

**Vittoria Martini****How La Biennale as a Brand was Born: Venice as the Archetype of a Biennial City****Abstract**

“When discussing the Biennale, it is impossible to ignore the particular importance of Venice as its host city”. The history of the bond between Venice and the Venice Biennale has become an archetype for all those cities that, from the end of the 1980s, took part in the so-called ‘biennialization,’ namely the explosion of the phenomenon of biennials all over the world.

Historically, the image of a decadent Venice was used as a means of regenerating the city and bringing it into the modern world. Its poetic qualities contained a universalism which opened the city up for international consumption. This appealed to universal myth and its appropriation for commercial purposes underlay the development of the early Biennale. The history, beauty and architectural singularity of Venice – which were born out of political and economic necessity – became the distinguishing attributes of the “Patrimony of Venice.”

Despite the Venice Biennale has never changed its structure, mirroring a lost modern world with its national pavilions, it survived until the post-globalized world remaining at the centre of the art world, the place where the national/local identities still have a voice. The “Patrimony of Venice” is at the core of its success and Venice and its Biennale could be seen today as the archetype of a “brand” thanks to the specificity it preserved.

In this text I will analyse the history of the bond between the city of Venice and the Venice Biennale to outline the reasons of a successful “brand”.

**Keywords**

History of the Venice Biennale, Origin of the Venice Biennale, Experience, Archetype, Future of the biennials

**Translation from Italian by**

Elisabetta Zoni

**OBOE**Journal On Biennials  
and Other Exhibitions

ISSN 2724-086X

**obojournal.com****Published online:** September 16, 2020**To cite this article:** Vittoria Martini, “How La Biennale as a Brand was Born: Venice as the Archetype of a Biennial City”, *OBOE Journal* I, no. 1 (2020): 99-107.**To link to this article:** <https://doi.org/10.25432/2724-086X/1.1.0008>

# How La Biennale as a Brand was Born: Venice as the Archetype of a Biennial City

Vittoria Martini

No longer, as in times of old, O beautiful Venice,  
Do warriors from beyond the Alps seek your help  
in daring endeavors,  
Nor do ambassadors ask you to preside over their  
tangled contests,  
Nor do rulers aspire to your precious friendship.  
Today some loftier ideal drives a host of high  
geniuses to you: art<sup>1</sup>

The birth of a new biennial is no longer news: today, it seems perfectly normal to find one even in the most remote places on Earth. In general, when talking about a biennial, we tend to provide a short history of the origins of this exhibiting format, listing a series of generic facts which, more or less directly, led to the foundation of the Venice Biennale, in 1895. These facts, often passed on in anecdotal form, have ultimately toned down what is in fact a complex story, although often regarded as no longer relevant given its distance in time. More and more frequently, the origin of the most recent biennials is traced back to the boom at the end of the 1980s.<sup>2</sup> Locating their origin in a more recent time seems to better justify the worldwide spread of biennial shows. Yet the International Art Exhibition of the Venice Biennale, is not only still active after 120 years, during which it only exceptionally failed to organise its events, but continues to be an unmissable event, a key place for producing, exhibiting and discovering art, and an example of excellence in contemporary international art. The purported familiarity with its context of origin, coupled with a lack of adequate literature, led to the fading out of a history which

---

1

Vincenzo Natali, "Fascino", in *Prima Esposizione Internazionale d'Arte. Numero Unico Illustrato* (Venice: Luigia Alzetta/Zanco, 1895).

