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	<div data-bbox="635 358 1390 452">Between the Biennials: Cultural Networks in Times of Geopolitical Crisis Carmen Lael Hines, Helge Mooshammer, Peter Mörttenböck</div> <div data-bbox="635 517 748 544">Abstract</div> <div data-bbox="467 551 1423 963"><p>This essay unpacks key issues of transnational curatorial collaboration that emerged during the Biennale Architettura 2021, a high-profile cultural event marked by the uncertainties and challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. The article places particular focus on the happenings of the Curators Collective, a coalition of national pavilion curators formed in relation to this particular Biennale, as a case study for considering the tensions and possibilities that come with mutually supportive networks in the context of international cultural exhibition events. <i>We Like</i>, the Austrian contribution to the 2021 Venice Architecture Biennial, dedicated to platform urbanism, became a site of transnational curatorial collaboration and is discussed in the article to contextualise the numerous projects and events of the first Biennale Architettura Midissage (August 27-29, 2021), jointly organised by several dozen national pavilions to fulfil the Biennale’s potential as a platform for synergistic collaboration, solidarity, and accessibility.</p></div> <div data-bbox="635 1028 762 1057">Keywords</div> <div data-bbox="467 1061 1287 1122"><p>Biennale Architettura 2021, Curators Collective (CC), Austrian Pavilion, Transnational collaboration, CC Midissage</p></div>		
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Between the Biennials: Cultural Networks in Times of Geopolitical Crisis

Carmen Lael Hines, Helge Mooshammer, Peter Mörtenböck

The etymology of Biennial means, quite literally, “every two years”. It denotes a temporal framework – a structure suggesting recurrence and sequence in space and time. Sometime in the latter half of the twentieth century, in the wake of hegemonic nation-building and contestations by anti-colonial movements, the definition of Biennial secured itself to suggest a temporary exhibition situated in a *particular* place that brings together international cultural positions for a *limited* period of time. Biennials exist as a liminal space between locality and globality and between presence and ephemerality. Biennials thus often become situated moments that play upon these juxtapositions. In this contingency, Biennials become spaces ripe for consideration of how structures, operations, and politics dictate global networks.

It is less the habitual stability and recurrence of these events that is currently being challenged by various kinds of crisis, than the ways in which their operations interact with new cultural sensibilities and aspirations. One of the many crises that framed the Centre for Global Architecture’s involvement in the Venice Biennale in 2021 was the COVID-19 pandemic, a crisis that dominated the spirit and execution

fig. 1
Venice Architecture Biennale
2021, Midissage organised
by the Curators Collective,
Austrian Pavilion, Venice, 2021
(photo: René Seindal)



of the 17th Venice Architecture Biennial at every logistical level. The spatial bringing together of over 50 nations for one cultural event was shaped by this unique moment in international relations. International measures introduced in response to COVID-19 forced the Biennial to be postponed and organised according to the vicissitudes of the pandemic. Upon consideration several years later, the strategies and actions which emerged as a result of these difficulties implicate profound systemic and structural reflections on how crisis shapes and orients international exhibition events and, further, how Biennials are shaped by geopolitics.

The organisational challenges brought by this crisis paved the way for several unique actions, one of which was the orchestration of a series of networked happenings that occurred within, outside and between the established Biennial apparatus. These happenings took their primary form at the midpoint of the Biennial, in late August, when a series of coordinated events occurred across Venice, united under the framework of a *Midissage* initiated by the curatorial team behind the Austrian Pavilion.¹ The events took place in various locations across the city, within the Giardini, Arsenale, and beyond. Some were geared towards the curators and exhibitors of the Biennial, and, on certain occasions, to the general public. The events were orchestrated by a self-organised coalition of national pavilion curators participating in the Venice Architecture Biennial 2021: The Curators Collective, or CC for short. They explored a range of themes through varied formats, such as public talks, book launches, informal gatherings, temporary installations, and organised walks. The events were tied together over the course of a few months, predominately through online meetings and email exchanges, and were communicated externally with a specific visual identity conceived by the team behind the Korean Pavilion *Future School*.

