because of technology.

That's what technology does: it connects you with Hong Kong or your grandmother, who probably lives in the 1950s, even if she's in 2017, and at the same time it separates us. But the idea that you can jump from one world to another already presupposes that there are individualities and identities of specific worlds, that they're separate from each other. Where does that initial separation of things come from?

It's like the monolith in Kubrick's *2001: a Space Odyssey*: when we first encounter that monolith, humanity is at an early stage, still apes, but the same monolith reemerges in the future, when evolution is at a very advanced stage. In that film, the monolith is something unchanging, while everything else changes.

What I enjoyed in the work we did for the biennial was that we essentially treated the works, the objects, as people, or more precisely, artistic practice as people with a biography. It's like with a character such as Homer Simpson: you grow to know him as you see how he behaves in a particular ecosystem, world, set of relations, how he does or doesn't sort out a problem. I think that was an amazing approach for artistic practice, because you're not trying to say, 'This is an object, and this is its meaning'. You can create the space in your head, or develop feelings for this object that produce meaning according to what you project onto it. It's as if the artists have lives and that life grows on you, in relation to where it's placed, and which fiction it's placed in within the narratological system we put together.

We spoke about how many parallel universes were happening at the same time in the city, and it also sort of harnessed the city's potential. You could take the same idea of an artwork in different sets, having different lives (like that monolith), and the whole biennial could be just one artwork located in different sets. So imagine installing a sculpture by Paul McCarthy, for example, in different parts of the city – it's the same sculpture but it does different things in different settings. It's a more abstract way of thinking about what that artwork could be.

Also it's nice to think of artistic practices as a living organism, as a sort of continuity that you show in different situations, and that creates an interesting play of repetition and difference. I remember how we envisaged this effect for the Rita McBride's *Perfiles*, when we decided to distribute them across different episodes so that they would have very different lives, but when we tried, we also felt that the idea was too abstract and didn't deliver the intended result. When you follow an abstract idea, at some point you have to deal with its concrete life, which is often quite different from what you imagined it would be. With that specific piece, its abstraction clashed with the concrete world. In order to find the best situation for each of those sculptures, we would have had to curate the whole exhibition around just that one piece.

After the opening, we all agreed that reducing the number of episodes would have made it easier for the public: it would have allowed us to have much clearer fictional markers. For example, why did the Greek episode at Tate and the Chinatown episode in the cinema work best? Because the fictional markers were well developed, so that audiences could read a story or a set of relations like an ecosystem, into which we inserted certain artworks that functioned as ecosystemic elements. In the Ancient Greece episode at Tate, the statues readily signalled the fiction of time travelling, and in the cinema it was due to the building, the setup and the atmosphere, plus the script read by Marcos Lutyens. The Greek statues and Markus's script, in relation to each building, were good enough fictional markers to allow people to understand that they were entering into a world, into a parallel universe, where things that normally don't happen could happen. We didn't achieve that in other places, definitely not in the Cains Brewery site, whereas the Oratorium had a bit of that.

That's also about how something can be contained within the parameters of the composition. The artworks needed to be transplanted into what we called the ecosystemic fiction without being rejected or



rejecting it – like in organ transplant.

The problem with the container you're talking about is a very good point that we used while trying to figure out Cains: the Andreas Angelidakis' *Collider* was merely an architectural marker, and not an ecosystemic fiction marker that could tell you through its three-dimensional presence that you were in a different world. When you were in the corridor, you entered a different world, but that wasn't enough to conjure up an overall fiction or parallel dimension. At the centre of the collider, the Children episode was much more intuitive, and thereby more successful, because of the joined-up attitude between works: all the elements there allowed you to imagine yourself in a different world.

Imagine if the exhibition in Cains had been there for the following couple of years, and if during that period, other artists or whoever came there had a go at rearranging it. It could also involve local or small businesses or cafes settling themselves inside the exhibition. That would make it something completely different, so that the boundaries that we were trying to make (the markers of fiction) would be blurred with much more concrete social living, and would become something that the next biennial could build on.

That would be the organic growth of worlds around the artworks – very interesting and Ballardian – the reverse of our process because the fiction would grow after the positioning of the works. Maybe what we didn't pay enough attention to was the growing of those worlds in advance of the pieces arriving. That would be exhibition design as fictional sets. Sometimes the settings were readymade, completely preexisting, like for Lara Favaretto's *Momentary Monument*, the street being a complete narrative that's pretty easy to figure out through a wall text or just by knowing the history of the city. Essentially, you've got a big narrative there. So the idea of 'fiction-specificity' that we were trying to address worked there because the fiction was already there. While in other places it wasn't there and we probably didn't design it enough or well enough to allow people to suspend their disbelief. Because what we were trying to do was to experiment with the idea of the contemporaneity of different fictions, and the idea was to activate the fictions that were inside the city as parallel worlds, not in metaphor, but in reality.

Across the years, we've had many conversations about the idea of simultaneity as opposed to contemporaneity, which very often in exhibition-making can lead to an interesting swapping of parameters between space and time. For the Liverpool Biennial, that's what we did in order to activate the notion of time travel. For example, at Tate, we placed something from the second century AD in front of something from 2016. Such a juxtaposition allowed the postulation, by sympathetic magic, that the two pieces were contemporary because they were in the same space, essentially equating the shared space with a fictional shared time. This is what you can do with curating – locate things that come from different places or different times in the same space, and then say that they're simultaneous. They're contemporary in their existence today, even though they weren't contemporary in their origin. But in another universe, they are actually completely contemporary, and they were born on the same day. This is essentially what we did with the Greek and Roman statues we selected, because they were assemblages of different fragments from different times. And what the eighteenth-century Italian restorers had done with these statues, by piecing disparate parts together to make a whole, was exactly the same thing – they assembled different periods, saying 'This is all from the same time.'

This sheds new light on our idea of 'one day' – when we wanted one of the episodes to be located on a particular day of the calendar (with no specified year). Early on, we even did an event where people suggested which day to choose. You could think of a specific day – 1 March 1968, for example, or it could be 1798. The idea is that it's always March 1, but unlike the film *Groundhog Day*, in which the same day starts again every morning, the calendar moves year to year, rather than day to day, staying on 1 March. So you travel to 1 March and cross different years and different times, as far back and forward as the calendar reaches.

Time travel is always depicted as the process of passing from one dimension into the other, like multiple parallel universes, but it becomes very interesting when those thresholds don't exist at all.

That was a major curatorial debate that we had, and we were on opposing lobbies, about on the one hand making more markers of thresholds and on the other hand the dissolution of the thresholds, and somehow they both needed to exist as a double force.

It became very interesting in the ABC cinema as a curatorial principle because the thresholds between the works were much less identifiable. There was no separation. I don't think that made it a 'total' work of art, likening curatorial work to an artist's work; it was much more like blurring the marks of definition and identity. In retrospect, I think that was the single most important element of the Biennial: this idea of a post-trans cultural condition where thresholds become less relevant: there is no such thing as 'trans' as in sexual transition, or trans-passing, as a moment in which you leave one realm and you enter another one, because that boundary becomes meaningless. The potential of disregarding thresholds opens up more possibilities for knowledge. The idea that you can't say whether the work is by Céline Condorelli or Giraud Siboni makes the presence of those two works in the same space more fertile for the production of new ideas and feelings. It relies more on the person who's perceiving it. There's no bad effect on the work, because after the exhibition finishes the work goes somewhere else, and it still retains its identity. But that moment of not knowing is very evocative. This is why one great piece of feedback that we got is what the designer and curator Prem Krishnamurthy said when he came out of the ABC cinema. He said: 'I have no idea what the fuck that was about', which for me was the best compliment that you can get. It was so effective that he wasn't able to articulate why and what. Imagine if Prem were to enter the ABC cinema sometime much later in his life with the same set of artists, and realised that back then he actually went to the future.

The ambition that we had was to have seven biennials in the same city, to have seven different versions of the same exhibition, which normally you'd plan to do at different times, and this reminded me of your comment when we were at the Conference of the Turin Triennial in 2005, curated by Caroline Christov-Bakargiev and Francesco Bonami, when you said: 'Wouldn't it be fantastic to do the same biennial every two years, with the same artists, over and over again for 100 years?' And somehow, that was the idea that we tried to do, but in space, rather than in time.

I still think that a biennial with the same group of artists through time would be great. But I can already hear the criticism that it descends into nepotism and dynasties. Maybe the problem with the Biennial is that it requires knowledge: in order to understand it, you'd have to see all the episodes. And that's what we did differently here: you had access to all the episodes in the same time and space. But this always happens to a certain level in curatorial work: to understand the next Venice Biennale fully you'd need to have seen at least the last two. Otherwise, you'd be like Chris in the *Family Guy* episode when he gets magically pulled into A-HA's video 'Take on Me'. When he comes out, he's asked where he's been and, just like our friend Prem, he says 'I DON'T KNOW!!!'.

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### Francesco Manacorda, Raimundas Malasauskas

Francesco Manacorda is Artistic Director at Tate Liverpool. From 2010-12 he was Director of Artissima in Turin, and between 2007 and 2009 was Curator at Barbican Art Gallery, London, where he realised *Martian Museum of Terrestrial Art* (2008) and *Radical Nature* (2009). He curated *Venetian, Atmospheric*, Tobias Putrih, the Slovenian Pavilion at the 52nd Venice Biennale (2007). He is part of the Curatorial Faculty for Liverpool Biennial 2016.

Raimundas Malasauskas curates often, and writes occasionally. Recent projects include: *In My Previous Life I Wanted to be a Tablet*, Instituto de Vision, Bogota (2015); *Tomorrow night I walked into a dark black star*, Universidad Di Tella, Buenos Aires (2014) and *Oo*, Lithuanian and Cyprus pavilions at the 55th Venice Biennale (2013). He has co-written the libretto of an opera, produced a monthly television show, and was an agent for DOCUMENTA (13).

# Biennial Experiences - From Participating To Curating

Photos of *The Collectors*, exhibition curated by Elmgreen & Dragset at the The Danish & Nordic Pavilions, 53rd International Art Exhibition - La Biennale di Venezia, 2009. Installation views. Photo: Anders Sune Berg.











Danish Pavillion









Nordic Pavilion



Death of a Collector

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### Elmgreen & Dragset

Elmgreen & Dragset: Michael Elmgreen and Ingar Dragset are based in Berlin and have worked together as an artist duo since 1995. They have held solo exhibitions worldwide, including at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art; Ullens Center for Contemporary Art, Beijing; PLATEAU, Samsung Museum of Art, Seoul; National Gallery of Denmark, Copenhagen; Astrup Fearnley Museet, Oslo; Victoria and Albert Museum, London; Museum Boijmans van Beuningen, Rotterdam; ZKM Museum of Modern Art, Karlsruhe; Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Castilla y León; The Power Plant, Toronto; Serpentine Gallery, London; Tate Modern, London and Kunsthalle Zürich. They have participated in the Liverpool, Singapore, Moscow, Gwangju, São Paulo, Istanbul, and Berlin biennials, and received a special mention for their exhibition *The Collectors* at the Nordic and Danish Pavilions, 53rd Venice Biennale (2009). The duo were shortlisted for the Hugo Boss Prize, Guggenheim Museum, New York (2000) and won the Preis der Nationalgalerie, Hamburger Bahnhof, Berlin (2002). In 2012 they were selected for London's Fourth Plinth Commission in Trafalgar Square. Elmgreen & Dragset are the curators of the upcoming 15th Istanbul Biennial, taking place in autumn 2017.

# Biennial Topology



Stuart Ringhold, *The Trekkers*, 2011. Performance at the 54th Venice Biennale as part of the ACCA Pop-Up Program: Venice (2011). Courtesy the artist and ACCA Archive.

People speak of the 'biennial model', but in truth there is no such thing. The 'biennial' is an occurrence, and as is now the case, a chain of occurrences that over time have reformed, deformed and reformed – each time in another episode – in one of the longest-running sagas in which art, aesthetics, ideology and commerce collide – sometimes wonderfully, occasionally explosively.

There are, however, topologies of the biennial occurrence. The Aperto of the 1990 Venice Biennale, for instance, presented in the newly conserved shabby grandeur of the Arsenale, inaugurated both the need and the opportunity for a RAW, un-institutionalised, apparently 'open', borderless, more maverick space in which a curatorial voice or set of voices could attempt to eliminate the apparent nationalistic representations that had become a rejected burden in the Giardini. The RAW topology offered the opportunity to investigate a 'theme' or 'tendency' or 'selection'. Today, the RAW space for a biennale is a 'given', a commonplace, a must-have, a searched-for archaeology of the ever-metabolising city and an essential part of the urban-discovery narrative.

We should not underestimate the importance of the Aperto and Arsenale topology and its emergence as part of our case study into the 'episodic' and the 'contemporaneous' condition.

In 1990, as visitors and arts-policy wonks, wandered up and down the vast and impressive new (old) space of the Arsenale (mostly in search of Koons' *Made in Heaven*, like a lot of the Venetian sailors that year ... boosting the biennale numbers) it became immediately apparent that you did not need a major museum building or set of national pavilions to mount a Biennale, you could space-invade a city and squat in empty and transforming spaces. Such a notion was a boon for cities who bought into the whole culture/regeneration narrative emerging in places such as Liverpool, led by urbanists like Graeme Evans and Susan Carmichael, and taken up by a variety of cities, enthusiastically embracing, not long afterwards, the Richard Florida concept of Creative Cities. The inhabitants and visitors in such places, and in the highly lucrative cultural tourism category, were not, Florida suggested, especially interested in cultural institutions in the form of high-profile art galleries, operas and such, but preferred to meander about in urban districts characterised by warehouses and the hole-in-the-wall operations of the nascent pop-up

culture – cafés, start-up galleries – which themselves bred the next gen of outlets – bookshops, grass roots and recycle boutiques etc.

This NEO (NEW ECONOMIC ORDER) tribe of cultural consumers were and still are, although this is waning, due to political unrest, happy to combine many different forms of cultural experiences in a lifestyle engagement – discovery, food, travel, been there first, off-piste, see and tell ... oh, and art.

The RAW topology provided them with a sense of authenticity and an unconventional underground encounter that rang their bells. It also bred and coincided with the NEO audience, who were financially able to consume contemporary works avidly, fulfilling their consumerist desire for icons even whilst the Old Masters were out of reach.

A sub-tendency of the RAW topology was the creep of the art-fair crowd across to the Biennale experience, and of course the boom in art fairs themselves, as the new rich felt enfranchised, and were actively recruited as audience, patrons and, of course, consumers by increasingly aggressive marketing campaigns and incentivisations like dinners, parties and special VIP tours and discounts.

It might be said that the slew of infant flagship biennales, some that are now adolescents, such as Berlin, Liverpool, Istanbul, Lyon, Taipei, Gwangju, Sharjah etc. and those that came and went – Johannesburg, Melbourne, and others – were bred of this RAW/culture/regeneration narrative topology.

The financial, civic and urban planning ducks were lined up and art was a *modus operandi*, not really an end in itself for many, but an outcome, of course. 'Real life', or contemporaneous events enhanced this RAW topology. Contemporary art and its emergence as a cultural-regeneration and city-tourism tactic, was stimulated by and coincided with the slump in developers' confidence and liquidity in the post-1987 crash, which bred, as a consequence, a vast number of black-hole urban spaces. The notion that art was a quick and inexpensive fixer-upper was compelling, and the attendance figures emerging from the newly minted, reclaimed-space biennales were compelling too.

Speaking of real life, business contemporaneity, airfares started to descend around 1989, and they have been descending ever since, until about two years ago. The rise of the international fly-about biennale visitor was undoubtedly enabled by the emerging affordability of air travel. Airfares have dropped by a significant 50 per cent over the past thirty years, and one might note the correlation to increased numbers. In 1990 approximately 185,000 people attended the Venice Biennale (less than in the year it started, when 345,000 people visited). In 2015 the figure was put at approximately 505,000, while the 14th Biennale of Sydney achieved approximately 635,000 and Documenta 13 a whopping 800,000+. Aghhh... the footprint!

The mega found space, which quickly became a monolithic new version of the salon, a quasi-institutional repetition, bred a counter topology. The NOMADIC, scattered, distributed topology. This was more of a squatting strategy. Nimble, quixotic in nature, it fulfilled the same seek-and-discover desire of the now primed biennale visitor, intrepid and armed with a map, ready to go where no Jimmy Choo shoe had gone before.

Several biennales have now combined the NOMADIC space topology with the RAW and institutional 'home' (a regular gallery or museum venue). And 'home' provides a stable way to readjust when the development and business ducks don't line up, which of course frequently happens.

As an interesting side bar, the introduction of the RAW topology in Venice in 1990 also coincided with a few important pavilion one-up-man-ships that gave added thrust to the potential of the properly invested, no-holds-barred, fully installed and site-specifically designed national representation. Jenny Holzer's American pavilion, not only won the Lion that year, but its extravagant, beautiful and powerful installation, jettisoned forever the idea that pavilions were staid mini monuments and domestic vessels for polite encounters. Hans Haacke's 1993 ruinous *Germania* pavilion sealed the deal.

The emergence, too, of new technological display materials, such as LEDs, and of course the strong entry of data projections in the 1990s, also influenced a movement towards light-tight, less permeable

spaces. Once again, pavilions became useful because they could be contained and controlled, and the museum room and white cube once again reasserted itself as an ideal. And if you couldn't be in a pavilion or a museum surrogate space, then you could always rent a Palazzo! Also, great for a patron party.