2

The most recent and relevant instance of this is Tony Smith, "Biennials: Four Fundamentals, Many Variations", *Biennial Foundation Magazine* (December 2016), <http://www.biennialfoundation.org/2016/12/biennials-four-fundamentals-many-variations>, accessed January 2018, and Anthony Gardner and Charles Green, *Biennials, Triennials, and Documenta: The Exhibitions that Created Contemporary Art* (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2016).

nonetheless is not only still relevant today, but also turns out to be an extremely productive archetype.<sup>3</sup>

While I was reflecting on these ideas, and on how to structure a text for the opening issue of a new magazine on biennials, I came across an article titled *How brands were born: a brief history of modern marketing*.<sup>4</sup> It was written in 2011, and its author Marc De Swaan Arons – a global marketing consultant and brand expert – claims that, until 70 years ago, in order to set up a successful business, all you had to do was to come up with a quality product, and as long as the quality of that product was better than that of its competitors, you had nothing to worry about. But as a reaction to a world where quality gets standardised, brands began to emerge. The transition from simple product to brand happened around the mid-twentieth century, and is what pushed companies to find solutions that could differentiate them from their competitors. Between the 1950s and 1960s, major brands like Tide, Lipton, Kraft, Procter & Gamble, and Unilever excelled in marketing, and set a benchmark for all current brands. Normally, the companies that are born first, and hence manage to secure customer loyalty, are those that stand the test of time, thereby becoming “foundational brands”. It is in this very historical period that major companies began to focus on marketing in order to give the product an identity that could set it apart from its competitors. This is how brand marketing was born, by studying consumer targets. This led to the formulation of a “brand proposition”, or value proposition, which includes everything that is sold as part of the product, and makes up its “emotional value” – this is what creates a “buffer” against competitors. Knowledge of the consumer, along with a value proposition, creates the right “brand mix”. The notion of brand is therefore an abstract, complex one, which goes beyond that of a simple brand, since, unlike a trademark, a brand is not tangible. A brand contains the history of a product, customer experience, identity, a host of expectations, promises, and values which consumers, employees, competitors and shareholders perceive abstractly, without being able to quantify them. There are brands, such as Apple, which embody a way of life, and this is not really quantifiable – it is a symbolical value which results from knowing the mythology that grew around its founder, what it represents and its history. A brand can therefore be described as the whole range of perceptions that are activated in the mind of the consumer.

What I have said so far about the brand definitely seems to me an appropriate framework to approach a text in a magazine, entitled *Why Venice?*, or I would argue “why *still* Venice?”. In this text I shall argue that La Biennale di Venezia is one of the most highly ingenious and effective brands modern culture has ever produced, so much so that it has stood the test of time, has become the foundational brand for all following biennials, and created the most widespread exhibition format in our contemporary world – it has even gone as far as becoming an effective way of relaunching cities that are going through functional crises. What is, therefore, the exceptional brand mix, which *La Biennale di Venezia* has offered, and which allowed it to become the benchmark for art biennials worldwide?<sup>5</sup>

---

3

In her latest book, Caroline A. Jones brilliantly fills a gap in literature. In *The Global Work of Art* Jones describes the modern appetite for experiences and events, associated with the history of the world fairs and biennials, and goes on to claim that contemporary art itself today coincides with this culture. “This book would not have been written if biennials had not been replicated well beyond the original instance in Venice [...] biennial replaced the vast expositions [...] and that by inheriting and building on an ‘international’ art audience, biennials have proved adaptable and resilient”, in Caroline A. Jones, *The Global Work of Art. World’s Fairs, Biennials and the Aesthetics of Experience* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2016), 84.

4

Marc De Swaan Arons, “How Brands were Born: A Brief History of Modern Marketing”, *The Atlantic* (3 October 2011), <https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2011/10/how-brands-were-born-a-brief-history-of-modern-marketing/246012/>, accessed April 2020.

5

The definition is by Oliver Bennet, “A City’s Art Biennial can be like Watching an Army of Curatorial Truffle Pigs”, *The Guardian*, February 24, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2017/feb/24/city-art-biennial-curatorial-truffle-pigs-contemporary-architecture>, accessed April 2020.

