

Angela Vettese
Why OBOE? The Gerundive Nature of Artworks**Abstract**

The introduction to *OBOE*'s first issue aims to illustrate how a certain method of studying exhibitions is directly linked with the study of contemporary art history. Mirroring contemporary art's gerundive nature the journal's periodicity becomes the ideal space to write an inclusive history of biennials, but also of the many avenues for art's manifestation.

Keywords

Venice Biennale, Biennials, Artworks, Art Journal, Exhibition Studies

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Why OBOE? The Gerundive Nature of Artworks

Angela Vettese

The first poster advertising the *Esposizione Internazionale d'Arte della Città di Venezia*, which took place from 22 April to 22 October 1895, promised a packed programme of entertainment:¹ as well as advertising the event, this list also presents itself as a programme. From the very outset, the Venice Biennale sought to bring together initiatives designed to redefine the external perception of the city and life within it. Brought about by mayor Riccardo Selvatico and a group of intellectuals and businessmen who met regularly at Caffè Florian, including figures such as Antonio Fradeletto and Giovanni Bordiga, the event aimed to meet a number of different requirements. The first was to respond to the appeal from the newly founded Kingdom of Italy to celebrate its very existence through exhibitions and fairs.²

This informal committee founded an event that was never intended to be episodic, but was always planned to be repeated every two years, endowing it with special features to make it stand out from similar events. The intention was to make it a high-quality occasion, so a decision was made to only showcase the visual arts and not furnishings, manufactured items or objects. It was believed that paintings and sculptures could “stimulate the public more with the fame of illustrious foreign artists”,³ thereby leaving aside all localism (albeit with some controversy – this is what led to the birth of the Fondazione Bevilacqua La Masa and, subsequently, the Venice Pavilion) and also the sense of nationalism. It was only during the Fascist period that the Central Pavilion in the *Giardini* (gardens) featured the word “ITALY” on the architrave, which is now set in the ground at the Arsenal. The committee also made a daring decision not to insist on the most popular styles, so that the public could “compare the most diverse aesthetic approaches”,⁴ thereby launching themselves into the arena of experimentation. Despite seeming to follow

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The program comprised “Serenades – Regattas – Sporting Competitions – Illuminations – Boat Events – Concerts – Bacchanale del Redentore – International Fencing Tournaments – Fireworks – Great Theatrical Performances and other exceptional Celebrations”. A copy of the lithographic poster, now in the Historical Archives of the Venice Biennale, can be seen in Caroline A. Jones, *The Global Work of Art. World's Fairs, Biennials, and the Aesthetics of Experience* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), plate 13.

2

Memorandum from Minister Rattazzi dated July 15, 1892, which called for the celebration of the royal couple's silver wedding anniversary, cited in Antonio Maraini, *La Biennale di Venezia* (Venice: Ufficio Stampa dell'Esposizione, 1932), 20.

3

Prima Esposizione Internazionale d'Arte. Numero Unico Illustrato 1985, exh. cat. (Venice: Giardini di Castello, April 22 - October 22, 1895).

4

Ibid.

on from the Salons and the expos, the Venetian exhibition was founded with innovative intentions hidden beneath its folds. In many ways, these aspects illustrate why a certain method of studying art history, particularly contemporary art history, by organising exhibitions, began with the Venetian formula.

The phenomenon defined as “biennialisation” has, in fact, spread around the world, with expectations not too far removed from those explored above, despite the fact it developed during a different period of history, that is to say after the two world wars, accelerating its pace following the reorganisation of the world after 1989 and during the information revolution.⁵ Consequently, it can and must be described using modern terminology and explored with the caution of those who, do not underestimate the succession of events across the planet and their effects on art. After all, it is due to eminently historical events that the biennial format has become so widespread.

Venice was followed by the São Paulo Art Biennial (1951), the quinquennial documenta in Kassel (1955) and then other biennials in Sydney (1973), Havana and Taipei (1984), Cuenca and Istanbul (1987), Lyon (1991), Sharjah (1993), Johannesburg (1995–97), the touring European show Manifesta, as well as Dakar, Porto Alegre and Shanghai (1996), Berlin (1998), and Yokohama (triennial) (2001), Singapore (2006), Ushuaia (2007) and other places. Although each event came about for different reasons, they still all have some key aspects in common: first and foremost, they all offer themselves as representing a different way, which is often deliberately alternative to the Venetian example. Despite this, it was in Venice that certain established exhibition practices were questioned most stridently. The event went on to become a conflagration of exhibitions and performances, succeeding in overturning the decisions of the directors in charge, often with stinging criticism of ideas that responded to the terms exhibition, nation, collective identity and visual art as solitary disciplines that never intersect with other fields.⁶ This phenomenon became obvious in 1993, when the artistic director himself delegated some of his tasks to a very extended staff of curators, so as to ensure that the offerings and subject matter were as diverse as possible.⁷