Art is the contemporary contingency in this equation of the episodic and the contemporaneous. Art, and sometimes the curatorial determination. The natural episodic character of the biennale is durational – long and almost normalised by this temporal length and now global ubiquity, so that its shape-shifting and so-called modelling loses definition. So it is art and the curatorial direction that can either chime with the expectations of the audience, the contingent 'real life' (contemporaneous) forces, or the unexpected change of fate in real life that intervenes between conception and delivery.

I remember vividly the turn of events in 1999 when Ann Hamilton's American pavilion, itself a physical, aesthetic essay on the trauma and brutality of American history, became newly symbolic of the atrocities occurring in Kosovo. NATO bombing between 24 March 1999 and 10 June 1999 meant that the Venice Biennale opened amidst the sustained final bombardments, and with Venice a mere 90 kms away from the Italian airbase deploying the aircraft lifting NATO bombs, the proximity and contemporary condition cast a completely different interpretation on Hamilton's walls, which appeared excessively blood-streaked and visceral. Hamilton's interest in the temple form as an idealised image projected onto civic space led her to engage the neo-classical building of the American pavilion as both subject and object of the project. It was a meditation on aspects of American social history that are present and pervasive in effect, but which remain invisible or unspoken. Her self-given task, she said, 'was to make a place in which this absence could be palpably felt and to create a space simultaneously empty and full'. This may have been the original intention, but in the wake of the Kosovo trauma, her gesture of brail and saturating pigmentations, the almost grotesque opulence of the event, came to stand for everything that was suspect, imperial and decadent in the USA. There was a palpable sense of disgust. And in many ways this was great: people were speaking about the war, were questioning motives. But Hamilton's own project was dislodged by the real-life, contemporaneous situation. She took years to process this misunderstanding of her symbolism, and from the failure to some extent of her own aesthetics, which were let down by the over-zealous pouring of pigment powder. Nevertheless, her event 'ruptured' something that year.

Strikingly, in the same year, in the Austrian pavilion, Commissioner Peter Weibel formulated his programme as an open system; political, social, economic and ecological elements were consciously brought into the work. That which Weibel perceived as the commonly accepted 'differentiation between the higher sphere of art and lowly everyday life, between the artist and the consumer, between aesthetic communication and social activity' led him to invite the group WochenKlausur to realise a socio-politically relevant project. For seven months, WochenKlausur worked in the Austrian pavilion, using the opportunity to conduct an intervention that would make use of international attention and get the Biennale's approximately 200,000 visitors involved. A project was conceived to assist the huge number of refugees driven out of Kosovo and into Macedonia, Albania and Montenegro. Following intensive research on the scene and in cooperation with the Macedonian civil rights organization ADI (Association for Democratic Initiatives), a network of language schools for young people was developed in Macedonia and Kosovo. These lasted for some years after the Biennale and provided real and useful assistance to fleeing peoples. Whether the project made for great exhibition art is arguable, but its intention and actual outcome can be seen as significant. Its success, however, being displaced, meant its intervention in the Biennale was slight, except that it provocatively rubbed up against the installations of aesthetic shock, opulence and awe.

It is to Gaston Bachelard and his thoughts on duration and the instant that I turn to help frame this within a kind of philosophical proposition. In respect of its ubiquity, its recognisable set of typologies and tropes, as an entity that gathers ever more and dissolves ever more into itself, we can consider the biennial as an episodic, durational thing, demonstrating a kind of indestructible longitudinal unity. But if we think of

the real life and contemporaneous actualities that impinge from time to time on the Biennale and its contents then we sense a sudden mutation where the creative acts are occurring, and we can feel that a new era is opened up by abruptness.

Every evolution, if it is important, is punctured by creative instants, and these instants, I would suggest, are born of the punctum of 'real life' entering into and pricking the otherwise protective bubble that carries the biennale in its seemingly transparent shape ever onwards. These punctums are, of course, the ruptures that somehow rescue the 'art' from the biennale. And as a consequence, and somewhat paradoxically, make the 'biennale' seem relevant as a modus. I think my 19th Biennale of Sydney is a case in point.[1] It is a punctum symbiosis that cannot really be manufactured, as has been attempted when 'real life' has been curatorially imitated or 'illustrated', producing a weird simulacrum of, say, the Occupy Movement. It occurs when art struggles to hold its original conception against the prevailing force of a real life that has consequences and outcomes and has no bubble barrier.

During last year's Venice Biennale, unofficial Swiss artist Christoph Büchel, enabled by Iceland, commandeered a deconsecrated Venetian church and converted it into Venice's first mosque. A place for many of Venice's Muslim community to pray and meet, Büchel's project was greatly criticised by locals and others, and eventually, after protests and police intervention, closed down. Local curator Marco Baravalle, interviewed by journalist, Piero Bisello, said: 'Büchel used a cheap strategy to activate polarisations, to create a scandal and make a lot of noise in the media just for the moment when the project was shut down. Right now, nobody remembers that intervention and unfortunately the local Islamic community is not more likely to get a mosque than they were before the Biennale.' [2]

That may be so, although I don't agree, because *Mosque* was a punctum that effectively – and by that I mean problematically – comingled the real life with the artificial life of the art project in such a way as to cause maximum discomfort to spectators who found themselves strangely observing real worship as a kind of manipulated artefact. Its exploitation embraced everyone and as a result became metaphorically as well as actually powerful.

Real life is real life and it impinges in powerful ways with well-intended didactics. The anecdote, repeated by Roce Smith concerning Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev's alleged entry into Afghanistan as part of her research for Documenta 13 illustrates the point. According to Smith, as related by Professor Amareswar Galla, Christov-Bakargiev entered unannounced into a meeting of UNESCO delegates in Kabul to inquire about the possibility of staging part of Documenta 13 in Afghanistan. Galla recounted his amazement about how unaware she was of the risk to injury to herself – recalling that members of the Taliban were meeting in a room adjoining the UNESCO board's conference room.

The delegates apparently then reminded her about the disconnects between the contemporary art world and museum patrons' understandings of hardship and the stark realities of life in Afghanistan. Galla it is reported asked her if she had anticipated the very real need for bulletproof vests for visitors should she go ahead with such a plan. He asked whether she had thought about the infrastructure of Afghanistan and its ability to sustain cultural tourism, as the biennale has come to construct it. He also asked whether she had truly thought about the place of art and how it interfaces with abject poverty, homelessness, hunger and war.[3]

For many contemporary artists and curators, and Christov-Bakargiev is one of many, there remains natural and genuine sympathy, empathy and sometimes rage concerning the politics and issues of our time and a great desire to be seen to be useful in bringing contemporary art together with the real life, even if this sometimes seems absurd and misplaced and a confusion between the power of metaphor and dangers of reality.

Contemporary artworks, unless pursuing the perennial formalisms of modernism, are productions of our times. But again, the issue here is whether or not the art can hold its own in the face of such real-life pressure. I think at times it can. Ultimately, I prefer – and perhaps this is my own aesthetic – the more



potent poetic of, say, Tacita Dean's tragically majestic, utterly fragile blackboard drawings of the terrain of Afghanistan – itself out of reach, ungraspable, and so precarious – that she produced for Christov-Bakargiev's Documenta 13, to the blunter didactical works that illustrate the contemporaneous condition. Dean's backboards will never march into a room and take a stand, but they will linger long in the psyche and speak to the mystery and heart of darkness that lies at the root of millennia of conflict.

We started off by mentioning the RAW topology and its attachment to the real-life situation of the contemporary condition, especially as it related to the desires of a city to regenerate and metabolise its urban space and feral real estate. And we have seen how the RAW topology intermingled with the re-embraced museum or pavilion, official space, as technology demanded light-tight circumstances and quarantine from the porous curatorial gesture, and challenging installation set up. And we saw that the combination of a re-occurring 'main' venue with 'found' venues was desirable to counter the vagaries of the real-life market force and economic quixotics that could jeopardise the security of the biennale from time to time.

One final typology might be mentioned, and it is the infant of the RAW and the grandchild of the pavilion and the museum. Of late we have seen the emergence of the CHAPTER typology. One might even agree that this is an episodic gesture held within the biennale itself. As we, an audience, are moved from the RAW venue, to museum to pavilion, to found nook and cranny (palazzo, factory, warehouse, school, sewer, pump station, street, church, bank, railway etc.) a need has emerged to create an interlinking narrative that makes some sense of an ever-expanding, extending itinerary, sometimes navigating whole cities and far-flung islands. This air-filled typology lives in danger of losing its shape, blowing in the wind of its own freedoms, and of course brings with it massive financial burdens. Nevertheless, it is a front-runner for urban development and a logical extension of tourism. The 'blind school' chapter is the hipster bar of tomorrow; the defunct day-tripper island the next shabby-chic destination for a post-maxist flurry. In an effort to remain 'relevant' and continue to obtain investment from city councils and tourism commissions; to get buy-in from hotels and supporters, a narrative that includes, unfolds and develops the city provides the plot for the CHAPTER narrative. Cultural tourism has ascended. And in some ways, the pavilion, once a discredited national fortress, is the bulwark against the porous city and its artistic and urban leakage. Jeremy Deller's wonderful little Britain, 'English Magic', made the point fabulously in Venice in 2013.

#### **The anecdote: the fleeting, the rumour and the parallel shape**

What might save art from the episodic and contemporaneous real life and these fixing, implicating typologies? Perhaps an answer is provided by the quixotic project of Stuart Ringholt – a project that I organised with my colleague Charlotte Day. Ringholt's 'trekkers' arrived into the hurly burly of the Venice Biennale vernissage in 2011, but never went near the Giardini, nor the Arsenale, nor any collateral positions. Instead, they travelled in their parallel universe, searched for the gaps in reality and fiction, the fourth dimension, carrying their sculptural talisman, a nod to Manzoni, and then disappeared. Ringholt's project lives now, and will always, only as a set of photos, a rumour, a glimpse and a re-telling. Detached from the burdens of any contemporary circumstances or long-term episodic encounters, it was an art project that held its original conception against the prevailing force of a real life and an episodic moment because it maintained its bubble shape: free-floating, ungraspable and prepared to evaporate.

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[1] 19th Biennale of Sydney (2014).

[2]  
<http://www.conceptualfinearts.com/cfa/2015/11/23/venice-biennale-the-day-after-how-all-the-world-s-futures-affect-local-future/>

[3] Royce W. Smith: Too Big To Fail? Excess, Crisis, And The Contemporary Mega-Exhibition.

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## Juliana Engberg

Juliana Engberg is Artistic Director of the European Capital of Culture Aarhus 2017. She is currently a Professorial Fellow at Monash University in the Faculty of Art, Design and Architecture, and an Adjunct Professor at RMIT in the Faculty of Architecture and Design. Previously she was Artistic Director of the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art (2002–09); Senior Curator at the Museum of Modern Art, Heide; Senior Curator and Deputy Director of the Monash University Gallery; Curatorial Adjunct at the New Museum in New York and Director and Curator of Ewing and George Paton Galleries at the University of Melbourne. Her articles, essays and texts on visual arts and architecture, have been published in *Frieze*, *Agenda*, *Photofile*, *Art Monthly*, *Art in America* and *Artforum*, amongst others. She was Artistic Director of the 19th Biennale of Sydney (2014); Commissioning Curator of the City of Sydney Legacy Project (2014); Commissioning Curator of Carriageworks Special Biennale Project (2014); and Senior Curator of the Australian Presentations for the Australian Pavilion at the Venice Biennale (2007). She was also curator of the Visual Arts Projects for Edinburgh, Adelaide and Melbourne Festivals (1998-2007); Artistic Director of the Melbourne International Biennial: *Signs of Life* (1999) and the Adelaide Biennial: *All This and Heaven Too* (1998).

# Inside Seven Hills - Kampala Art Biennial 2016



Julien Creuzet, LOVA LOVA, SAFARI GO, 2016. Video still, 9'17". Courtesy the artist.

My interest in the notion of mobility began in 2008 when I was working on an experimental programme for disadvantaged youth at the SNCF Foundation (a charitable body set up by the French railway company). The project, entitled *Transeuropéen*, invited schools to travel to different European capitals for a period of three weeks. The pedagogical aspects focused on the preparation of the journey during classes held over several months. The aim was to promote another vision of European mobility and citizenship and to conclude with an artistic project.

A few years ago, I started a conversation with [Mobile Lives Forum](#). The aim of this new SNCF Research Institute is 'preparing mobility transition' through mobile lifestyles. The Institute's approach is interdisciplinary, inviting researchers and artists to work together. Reference is made to a comment by the sociologist Vincent Kaufmann: 'Questioning displacement means asking why are we in motion?'

Mobility refers to the physical movement of goods, objects and services; the travel of people for work, leisure, migration and escape; imaginative travel in images and media; and communication and virtual travel through connected technologies. The sociologist, John Urry sees mobility as a core of a social change.[1]

When I started, in 2015, to research the global notion of mobility in my curatorial projects, I felt that it was relevant to merge my experiences at SNCF and in the art world. My first exhibition on the topic, 'Entry Prohibited to Foreigners', gave me the opportunity to experiment with a new approach to the art space through artists' intimate and collective narratives on different forms of mobility.

## Building Seven Hills curatorial project

When I received an invitation to curate an exhibition for the 2nd [Kampala Art Biennale](#), 2016, I decided to explore mobility transformations in Uganda in connection with East Africa and South Asia. Having co-curated the 2014 Dakar Biennale, I found the prospect of working with a young and independent structure very exciting. I wanted to work freely, connecting to the city environment and its politics of space. On a first trip to Kampala, I discovered that the context and the place was open to experimentation,

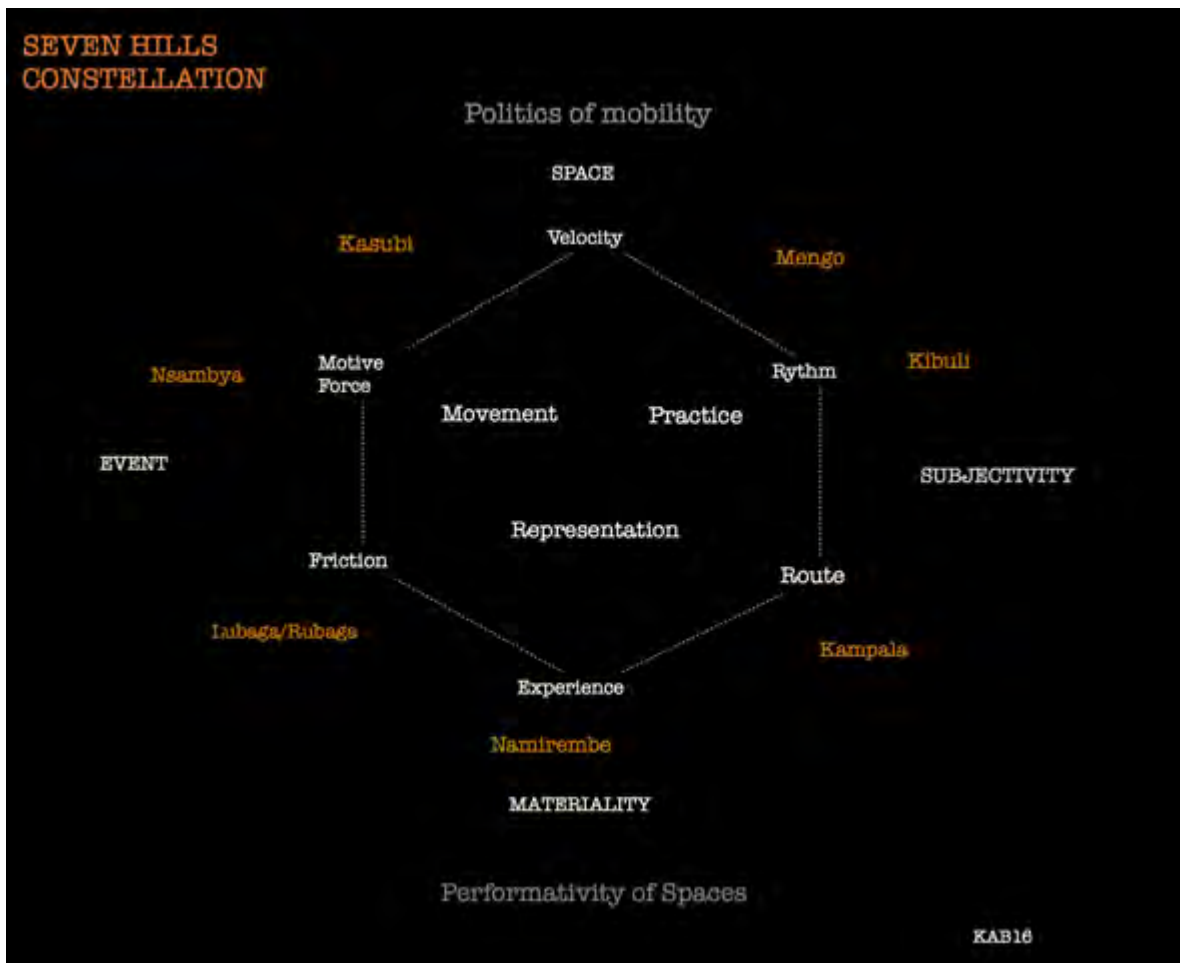
imagination and organic processes.