“When discussing the Biennale, it is impossible to ignore the particular importance of Venice as its host city”:<sup>6</sup> my starting point is this idea, simply and essentially expressed by Shearer West in one of the very few essays that carry out an in-depth analysis on the history of the origin of the International Art Exhibition. When an institution decides to launch a biennial in a specific city, what does it hope to achieve? “A biennial puts your city on the map and it’s great market”,<sup>7</sup> says Rafal Niemojewski, director of the Biennial Foundation. It is worth noting that major capitals do not have a biennial, whereas the cities where biennials come into being are peripheral, and choose to invest on contemporary art to relaunch their economic growth. These cities must already have a modicum of potential (starting from a well-connected airport), a structure that can support a biennial, although it is not a permanent event and is “far cheaper than a big sporting event”.<sup>8</sup> I will now enter into detail about the background against which the Venice Biennale emerged, so as to analyse the archetype of the biennial model in its complexity as an exhibiting structure connected to a city.

In the nineteenth century, Venice was searching for its identity as a city, and was looking for a new function after the fall of the *Serenissima* Republic, and the long decades in which it had been subject to foreign rule. Venice had retained its cosmopolitan spirit, despite being a less popular destination than Florence or Rome during the Grand Tour period, due to its ill-repute as a decadent city. It was precisely this atmosphere that attracted Lord Byron in 1816, when he was forced to leave London. For Byron, Venice was the ideal Romantic destination – the wild shores of the Lido, the libertine life in the sumptuous palaces on the Canal Grande, the Carnival festivals, the Island of San Lazzaro degli Armeni... The “gloomy gaiety”<sup>9</sup> of Venice, as described in Byron’s masterpiece *Childe Harlod’s Pilgrimage* – amusements, funerals, splendor and decadence, all gave life to a new identity which influenced the imagination of John Ruskin, William Morris, William Turner, Charles Dickens, Henry James, Marcel Proust, Thomas Mann and Karl Baedeker who, since 1827, had been producing tourist guides, an essential tool for nineteenth century travellers. As late as the end of the century, anyone who came to Venice holding the red guide in their hands expected to find the places described by Byron. The Romantic age gave way to the Symbolist period with the death of Wagner, in 1883 in Venice, where he had written his famous second act of *Tristan und Isolde*. This led to an inevitable association between the decadence of the city and death, which became a literary *topos*: Nietzsche said that *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1891) was inspired precisely by the death of Wagner in Venice, while Gabriele D’Annunzio’s passionate novel *Flame*, set in Venice, was published in 1900 and in 1911 Thomas Mann wrote *Death in Venice*. Nostalgia, death, mystery, passion, eroticism and, for Nietzsche, an almost surreal place at the end of the world, outside of time, the place of melancholy *par excellence*.<sup>10</sup> As Nietzsche writes, “all is now motionless, flat, dejected, gloomy like the lagoon of Venice”, the miasmas, the solitary beauty of the still, flat waters, out of which the sophisticated city emerges, where every single stone has a history, as Ruskin wrote. At the end of the century, the idea of decadence, in the words of Margaret Plant, carried strong sexual overtones, was very fashionable, and had sparked the creativity of Marcel Proust, Oscar Wilde, Robert de Montesquiou, James Whistler, Gustave Moreau, Edgar Allan Poe, and Arnold Böcklin. As Henry James observed, the true appeal of Venice lay in its

6

Shearer West, “National Desires and Regional Realities in the Venice Biennale, 1895-1914”, *Art History*, 18, no. 3 (September 1995): 405.

7

Oliver Bennet, “A city’s art biennial”, cf. footnote 5.

8

Ibid.

9

Letter CCLIV to Mr. Murray, (November 25, 1816) in *Letter and Journal of Lord Byron: With Notices of his Life*, ed. Thomas Moore (London: Murray, 1831), 249.