The new biennials tend to redefine the language of exhibitions with many often contradictory reference points: on the one hand, we have entertainment for a learned audience, from the perspective of the society of the spectacle; we have city rebranding methods involving an elevated lexicon; we see the city being used as a vehicle for the culture industry with all its connotations of consumption. The exhibition is used to boost profits from tourism but also for social control purposes, resembling a new version of the ancient “festival, flour and pitchfork.” On the other hand, however, we find examples at the limits of activism, perhaps seeking to rouse a sedated region to consciousness, pollinating local tradition with moments of international openness, emerging from postcolonial logics in Africa and Central and South America, but also highlighting new centres of economic power such as Russia, China, Korea and the Arab states, escaping European-American polarity as the quintessential axis of twentieth-century artistic production.

The list of issues that can answer the question “a new biennial: why?” is therefore truly vast and touches upon themes that range from geopolitics to peacekeeping systems such as soft diplomacy, also implemented through sport or music festivals for young people. However, we must not forget that, as regards the specific field of artistic production, these events also question curatorial methods.

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For an examination on the global proliferation of the biennial format see Anthony Gardner and Charles Green, *Biennials, Triennials and Documenta: The Exhibitions that created Contemporary Art* (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2016), as well as the comprehensive volume edited by Elena Filipovic, Marieke van Hal and Solveig Øvstebø, *The Biennial Reader* (Ostfildern: Hatje Kantz, 2010).

6

See Angela Vettese, “The National Pavilions at the Venice Biennale as a Form of Public Space”, in *Public Space? Lost and Found*, eds. Gediminas Urbonas, Anne Lui, and Lucas Freeman (Cambridge MA: MIT School of Architecture and Planning; and London: SA+P Press, 2017): 211–221.

7

See Clarissa Ricci, *La Biennale di Venezia 1993-2003, l'esposizione come piattaforma*, (PhD diss. luav University and Ca' Foscari University in Venice, 2014): 29–129.

Although the Venice Biennale often ends up being comparable to a parent to be killed off, it is impossible to deny that it remains a starting point. The very fact that it is criticised illustrates how it continues to be a source of inspiration.

Numerous studies have been conducted on each of these aspects, but an inclusive history of biennials or even of the International Art Exhibition on its own has never been written. A magazine on the subject of periodic exhibitions, which takes Venice as its historical and geographical starting point, could therefore act as a field of investigation that leads us along many different paths.⁸ A magazine on biennials resembles a keyhole through which to observe contemporary art and its multiple problematic relations with artworks, their changing language, the audience types to be targeted, changing global political situations, and new accounts of historical events and relations between peoples, but also with the philosophical statute of art.

With regard to this latter point, the growth in periodical exhibitions places the accent on an essentially modern and contemporary type of temporality, brought about by the acceleration in technological discoveries over recent centuries and developed with the need of capitalism – initially commercial and industrial and now primarily in the tertiary sector – with regard to the impossibility of permanence. Just as money does not stop, swept up in an unrelenting flow, we conceive our lives and our ability to present ourselves as something perpetually in motion. While a stable economy such as the agricultural one allowed for millennia of relatively stable religions and cultures, the situation born out of the West and centred around trade, then heavy industry and now communication, has rendered us ever less suited to any form of permanence.

The dynamic history of museums helps to explain this phenomenon. Having started life for the most part as private collections, going on to become unchanging public centres, they are now dominated by change. None of the newly conceived museums willingly keep their display the same. The collections are added to with as much dynamism as possible. They have all learned to stage temporary exhibitions that inspire visitors to return. A purely contemplative, repetitive and obsessive approach, such as the one described by Thomas Bernhard in *Old Masters* (1985), has become unthinkable.

We are driven by a desire for change and addicted to fast usage. By putting itself forward as a temporally subdivided event, ever identical yet different from itself and therefore captured as it is being constructed, the periodic exhibition forms an ideal part of an overall exhibition that necessarily puts itself forward as being continually in progress. In historical and artistic terms, we can interpret this as the current version and offshoot of a Dadaist and Surrealist approach. Artists, curators and the public have primarily learned this *modus operandi* from certain historical avantgarde exhibitions that we would now describe as interactive and that, over and beyond the terminology, declare themselves to be non-monumental and indeed aimed at problematising the way in which we look at works and the impermanence of the works themselves.