Then, a six-weeks residency at [Delfina Foundation](#), '[Public domain season 2](#)', allowed me to develop the direction of the project. Time to step back and get a space to think and exchange was necessary in order to dig into the subject for Kampala's curatorial agenda, but also to develop a potential long-term research project. The key to my strategy was a dialogue engaged in with resident artists, artistic directors, the Delfina team and networks, as well as researchers at Lancaster University and their Mobility Lab. With the residents, the discussion usually brought us to questions of control and freedom in the internet sphere and the use of new technology and social media. Resources and reading sessions at the Lancaster University Mobility Lab, with its welcoming researchers, helped me to draw a conceptual approach and new perspective. Finally, these interactions led me to engage in my work on physical and virtual mobilities.

In the project '[Entry Prohibited To Foreigners](#)', I had started building the narrative of the exhibition from the work of artists, who offered different perspectives on displacement or the immobility of people, objects, ideas and information. For 'Seven Hills', I posed a question about the notion of power and domination in relation to both the internal and external notions of individuals' mobility.

Like Rome or San Francisco, Kampala was built on seven hills, in this case by the Buganda kingdom: Mango hill, Kabuli hill, Namerembe hill, Lubaga hill, Nsambya hill and Kampala hill. The Biennale's title, *Seven Hills*, is an evocation of the historical colonial heritage and the consequences for the region and their inhabitants. As Benard Acema writes: 'First of all Kampala was designed with a boundary "Ring Road" that encompasses only two hills of the city – Kololo Hill and Nakasero Hill. This ring road goes around this area only.' [2] The German architect Ernest May chosen by the British established a new hierarchy around two hills. In the center resided the English, while a second perimeter was reserved for Asians. The Buganda people were restricted to the periphery.

Today, Kampala city spreads across 24 hills, a low-rise sprawl that stretches to the shore of Lake Victoria. 'The resident population of 1.8 million swells to 4.5 million during the day and is growing at 4 percent a year.' [3] The Biennale's proposal was to produce collective meanings about the city and its development from the past, through the present and toward the future. I proposed two parallel approaches: the 'Politics of mobility' and 'Performativity of Spaces' to question mobility and space in an empirical way and create a dynamic context of thoughts and imagination.



KAB16 curatorial plan, © Elise Atangana.

The plan shows the aspects of Politics of Mobility.[4] The geographer Tim Cresswell analyses mobility (movement, representation and practice) as a production for power and relations of domination. In that case, mobility could be considered as resources allowing different possibilities of access, in different level: motive force, velocity, rhythm, routes, experience and friction.

From that perspective, the project invited artists to explore in parallel the notion of performativity of space[5] by cultural geographer, J.D. Dewsbury. How individuals operate through their bodies, gestures, habits, micro-movements? How can the capacities of individuals activate a space in an event (time), a materiality (body) and with subjectivity (consciousness)? What are the creative and dynamic strategies for performing the present in space?

Globally, the project reflected on how we inhabit mobility today in relation to the past but with an eye on the future, and asked, can we redistribute the power between public and private space?

## A plurality of artists, from everywhere

Eleven artists from different places in the world, including Ugandan artists, were selected for a residency in Kampala. Some constituted a new generation of artists, while others were more established, but were willing to explore a new context or approach. I was very interested in the diversity of the group.

I invited the artists to engage with the notion of movement on a personal level in a non-representational, performative way. Within that relatively broad frame, they were able to experiment,

draw a story, a real or fictional narrative through their experience in Kampala. We were all living in the same group of beautiful old-fashioned guesthouses. Living together in peaceful space creates affinity. I felt more like an insider, witnessed the nature of their working process as well as great moments of friendship. From the beginning of our conversations, my question was about their expectations. I wanted them to experiment in every way they wanted. My role was more that of a facilitator, creating the best conditions to develop or initiate their projects, giving them the maximum freedom to confront new situations. Some student volunteers also worked alongside the artists during the residency. [32° East Uganda Art Trust](#), one of the most active art resource centers in Kampala, opened its studio for the artists' productions.

The second group of artists was selected through an open call focused on virtual mobility. The concept dealt with the ability of new technology to create new experiences of mobility, from the distortion of distance to co-presence. I originally intended to select seven projects from the open call to show at the biennale, but in the end I added another seven works, with a focus on six videos. The overall selection of artists was composed of twelve nationalities: seven from Africa, four from Europe, one from India. The major presence of Ugandan artists was due to the excellent projects they proposed, which some connected to the Kampala context. The fact that these artists were present in Kampala made it easier to show their works. They took the opportunity of the open call to come out of their comfort zones, propose new subjects and use different technics. The open call became a way to connect with them and start a conversation on the range of their practices and concepts.

## Proximity, immediacy and organic modus operandi

As newcomers to the Biennale circle, we failed to get the expected resources, despite all our efforts and ambition. The biennale was set up with low budget and relied on the commitment of a very passionate and efficient team, both young and experimental. I teamed up in France with [Graphica](#) design agency and L'agence à Paris to collaborate on production and communication.

The director Daudi Karungi and I worked together on the coordination, dealing with partners, institutions, production (works / space) and the schedule. All the logistics were very efficient, thanks to the brilliant administrator. The challenge, as usual, was space logistics, and as usual, we faced unexpected changes and challenges. Seven spaces were allocated, six for shows and one for a conference.

There were two temporalities to be taken into consideration: the production of the projects during the residency and the installation of works already produced from the open call. My main role was to supervise the production of artworks and exhibitions. The key was to deliver information in real time and always stay connected. So we created different groups on WhatsApp to manage and to receive the information (artists, production, communication, management). We were a small team but always mobile. This helped us to work collaboratively, sharing tips and information. For some people in the team, it was their first experience. All were committed to finding solutions to technical problems in order to produce the shows.

This experience of the Biennale in terms of intensity, organic process, passion, friendship and a collective reflection of togetherness was priceless. Multidisciplinary artworks were distributed across different locations throughout Kampala: the temporary exhibition space at the Ugandan Museum, the [Art School space](#) at Makerere University, Nommo gallery, Kampala Railway station, with video and multimedia installations, as well as Afriart gallery. Performances were planned during the open week in almost every space.

## Mapping the Biennale



Sajan Mani, *liquidity Ar*, 2016. 50 hours performance, Photo: Gilbert Frank Daniels, Courtesy of the artist.

This 2nd edition of the Biennale was a chance for the event to establish itself on the global art-world map, as well as connecting to local situations. The Biennale was well-received, and well-communicated in social media, with an emerging online strategy, which could and should be developed for the next edition.

Collective and informal conversations with artists on the process of the Biennale were organised. The Biennale also triggered a debate with KCCA (Kampala Capital City Authority) experts, researchers and innovators on city transformation and the link with innovation. What emerged was that there is a lack of means for engineering resources and too little collaboration with local start-ups, which could contribute to developing local solutions to improve mobility in the city, for example using city data. In Kampala 60% of the population do not use means of transport, but walk to work. The density of cars during rush hour, however, remains considerable, as in many big cities. Inhabitants felt that gentrification and frenetic changes were taking place in the city without any dialogue, which was creating inequalities and resistance. In parallel, Kampala is becoming an international reference for its financial model for city development.

The main challenge for Kampala Art Biennale is to address a wider local audience, currently more focused on music festivals sponsored by the city. The education programme organised with city schools on the 'mobility challenge' aims to ground the Biennale in a long-term perspective. The next edition may focus on a local curatorial approach, a way to find new organic strategies to bring art closer to city dwellers.

[Kampala Biennale web site](#)

[Facebook KAB16](#)

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[1] John Urry, *Mobilities* (Cambridge: Polity, 2007).



[2] Bernard Acema, 'The Racism Behind Kampala – scare-a-hero', (originally from Acema's, 'Kampala's Racist Design and its Mental Effects on Ugandans Today').

[3] Liam Taylor, 'How One African City Is Flipping the Script on Urban Development – Next City'.

[4] Tim Cresswell, 'Toward a Politics of Mobility', in *African Cities Reader II – Mobilities and Fixtures*, Chimurenga and the African Center for Cities, pp.159–71.

[5] J.D. Dewsbury, 'Non-representational landscapes and the performative affective forces of habit: from "Live" to "Blank"', *Cultural Geographies* 2015, Vol. 22(1), pp.29–47.

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## Elise Atangana

Elise Atangana is a curator and producer based in Paris. Her research focuses on the links between physical and virtual mobilities/immobilities (movement, representation, practice), and considers their relation with contemporary art practice. How can space be activated by the physical and virtual movement of individuals? How is artistic practice influenced by these new mobilities? She curated *Seven Hills*, Kampala Art Biennale, Uganda (2016), *Entry Prohibited to Foreigners*, Havremagasinet, Sweden (2015), and co-curated *Producing the Common*, the international exhibition of the 11th Dakar Biennale (2014). In 2015, she participated in a Delfina Foundation residency and was a jury member of Artes Mundi Prize 6, as well as a selector of the Artes Mundi 7 shortlist. She is a member of the acquisitions board of Nord-Pas de Calais Regional Fund of Contemporary Art.

**Learning From  
Athens - a working  
title and a working  
process for  
documenta 14 in  
Athens and Kassel**



Yannis Karlopoulos, News from the Past Series, Athens: Acropolis view with Smoke, 2013. Collage, vintage postcards (First published in South as A state of Mind issue 5).

#### **- extracts from the transcript of the conference talk**

[...] The word 'episodic' has been repeated many times in relation to the Liverpool Biennial. In Greek, it doesn't have the same definition as it has in English: it's an adjective meaning eventful, adventurous, memorable. So one can say: 'This was an episodic marriage, an episodic day.' There are many gaps like this in translations, and they occur very often with the Greek language, but in this case, there's a happy coincidence. What often happens with biennials is a restriction within time and space – the duration and location of the exhibition – which creates and projects this eventful or adventurous attraction. And perhaps this kind of temporal restriction, which has recently been readdressed, and which some organisers of biennials are attempting to eliminate, is exactly what creates the kind of hype that's needed by the art market, or even the biennial market – but that leads to a kind of biennialisation or/and the biennial condition. And I'm not excluding anyone from this. As art professionals, we're all part of this market of biennials.

There are a few other words that I'd like to introduce here that come to mind in relation to documenta 14 in Athens and Kassel, and in relation to any kind of episodic visual experience. 'Cultural appropriation', which can be also understood as 'cultural misappropriation' is one of the first notions that comes to mind. And to think in terms of this is to ask, who has the right to speak for whom? I come from a topography, a country, a city, a neighborhood even, that's considered to be the cradle of Western civilisation. As much as this is believed to be a truth, it's also an assumption. It's similar to the classicists' idea of the pure white of the Greek statues and temples – which was a construct, since everything was painted in vivid colours: fuchsia, gold, cyan, red, terracotta. Even the columns of the Parthenon were painted with stripes – as has been proved by chemical testing. The assumption of whiteness, which came much later from Western hegemonic culture, was a kind of a cleansing process, eradicating paganism, multi-theism, multivalent expression, a successful effort to create a pure past, stripped not only of its shadows but also of its variety of aesthetics. The 'white cube' follows this idea of the purity of so-called mythical Ancient Greece.

To me, to take this even further, this echoes the way in which capitalism is trying to de-realise life,

attempting to create a common and predictable future for all of us. This is perhaps what we mean when we speak about the homogenised global village: what else can it be but a controllable future for everybody around the world? Multinational companies and their goods via malls that look the same everywhere and make every location and the social processes that take place within them the same, is the prevailing scenario – or better, the prevailing reality. Even if some call this accessibility or democracy, don't forget that democracy is a political situation that was based on slavery. Today's slaves may be the slaves to consumption. The question is where the profits of this world consumption go. And how does this shape our future needs, our projections for the future, which seem to be becoming more and more identical for all – no matter where we are.

This de-realisation of the future as a process of capitalism – let's call it radical capitalism because it's happening all over the planet – is a situation where the roles of the victim and victimiser are interchanging, and this creates great uncertainty. A very interesting proposition for the abolition of capitalism was put forward by writer and law theorist Oscar Guardiola Rivera in his book *Being Against the World: Rebellion and Constitution*. In a chapter called 'Rip it up, and start again' he writes: 'What matters is to recognize that the de-realisation of time, objects and social world is the operation that allows capitalism to establish the financial value of things.' In my opinion, these are the terms on which a biennial, or any kind of big artistic agency, is operating on the real.



Marta Minujin, *El Parthenon de libros* (*Parthenon of Books*), 1983. Installation, Avenida 9 de Julio, Buenos Aires. Photo: Marta Minujin Archive.

[...] In front of you is an image of the Parthenon being burned. And here you see an image of another Parthenon, which is being built in Kassel for documenta 14. This *Parthenon of Books* is conceived by artist Martha Minujin, and it's built from books that have been banned in different political situations in various countries and periods. It will take 100,000 books to build it, donated by individuals and publishing houses.

At the end of the process, they will be taken by visitors, who will be allowed to go and dismantle the work. This Parthenon made from banned books is built in the same square where, in 1942, the Nazis burned all the books that belonged to the people living in Kassel during World War II.

[...] I'd also like to show you, through images, our first act in Athens. Documenta 14 established its office in Athens in 2014, when the artistic team moved there, and its public programmes began in 2016, a year before the exhibition itself. Catherine David tried to do the same thing for documenta 10, but it wasn't yet time – it was a very avant-garde idea, so she wasn't allowed to do it. Then, for documenta 11, Okwui Enwezor created platforms on every continent long before the Kassel event, whose content was then brought back for the biennial itself. For documenta 13, Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev staged a small episode (if I can borrow the word) in Kabul, unfortunately in a place that only a few international visitors could access, but it had a very a great local impact. Documenta 14 is one documenta in two acts: it will open in Athens in April and then it will reopen in Kassel in June. The two acts will coincide for one month. The same artists will show in both locations, so it's a kind of a mirroring. But what can a mirroring between Greece and Germany, between Athens and Kassel, be? That's a question to keep in mind.

As we speak, we've started our public programmes, which are operating under the title and framework 'The Parliament of Bodies', as conceived by Paul Preciado. They're hosted in a public building that used to be the headquarters and torture chambers of the military junta in Greece (1967–74) and then became a white-cubic municipal exhibitions centre – another process of erasing or whitening the past. Our public programme space has been re-formed by architect and artist Andreas Angelidakis – who also worked with you at the Liverpool Biennial and with whom I've been collaborating since 2004 on several exhibitions including the Thessaloniki Biennial. For the space in Athens, Angelidakis has created a modular seating device, resampling and based on his previous research on soft ruins. The park that hosts the buildings is called Parko Elefthrias (Freedom Park), which inspired Preciado's first events: '34 four exercises of freedom'. This was one of our ways of attempting to spread documenta 14 organically out into the city and to get acquainted with some of our audiences.

[...] The next word you see on the screen is 'methexis', a word that derives from Greek philosophy, and has been used in the context of Greek Tragedy, where it means that the audience can participate in the plot and thus improvise the ending or other parts of the drama. Applied to a biennial, this might imply the human encounter, exchange, and a question would be, how do you allow the audience to change the plot? In ancient tragedy, the audience could speak up if they didn't agree with the way in which the plot was going, and they could change it, because the theatre was a forum for discussing politics, just as a biennial or other cultural spectacles could be.

In Greek theatre, they also had this clever device called 'deus ex machina' (which translates as 'God from the Machine'). It was a machine that appeared from above when events on stage came to a kind of an impasse politically. This machine would arrive from nowhere and like a giant hand, somehow put everything in order. It wasn't believed to be a sacred god, but seen as a kind of abstract and undefined solution that signified the results of multiple efforts and multiple queries – even unexpected ones that came from the audience – to the problems at hand.

[...] Nothing can be completed, assumed, learned without the participation of the visitors, whom we like to think of as part of our team in this endless process of learning. We've often been asked what documenta 14 is learning in Greece, where the reality is harsh and uncertainty is testing the limits of its citizens' capacity. I find this a rather silly question. Tangible answers will only serve the capitalistic way of understanding the world: as one globalised future. For us, learning is a working process that forms multiple questions rather than concrete answers; a creative and necessary confusion. The maze shouldn't be the problem. Closed doors and absolute points of view or absolute solutions are the problem. And this is one of the things that one can learn while in Greece: concrete solutions proposed by bodies of economic experts cannot help the financial situation and the existential and social crisis that it entails. A certain kind

of shifting into the questions asked and the pursuit for answers might be more helpful.



*Fridericianum, Kassel. Photo: Mathias Volzke.*

[...] The idea of our artistic director Adam Szymczyk to share documenta 14 between two locations, Athens and Kassel, to my mind prompts a necessary creative confusion that might have quite a positive political impact on the idea of the exchange between multiple realities and cultures. In Athens and Kassel, the two cities that are receiving artists from all over the world and are sharing the organisation, the implementation, and later, the presentation of the work, documenta 14 has triggered the 'locals' of each city to think actively about issues of identity and relationships between economy and power structure rather than in terms of nation. Questions surrounding the local and the global, the 'cosmopolitan local' and the 'cosmopolitan global', the various conflicting and yet shared pasts and origins, are questions that, within the context of mega exhibitions and biennials as agencies, will hopefully remain unresolved, constantly fluid and modifiable.