10

Cf. Margaret Plant, *Venice: Fragile City 1797-1997* (New Heaven and London: Yale University Press, 2002), 192-229.

decadence: the strong sense of history that emanated from every street corner, the preciousness of materials, the sharp contrast between beauty and decadence, power and downfall, magnificence and destitution.<sup>11</sup>

After years of foreign rule and economic stall, and after having been annexed to the Kingdom of Italy in 1866, Venice soon managed to make up for its delay in modernisation. In 1846 the railway line connecting the city to the mainland had been inaugurated, but the heavy fiscal policy of the Habsburgs had hampered the development of entrepreneurial activity. Once free from the Austrian government, the city set as its most urgent priority to redesign its topography – a renovation of waterways and land roads was necessary in order to improve the salubrity of the city in an epoch of cholera epidemics. It was already widely known that hygiene and health in cities were dependent on a sewage system, lighting and air circulation: starting in Paris with the Haussmann plan in 1858, cities began to move away from their medieval structure, and radically modernised their urban plans. In Venice, a series of main arteries were built through the heart of the city, in order to improve urban circulation and the passage of air and light. In 1883 a new public transport service, the *vaporetti* (ferry boats), was introduced. 1884 saw the end of building work for the aqueduct that conveyed water from the mainland, the rebuilding of the sewage system, the opening of a fish, fruit and vegetable market in Rialto, the enlargement of the cemetery, and the approval for the construction of new houses. As the economy recovered, the axis of trade – historically located in the Arsenale and San Marco – moved closer to the train station: the Canal Grande was used for boats that carried the goods bound for Rialto market, and ferries carrying citizens and tourists, and the Giudecca island became the new industrial harbour. The presence of a railway station led to the building of a commercial port around 1870. In 1884 the Mulino Stucky became operative, and in 1896 its premises were opened in the imposing neo-Gothic brick building on the Giudecca, which changed forever the city skyline. Again, close to the harbour and train station, in the same period, the Santa Marta cotton works were opened. From 1866 onwards, until the end of the Second World War, the Arsenale enjoyed a second life with the building of the Darsena Grande, where submarines and war ships for the new government were built. In 1867 Thomas Cook, the powerful travel agency, began to operate on the Venice territory, at a time in which infrastructure was starting to make the development of modern tourism possible. Venice was still perceived as exotic, mysterious, picturesque for its gondolas, its artefacts, and the faces of ordinary people who tourists could meet, more than in any other tourist city, while walking down the *calli* (streets).

Another factor, which should be added to this picture, is that, in the early nineteenth century, Venice had become a major centre for scientific research on hydrotherapy. In the second half of the nineteenth century, Venice became one of the most exclusive European resorts for water therapy and marine climate, at a time when these were very fashionable. It was in that period that many private palaces at the heart of the city were transformed into big hotels. In 1848, tourism in Venice began to play a central role in the city's economy.<sup>12</sup> In 1857 the first bathing establishment opened at the Lido.<sup>13</sup> In 1872 the Società Bagni Lido was established, which was later taken over by *CIGA - Compagnia Italiana Grandi Alberghi* (Italian Company Great Hotels). In 1900, the company started building the first big luxury hotel of the Lido: the Grand Hotel des Bains, followed by the Excelsior Hotel in 1908. In 1904 the *New York Times* described the Lido as one of the most interesting tourist resorts, and the therapeutic bathing trend gave way to swimming as a source of pleasure and social life. At the end of the nineteenth century, Venice had become the place for physical experience.

---

11

Henry James, *Italian Hours* (London: Penguin Classics, 1995).

12

Paul Ginsborg, *Daniele Manin e la rivoluzione veneziana 1848-49* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1978), 46.

13

Giandomenico Romanelli, "Dalla laguna al mare: 'invenzione' del Lido", in *Lido e lidi. Società, moda, architettura e cultura balneare tra passato e futuro*, ed. Giorgio Triani (Venice: Marsilio, 1989), 99.