In a moment shaped by an urgency to “be together”, after months of uncertainty as to whether any form of gathering would be possible, several working groups within the CC emerged. These working groups developed as a structure for collaboration between pavilion curators on material projects that were all spatial, communicative and performative in character. These projects, and the working structure needed to realise them, came to form the structure and essence of the Curators Collective. A group led by Annie Pedret, Christian Schweitzer and Ryul Song, devoted itself to the creation of a manifesto stating the shared values of the CC in the form of a booklet. Titled *An Evolving Manifesto*, this text mapped the intentions, happenings and efforts of the CC. Indeed, the manifesto did not define itself as a finished text as such, but instead as a documentation of the *efforts* and intentions towards the development of a manifesto. The manifesto group asked, amongst other things, what it meant to articulate shared demands and values in the wake of an international crisis, and where the importance lay in advancing defined claims in the wake of international flux and adaptability. In the words of Schweitzer:

Architecture is a fundamentally social act. We can write a manifesto by doing it together as a social act, and thereby not create a manifesto but create architecture itself. A conversation is already a manifesto is already architecture. And I challenge you to engage in this conversation with even the simplest of thoughts. It is not about what we say, but that we say it, and the meaning and relevance will emerge inevitably through the confrontation of these thoughts with each other.²

The manifesto thus emerged as the tactile, yet performative and gestural process of creating a manifesto as such.

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“Transnational Midissage”, *e-flux Architecture*, August 2021, <https://www.e-flux.com/announcements/411226/transnational-midissage/>, last accessed November 2024..

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Christian Schweitzer, “An Evolving Manifesto”, Curators Collective website, <https://curatorscollective.co/about/>, last accessed November 2024..

A second working group, *A Bench in Venice*, formed to support an international open call for design students to submit a proposal for a bench for installation in Venice during the summer of 2021. Led by the pavilion of the United Arab Emirates, and specifically curator Wael Al-Awar, participants in the CC worked together to develop, publicise and disseminate the open call across international contexts. It was indeed the structure of the CC which allowed for this open call to become even more global in scope, with curators sharing and disseminating the call amongst their national and international networks. Moreover, the CC facilitated coordination to ensure these benches could be constructed *between* respective pavilions. Detecting the bench as one of the key indicators and activators of common-space, students from all around the world were invited to propose designs for installation during the Biennial, becoming, in essence, a spatial manifestation of the urge towards collective gathering. Selected projects included: *El Banco del Mundo* (The Bench of the World), proposed by Alexis Olivares and Gonzalo Mazzey Arevalo of la Universidad Tecnologica Metropolitana UTEM in Santiago Chile, *The Space Between Six Circles* by Sigi Buzi and Jinsu Park of the University of Waterloo and USI Accademia di Architettura di Mendisio, and finally *BENCH(?)* proposed by Roberto Gonzalez Calderon, Emilio Padilla Villanueva, Braulio Angeles Martin and Eduardo Lopez Camarillo from la Universidad Nacional Autonoma de Mexico. Each of these projects, installed in the spaces between pavilions, utilised recycled, surplus materials from the Biennial.³ Each of them, though temporary in nature – formed a structure for collectivity, discursive exchange, and rest for Biennial visitors and participants.

fig. 2
Venice Architecture Biennale
2021, Midissage organised
by the Curators Collective,
Austrian Pavilion, Venice, 2021
(photo: René Seindal)



The third working group, that of the Midissage, was led by our team in the Austrian Pavilion. The intention behind the Midissage was to organise and enact the bringing together of people and ideas between and beyond the scope of the national pavilion. A joyous series of interconnected happenings at the height of summer, the projects and discussions related to the phenomena shaping the Midissage's context, including, but not limited to transnational curatorial collaboration, the state of architectural production today, and the future of our built environments. On Saturday, August 28, a public discussion hosted by the Hungarian Pavilion on "Collaboration, Cooperation and Cohabitation" and a press conference for local media organised by the Pavilion of the Dominican Republic was preceded by "Reflections on Curatorial Practice", and "Labour in the Platform City", both hosted by the Austrian Pavilion. Later in the afternoon, the curatorial team from the

fig. 3
Venice Architecture Biennale
2021, Midissage organised
by the Curators Collective,
Pescheria, Venice, 2021 (photo:
René Seindal)



Spanish Pavilion led a shared walk through Venice to visit various national pavilions dispersed throughout the city. The day ended with an informal gathering at the Rialto Fish Market to celebrate the 17th Venice Architecture Biennial's realisation, after months of uncertainty due to the varying restrictions imposed on such events in the wake of COVID-19. With over 30 transnational events jointly organised by curators of national pavilions, including impromptu conversations with senior voices such as Saskia Sassen and Richard Sennett, the Midissage marked a unique point in time that helped to forge new forms of cultural solidarity beyond the protocols set up for such relationships.