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### **Marina Fokidis**

Marina Fokidis is a curator and writer based in Athens, Greece. She is currently Head of the Artistic Office, Athens, for Documenta 14. She is the founding and artistic director of Kunsthalle Athena, the first art institution of its kind in Athens, which has presented several exhibitions, workshops, performances and talks between 2010 and 2014. Since January 2012, Fokidis has been the founding director of South As a State of Mind, a bi-annual art and culture publication. She was one of the curators of the 3rd Thessaloniki Biennial (2011), commissioner and curator of the Greek Pavilion at the 51st Venice Biennale (2003), and one of the curators of the 1st Tirana Biennial (2001). Since 2013 she is an adjunct curator in the Schwarz foundation3 – Art Space Pythagorion where she has curated solo shows by Slavs and Tatars (2013) and Nevin Aladag (2014). Fokidis has curated several exhibitions in Greece and internationally, including:

Juergen Teller: *Macho*, a solo show of self-portraits in Deste Foundation (2014); *Open Form*, a group show of international artists in the Greek art fair, *Art – Athina* (2013); *Midsummer Night's Dream*, a three-month screening programme, as part of *Remap 2*, a parallel programme to Athens Biennial (2009).

# Biennials Within The Contemporary Composition

Terry Smith





Anthony Gardener and Charles Green, *Biennials, Triennials, and Documentas: The Exhibitions that created Contemporary Art*, Wiley-Blackwell, 2016. Bookcover.

How might we understand biennial exhibitions within contemporary conditions? To answer this question, I will confine my remarks to the visual arts, because the biennial form is so central to them, even though it appears in architecture (at Venice especially, where the biennials act as the major international barometer of the practice), and occasionally, in music worlds (such as the NY PHIL BIENNIAL, presented by the New York Philharmonic, which began in 2014, billing itself as ‘11 days, 21 concerts, A musical playground of the here and now’ and continued in 2016).[1] I will focus on biennials within visual art worlds, but will constantly reference their relationships to the broader social, economic and political situations from which they emerged and in which they continue to be embedded.

Charles Green and Anthony Gardner’s *Biennials, Triennials, and Documentas: The Exhibitions that created Contemporary Art* (2016), gives us a nuanced understanding of the historical unfolding of the form.[2] In successive waves these ‘recurrent mega-exhibitions’ have proliferated globally, becoming what seem to be indispensable nodes within a dense field of mobility between artists, curators, gallerists, critics, collectors and visitors that is – especially on an international level – unprecedented in its quantity, scope and variety. Green and Gardner make the bold claim that these ‘regularly recurring exhibitions have, since the early 1990s, come to define contemporary art’.[3] A little hyperbolic, perhaps, given the forces generated by the art itself, the media savvy of certain artists, the museum boom, the stratospheric market, art fairs, the ubiquity of curating, and the discursive storms around contemporary art, to name only some of the more obvious the factors that usually arise when we name the features that distinguish contemporary art. There is, however, no doubt that biennials are, today, an essential component of any such definition, and are likely to remain so for some time to come.

Green and Gardner identify a widespread belief about the benefits and deficits of this now ubiquitous exhibitionary form:

Biennials have drawn local practitioners into ostensibly globalized networks of art-world attention and financial support, publicized regions or cities previously deemed ‘peripheral’ to the metropolitan centers of London and New York. However, on another level, all this equally suggests that these exhibitions may also have served as mirrors, even handmaidens, to the spread of transnational capital and

imperialist politics associated with globalized neoliberalism.[4]

Fortunately, the careful historical survey that they provide suggests a more nuanced response than this 'on the one hand but on the other' vacillation. They point to the late nineteenth-century origins of the biennial and its slow growth during the twentieth century; the important but relatively neglected 'second wave' (from the 1951 Bienal de São Paulo to the Third Bienal de la Habana in 1989) and the 'biennial boom' in the 1990s that even now shows little sign of abating, although various divergent currents may be observed operating within it. The aim of their book is locate 'the cultural geography of biennials during this transition to contemporaneity: in the world at large, not inside one of its zones, looking out.'[5] Their response to the vacillation mentioned above is this:

We replace the usual, reductive, and immobilizing question – do biennials promote or subvert globalization? – with the far more interesting question that others have also raised: are they the artistic playgrounds of neoliberal capitalism or do they enable the forging and testing of alternative, critical, even subtly subversive perspectives? We show that each biennial's success was completely dependent on real and pressing contingencies, but also on understanding that neoliberalism and criticality were not mutually exclusive pathways. And from that, we show that biennials would still face a further question that artists themselves knew was far from trivial and which would remain unresolved: would biennials serve, lead, or be passive spectators to the new 'world orders' around them?[6]

I strongly endorse the value of a historical approach to these questions, and believe that Green and Gardner's account is the best that has been offered to date. It reinforces several more general points about the distinctive characteristics of biennials as a definitively contemporary exhibitionary form. What are those characteristics?

The most obvious is that the biennial has become as structural to what is usually called 'the artworld' in any particular location as every other element of that world. Likewise, biennials have become essential to contemporary art's evidently international character, many would say its 'globality', although I will argue more specifically that they have been the primary platform of the transnational transitionality that has shifted the core locus of art making, distributing and valuing from what used to be called the West, moved it South and then East, within regions of the these regions, and thus, now, everywhere. It is this in-transit energy that drives much contemporary art today, throughout the world and in most of the traditional and modern centres. Thirdly, in so far as biennials have become structural to art worlds in most cities around the globe, and to contemporary art's very contemporaneity, they too are subject to the larger changes effecting communicative exchange everywhere, including network culture's mediatization of the social. Finally, to return to Green and Gardner's question cited above, there is the most important matter of the worldliness necessary to our contemporary composition: are biennials still the platform on which contemporary art does most of its world-making work?

Let me begin from basic descriptions of biennials as an exhibitionary form, then work up to consideration of these still open questions. It will become evident that biennials slowly established a set of distinctive protocols and formalised them during the 1990s, which enabled their rapid replication throughout the world. It is also evident that, today, these distinctive characteristics of the biennial form are everywhere being exceeded, as they, like every other component of the artworld activity, fall subject to the frenzy of code-switching.



*Distribution of biennials - map of Europe.* Courtesy of BIENNIAL FOUNDATION. The image above is a captures of a continuously updated map applet which can be found at the [BF's Directory of Biennials page](#).

1. *Biennials have become structural within the contemporary visual arts exhibitionary complex.*

Biennials share with all exhibitionary formats the fundamental purpose of holding something out for inspection, of showing items – as the definition of the word ‘exhibition’ (in English dictionaries, at least) tells us – *publicly, for entertainment, instruction, or in a competition*. In modern societies, these purposes characterize distinct kinds of displays, which are usually held in specialised venues: for example, music halls, public museums or sporting fields. In practice, however, while one of the three will be emphasised, the other two will be drawn upon to supplement the main purpose. A circus will aim to entertain above all, but will at times pretend to educational seriousness, and often include competitive components. Didactic displays in science or natural-history-museum exhibitions routinely use entertainment-oriented interfaces to attract and sustain less focused visitors. Annual artist society exhibitions, since their origins in France and England during the seventeenth century, have emphasised contestation between artists, attitudes and genres as manifest in freshly made works of art: competition to gain entry to the academy, competition for prizes, then competition for sales. Since Venice in 1895, and Pittsburgh’s Carnegie International from 1896, recurrent exhibitions all over the world have sought to fulfill all three purposes at once.

So, as the first fundamental but not unique characteristic of a visual arts biennial exhibition, we can establish this proposition: that it offers, in one place, a display of the contemporary art of the world in ways that are entertaining, instructive and competitive, all at the same time. Doing all these things at once begins to distinguish them from exhibitions in art museums. Biennials are, crucially, exhibitionary *events*, as distinct from displays of the kind exemplified most clearly in the permanent collection rooms of a modern art museum (where continuity over time is emphasised, and change is understood as a

modification or eruption within the evolutionary narrative of art's history), and from temporary exhibitions in such museums (which usually explore in more detail and depth aspects of the history of art that are exemplified in a more general way in the collection display rooms – including the rooms that show the recent past as an opening towards an unspecified present). Being events, rather than primarily an assembly of art objects on display, is what makes biennials contemporary.

The logic and dynamic of the biennial differs from the core logic and dynamic of the modern art museum. Such museums alternate between relatively static displays of their permanent collections and a programme of temporary exhibitions of artworks that usually, yet not always nor entirely, come from somewhere else, often from another museum or a private collection. Within this framework, the biennial occurs as an alternative to both the collection and the temporary exhibition, while at the same time having some features of both. (Some museums – notably the Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh, host to the Carnegie International, and the Queensland Gallery of Modern Art, host to the Asia Pacific Triennial – acquire works from biennials, often the prize-winning works, thus continually reshaping their collections.) During the boom years of the 1990s and 2000s, the controlled dynamic between collection and temporary exhibitions that previously prevailed at the modern museum was disrupted by the biennial, which regularly offered different models of what both the collection rooms and temporary exhibitions programme might become. This is still an important effect of biennials in most cities in most parts of the world, an effect that is still unfolding. In contrast, in some cities, such as Sydney, which has mounted a biennale since 1973, the local museums that regularly host biennials (the Art Gallery of New South Wales, and the Museum of Contemporary Art) have worked hard to absorb them into their programming, framing them as if they were temporary exhibitions that happen to be recurrent. My instinct is that, in such cases, we are seeing the modern museum working with, but also struggling against, the artworld expectation that today all art should be open to being experienced as contemporary. More broadly, museums and galleries of all kinds are widely expected to be spaces in which art can be experienced in ways continuous with the socially mediated presumption of images that today is spreading across all exhibitionary platforms, actual and virtual.[7]

2. *Condensed contemporaneity, every two years.* The simple fact of its occurrence *every two years* has become the most widely adopted characteristic of a biennial. It is often forgotten that the Venice International Exhibition only became a biennial some years after 1895 (indeed, its organisation was made systematic during the 1920s and 1930, the fascist years in Italy). Why has this rather mechanical, pragmatic aspect of staging large-scale exhibitions become so definitive? I suggest that it is because, while they occur every two years, and are in that sense repetitions, biennials offer difference each time. They must do this, because they are usually committed to showing contemporary art, or recent and past art in so far as it is relevant to contemporary circumstances. Contemporary art, by its own constant redefinition, is an art of becoming, of happenings, occurrences and occasions. While its content may include material from any time, it is precisely because it typically engages with more than a single temporality at the same time that contemporary art requires the event as its form of appearance. When contemporary art is slowed down – for example, as part of a chronological history of art display in a museum, it ceases to be contemporary, although it maintains the distinctive character of having been contemporary within the contemporaneity that we still share with it. Artworks shown in biennials may be subsequently shown at art fairs, and may be acquired by museums, but, unlike most other exhibitionary venues, neither commerce nor historical valiance is their primary purpose or source of value. Rather, it is to show a purposeful selection from, or as wide a range as possible of, the art being made in the world right now. This is why biennials have – overwhelmingly, and, until recently, almost entirely – shown new, or at least recent work, and have favoured work made for the occasion, and specifically for the site. It is this impulse that underlies the preponderance of new media, videos and installations of various kinds, as well as their openness to research-based, archival and 'social practice' work that is less readily shown in museums and for-profit

venues.

In these ways, biennials typically concentrate contemporary energy in one place, or a related set of places, for a specified time. They are a double-sided form: reliable in their recurrence, but open-ended in their actualization. We do not know what art will be like two years from now, but we can expect that it will be different. Therefore, biennials can be counted on to build anticipation beforehand, and to surprise us when they happen. A regularly timetabled openness to contemporaneity – to art to come, whatever it may be – is the second most distinctive feature of biennials.

3. *Local, regional, international.* The first Venice International Exhibition and the first Carnegie International introduced another key innovation, one that has persisted to this day: biennials are forms of cultural exchange between nations, enacted at a regional center; specifically, they encourage negotiation between local and international artworlds, conducted at distances within both. I will devote some time to this rather complex quality, since it is a source of much that is positively distinctive – indeed, world-changing – about biennials, as well as of much of the confusion, over-hyping and sense of failed expectation that they also seem to engender.

At Venice every two years there is a precinct, the Giardini – and, indeed, an entire, citywide proliferation of venues, expanding every time – organised mostly according to national pavilions. Very few other biennials follow this nineteenth-century model of the international exposition, or trade fair, so closely. But all biennials import into a local artworld or a national art space contemporary artworks from a variety of other cities, nations or regions; works chosen as exemplary, representative or the best available from these other places. As well, they often position certain local practices within this larger framework. During the Symposium at the 2013 Busan Biennial, Paul Domela remarked that the original, utopian desire driving the biennial was to exceed local constraints.[8] The flip side is a strong desire to constrain international difference, to leave space for local agency and choice. All biennials strive for a balance between the two. None achieve it to the satisfaction of all concerned.

This dynamic can generate some strange paradoxes. For example, Venice has for decades been an exception to its own rule, as few artists actually live and work in the city.[9] And Italian artists figure infrequently, especially since the main pavilion in the Giardini lost its title as ‘the Italian Pavilion’. Feeling the pressure of this eclipse, in 2009 the Italian government rebranded a pavilion in the Arsenale, overseen by the Ministry for Cultural Affairs. It has been poorly curated ever since. In 2013, a populist, nationalistic agenda shaped artistic choices; to international visitors, this came across as a reactionary parochialism. In 2015, a more subtle, although only marginally more successful, ‘rejection of the present’ was attempted. It housed installations by international and Italian artists devoted to the archiving of memories.[10]

Biennials did not invent the conception of the ‘international’ or the ‘regional’ in art contexts, but they have certainly institutionalised these modes of internal world-picturing among artists, curators, art writers and art’s many publics, more thoroughly than any other exhibitionary platform. ‘International’ is not a single synonym for ‘global’; nor is it a straightforward antonym to ‘local’. Within the biennial dynamic, ‘international’ usually means *everywhere else*; it means connectedness occurring at scales beyond the immediate reach of the local agents – that is, beyond my art world, and those nearby, beyond my ‘region’. It is a concept that has a kind of default inequality built into it, but also the potential that unequal distributions of power may be overcome by assiduous activity, and by making better, more interesting and more transformatory art *right here*. It recognises the fact that art worlds everywhere else are also local, with regions around them, and ringed with other art worlds at both practical and ideological distances. Internationality stakes its agency on effective mobility across this circuitry, as distinct from falling subject to the logic of provincialism, of centre-periphery dominance. It acknowledges provincialism as a fact of cultural power, but it holds out the promise of being a vehicle that might assist in overcoming it.[11] This kind of internationalism is not globalism; it will not occur as a result of any top-down, ‘beneficent’ spread of economic and political globalisation. It must be won, precisely, *against* neoliberal globalisation. By

working in steps, from locality to region, from my locality to another, relevant one, outside my region.

While artists everywhere have always been alert to art being made elsewhere that might be important to their practice, in recent decades biennials have intensified this sense of global connectedness and comparison. It is true that, beginning with Venice, many biennials were founded by lord mayors, city leaders, or civic-minded patrons. Yet these people were usually prompted by groups of local artists who wished to exceed the limits of their location, and few have survived without the support of at least some local artists (while being reliably opposed by others). So, we can say that the biennial offers local artists the sharp shock of competition; it educates local audiences about art being made outside of their community; it tests local critics, inspires local collectors and challenges local art administrators to provide the relevant infrastructure so that art of this kind can be made locally and circulated throughout the world. In sum, biennials have become the major means through which local artworlds regionalise and internationalise themselves. (Other methods include travel, magazines, overseas residencies, trading exhibitions and cultural exchanges.)

Looked at from worldly perspectives, local-international exchange is built into the biennial form. Thus the biennial has suited Western institutions that wish to sample art from everywhere else, yet not necessarily collect it. Venice, São Paulo, Sydney and to a degree Berlin are examples. In mirror reversal, the biennial form 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. Biennials also demonstrate international exhibitionary standards for art-producing locales that wish to build and maintain permanent cultural infrastructure. This is their main role in South East and Northern Asia. In many cities in this region (Shanghai, for example) the biennial substitutes for the mega-exhibition of contemporary art in cities that do not wish, or cannot, present them as a matter of course. In Busan, the Biennale runs the risk of substituting for the creation of local visual arts infrastructure.[12]

Of course, international cultural exchanges have never been equitable. They are often oriented towards spreading a nation's influence and values, now known as 'soft power'. Yet, on balance, the global proliferation of biennials has challenged the predominance of certain EuroAmerican art centres, such as Paris and New York – not as markets, but as art-producing localities. Biennials have done so because, since the 1990s, they have been ideal disseminative vehicles for what I have identified as the one of the major currents in contemporary art. Some characterise this current as 'postcolonial' or 'global' art, but I call it the art of *transnational transitionality*. [13] Along with a number of path-finding travelling exhibitions that surveyed the art of various continents and regions (*Magiciens de la terre* of 1989 being the paradigm), the proliferation of biennials, especially since the 1990s, has enabled artists from previously colonised countries to show their work in venues in their regions and around the world. A network that is no longer dependent on the metropolitan centres has emerged. Unlike the situation for artists throughout the twentieth century, who were obliged to expatriate themselves to metropolitan centres for long periods in order to pursue sustainable careers (or, less materially, make the best art of which they were capable), it is this network that is sustaining many of the most ambitious and inventive artists. They may participate in it from bases anywhere in the world (although, of course, enterprising regional, that is, so-called 'second tier' global cities, such as Berlin, compete to attract artists by offering them affordable access to precisely such bases).