On the one hand, therefore, there was the widespread Romantic ideal of Venice, associated with its past, the picturesque, the Venetian way of life and its tradition. On the other hand, as Nietzsche had intuited, Venice seemed to be designed more for the man of the future, “a solitary felicitous island”, in the words of Margaret Plant, “an obduracy born of the toughness that forged the city remained as a historic dimension, still part of the present”.<sup>14</sup>

The decadent atmospheres that had become so fashionable, along with quality tourism, the modernisation of infrastructure and the general economic recovery, gave Venice a new identity and a new role. At the end of the nineteenth century, Venice was able to showcase itself as a cosmopolitan capital of contemporary art in the new Kingdom of Italy. On April 19, 1894, the City of Venice decided to hold an art exhibition “every biennium”, connected to a money prize to be awarded to the best work of art, and to donate “all proceeds to city charities”.<sup>15</sup> It was immediately established that the exhibitions “should look beyond the boundaries of Italian art”. In the words of the catalogue of the first International Art Exhibition:

An international exhibition will have to attract the public mainly through the fame of the distinguished foreigners who will take part in it. It will provide all perceptive visitors, who are unable to embark on long journeys, with a way of getting to know, and compare, the most varied aesthetic trends, and will expand the intellectual knowledge of the young artists of our country, who will be inspired by the work of their brothers from other nations to create more ambitious projects.<sup>16</sup>

What is noteworthy about the planning of the exhibition is that the care for the display, and hence for the public’s experience, was the focus of attention right from the outset:

The public is weary of the usual chaotic exhibitions [...] it is essential that the sense of bewilderment, exhaustion, sometimes even boredom, caused by the accumulation of works, give way to the kind of unreserved admiration that a sober, skilful selection of exquisitely original works awakens in us.<sup>17</sup>

Benefit for a public charity, an international agenda and a didactic and educational mission for ordinary people and artists. These noble intentions and civil ambitions were part of a sophisticated strategy which would be called marketing today, aimed at a general economic relaunch of the city. In an 1894 report of the City Council, which discussed the nature of this future “permanent exhibiting structure”, we read that:

---

14

Margaret Plant, *Venice Fragile City*, 197.

15

D. Benassi [sic.], “Venezia e la Mostra Biennale d’Arte Come nacque l’idea”, in *Prima Esposizione Internazionale d’Arte. Numero Unico Illustrato* (Venice, 1895).

16

*Prima esposizione internazionale d’arte della Citta di Venezia. Catalogo illustrato* (Venice: Visentini, 1895).

17

From the committee report in the Minutes of the Municipal Council of Venice, session of March 30, 1894, quoted by Maria Mimita Lamberti, “Le mostre internazionali di Venezia”, in *I mutamenti del mercato e le ricerche degli artisti*, in *Storia dell’arte italiana VII* (Turin: Einaudi, 1982), 102. Maria Mimita Lamberti’s text remains an essential bibliographic source to analyse the birth of the Venice Biennale. For an english translation of this essay see Maria Mimita Lamberti, “International Exhibitions in Venice” [1982], *OBOE Journal* I, no. 1 (2020): 26-45.

These exhibitions we organise will promote its [Venice's] economic growth by attracting even greater numbers of foreigners, and by gradually establishing it as one of the most important centres for art trade.<sup>18</sup>

The Council thus made an appeal for collaboration between all Venetian institutions, first and foremost the powerful association of hotel managers, urging them to “provide for [...] spending in the fine arts”.<sup>19</sup> In 1893, the members of the Venice City Council had started approaching the problem by considering the existing exhibitions, which, in their opinion “have not always brought lasting advantages to the cities in which they were held”.<sup>20</sup> In order to reach this goal, they claimed, the Venice exhibition had to have “its own hallmark, a distinctive feature that sets it apart from the exhibitions that have followed each other in Italy”.<sup>21</sup> It was then decided to introduce two requirements: “the most illustrious painters and sculptors”<sup>22</sup> will be asked to form a committee, and a section should be devoted to foreign artists. What emerges from this lucid analysis of the necessary requirements for the new exhibition, which came last in an already crowded scene, is a sharp focus on the relaunch of Venice through the creation of a new type of market – that of contemporary art.