The Midissage, and the many moments that comprised it, materially enacted the discursive intentionality that framed the CC's creation and foundation. As a multi-directional forum based on a shared desire for transnational dialogue and collaborative curatorial practices, the Midissage actualised a process which found its origin in the spring of 2020, when the Venice Biennale organisation announced the postponement of the 17th Venice Architecture Biennial.⁴ The announcement, though expected and in congruence with global circumstances, threw the exhibition plans from 113 participants coming from 46 countries into flux, forcing exhibition teams to resort to patience and speculative organisation. For an exhibition based on international interaction through orchestrated, spatial proximity, we, along with other curators, found ourselves enmeshed in quite contradictory circumstances of distance, isolation, and stasis. There was a sense of elusiveness as clear and reliable information became sparse. It was felt that the Biennale organisation's public announcements, which *outwardly* assured the exhibition's realisation in the coming months or year, did not fully align with the insubstantial information passed on to curators. How and when could the exhibition occur? And under what framework and timeline?

The CC's first meeting on May 23, 2020 formed as an active response to these challenges. Organised by Hae-Won Shin, the curator of the *Future School* exhibition at the Korean Pavilion, this first meeting, along with the many others that proceeded it, fostered a sense of mutual recognition, support, and relative clarity amidst the destabilising circumstances.⁵ Some curators, who were already in Venice for set

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"The 17th International Architecture Exhibition postponed to 2021", *e-flux Architecture*, May 2020, <https://www.e-flux.com/announcements/331892/the-17th-international-architecture-exhibition-postponed-to-2021/>, last accessed November 2024.

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"Venice Architecture Biennale 2021 National Pavilion Curators Collective", *e-flux Architecture*, May 2021, <https://www.e-flux.com/announcements/392753/venice-architecture-biennale-2021-national-pavilion-curators-collective/>, last accessed November 2024.

up, reported to the group on what was happening on-site. Others shared pieces of information relayed to them by their respective commissioners and explained their internal plans moving forward. As a self-organised initiative, the origins of the CC both emerged within and outside the Biennial as a framework. In its evolution, the CC's main goal was to fulfil the Biennial's potential as a platform for synergistic collaboration between national bodies.⁶ This collective comprised of any curator involved in the Biennial during that particular period. Its definition prompted fluid membership and a constantly evolving list of participants. Participation was open and voluntary, and held together through strong personal ties.

In the Austrian Pavilion, the exhibition *We Like - Platform Austria* explored, through the performative research strategy of network-building, the impact of platforms (in an expanded sense) on the way we live together. We centered our study on the multi-dimensional role platforms play in spatial and governmental practices, which are increasingly impacting what cohabitation means, on various scales.⁷ This research orientation earned us a unique position of consideration, where indeed, the self-organised Curators Collective and institutional apparatus of the Venice Biennale intersected with the theoretical intentions of our programme. Our study on the potentials, limitations, and tensions at the heart of platforms as an organisational structure in contemporary city-making, aligned our work with the development and progression of the CC as something which was both real in its impact, and representative in its significance.

Platform architectures, like the Biennial, can facilitate exchange, collaboration and diversity. In dialectical tension with this, platforms are nonetheless enmeshed, and themselves engender, structural tensions which materialise in unequal economies of access, recognition and representation, as has been made even more apparent recently with controversies related to the recognition and positioning of Palestine as a national perspective at the Biennial. Indeed, in a world increasingly shaped by platforms, the production of architecture is becoming simultaneously oriented around both hyper-connectivity, and systemic isolation, owing to the fact that platforms mediate access. The CC, as an ongoing initiative within the context of the Venice Biennale 2021, rendered visible many of the dynamics we discovered during the course of our research. Specifically, it made apparent the positive expectations, yet structural tensions, characteristic of public stagings of cultural exchange, like the Venice Biennale.