In these ways, the overall impact of biennials has, I believe, been of value for contemporary art in the world as a whole. International experience has been crucial to the maturation of the work of a number of contemporary artists from previously colonised countries and those who are members of postcolonial diasporas. El Anatsui, William Kentridge, Tania Bruguera, Wangechi Mutu and Pedro Lasch are some obvious examples. On the other hand, it is rare for a local art world – even those as close to concentrations of enormous wealth as New York and London – to contain all the resources necessary to challenge an artist of the strongest ambition in a sustained way across the course of a career. I think of Isaac Julian, John

Akomfrah or Steve McQueen, to take some based in London, or artists such as Tacita Dean or Olafur Eliasson, who shifted their studios to the relative periphery of Berlin. Whatever their origins or bases, however, artists today must negotiate contexts and challenges that are – at the same time – local, regional, global and connected. Being artists, they are sensitive to the fact that these complex relationships are not given, like rules in a game, or settled, as in traditional cultures. They are volatile, and are characterised above all by the contemporaneity of different kinds of difference.

In his contribution to the 2014 Aarhus conference on Contemporaneity and Contemporary Art, and subsequently in a lecture to the World Biennial Forum, delivered in São Paulo, Peter Osborne claimed that ‘Art today lives – can there still be doubt? – in “the age of the biennial”.’[14] He argued that the dominance of biennials as an exhibitionary form has shifted the exhibitionary complex from its roots in museums to a more disruptive and dispersed kind of temporality dictated by the multiplicity of biennials. To him, this is the ‘expression’ in ‘art spaces’ of ‘the tendential global extension’ of capitalist accumulation, that is to say, of neoliberal globalisation.[15] As I have been outlining, he is right on both counts. But a little more precision is needed. As I will show in a moment, museums in the main centres are pushing back against their ‘biennialisation’. And at the level of geopolitics, decolonisation names a set of forces that are of at least equal, if not of greater, transformatory relevance than the globalisation imposed by contemporary capitalism.

The decolonisation of key sectors of the world, and the modernisation of regions outside of the West, is a global process that has been going on now for over fifty years.[16] Such geopolitical changes have shifted the balance of global cultural power (if we may put it this way) – one hopes, forever (although there is considerable push back coming from those sensing that globalisation has left them behind, and that national capitalisms were not so bad after all). We experience the warring between these huge counter changes and recursions as if we were on the cusp of a tectonic plate, as it shifts the earth’s surface, slowly but inexorably. Artists, curators, collectors, administrators in Western centres are now as aware of art being made elsewhere in the world as they are of that made, and presented, in their local artworlds. This applies not only to artistic trafficking *between* regions and nations, but also *within* them. Of course, this has economic, even financial dimensions. In South-East Asia and the Middle East, there is intense competition for cultural dollars between cities that are located in close proximity to each other. In China, there is a fierce competition between cities all over the country that are building museums in the expectation that they will be able to fill them with exhibitions. Many nations, including South Korea, have more than one biennial, as different cities use the exhibitions to demonstrate the distinctiveness of their local cultures. The Fukuoka Art Museum has been staging surveys of Asian art since 1979, and, since 1999, has been presenting the Asian Triennale, showing work from twenty-one countries. In 1993, the Queensland Art Gallery launched the first of what are by now eight Asia Pacific Triennials. These examples demonstrate that biennials connect art and artists not only at international and local levels, but also at inter-regional and intra-national ones. The positive outcome is that biennials are the exhibitionary format within which these complex relationships have, in recent decades, been most effectively negotiated. On the negative side, their proliferation has promoted a competition for ‘brand differentiation’ among closely similar products: the language here alerts us to the fact that many of the desires driving the biennial have been subsumed within the framework of global tourism.

Too late. Within the past few years, another large-scale change has become evident at a world geopolitical level: globalisation as a hegemonic world-system may be beginning to fail. In 2008, the United States financial system was riven by its self-destructiveness, the European dream began to falter under its own vacuity, Third World countries began to resist outsourcing from the West, ‘Second World’ models emerged in the BRIC countries then quickly ran aground in most of them. Meanwhile, multinational corporations over-reached (for example, the spillage from BP oilrigs in the Gulf of Mexico), and governments worldwide struggle to respond to climate change. Peoples everywhere have, in response,

turned to local values and community building, and have developed a stronger, more critical alertness to the connectivities between localities and distant power, to the deleterious operations of power with a global reach. This response is as evident in art worlds as it is elsewhere in societies. These are not self-deluding fictions (although they certainly can take such a form when seized upon by agile politicians, witness the role of UKIP in Brexit, and the election of Donald Trump).

If the biennial began, in 1895, as an ideal form for internationalizing local art worlds(at least within the centres and peripheries of Europe), we could say that, now, it has become one among the many forms that are assisting to localise and regionalise the international. Like other changes in exhibition making, this is also a result of changes in art practice, which has for decades been leading curatorial practice. An example is the 2013–14 Carnegie International, which responded to this overall situation in a number of interesting ways. It introduced a range of local activities two years before the opening of the main exhibition. The curators also extended the exhibition into local playgrounds (Tezuka Architects), and supported such specific community initiatives as reviving the practice of local libraries checking out works of art as well as books (Tranformazium at the Carnegie Library, Braddock). In the museum-based aspects of the show, the work of artists concerned with questions of locality (Joel Sternfeld on utopian communes) was highlighted.[17]



*Distribution of biennials - map of America.* Courtesy of BIENNIAL FOUNDATION. The image above is a captures of a continuously updated map applet which can be found at the [BF's Directory of Biennials page](#).

4. *The biennial as a distributed event.* Does the biennial have a distinctive spatial character? In most cities, the anchor of the biennial, or at least one of its sites, is the main art-historical survey museum, or the museum of contemporary art, or an equivalent venue or pairing of venues. Venice and São Paulo are exceptional in that they have dedicated sites for their biennales. Nowadays, while the main local museum



or contemporary art gallery might anchor the event, biennials increasingly occur across a number of sites in their host city. This happens most dramatically at Venice itself, with over 200 related venues outside the Giardini and the Arsenale, but is also characteristic of smaller biennials, such as Liverpool. Thus we can identify the fourth feature of biennials: they have become *distributed events*. They are cosmopolitan (of the city) in this basic sense; and in the broadest, international sense, that is, in linking what is, in effect, the art produced in a number of cities.

In being exceptional yet recurrent events in a particular city, yet deploying a form that is used in many cities, biennials take on some of the character of festivals: crowds of people gathered to have a good time, to be entertained by art, to participate in an occasion on which behaviour apart from the norm is expected, to be spectators at a carnival, yet secure in the promise that normal life will resume when the circus leaves town. *New Yorker* art critic Peter Schjeldahl accuses biennials of becoming subject to 'festivalism'. [18] Sometimes, merging the forms of the recurrent exhibition into those of the festival can be a good thing: the Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennale is a case in point. Since 2000, Fram Kitagawa has brought hundreds of artists from all over the world to work with local villagers to create around 900 pieces, of which 200 remain as site-specific works in locations throughout the region. But Schjeldahl was, rightly, targeting the tendency for artists to produce high-impact, low-quality works that stand out amid crowded displays, through which bemused crowds wander, mouths agape, minds emptying, feelings benumbed. This complaint was often heard during the 1990s and early 2000s: a small cohort of curators was regularly accused of sequestering opportunities for their signature cadres of artists, dominating what was perceived as a finite circuit, excluding other worthy artists, and boring audiences with repetitions and variations of the same kind of art. As biennials increase in number, size, range and kind – way beyond the capacity of any individual to monitor – this complaint is less often heard.

In recent comments, Steven Henry Madoff highlights another aspect of this drift towards spectacularisation: the overcrowding of exhibitions. Noting that the 2016 Istanbul Biennial boasted over 1,500 artworks on show in fifty-four venues, he speaks of a 'visual elephantitis' that places 'the spectator under siege'. Sourcing it to the proliferation of art fairs and the booming market for contemporary art, he accuses curators of biennials of succumbing to this quantitative overload. For the spectator, unable to assimilate more than a part of such exhibitions, this leads to what he calls a 'trauma of numerosness'. [19] Of course, this disease is not confined to biennials and large-scale temporary venues; it is becoming true of 'institutional settings that have historical collections, modern and contemporary collections, stage temporary exhibitions, and commission performances and other works, other experiences – and do so more and more in keeping with the acquisitive propinquities of their boards, whose buying habits now regularly prefer contemporary art over historical works'. He concludes by asking: 'How do we as curators conspire or resist, implicitly state complicity or redress what can be seen as the loss of contemplative solemnity in solitude? Or has the true reign of the surface begun?' [20] This sounds like a lament for the experience of museum-going fifty years ago, an experience long since lost, and returns us to the clash between the values of the modern museum and those of the biennial as a contemporary form.

There are other challenges to the biennial that also need to be addressed. I list some of them, as questions, with short answers to each.

5. *Biennials blending with other exhibitionary forms*. Some recent biennials abjure their traditional obligation to survey as much as possible of contemporary art on a worldwide basis, and have put aside themes that imply a matching generalised socio-political statement about the world today, in favour of a museum-like exhibition about a certain kind of art. A striking recent example was Massimiliano Gioni's 2013 Venice Biennale. Has this tendency diminished the biennial's core purpose of offering a wide-ranging survey of international contemporary art to local audiences? On the other hand, art fairs such as Art Basel, Miami and Hong Kong, and Frieze London and New York, have taken up the model of the annual salon

presented by an artists' society, with the difference that selection is made by a jury of peers consisting of dealers rather than artists. Has the art fair replaced the biennial in offering annual surveys of contemporary art? Short answer: in places where the art fair is strong, developed and diverse in its formats (including, for example, paracuratorial activities), yes. Elsewhere, not so much. A longer answer would focus on the influence of art dealers on mega-exhibitions, both those in museums and in biennials. In 1972, Konrad Fischer was a vital figure within the curation of Documenta 5, but dealer input is a factor now widely perceived as having grown to become a somewhat distorting influence, especially on the 'production values' expected of displays at the leading biennials. It is entirely predictable that key collectors, whose impact on museums has been out there in recent years, will soon have a similar impact on biennials.

6. *Biennials as infrastructure builders.* When biennials mature to become leading cultural institutions in their locality, nation, or region, they may take on roles usually pursued by established art institutions – especially if these are relatively weak. In Liverpool, for example, the Biennale office remains active on a constant basis, offering between biennales a variety of local cultural services, including the commissioning of public art for the city, educational activities for all ages and levels, public fora on issues of concern and regular publications in print and online. On the other side of the coin, prominent biennials have taken on roles that extend well beyond the city in which they are located. During the 1930s and 1940s, when the Venice Biennale was one of Italy's most internationally visible cultural institutions, it actively staged exhibitions of Italian and other art elsewhere in Europe, the United States and Asia, and curated the participation of Italian artists in exhibitions abroad, including in other biennials, such as Alexandria and São Paulo. These activities continued until 1968, when the credibility of the Biennale came in for widespread questioning by a new generation, leading to artist boycotts and gestures of solidarity. In 1970, the Biennale abolished its Grand Prizes and its sales office, and staged thematic exhibitions instead of the usual celebratory and monographic exhibitions. In 1974, the entire edition was devoted to protesting the overthrow of democracy in Chile.[21]

7. *The impact of network culture.* Is the online experience of art calibrating how biennial visitors look at art in the same ways and to the same degree that it is affecting those who visit art museums? Is it introducing a temporality between viewers and artworks that is indifferent to the seasonal and schedule-driven character of museums and the commercial sector, galleries, fairs and auction houses? Does the ubiquity of online access to images of art being made everywhere today, and in every past everywhere, reduce the need to be shown a curated survey of contemporary art? Short answer to each of these questions: yes. Biennial recurrence is an artifact of the practicalities of staging a major physical exhibition in an institution or a city on a regular basis. It makes no sense within the time zones of the internet.

8. *Biennials as occasions of curatorial innovation.* It is true that, during the 1990s and 2000s, there was a repetitious narrowing of the number of artists who were regularly seen in these exhibitions, and a concentration on the efforts of a few curators. This has changed in the last few years, due to the sheer number of biennials, their global spread, the proliferation of curatorial styles, and the multiplicity of regional and local purposes that they now serve.

In *Thinking Contemporary Curating*, I make the point that, since around 2010, the biennial has been widely understood by many people in the international art world as being in a crisis of overproduction, of having become stale in form, and, as a result, in danger of being absorbed back into the traditional museum.[22] Asked whether she thought 'there is life left in the form yet' Juliana Engberg, director of the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne, replied:

Yes. I think it's funny, this whole rhetoric around the problem with biennales. I've just seen four in the past three weeks, each different, showing different work, going for a different idea. They are events that come around every two years, shaped by diverse curatorial approaches. They generate a great deal of discussion and debate and excitement and they are a clearly visible event for a public looking to be attracted by contemporary art in a different way from museums and small enterprises. And I wonder who

constructs this rhetoric. Nobody knows what a biennale should be, and that's its strength.[23]

Whatever one's opinion, there is no doubt that among the curatoriate there has recently arisen a competition as to who could reconceive the biennial in the most inventive and influential way. Critic Eleanor Hartney: '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.' [24]

Yet to reinvent the biennial every time out, and do so for every iteration of the 150 plus being mounted today, is to take on the impossible. Many curators seem to have responded to this challenge by reverting to exhibitions that are scarcely distinguishable from collection displays in museums, or those of in-depth, historical temporary exhibitions on a specific theme. For example, the 2013 Venice Biennale was a museum-type historical survey of parallels, during the twentieth century, between the exploration of psychoanalytic themes by certain modern and contemporary artists and the obsessive pursuits of 'outsider' artists, many with certified mental illnesses. While finely done, and often fascinating, it puts to one side any concern about *contemporary* art per se. To me, this made it a contra-biennial, if it was one at all.[25] For Boris Groys, in our conversation in *Talking Contemporary Curating*, it was simply an example of subjective curating, which one either likes or not, on the same subjective grounds. Unlike the case of an exhibition that attempts an art-historical task (such as offering a survey of contemporary art) neither the curator nor the audience is in any way accountable.[26]

Some might argue that, being committed to contemporaneity, it goes against the nature of biennials to offer installments in a longer story of art's history, because, in contemporaneity, there is not one story, but many stories. More to the point, today's stories will not necessarily add up into a shared history – neither a Story of Art, nor a Story of the Human Being. The 2016 Liverpool Biennial aimed to tell a set of five stories, each shared across five venues. The issue of what counts as a 'story' in this context arises, as does the danger of these stories dissolving into a myriad of voices that initially talk to each other, then alongside each other, then in their own void.

9. *Biennials, triennials, and documentas*. At least since Catherine David's iteration in 1997, documentas have become, in my estimation, *meta-exhibitions*, that is to say, exhibitions that add to the fundamentals of repeating mega-exhibitions such as biennials and triennials a quality of overview and, by implication, commentary on these exhibitions. Their five-year cycle, and their huge budgets, permits this critical distancing. Of course, this distinction is as unstable as every other one that I have been making so far: we must anticipate a documenta that will retreat into the most conventional survey of world art format, just as we witnessed in 2015 Okwui Enwezor attempting to insert a documenta-type meta-exhibition into the main pavilions of the Venice Biennale.

10. *The institutionalisation of artistic-political-ideological orientations*. These are especially notable at established biennials, such as Venice, Sydney, Sao Paulo, as well as Documenta, that routinely swing from one side of the ideological compass to the other. Thus the president of the Venice Biennale, Paolo Baratta, announces blithely that after Okwui Enwezor's 2015 biennale, which, he says, 'centered on the many rifts and divisions of our contemporary world', for the next iteration in 2017 he has chosen a curator 'committed to emphasizing the important role artists play in inventing their own universes and in reverberating generous vitality towards the world we live in'. [27]

Those who would deny, or denigrate as insignificant, the political implication of biennials as a cultural form need to pay attention to statements such as these. Effective power brokers know that their work is most effective when it is done in plain sight, especially when you are trafficking in how to symbolise the present in the interests of the 1 per cent when most artists wish their work to serve those of the rest of us, especially interests that we do not yet know that we have.

Sometimes a biennial can judiciously operate at a tangent to the expectations of left and right. The 2016 Gwangju Biennale, curated by Maria Lind, by all reports seems to have done exactly that. Entitled *The*

*Eighth Climate (What Does Art Do?)*, it opened with a recreation of the bookshop at which the uprising of 18 May 1980 was fermented, and which was greeted with the massacre of over 600 protestors by the military government. Reference to that uprising is a requirement of every edition of the Biennale. The exhibition continued through a suite of spaces that, according to reports of some sceptical visitors, judiciously mixed works that directly addressed current political concerns with those that invited quiet contemplation of abstract ideals. She also invited representatives of 70 small to mid-scale non-profit arts organizations from around the world to a workshop entitled *To All The Contributing Factors*.



*Distribution of biennials - map of Asia.* Courtesy of BIENNIAL FOUNDATION. The image above is a captures of a continuously updated map applet which can be found at the [BF's Directory of Biennials page](#).