I am thinking particularly of two memorable exhibitions, both held in New York in October 1942, capable like few others of underscoring the “fluctuating world” that contemporary art was bringing into focus. The first is the web of string developed by Marcel Duchamp for the Surrealist exhibition at the Whitelaw Reid Mansion, while the second comprises the chairs designed to act as easels, the curved walls that concealed grottoes, the deceptive lighting and the general sense of a haunted cavern conceived by Frederick Kiesler for Peggy Guggenheim’s Art of This Century gallery.

Furthermore, the gerundive nature of artworks was also established at the same time. From the 1910s onwards, they no longer tended to be defined as a field of resolved compositional forces, but instead became an open process. This did not come about easily and it is true to say that the Futurist evenings, the Dada eve-

nings, the *Ursonate* declaimed by Kurt Schwitters, but also seemingly extravagant projects such as the *Nesting Tables* developed at the Bauhaus by Josef Albers (1922) or the sense of sliding walls inherent in Mies Van Der Rohe's *Barcelona Pavilion* (1929), were marked by an awareness of change. The post-war period pushed strongly in this direction, with works that displayed a decided sense of motion (we should remember *Le Mouvement* exhibition, curated by Pontus Hulten in 1955 at Denise René's Parisian gallery) and Situationist practices, including the walk born out of the public transport strikes in August 1953, implemented according to the concept of drifting as put forward by Guy Debord.⁹ A similar awareness led to the development of techniques and works that already revealed their transitory nature and ongoing relationship with time in their definition or title: from Willem de Kooning's problems completing a work, conceived as continually reviewable, we come to Pollock's dripping, Robert Morris' *Box with the Sound of its Own Making* (1961), and Richard Serra's *Splashing* in the *Nine at Leo Castelli* exhibition (New York, 1968), and so on, to the point that the artwork is put forward as being open to movement, to the variations of atmospheric time, to perceptive reactions and to the human relations that it generates. The unpredictable temporality of the performance, of public art, of relational aesthetics generated in the 1960s and explored from the 1990s onwards, speaks a language that continues on from those early proposals, based on a plurality of visions and flexible results. As Lawrence Alloway understood when talking about the "multicellular" nature of Venice,¹⁰ there is a relationship between exhibitions and repetition and between repetition and infinite reproducibility.

The examination of the biennial phenomenon, therefore, puts itself forward as an analysis of the artistic language in its making, in its exhibition, in its seeking formal series that pertain – in a Kublerian way – to the *anthropos* that we have become and the anthropocene we have constructed. Within this scenario, a magazine can even be presented as an evolving exhibition platform, with an indefinite temporality and within which we can imagine infinite dialogues, in keeping with the ancient Socratic method that takes nothing for granted, and artists' projects designed to be ongoing. This magazine format ends up embodying slippery temporality, which is stimulating because it is never targeted at an end point except perhaps a "definitively unfinished" asymptote such as Duchamp's *Large Glass*. All this in the awareness that the Venice Biennial and its legacy also live on by emanating an unfinished music, the sound of an oboe that accompanies and describes thought in its making.

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Guy Debord, "Theory of the Dérive", *Internationale Situationniste*, no. 2 (December 1958): 62-66.

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See Lucy Brandnock, Courtney J. Martin, and Rebecca Peabody (eds.), *Lawrence Alloway, Critic and Curator* (Los Angeles: The Getty Research Institute, 2015): 158. See also Lawrence Alloway, *The Venice Biennale 1895-1968: From Salon to Goldfish Bowl* (New York: New York Graphic Society, 1968), 153.

Author's Biography

Angela Vettese is Founder and Director (since 2001) of the Graduate Programme in Visual Arts at the Università Iuav di Venezia, where she teaches Theory and Criticism of Contemporary Art. She has previously taught at the Università Luigi Bocconi in Milan (2000-2007/2011-2013) and has participated in the ERC European Research Council commissions (2012/2013). She has directed the Civic Gallery of Contemporary Art in Modena (2005-2008) and the Arnaldo Pomodoro Foundation in Milan (2008-2009). She has also been president of the

Fondazione Bevilacqua La Masa (2002-2013), as well as City Councillor for the Cultural Activities and Development of Tourism in Venice (2013-2014). In 2017 and 2018 she was artistic director of Arte Fiera Bologna. She has written numerous essays as "The National Pavilion as the Venice Biennale as a Form of Public Space" (in *Public Space? Lost and Found*, 2017). Recent book titles include *The National Pavilions of the Venice Biennale: Spaces for Cultural Diplomacy* (2016), *L'arte contemporanea tra mercato e nuovi linguaggi* (2017), *Desiderio* (2019).