It was with the first 1895 exhibition that the design of the perfect show became reality. Leafing through the catalogue, we notice that the introductory text and the list of members of the Patronage Committee, are followed by the “*Abbonamenti*” (subscriptions) section, where visitors to the exhibition could learn about various types of subscriptions and pick the one most convenient for them, in conjunction with a special fare for the train ticket. At the end of the catalogue we also find the “*Annunzi*” (announcements) section, which contains advertisements for hotels, restaurants, cafés, pubs, seaside spas, antiquarians, photographers, knick-knack shops, liquor stores, addresses of physicians, dentists, hatters, lingerie shops, watchmaker’s shops, banks, jewelleryes, forwarders – in short, everything a Biennale tourist might need. Besides, the cover of the *Numero Unico Illustrato dell’Esposizione d’Arte*, announced that during the exhibition there would be “serenades, regattas, sports matches and light shows, the bacchanal of the Redentore, an international fencing tournament, fireworks competitions, great theatre shows, concerts and other exceptional celebrations”.<sup>23</sup> Clearly, the target public being addressed here are precisely the kind of tourists who had emerged in the last two decades, who visited Venice for therapeutic purposes or to relax in a bathing resort. This type of tourist was educated enough to be interested in a contemporary art show and affluent enough to buy works of art, as part of a sophisticated system of entertainment and modern social life. This is confirmed by the significant fact that the exhibition venue was located in the Napoleonic gardens, the only area of Venice where history had been erased, and the only one not redolent of the myth of Venice.<sup>24</sup> Only a place that had absolutely no connection with the city’s encumbering past could host a project that looked to the future. Visitors to the exhibition could therefore enjoy the magnificent view of the San Marco basin while immersing themselves in the modernity of the show. Later, in 1934, it was the brilliant

18

Ibid.

19

Ibid.

20

Ibid., 101

21

Ibid., 102

22

Ibid.

23

*Prima Esposizione Internazionale d’Arte.*

24

Cf. Vittoria Martini, “A Brief History of How an Exhibition Took Shape”, in *Starting from Venice. Studies on the Biennale*, ed. Clarissa Ricci (Milano: et al., 2010): 67.

communicators of the Fascist government who officially changed the denomination of the “*Esposizione Internazionale d’Arte of the City of Venice*”, renaming it “*Biennale di Venezia. Esposizione Internazionale d’Arte*”, which, from that moment onwards, was commonly shortened to “*La Biennale*”.<sup>25</sup> The temporality inherent in its structure came to be the standard denomination for the whole exhibiting genre, which would start developing only twenty years later.

At the beginning of this text, I mentioned De Swaan Arons’s idea that understanding the consumer target, along with what is called a branded proposition, is necessary to create emotional value. In a 2014 article, the same author defines the notion of “total experience” that he associates with the launch of a brand.<sup>26</sup> This, according to the economist, is one of three elements that make up a highly effective brand, along with a “universal truth”, and being “More than a Business”. The “total experience” is “not about share of market anymore. It’s about share of consumer experience”<sup>27</sup> and still today the experience of a spectator of the Venice Biennale, is that of being guided, via contemporary art, to the least known places, those that are more off the beaten track of tourist Venice. To be able still to feel this sense of being lost in the city with the most tourists in the world today, remains a unique experience.<sup>28</sup> The Venice Biennale gave the city in which it was born a permanent exhibiting structure that could not be transposed to any other part of the world. Venice was included in the exhibition package from the very beginning, and vice versa. In one of the most ancient and fascinating cities in the world, tourists could learn about the latest trends in current artistic production. The International Art Exhibition was conceived as a promotional strategy for the city of Venice, and vice versa – today, the art Biennale invades the whole urban area, taking spectators from the Giardini to the heart of the city and plunging them into a total experience.<sup>29</sup> If for Apple the experience is the product, for the Venice Biennale the experience is the city.