11. *The impingement of actual politics on the biennial's habitual politics of the symbolic.* As biennials become more and more like other elements within the exhibitionary complex, especially the slower, more institutionalised ones, they become less and less able to engage with the challenges thrown up by present and emerging realities. A case in point was the 19th Sydney Biennale, shown in many venues around the city between March and June 2014. Curated by Engberg, , its theme was 'You Imagine What You Desire'. In her own words:

*You Imagine What You Desire* is an evocation celebrating the artistic imagination as a spirited describing and exploration of the world through metaphor and poesis. It makes enquiries into contemporary aesthetic experience, and relates this to historical precedents and future opportunities to imagine possible worlds. It seeks to understand the need artists have today to create immersive and expanded environments, and locates this activity as part of an art historical trajectory, and as a pursuit into the issues of human consciousness, and their psychological, cognitive and corporeal imperatives.[28]

This statement typifies the aspirations of well-established biennials these days. It appeals to a

universal quality of art (poetic imagination), which is presumed to manifest itself today on a global scale. It highlights two new kinds of art (immersive and expanded environments), themselves regarded as the latest chapter in the history of art. In these senses, the statement is not very different from what we might read as the rationale for a large temporary exhibition, a survey of contemporary art of the world at a major art museum.

Shortly before the exhibition was due to open, controversy arose when it became known that the main sponsor, the Transfield Foundation, was tainted by direct association with a company that executes the Australian government's egregious policy of mandatory detention and off-shore processing of refugees who risk their lives on the high seas of the Indian Ocean and the Timor Straits in order to reach the safety of Australian territory. A call to boycott the Biennale was issued by a number of the invited artists. Displaying unusual resolve, the board asked its chairman, Luca Belgiorno-Nettis, president of the Transfield company, to resign. He did so, withdrawing the company's sponsorship. Subsequently, all but two of the artists agreed that their work could be shown.[29]

Meanwhile, in St Petersburg, artists were called upon to boycott the 11th edition of Manifesta because the Russian state, having recently legislated against 'homosexual propaganda', was busily annexing Crimea, and advancing into Eastern Ukraine. Curator Kasper König appealed for an apolitical exhibition, condemning any political action in this situation as a 'misuse'. Invited to write a catalogue essay on the 'political meaning of Russian contemporary art', critic Ekaterina Dergot instead wrote an essay entitled 'A Text That Should Never have Been Written?' I cite two passages:

Are things so bad that Manifesta 10 might be considered a positive, 'civilizational' event no matter what its content, by sheer dint of taking place in a country plummeting into the abyss of militarist aggression, obscurantism, and proto-fascist nationalism? Could it be that the fast-paced conservative revolution in Russia will save not just the reputation but also the very identity of contemporary art? Or is this simply untrue? Representations of contemporary art in authoritarian contexts have become more and more frequent since the 2000s. Perhaps they rather call into question the very foundations of the discipline at large. Slavoj Žižek has said again and again that the eternal marriage between capitalism and democracy has ended, but perhaps we must say the same of the supposedly eternal marriage between contemporary art and progressive thinking?

After a searching examination of the mountains of bad faith being generated by all involved, she concludes with this passage:

In a way, the Russian cultural authorities who suddenly became archaically and ridiculously anti-modernist and made Manifesta, no matter how it would appear, into a heroic deed, made things look simpler than they currently are. Since Vladimir Putin goes so far as forbidding state employees to ride foreign cars and to take their holidays abroad, why not just ban any foreign art outright? Under aesthetic censorship (that agrees to make some exceptions for 'export' situations), international contemporary art is a protest act by definition. But in a broader context it is not, and has not been for decades. The world we live in is more complex than that. There is no guarantee of emancipatory potential in contemporary art, and neither are there specific forms that would assure us of the correct political behavior of their creators, let alone their owners. Increasingly, we hear of such a thing as a left-wing rhetoric (and maybe not even just a rhetoric) of the right wing, and we see contemporary-looking (and maybe even contemporary-thinking) art that embraces nationalism and dictatorship. There will be such examples – from the Russian context – at Manifesta, although it seems through an oversight rather than programmatically. There are no rules anymore, and each case has to be taken separately; the relatively safe common ground of contemporary art is shifting. And this incredible complexity is the only hope left.[30]

12. *Biennials exceed their specific form in a converging artworld but a divisive social context.* This has been evident throughout these comments. For cities intent on establishing their own biennials, or improving the still developing one that they have, established biennials like the one in Sydney are

instances of international culture to be examined and adapted for local use. Implicitly, those planning to create a biennial ask: can my city create a visual arts infrastructure that will be sophisticated enough to sustain such an event for a number of years to come? But in places that have biennials similar to that in Sydney, and have had them for some time, the problem, today, is the opposite: can the biennial form, now past middle-age, be regenerated to capture the innovative energy and the inspiring impact that it had throughout the world during the 1990s, or will our biennial drift into the repetitions of institutionalisation, the taming of difference, and the merge with other artworld structures?

As biennials everywhere become more institutionalised, more integrated into the visual arts exhibitionary complex on the one hand, and, on the other, more subject to the subjectivism of independent curators, it might become necessary to invent a different exhibitionary structure, one that manifests more acutely the antinomies of our present situation: its multiplicity, its layered cotemporalities, its proliferation of differences, and its increasingly desperate reach for a revised contract with the planet. This is the direction in which, I believe, artists, curators and arts administrators are being asked to move if they wish to really engage themselves in exhibiting our contemporaneity, and in doing their part in creating our contemporary composition.

**Keynote lecture for the symposium at Liverpool John Moores University curated by Joasia Krysa, *The Biennial Condition: Contemporaneity and the Episodic*, 7 and 8 October 2016, which presented work in progress from 'The Contemporary Condition' project, led by Jacob Lund and Geoff Cox of Aarhus University. Some ideas were first presented at the Busan Biennale Symposium 2013 on *Biennale Ecology in Contemporary Art*, held at the Museum of Art, Busan, Korea, on 30 November, 2013, and were published in Kwangsu Oh (ed.), *The Symposium 2013 Busan Biennale: Biennale Ecology in Contemporary Art* (Busan: Busan Biennale, 2014).**

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[1] See <http://nyphil.org/files/biennial/index.html>.

[2] Charles Green and Anthony Gardner's *Biennials, Triennials, and Documentas: The Exhibitions that created Contemporary Art* (London: Wiley, 2016).

[3] *Ibid.*, p.3.

[4] *Ibid.*

[5] *Ibid.*, p.13.

[6] *Ibid.*, pp.13–14.

[7] See Terry Smith, *Thinking Contemporary Curating* (New York: Independent Curators International, 2012), chapter 2 'Shifting the Exhibitionary Complex.' Of course, biennials have not been the only precipitators of transformation in the modern art museum. The emergence of economies of experience brought about by globalised communicative connectivity, and the rise of global cities in particular, is a deeper and more pervasive causal factor. See B. Joseph Pine and James H. Gilmore, *The Experience Economy* (Harvard Business Review Press, 2011 updated edition), and Terry Smith, *What is Contemporary Art?* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), chapter 5, 'The Experience Museum' and chapter 6 'The Intensity Exhibit'. Since 2000, Tate Modern has led in showing its collections as regularly changing thematic exhibitions. In 2016, the Museum of Modern Art, New York, transformed its collection rooms into a sequence of historical and thematic shows, including one floor devoted to its holdings from the 1960s, one room per year.

[8] Paul Domela, 'What can a biennale do?', in Kwangsu Oh (ed.), *The Symposium 2013 Busan Biennale: Biennale Ecology in Contemporary Art* (Busan: Busan Biennale, 2014), pp.35–39.

[9] Indeed, as Salvatore Settis poignantly laments, very few Venetians *per se* live in the city, which has come to exist, precariously, almost entirely as a tourist fiction of itself. See Salvatore Settis, *If Venice Dies* (New York: New Vessel Press, 2016).

[10] See <https://www.inexhibit.com/case-studies/stepping-rooms-memory-venice-art-biennale-2015-italy-pavilion/>.

[11] See Terry Smith, 'The Provincialism Problem: Then and Now', *ARTMargins*, 6:1 (January, 2017).

[12] On the specific difficulties but also inventive freedoms of biennials outside of Europe and the United States, see Carolee Thea, *On Curating 2: Interviews with Fourteen Curators* (New York: D.A.P./Distributed Art Publishers, 2016).

[13] Terry Smith, *Contemporary Art: World Currents* (London: Laurence King; Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson/Prentice Hall, 2011), Part 2.

[14] Peter Osborne, 'Existential Urgency: Contemporaneity, Biennials, and Social Form', *The Nordic Journal of Aesthetics*, no. 49-50 (2015), p.175.

[15] Osborne, 'Existential Urgency: Contemporaneity, Biennials, and Social Form', p.176.

[16] Although Walter Mignolo traces its origins back to the twelfth century in the Americas before focusing on its resonances for today. See, for example, his *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

[17] Daniel Baumann, Dan Byers, Tina Kukielski, *2013 Carnegie International* (Pittsburgh: Carnegie Museum of Art, 2013).

[18] Peter Schjeldahl, 'The Art World: Festivalism', *The New Yorker* (5 July 1999), p. 85.

[19] Steven Henry Madoff, 'Spectator Under Siege', panel presentation, CAA Conference, Washington, 6 February 2016, unpublished.

[20] Ibid. Claiming that the chaos of contemporary experience should be registered in mega-exhibitions, Francesco Bonami, artistic director of the 2003 Venice Biennale, convened eleven separate exhibitions, two of which he curated, and gave complete autonomy to the nine other curators or curatorial teams to do as they pleased, as well as encouraging 96 other exhibitions throughout the city. Entitling the whole *The Dictatorship of the Viewer*, he sought to open out what he saw as an 'outmoded structure of national pavilions and thematic exhibitions', to, in effect, display the chaos of contemporary art as it was happening. Green and Gardner offer a searching analysis of what they see as 'a purely rhetorical challenge to the mess and conflict of globalization signaled in the title and obvious to every viewer: this was, after all, the first Venice Biennale after the attacks of 9/11' (*Biennials, Triennials, and Documentas*, 231).

[21] See <http://www.labiennale.org/en/art/history/abroad.html?back=true> and <http://www.labiennale.org/en/art/history/1970s.html?back=true>.

[22] See Smith, *Thinking Contemporary Curating*, pp.92–99.

[23] Cited in Coline Millard et al., *The New Curator* (London: Laurence King, 2016), p.41.

[24] Eleanor Heartney, 'Gwangju Report: Image Surplus', *Art in America*, vol. 98, no. 11 (December 2010), p.78.

[25] The museum character of the exhibition was confirmed when Gioni curated a smaller version of it, with additional examples, in the exhibition, *The Keeper*, at the New Museum, New York, July–September 2016. This is puzzling, given Gioni's range as a curator, although perhaps it is his range that is being expressed, within and against the expectations of each exhibitionary format. His essay, 'In Defense of Biennials', in Alexander Dumbadze and Suzanne Hudson (ed.), *Contemporary Art: 1989 to the Present* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), is one of the best reflections on the subject.

[26] Terry Smith, *Talking Contemporary Curating* (New York: Independent Curators International, 2015), pp.71-74.

[27] Jane Morris, 'Venice Biennale director Christine Macel promises an artist-centered exhibition', *The Art Newspaper*, 23 September 2016.

[28] See <http://www.biennaleofsydney.com.au/19bos/exhibition/exhibition-overview/#sthash.9SJoYbTL.dpuf>.

[29] [The Sydney Biennale website explains](#) that the Foundation was established as a joint venture by Transfield Holdings and Transfield Services, the last being the company managing the detention centres. On the controversy, see the '[Open Letter to the Board of the Sydney Biennale from Participating Artists](#)', 19 February 2014. [Statement of withdrawal by five artists](#), 26 February 2014.

Media release by [Biennale regarding resignation of chair](#). The controversy is discussed in detail in many articles in the June 2014 issue of *Contemporary Visual Art+Culture Broadsheet*, vol. 43, no 2 (June 2014), and on the website of the journal [Discipline](#), with statements by Nikos Papastergiadis, Charles Esche and others. Juliana Engberg's comments may be found in the interview in Coline Millard et al., *The New Curator* (London: Laurence King, 2016), p.41.

[30] Ekaterina Dergot, '[A Text That Should Never have Been Written?](#)'. See also *Art Newspaper*, #257, May 2014.

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## Terry Smith

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# The Contemporary Condition: Key Concepts

Jacob Lund, Verina Gfader, Anne Kølback Iversen, Geoff Cox



When are you from? Hondo Chinese Supermarket, Liverpool Biennial 2016. Photo: Mark McNulty.

## Contemporary contemporary[1]

The designator 'contemporary art' refers to an art that somehow addresses and expresses the present. But what is this present? What constitutes the *present* present and the *contemporary* contemporary? 'When are you from?', as the legend on the Liverpool Biennial bags reads.

When did the present that we inhabit begin? Who is included in that 'we'? How far does it expand in space? When and where does it end?

Defining the *contemporary* contemporary – that is, the contemporary of our times rather than the contemporary of *anytime* – is related to an understanding of the contemporary condition as being one of *con-temporaneity*. Contemporaneity is the bringing together of a multitude of different co-existing temporalities in the same historical present; it is an intensified planetary interconnectedness of different times and experiences of time. On a global macro-level, contemporaneity therefore refers to the temporal complexity that follows from the coming together in the same cultural space of heterogeneous cultural clusters generated along different historical trajectories, across different scales, and in different localities, which also – on a micro-level – affects the time-experience of the individuals and groups inhabiting these clusters. This interconnection and bringing together of *different* times and experiences of time at a global or planetary scale, and their taking part in the *same* historical present, is what characterises our present, what constitutes the *contemporary* contemporary or the present present. Climate change and our entering into the geological era of the anthropocene in which the human species begins to face its own extinction in a certain sense forces contemporaneity or a shared present – and potential absence – upon us. Another factor in the production of contemporaneity is the development of planetary-scale computation, theorised by Benjamin Bratton as 'the Stack', which interconnects a number of different layers and facilitates interpenetration between digital and analogue times, and between computational, material and human times[2]– bringing into being a kind of planetary instantaneity in which *everyone* and *everything* takes part.

Thus, the *contemporary* contemporary is about a changing temporal quality of our or, perhaps more

objectively, *the* historical present and how something like the present and presence is perceived. It is about changes in what sociologist Helga Nowotny calls our *Eigenzeit*, self-time or proper time, understood as 'a constellation of beliefs regarding future, past and present [...] opinions about change and permanence, about the inevitability of death, about philosophical, religious and aesthetic judgements, and even about identities and allegiances. It stands for the totality of a person's or group's ideas and experiences of time.' [3]

According to Nowotny, people draw their fundamental thought categories, such as space and time, from social organisation. Individuals, societies, cultural groups have differing judgements about the role and importance of their own and of other people's and group's times. 'Contemporaneity' occurs through the bringing together of different social and historical times, through the bringing together of different *Eigenzeiten*, within what Peter Osborne calls the disjunctive 'living' unity of the historical present. [4] In other words, the way in which the *present* present is constituted is different from the way in which previous presents were constituted, and our conception of the contemporary and contemporaneity therefore needs to be historicised.

(JL)

## Chronophobia

The Japanese Gutai artist Atsuko Tanaka gave up figurative painting when hospitalised in 1953. 'I wrote down the dates – four or five days – until my release', he said, 'and coloured around them with crayon. I thought: This *is* painting. I subsequently drew calendars, and the compositions of numbers drawn with crayon on linen. Linen, which is a simple material, is accepted by everybody with little resistance.' [5] As the numbers were written down, they 'gave form to time'. [6] Ming Tiampo in her essay 'Electrifying Painting', describes how the artist was disorientated by the sameness in the routine of hospital life and how the counting of the days until his release needed to be visualised.

Two *Calendar* paintings emerged at the time, in 1954. The *Calendars* are paper collages, one with ink and pencil in the format of a portrait, the other one, landscape format, with oil and ink. Measuring 38 x 54 cm each, they are ordinary calendars 'elevated' into works of art, and sit outside the discussion of realism versus abstraction. And since their complex process involved the use of the architectural blueprint, they become 'a palimpsest of semiotic systems: spatial, temporal, numeric, and linguistic, thus highlighting the spatiality of how a calendar represents time'. [7] Interestingly, Tiampo notes that, 'this collision of semiotic systems revealed their arbitrariness and materiality, by revealing how the same shape could simultaneously represent part of a building or part of a letter [and thus a day]'. [8]



Atsuko Tanaka, *Calendar*, ca. 1954. Ink and pencil on paper, collage. Collection Ashiya City Museum of Art & History. © Kanayama Akira and Tanaka Atsuko Association.

A sort of animation mechanism is indicated here, whereby the calendar's virtual plasticity becomes a translation tool. It opens up a lexicon of 'forms' and sensitises us to the calendar as an encounter of difference, plurality and adaptability within its environment.

According to Victoria Browne, 'calendar time is a tool for coordinating and managing social, economic, and political life'. [9] Among others, Browne draws references to 'Hannah Arendt's pluralistic concept of the "public" as a basis for developing a "deepened" account of calendar time as a public time', in order to explore 'the complex temporal dynamics and sociopolitical processes underpinning calendar time ... Such an account is not premised upon assumptions about neutrality, universality and uniformity, but rather, upon the need and desire for temporal coordination within and across diversity.' [10]

Particular attention is drawn to the day, which can 'seem to be the most natural of measures. Yet, as sociologist Eviatar Zerubavel insists, a day is *always* at root an 'artificial' segmentation of time, whether measured by a sundial, a mechanical timepiece such as a watch, or marked by a number in a calendrical grid (1981, 11)... The calendar "day", "month" and "year" can only ever be approximate representations of the "physiotemporal" relations between the earth and the sun, or in the case of lunar calendars, between earth and moon (Zerubavel 1997, 110). The key point, however, is not primarily about physiotemporal or astronomical *accuracy*. The point is that temporal measures are not natural measures that simply exist; rather, they are *constructed* measures that are decided upon and utilized within specific sociocultural situations and arrangements.' [11]

Tanaka's calendar time in that respect brings forth an abundance of the natural-artificial binary, identified here as being the ontological core of 'temporal measures': the *Calendars* reveal themselves as a strange complexity and physiology, with the artist's body (restoration, healing) intricately there.