The image of a decadent Venice was used as a means to regenerate the city, which was going through a profound functional crisis, and to drive it into the modern world. Its poetic qualities contained a universalist spirit, which opened the city up for international consumption. This appealed to a universal myth, and

---

25

Marla Stone, *The Patron State. Culture & Politics in Fascist Italy* (Princeton [NJ]: Princeton University Press, 1998), 33. It is important to know that the change of denomination is only the conclusion of a series of reforms that, between 1928 and 1933, transformed the nature of the institution. Since then, this definition has been used ambiguously, taking for granted that “La Biennale” describes the art exhibition, although La Biennale di Venezia is in fact a multi-disciplinary institution, which comprises also Biennale Architettura, Biennale Musica, Biennale Teatro, Biennale Cinema, and Biennale Danza. For this reason in this text I refer to the “International Art Exhibition” which is still the current denomination of the art exhibition of the Venice Biennale.

26

“...Our research shows that high-performing brands...[provide] what we call ‘total experience’... In fact, we believe that the most important marketing metric will soon change from ‘share of wallet’ or ‘share of voice’ to ‘share of experience’”, Marc de Swaan Arons, Frank van den Driest, Keith Weed, “The Ultimate Marketing Machine,” *Harvard Business Review* (July-August 2014): <https://hbr.org/2014/07/the-ultimate-marketing-machine> (consulted on April 2020). The notion of “experience” was introduced in the field of economics in 1998 by B. Joseph Pine and James H. Gilmore, two economists from Harvard Business School, who published an article entitled “Welcome to the experience economy”, 97-105. The following year, they published *The Experience Economy. Work Is Theater & Every Business a Stage* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 1999) which soon became a classic. Pine and Gilmore theorise the coming of a new economic era, that of experience, in which the product, good or service is no longer enough, because what the consumer wants is experience. For Pine and Gilmore, experience is the new economic value, and in this new era, every business is a stage on which to act out memorable events, for which an admission fee is required. Therefore, it is the value the individual attaches to the experience that determines the value of the offer, and experience is what lies at the basis of future economic growth.

27

Marc de Swaan Arons, Frank van den Driest, Keith Weed, “The Ultimate Marketing Machine”.

28

It is from the 1970s that the Biennale started to spread across the urban area, until it came to overlap with the very identity of the city.

29

“At best, art biennials can positively transform our engagement with cities”, Oliver Bennet, “A city’s art biennial”. Cf. footnote 5.



its appropriation for commercial purposes underpinned the development of the early biennials. The history, beauty and architectural uniqueness of Venice – which were born out of political and economic necessity – became the distinguishing features of the “Venice heritage”. Although the Venice Biennale has never changed its structure, mirroring a lost modern world with its national pavilions, as a strong brand it survived until the post-globalized world, remaining at the center of an art world where the national/local identities still have a voice. The “Venice heritage” lies at the core of its success, and if today Venice and its Biennale can be seen as the archetype of a “brand”, it is thanks to the specificity it managed to preserve. This is the successful history of the bond between the city of Venice and the Venice Biennale, which reveals the secrets behind a successful brand.

But as a matter of fact, in the current economy, brand authenticity has never been more crucial to a business’ success and companies that have dedicated themselves to the greater good instead of solely to their bottom lines have seen a remarkable surge in support and revenue.

Ethical brands have risen to prominence in recent years as a market solution to a diverse range of political, social and, in this case most interestingly, ethical problems. By signifying the ethical beliefs of the firm behind them, ethical brands offer an apparently simple solution to ethical consumers: buy into the brands that represent the value systems that they believe in and avoid buying into those with value-systems that they do not believe in.<sup>30</sup>

If we read the Venice Biennale through this lens of a leading brand, it comes directly to the issue of responsibility: brand responsibility is built on three pillars which are authenticity, courage and commitment to social good.

Authenticity encompasses continuity (a brand’s history), credibility (a brand that shows they’ve accomplished what they set out to do), integrity (a brand’s moral principles), and symbolism (a brand that adds meaning to people’s lives). We think of courage as something in the brand – or in its business practices – that disrupts the traditional system.<sup>31</sup>

We find a perfect resonance in a seminal essay written in 2011 by Carlos Basualdo, titled *The Unstable Institution*, a definition he coined to refer to periodic large-scale exhibitions, namely biennials. He writes:

Large-scale international exhibitions never completely belong to the system of art institutions in which they are supposedly inscribed, and the range of practical and theoretical possibilities to which they give rise often turns out to be subversive [...] in terms of the politics of exclusion historically enacted by the institutions of modernity, large-scale international exhibitions, as was the case with theatre in the High Renaissance, could perhaps be considered as “a force

---

30

Carys Egan-Wyer, Sara Louise Muhr, Anna Pfeiffer and Peter Svensson, “The ethics of the brand”, in *Ephemera. Theory&politics in organization* 14, no. 1 (February 2014): I-II.

31

Cf. <https://we-are-next.com/collection/what-is-brand-responsibility>, accessed January 2020.

for the breakdown of class distinctions, even for democratisation”.<sup>32</sup>

So, if we read the Venice Biennale both as a leading brand and as a prominent international institution of culture, thanks to its “unstable nature”, we realize that it has ethical responsibilities. This is for its very subversive cultural potential, precisely because it can propose themes that touch the uncomfortable international political and cultural contingency on the double level of locality and internationality, and it can do that through the discourses that artistic production opens, discourses which can reach a very large audience who will become a critical mass.<sup>33</sup>

---

32

Carlos Basualdo, “The Unstable Institution”, in *What Makes a Great Exhibition?*, ed. Paula Marincola (Philadelphia: Reakticon books, 2006), 60.

33

To take a quick dip in the heart of its history, and just to make one example, it is worth knowing that after the 1968 boycott and the proclamation of the new statute that cleaned the institution from the fascist intervention of 1938, La Biennale di Venezia had proclaimed itself a democratic and anti-fascist cultural institution. Between 1974 and 1978, La Biennale had given itself a mission that was cultural and political: the exhibitions were strictly connected to the international political and cultural situation, and in a vision deeply linked to post-1968 ideology, it operated as an institution that would work for the “salvation” and “vivification of the city”. It had an international glance on the state of the arts, offering a critical overview to open discussions, and it was the protagonist on the front line, militant, in the place where it was: the city of Venice with its many complex issues. Cf. Vittoria Martini, *La Biennale di Venezia 1968-1978. La rivoluzione incompiuta* (PhD diss. Cà Foscari 2012), <http://dspace.unive.it/handle/10579/1125>.

For example documenta, over the past decades, has played a leading role in taking the international discourse about art in new directions, establishing itself as an institution that goes far beyond a survey of what is currently happening, inviting the attention of the international art world every five years. The discourse and the dynamics of the discussion surrounding each documenta, reflects and challenges the expectations of society about art, cf. [https://www.documenta.de/en/about#16\\_documenta\\_ggmbh](https://www.documenta.de/en/about#16_documenta_ggmbh).

## Author’s Biography

Vittoria Martini is an independent Art Historian. She extensively published on the Venice Biennale’s exhibition and institutional history. She teaches History of exhibitions and she holds the seminar ‘Writing for art’ (with Giorgina Bertolino) at Campo, the course for curators run by Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo (Turin). Among her recent

publications, “Spain. Artistic avant-garde and social reality (1936-1976). Documenting the political reasons at stake behind an exhibition at the Venice Biennale”, in *documenta studies* (forthcoming 2020); “1948|1968 The Venice Biennale at its turning”, in *Making Art History in Europe after 1945* (2020).