(VG)

# RAM: Random Access Memory

Random Access Memory is a type of computer memory that can be accessed randomly. This means that any byte can be accessed without touching the preceding bytes.



Example of writable volatile random-access memory. Wikimedia Commons.

We can understand RAM in its relation to storage on the one hand and the processor on the other. Accessing data from the RAM may create some latency, but it is faster than retrieving data from the storage of the hard drive. Asking experts to explain RAM in layman's terms results in a range of illustrating analogies of which this is my favourite example:

Imagine your computer like an enormous building full of employees and different office departments. The purpose of the whole company is to deliver paperwork containing certain words to other buildings (this would be analogous to information that is sent to the screen, speakers and other peripherals). The main department (analogous to the microprocessor) is the smallest one, but it's also where action takes place. Here, employees read and write lots and lots of papers very quickly, all the time, and they are the only ones able to do this. But when these papers are not being read or written, they must be stored somewhere else, because there is only so much space on the small tables of this department, and you can't just drop papers or pile them on the floor. So there is another department (analogous to RAM) which has more physical space, and this is where all papers are temporarily kept, ready to be transferred from/to the main department (CPU) whenever required.[12]

Some of this extensive reading and writing that take place in the computer is 'occult' – never visible to the user of the programmes running on the computer. Some of it is authored by the user and, once

written, is saved in a hard drive for later retrieval.

Another interesting trait of RAM is its volatility – the data it holds is deleted when power is turned off. Is this instant forgetting something that is similar to, or what distinguishes RAM from human memory? Freud in his 'A Note Upon the Mystic Writing Pad' (a device for recording information involving celluloid-covered wax, which Freud compares to the human memory), he writes:

There must come a point at which the analogy between an auxiliary apparatus of this kind and the organ which is its prototype will cease to apply. It is true, too, that once the writing has been erased, the Mystic Pad cannot 'reproduce' it from within; it would be a mystic pad indeed if, like our memory, it could accomplish that.[13]

Wendy Chun underlines the fact that digital storage is not as reliable as we would like to think: links turn dead, software becomes out-dated and servers break down, creating what has oxymoronically been called 'enduring ephemerals'. [14] One might also assume that all human memory is random and unreliable (not just in the sense of Derrida's comment, based on his reading of Freud, that there is no true presence or origin of impressions but only differences), but in the sense that you never truly know – just as the computer doesn't know – what ought to be remembered and when. Facebook tries.

*Random Access Memories* is the fourth studio album by the French electronic music duo Daft Punk. (AKI)

## Real-time

The phrase 'real-time' seems to encapsulate the contemporary condition in which demand for ever-faster transactions and instantaneous feedback is delivered by informational technologies across global networks 24/7. This is critical for the operations of contemporary capitalism more broadly – not forgetting art festivals and biennials – that need to constantly update themselves.

Real-time computation underpins this cultural logic, as well as the wider applications of just-in-time economic production, yet there is little attention in the art world – aside from the real-time systems aesthetics of Jack Burnham from the late 1960s perhaps [15] – to how this influences aesthetic practices outside of the register of 'liveness' (of what constitutes 'live art'). More useful, at least to us, is a more precise conception of liveness in relation to computer-programming environments – thinking not so much of Philip Auslander's book *Liveness* but the degrees of liveness introduced by computer scientist Steve Tanimoto. [16] For instance, the liveness in programming is characterised by the ability to interact with a running system (that is not stopped while waiting for new programme statements). According to Wendy Chun, programming is full of such acts of 'sourcery', demonstrations of imaginative potential based on the (undead) logic of programmability that seeks 'to shape and to predict – indeed to embody – a future based on past data'. [17]

The artistic practice of 'live coding' (sometimes referred to as 'on-the-fly programming' or 'just in time programming') can also be understood in this way – changing rules at runtime – as attempts to reanimate dead materials, and subject them to real-time dynamics and the unpredictability, contingency and messiness of making things happen in real-time. [18]

Put simply, real-time refers to the effect of information being delivered seemingly as it happens. In computing, it serves to describe the computer processing time – the actual time that elapses in the performance of a computation by a computer – in which the operation appears to be immediate and able to correspond instantaneously to an external process, as for example, with the fluctuations of financial markets that operate at the level of micro or nanoseconds – attuned to the clock-time of the machine. Yet there is always a degree of delay in the system, an endless deferral of real time that we should more precisely call 'nearly real-time'. Real-time only ever describes this deferral between the occurrence of an event and the use of the processed data, indicated by the buffering effects when streaming audio or video

data from the internet.



Buffering, screen grab, online source.

It is the machine that is now crucial in producing our experience of real-time. We include these considerations because the experience of real-time (not to mention the way in which the notion has entered our everyday language) and thus of co-presence through computational technologies – or rather *pseudo-co-presence* – is a decisive factor in the coming into being of contemporaneity. And this testifies to a change in our experience of time itself.

(GC)

## Presentism

'Presentism' should not be confused with 'the present'. It describes a time-relation that has no temporal horizon other than itself. Presentism is a crisis of time, the sense that only the present exists, a present defined at once by what historian François Hartog calls 'the tyranny of the instant and by the treadmill of an unending now', [19] a capacity only for a short-term perspective. As Boris Groys remarks: 'Today, we are stuck in the present as it reproduces itself without leading to any future.' [20]

François Hartog has tried to come to terms with the meaning of the phenomenon of presentism through the notion of 'Regimes of historicity'. Historicity means the way in which individuals or groups 'situate themselves and develop in time' [21] and it is therefore closely related to the concept of *Eigenzeit*. The notion of 'regimes of historicity' refers to the way in which the relationship between past, present and future is articulated, and the order of time that can be derived from it thus differs depending on whether the category of the past, the future or the present is dominant. [22] The notion of regimes of historicity, understood as the articulation of the relationship between past, present and future, whether in a macro- or micro-historical sense, is therefore a useful tool to elucidate different experiences and ways of being in time – asking which present is operative in different places and at different times, and to which past and future is it connected?

Hartog sees a contemporary regime of historicity, where the past and the future are regenerated only to valorise the immediate, as replacing the modern one, where the present and the past were conceived in

terms of the future. Hartog, however, deals almost exclusively with time experiences within a European framework, that is, in the singular.

As noted in the entry on the *contemporary* contemporary, what I find crucial about our present, the *present* present, is that it is conditioned by *con*-temporaneity, understood as the interconnection of *different* presents in the same present. The present ways of articulating past, present, and future therefore not only makes our present, here and now, different from previous presents, but it also testifies to a change in our experience of time itself; an experience of an ever expanding, perpetual present – even though this presentist present is obviously experienced very differently, depending on one's geopolitical situation, position in society, etc. To some it is about acceleration and mobility, to others, the precariat, it is about stagnation and enclosure without any projects aimed at a different future. Jacques Rancière interestingly claims that 'prior to being a line stretching from the past to the future, time is a form of distribution of human beings, a form of division between those who have time and those who do not'. [23]

In general, today, we have lost the modern belief in linear historical progression and all societies moving towards a better future. It is a kind of internal retreat of the modern to the present, and contemporaneity is now what Terry Smith has called, 'the pregnant present of the original meaning of *modern*, but without its subsequent contract with the future'. [24] The future is no longer perceived as a promise, but rather as a threat. The future is a time of uncertainties and disasters; disasters which, moreover, are caused by ourselves as our behaviour has substantially influenced the atmosphere and geology of planet Earth. The virtual effacement of the categories of the past and the future means that the present is omnipresent, but if presence is all there is, then nothing is present any longer. Presentism names the dissolvment of presence and the present. Today, we are therefore confronted with the challenge of thinking or imagining a qualitatively different future, a collective protention, which transcends the all-encompassing temporal horizon of presentism, but without falling back into the synchronising and universalising discourse of progress that characterises Western modernity, where those who do not comply with its parameters are excluded and where progress is defined in terms of the projection of certain – that is, Western – people's presents as other people's futures.

(JL)

## Arrested movement / Ark

Arrested movement: movement that is imprisoned, does not progress, is blocked, delayed, obstructed, confused. The adjective 'arrested' explicitly links to questions of someone/something being seized by an authority, sovereignty.

Gigi Scaria, *The Ark*, 2015. Video duration: 3min 36sec. Single channel with sound. Size: 32' TV monitor. © the artist.

Gigi Scaria, *Voyage*, 2015. Video duration: 3min 36sec. Single channel with sound. Size: 32' TV monitor. © the artist.

Gigi Scaria, *Trapped*, 2015. Video duration: 3min 36sec. Single channel with sound. Size: 32' TV monitor. © the artist.

New Delhi-based artist Gigi Scaria pursues enquiries into time through 'social mapping' – whether territorial, cultural, environmental or of the hierarchies and systems of global communities. Inclusive to the work are themes of migration, community collapse, the beauty in labour and collaboration, and layers of ancient cultures as they are subsumed in the world's mega-cities. And there are 'memories and histories of our "time" [slipping] into the whirlpool of change, which is only understood by the notion called "speed"'. [25] Scaria's three animation works from 2015, *The Ark*, *Trapped* and *Voyage*, subtly refer to slow violence, impoverished visions of streaming, an ecological expression of memory, and nonhuman time. As condensed images, they include a single technological remnant of the age that has passed by.

Lawrence Abu Hamdan, *Language Gulf In the Shouting Valley*, 2013. Installation extract. Courtesy the artist.

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Iversen, Geoff Cox



In Lawrence Abu Hamdan's audio essay and audiovisual installation, *Language Gulf in the Shouting Valley* (2013), the voice of a small community inhabiting the border between Palestine/Israel and Syria is doubled – potentially multiplied. 'Listening closely to the oral border produced by this transnational community, in one voice we can simultaneously hear the collaborator and the traitor; the translator and the transgressor.' [26]

Think territorial time!

(VG)

## Migration

I am interested in the term *Migration* because of its flexibility, describing at the same time the movement of physical objects, animals, humans, and of immaterial information or data from one location to another. It is said that migration has defined our age, perhaps more than any other single issue in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, which have been characterised by prolonged global mobility on a massive scale. Global migration and its effects are reshaping the world, to the extent that in many areas, this level of mobility has created a new normal or status quo that challenges the idea of the nation state and old notions of collective core identities and mainstream cultures. [27]

In our age of mobility, the practices of the archive, whose important task is to categorise and store materials in the right place, are undergoing change, whether institutionally, hermeneutically or technically.

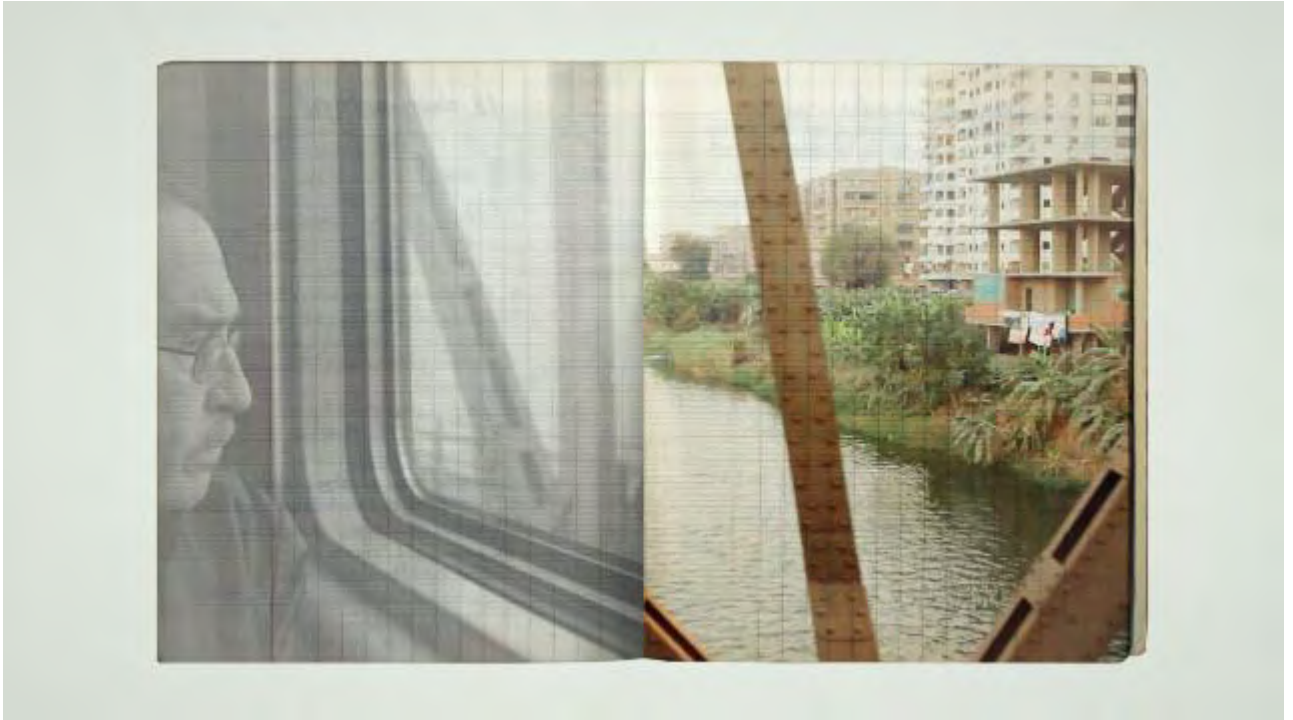
Arjun Appadurai has commented that moving images meet mobile audiences, following up this statement with his idea of diasporic archives:

The newer forms of electronic archiving restore the deep link of the archive to popular memory and its practices, returning to the non-official actor the capability to choose the way in which traces and documents shall be formed into archives, whether at the level of the family, the neighbourhood, the community or other sorts of groupings outside the demography of the state. [28]

Wolfgang Ernst coins the term *dynarchive* to denote the condition of permanent change, constant updating and migration of contents in digital collections. He suggests that through the acceleration of data-storage and data-migration in the digital technologies (hardware and software) the traditional spatial and temporal difference between the archive and the present is erased. [29] Nonetheless, Ernst warns us not to be fooled by the non-archival appearances of new media: in their techno-mathematical structures, the spectre of the archive recurs more strongly than ever – through the tracking and data-mining of the protocol, one might add, having Alexander Galloway in mind.

When Danish artist, Katrine Dirckinck-Holmfeld looked into the archive of Armenian-Egyptian photographer Armand, and was confronted with the many transformations and layers of information that had been put together, she realised that she could not just turn to 'the thing itself', to what we might call the pure archive:

When I went to Cairo, I thought I was making a film about memory, retrieving the memory of Philippe [son of Armand], but also of a whole period in Egypt's history, which to a certain extent is unavailable to the present. But it occurred to me that the project was becoming less about memory as storage, with or without access, but rather about memory as a process of re-materialization and migration. [30]



Katrine Dirckinck-Holmfeld, *Leap into Colour*, 2015. Still from video, courtesy the artist.

In a number of artworks and exhibitions, personal experiences of migration and travelling are told through objects that serve as testimony. Examples are Ibrahim Mahama's cocoa sacks bearing traces of its trade, transport and transformation into artworks; Dahn Vo's exhibition 'Slip of the Tongue' in Venice 2015, which weaved together a personal family story of immigration with the migration of artefacts and artworks; and Walead Besthy's *Travel Pictures* – photographic negatives 'damaged' by security X-rays. These works emphasise in different ways the interconnection between personal experiences of migration, exchange of capital and goods, and the circulation of artworks that proves not to be innocent.

(AKI)

## Algo-rhythm

In mathematics and computer science, an 'algorithm' is a self-contained step-by-step set of operations to be performed (such as calculation, data processing, or automated reasoning tasks), and has its origins in ninth-century Baghdad, in Arabic algebra and arithmetic:[31]

# خوارزمی

More than simply an expression of formal logic, algorithms do things in the world through their command structure to accomplish a decisive action with material effects and seem to play an ever-increasing role in our daily lives.[32]

Algorithms operate in time, and are part of larger assemblages and infrastructures that are also constantly evolving and subject to variable conditions and contingencies – part of complex assemblages that include data, data structures and bodies, that together are part of a process of new forms of

automation that captures time and living labour.

The relation between algorithms and capital thus becomes a crucial site of enquiry, where apparently simple operations such as searches or feeds – think of Google’s PageRank or Facebook’s EdgeRank algorithms – order data and reify information and knowledge in ways that are determined by corporate interests. Technical, social, human and nonhuman layers are folded together – into what Tiziana Terranova calls an ‘infrastructure of autonomization’ [33] or Benjamin Bratton ‘The Stack’[34] – to produce new layers of subjectivation at multiple scales.

Algorithms, then, can be said to produce measurable temporal effects, and they are generated by micro-temporal performative operations at a range of scales. More precisely, they do not simply determine an ensuing event but also a movement and rhythm of signals that oscillate between various materialities. This is what Shintaro Miyazaki refers to with his wordplay ‘algorhythmics’: on the one hand a finite sequence of step-by-step instructions, a procedure for solving a problem, and on the other a temporal ordering of infinite movement of matter, bodies and signals. [35] To Miyazaki, algorhythmics is a critical (media archaeological) concept that reveals epistemic aspects of computational processes otherwise largely overlooked. And as part of this, more precise scientific terminology is useful to describe creative processes: ‘clock’ or ‘pulse’ for instance. What unfolds, within the rhythm of algorithms, is a reordering of time itself that can no longer be considered to unfold in a particular order or sequence of actions.

If this reminds us that machines are running sequences and processes that are carefully orchestrated, and that reflect contemporary conditions, then we might begin to compose them differently, and produce other kinds of imaginaries.

(GC)

## Iconomy

Anthropologist Marc Augé writes of a new condition of radical contemporaneity between peoples and cultures. This condition makes it no longer possible to construct the otherness of so-called ‘primitive societies’, subaltern groups, and non-Western cultures, and to attribute lateness to these, as the speed of cultural, economic and migratory circulation has inaugurated *a generalized sharing of time*. [36] In the fourth thesis of *The Society of the Spectacle* Guy Debord claims that ‘The spectacle is not a collection of images; rather, it is a social relationship between people that is mediated by images.’ [37] The term ‘iconomy’ refers to the global circulation of images, including the way in which art now constitutes a *transnational* currency. The generalised sharing of time is – among other things – established through a sharing of images and symbols or a shared relation to the same, or some of the same, images and symbols. It is to a large extent mediated by images.

The global circulation that characterises the iconomy – in which if not all then most images today take part – means that an image not only has one context but several contexts at the same time; they are now everywhere at once rather than belonging to a singular context or place. This raises the question of *the quality* and character of this sharing, since the image circulation in contemporary media culture, not least on the internet – which I gather under the term ‘iconomy’ to signal its deep imbrication in the globalised capitalist economy – is closely related to what Hito Steyerl terms ‘circulationism’. Rather than the art of making images, circulationism is connected with the post-production, launching and acceleration of images, and with the public relations of images across social networks that both establish and tear apart ‘communities loosely linked by shared attention deficit’. [38] If, as Debord claims, the society of the spectacle is an expropriation of our images, of our capacity to communicate and take part in symbolic exchange, then there is an urgent need to re-appropriate the images, to address this circulationism and its work of mediation. In a Debordian analysis this work destroys our capacity for

collective imagination, but the shared and interconnected present – that is, the condition of contemporaneity – also holds a potential.

In trying to point out this potential it seems fruitful to theorize the phenomenon of the iconomy and global image-circulation in connection to the concept of trans-individuation, developed by Bernard Stiegler. According to Stiegler the Aristotelian definition of the human being as a political animal means that I am only human insofar as I belong to a social group:[39] 'This sociality is the framework of a becoming: the group, and the individual in that group, never cease to seek out their path. This search *constitutes* human time. And if the time of the *I* is certainly not the time of the *we*, it takes place within the time of the *we*, which is itself conditioned by the time of the *I*s of which it is composed.' [40] These two dimensions of the temporality of the political animal are tied together by what Stiegler calls 'trans-individuation'. Trans-individuation designates processes of co-individuation within media or symbolic environments in which the 'I' and the 'we' participate and are transformed through one another.[41] It thus conditions all social transformation, and the individual's participation in the social also implies a participation in the much vaster individuation of the very media, language, images etc. through which we communicate[42] – that is, the media that interconnect and make us contemporaneous. The image explosion of our current globalised and digitised society of the spectacle constitutes an inescapable iconomy, that mediates and governs our imagination and occasions what Stiegler would call a dis-individuation, but it also constitutes a generally shared image-environment, a 'visual bond' (Vertov), that is a potential medium for large-scale transindividuation, in and through which we might become able to create collective imaginations, that transcend the present and break with presentism.[43]

(JL)

## Pre(-acceleration)

*Pre* as in Erin Manning's *Preacceleration: a postscript on the phenomenon and cultural movement of accelerationism*. Accelerationism claims that capitalism should be expanded and accelerated to generate radical social change, using existing infrastructure as a platform to 'repurpose post-capitalist, collective ends'. [44]

Preacceleration is how the political philosopher Erin Manning in her book *Relationescapes: Movement, Art, Philosophy*, 2009 defines incipient movement. This is emergent movement – movement as it begins to happen or develop. Movement that is in its process of becoming form yet has not taken a shape. Movement's incipience, if we follow Manning, escapes the confinement of movement in conceptual, disciplinary and representational settings. Instead of the various ways of taking form, incipient movement prompts us to a prior question and state, namely, to understand the 'how to conceive of taking form itself'. [45] It is an approach to movement in its basic phases of initiation before its actualisation. It is a hint to micromovements, rhythm, for instance, 'alive at the phase where a particular shape has not yet taken hold'. [46] Choreography and animation are among practices through which Manning arrives at a conception of incipient movement that withdraws from actual movement, which she says is always 'reduced to very specific conditions and ... acted upon by its co-constitutive surroundings (including gravity)'. [47] Preacceleration is 'a movement of the not-yet that composes the more-than-one'. [48]

Manning's reference to dance and animation is Norman McLaren with his works *Pas de Deux* (1968) and *Begone Dull Care* (1949): animations of lines in the moment of becoming 'figural'. But perhaps one can find a similar economy of preacceleration in less abstract moving-image work too, or where abstraction happens on a different level, where abstraction is read in other ways.

And one can ask: in what way does pre-acceleration evoke a certain pre-temporal condition? Paradoxical as it sounds, this could be a potentially interesting theoretical challenge of today's temporal condition.

(VG)

## Timestamp

A timestamp is a sequence of characters or encoded information identifying when a certain event occurred, usually giving date and time of day, sometimes accurate to a small fraction of a second. The term derives from rubber stamps used in offices to stamp the current date, and sometimes time, in ink on paper documents, to record when the document was received. Common examples of this type of timestamp are a postmark on a letter or the 'in' and 'out' times on a time card.

In modern times usage of the term has expanded to refer to digital date and time information attached to digital data. For example, computer files contain timestamps that tell when the file was last modified, and digital cameras add timestamps to the pictures they take, recording the date and time the picture was taken.[49]

Timestamps are used as evidence that testifies to the exact sequence or simultaneity of events. In a work that was on view in Liverpool as part of the Biennial, artist Lawrence Abu Hamdan adopted techniques usually used for forensic evidence in criminal cases. His work *Hummingbird Clock* was located physically outside the law courts in Derby Square, and online at [www.hummingbirdclock.info](http://www.hummingbirdclock.info). Designed as a tool for investigations into civil and human rights violations, the clock records the second-by-second variations of the buzz made by the electrical grid. The sound files are made available online, so that the public can analyse the date and time of any recording made within earshot of the grid, in case they need to know whether the recording has been tampered with. The humming collected and presented is a timestamp in itself, and every digital audio recording from the area can be identified on a timeline through comparison with this hum.



Lawrence Abu Hamdan, *Hummingbird Clock*, 2016. Film still, Liverpool Biennial 2016.

Time-stamping is a kind of metadata – data about the data – which is increasingly significant in tandem with the constant circulation and migration of data (and objects). It records, creation, purpose, author, location in the computer (or archive), file size, standards etc.

Within contemporary art this kind of specification is in many cases what *makes* the work, since it establishes the ontology of the work and the basis of our reception of it: what is it that we see? How should we look at it? What does it relate to and how?

Through time-stamping it may be possible to discover recordings of events that have taken place but of which you have no evidence. This is the case for Mark Leckey whose video work *Dream English Kid 1964–1999 AD* was also part of the Liverpool Biennial. He explains that when he found a recording of a particular Joy Division concert that he attended as a fifteen-year-old, he began to think, or fantasise, that ‘through audiosoftware [he] might be able to find [himself] in the recording. I was watching youTube and thinking FUCK. If that’s online, then maybe everything is now online and I can find everything that I remember.’[50]



Mark Leckey, *Dream English Kid, 1964 – 1999 AD*, 2015. Installation view at Blade Factory. Photo: Mark McNulty.

Sven Spieker in his reflections on the use of archives in modern and contemporary art states: ‘Archives do not simply reconnect us with what we have lost. Instead, they remind us ... of what we have never possessed in the first place.’[51]

(AKI)

## Loop

Real-time operations, algo-rhythms, and recursive functions such as loops offer alternative epistemological perspectives and imaginaries, as for instance in the ancient image of a serpent eating its own tail. In computer programming, a loop– the iterative principle – and certain recursive procedures allows repeated execution of a fragment of source code that continues until a given condition is met (true or false in Boolean logic). A loop becomes an infinite loop if a condition never becomes FALSE. There are different types of loops: which loops, for loops, infinite loops or strange loops, to name only a few).

is an example of a while loop written in Python (not the serpent but the programming language):

```
time = 'true'  
while (time):  
    print 'endless loop'
```

Running the endless loops script, produced by author, video.

In a so-called Turing machine, a loop contains an ending, at least in theory. In '... Else Loop Forever', Wolfgang Ernst develops this discussion in relation to what he refers to as 'untimeliness'.<sup>[52]</sup> His starting point is the infamous 'halting problem' that underpins Turing computation – the problem of whether a computer programme, given all possible inputs, will finish running or continue to run forever. It was Turing's assertion, in his famous 1936/37 essay 'On Computable Numbers', that a general algorithm to solve the halting problem is not possible and this led to the mathematical definition of a computer and programme, which became known as the Turing machine.<sup>[53]</sup> (And it is worth emphasising that computation is understood this way: not in terms of what it can do but of what it *cannot*.) This decision or halting problem – or 'problem of ending' as Ernst puts it – underscores broader notions of algorithmic time and the way computation anticipates its own sense of never ending in an endless loop. That there is 'no happy ending' allows Ernst to elaborate on new temporal structures that are no longer aligned to traditional narrative structures (like history). Contrary to the traditional performance – with beginning, middle and end – Ernst points out, a computational recording can be replayed endlessly: 'with no internal sense of ending'; as a 'time-critical condition'.<sup>[54]</sup> (A Biennial that unfolds through episodes might make similar claims.)

For related reasons we are captivated by the apparent simplicity of the graphical spinning wheel icon of a 'throbber' that indicates when a computer programme is performing an action such as downloading content or performing intensive calculations. In contrast to the teleology of a progress bar, a throbbler does not convey how much of the action has been completed and thus resonates with our understanding of the real-time dynamics of the contemporary condition and the ambiguity of the multiple temporal registers that are running at the same time.



Throbber, screen grab, online source.

(GC)

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[1] The key concepts are derived from 'The Contemporary Condition', a research project at Aarhus University made possible by a grant from the Danish Council for Independent Research, which runs for three years from September 2015 to August 2018. This forms a glossary of sorts, somewhat in the tradition of Raymond Williams' *Keywords*: a lexicon, a database (or, we might be so bold as to suggest that there are echoes of Adorno's collections of aphorisms 'Minima Moralia'). More to the point we'd like to think there's something very 'timely' or 'contemporary' about the approach we are taking, and a presentation format that reflects the object of study as something nonlinear, somewhat *episodic*, collective and unfinished, open to contestation and further development. We offer twelve

key concepts here that we hope help to frame the discussion of contemporaneity and introduce a shared vocabulary to inform further discussions; not least, of how events such as conferences and biennials in themselves act as agents of 'contemporaneity'.

[2] Benjamin H. Bratton, 'The Black Stack', *e-flux journal* #53 (March 2014), accessed August 24, 2016. See also his recently published *The Stack: On Software and Sovereignty* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016).

[3] J.T. Fraser: 'An Embarrassment of Proper Times: A Foreword', in Helga Nowotny, *Time. The Modern and Postmodern Experience* [*Eigenzeit: Entstehung und Strukturierung eines Zeitgefühls*, 1989], trans. Neville Plaice (Cambridge: Polity, 1994), p.5.

[4] Peter Osborne: 'The Distributed Image', in *Texte zur Kunst* 99, September 2015, p.80.

[5] Atsuko Tanaka, quoted in Ming Tiampo (ed.) *Electrifying Art: Atsuko Tanaka, 1954–1968*, essays by Mizuho Kat? and Ming Tiampo, foreword by Lynn Gumpert and Scott Watson (New York and Vancouver: The Grey Art Gallery, New York University and The Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, 1970), p.104.

[6] Ming Tiampo, 'Electrifying Painting', *ibid.*, p.66.

[7] *Ibid.*

[8] *Ibid.*

[9] Victoria Browne, *Feminism, Time, and Nonlinear History* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), chapter 4, 'Calendar Tim', pp.99–100.

[10] Both quotes *ibid.*, p.100.

[11] *Ibid.*

[12] Answer posted by Jorge A. Berrueta, '[In laymans terms, what is the difference between RAM and a computer processor?](#)', accessed December 20, 2016.

[13] Sigmund Freud 'A Note upon the 'Mystic Writing Pad' (1925), in *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, XIX, 230, quoted by Jacques Derrida in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (London: Routledge, 2005), p.286.

[14] Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, 'The Enduring Ephemeral, or the Future is a Memory', in *Critical Inquiry* 35 (University of Chicago Press, Autumn 2008), pp. 148–71.

[15] Jack Burnham, '[Systems Esthetics](#)', *Artforum* 7:1 (Sep 1968): pp.30–35.

[16] Philip Auslander, *Liveness: Performance in Mediatized Culture* (London: Routledge, 1999); Steven L. Tanimoto, 'Viva: A visual language for image processing', *Journal of Visual Languages & Computing*, 1(2) 1990, pp.127–39.

[17] Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, *Programmed Visions: Software and Memory* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011), p.xii.

[18] For more on live coding, see [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Live\\_coding](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Live_coding) and <https://toplap.org/>.

[19] François Hartog, *Regimes of Historicity: Presentism and Experiences of Time*, trans. Saskia Brown (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), XV.

[20] Boris Groys, '[Comrades of Time](#)'.

[21] Hartog, *Regimes of Historicity*.

[22] *Ibid.*, XVI.

[23] Jacques Rancière, 'Rethinking Modernity', *Diacritics* vol. 42, no. 3 (2014), p.8.

[24] Terry Smith, 'Contemporary Art and Contemporaneity', *Critical Inquiry* 32 (Summer 2006), p.703. The contemporary extension of the present as substituting for the temporal logic of modernity is also stressed by Boris Groys: 'The present has ceased to be a point of transition from the past to the future, becoming instead a site of the permanent rewriting of both past and future – of constant proliferations of historical narratives beyond any individual grasp or control [...] Today, we are stuck in the present as it reproduces itself without leading to any future.' Boris Groys, 'Comrades of Time', in *Going Public*, p.90.



[25] Gigi Scaria, *on his exhibition, Time*, Laumeier Sculpture Park, Saint Louis, Missouri, April 16–August 14, 2016, accessed May 2016.

[26] ' ... about the politics of language and the conditions of voice faced by the Druze community living between Palestine/Israel and Syria. Recordings of the Druze Soldiers working as interpreters in the Israeli Military Court system in the West Bank and Gaza are contrasted with recordings from the Shouting Valley, Golan Heights, where the Druze population gather on both sides of the Israeli/Syrian Border and shout across the jurisdictions to family and friends on the other-side. By inhabiting the border between Syria and Israel and Palestine the Druze complicate the solid divide. If we listen closely to the oral border produced by this transnational community, in one voice we can simultaneously hear the collaborator and the traitor; the translator and the transgressor.' Accessed September 2016, <http://lawrenceabuhamd.com/#/langugae-gulf-in-th...>

[27] *Interdisciplinary.net*, A Global Network for Dynamic Research and Publishing, Conference Call, accessed 20 December 2016.

[28] Arjun Appadurai, 'Archive and Aspiration', in Joke Brouwer & Arjen Mulder, *Information is Alive* (Rotterdam: V2/NAI 2002), p.18.

[29] Wolfgang Ernst, 'Temporalizing the Present and Archiving Presence. The Impact of Time-Critical Media Technologies', lecture given at Concordia University, Montreal (Canada), 2014.

[30] Katrine Dirckinck-Holmfeld, *Time in the Making. Rehearsing Reparative Critical Practices*, Ph.D. Thesis (Copenhagen: University of Copenhagen, 2015), p.19.

[31] The Arabic source, *al-ʔwʔrizmʔ* 'the man of ʔwʔrizmʔ' (now Khiva), was a name given to the ninth-century mathematician Abʔ Jaʔfar Muhammad ibn Mʔsa, author of widely translated works on algebra and arithmetic; Persian: ????????, c. 780–850. See <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Algorithm>.

[32] See Andrew Goffey, 'Algorithm', in *Software Studies – a Lexicon*, ed. Matthew Fuller (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008).

[33] Tiziana Terranova, 'Red Stack Attack! Algorithms, capital and the automation of the common', *Effimera* (2014).

[34] Benjamin H. Bratton, *The Stack: On Software and Sovereignty* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016).

[35] Shintaro Miyazaki, 'Algorhythmics: Understanding Micro-Temporality', *Computational Culture* issue 2 (2012).

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[43] The localisation of such a potential is for instance resonant with a remark made by Hans Ulrich Obrist in conversation with Terry Smith that: 'The big question of the twenty-first century is how to foster collective action. In the age of the Internet, the potential to join, to come to a shared engagement, is there.' Terry Smith, *Talking Contemporary Curating* (New York: Independent Curators International, 2015), p.121.

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### Jacob Lund, Verina Gfader, Anne Kølbaek Iversen, Geoff Cox

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# Colophon

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