Though novel in its specific character (as a network conceived in the context of the *Venice Biennale*), the CC's foundation in critical discursivity, international dialogue, and the fostering of counter-support structures within the wider Biennial apparatus, is not necessarily new, but rather part of a genealogy of self-reflective critique initiated by the de-colonial efforts of "Biennials of the periphery".⁸ Indeed, the "turn" to self-reflexivity and criticality inspired, over the preceding decades, discursive network-building within Biennial formats, one such example being The European Biennial Network.⁹ Formed in 2008 within the context of the Athens Biennial, the European Biennial Network was conceived as a transnational, collaborative structure which emerged in the wake of the financial crisis, and intended to offer self-organised mutual support to Biennial curators across Europe.

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For more information on the CC's origins and scope, see: <http://curatorscollective.org>, last accessed November 2024.

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For more information on "Platform Austria", see: "Platform Austria", *e-flux Architecture*, May 2021, <https://www.e-flux.com/announcements/343894/platform-austria/>, last accessed November 2024; and Peter Mörténböck and Helge Mooshammer (eds.), *Platform Urbanism and Its Discontents* (Rotterdam: nai010 publishers, 2021).

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Oliver Marchart, "The Globalization of Art and the Biennials of Resistance: A History of the Biennials from the Periphery", in *Conflictual Aesthetics* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2019).

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This is a concept described as the "second wave of Biennialization" by Anthony Gardener in: "Biennials of the South on the Edges of the Global", *Third Text*, vol. 27, issue 4 (2013).

In a similar vein as the CC, the European Biennial Network aimed to orchestrate a structure of dialogue through public interventions, paid residencies, and other planned events across various Biennials including: Liverpool, Athens, Lyon, Berlin and Istanbul.¹⁰ The analogous origins of the European Biennial Network and the Curators Collective raise significant questions regarding the reasons, purposes and potentials of network-building in contexts of crisis. What is the role of cultural discourse in such circumstances? And how can bottom-up structures of support be retained over a longer period of time? With these contextual queries in mind, the CC Midissage becomes an active example of the latent *potential* and *possibility* of spaces within the Biennial framework to enact alternative approaches to a Biennial's status quo. Indeed, the CC engendered a critical space of rupture within, between, and outside the Biennial apparatus. This prompts theoretical consideration: to what extent can critique, and contestation emerge from *within* a structure like the Biennial? How can this be actualised in ways that do not fall blindly into patterns of *passive critique*, and *resignation to un-resolvability* which often characterises critical curatorial practices operating within Biennial frameworks?

While functioning as dynamic forums of exchange and collaboration, critics agree that such exhibition events can simultaneously incorporate patterns of hegemony. In the words of art historian Joel Robinson, the architecture of the Giardini alone indicates a characterisation of the Biennial as a “geo-political superstructure”.¹¹ They function as “complex constellations of power relations”,¹² matrices which can foster and facilitate a range of paradoxical strategies and outcomes. They posture and actualise a bringing-together of diverse actors and critical discursivity, which are often flattened by their simultaneous proximity to elitism, nationalism, consumerism, and ethnic essentialisms. As argued by Kolb, Biennials simultaneously present ostentatious, hegemonic narratives of national identity and “economic potency”, alongside critical interventions aimed at deconstructing and questioning those very mechanisms.¹³ Indeed, this inherent paradox is a tension which Julia Bethwaite and Anni Kangas argue should not be simplified into something “resolvable”. Instead, these paradoxes reveal what they call an “‘intermingledness’ in varying degrees: economy, power, artistic expression, and other aspects come together in a sort of contested field with different outcomes”.¹⁴

The structural roots of the dialectical tensions at the centre of the Biennial format are, of course, linked to the world in which Biennials have been formed and are situated – worlds shaped by globalization, neoliberalism, and layered crises which perpetually engender the latter. Oliver Marchart argues that in an era of globalisation characterised by “struggles of legitimation with the evolving cartography of the world”, national governments use the framework to essentialise, and posture their potencies within an arena that embeds represented countries in competitive struggles of ‘legitimation’.¹⁵ Indeed, according to his argument, the decentralisation of the West which accompanied processes of globalization, motivated many Western countries to utilise Biennials as instruments for asserting “national or regional identities, or at least close ties to national and

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For more information on the European Biennial Network, see: <http://www.europeanbiennialnetwork.org/calendar.htm>

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Joel Robinson, “Folkloric Modernism – Venice’s Giardini Della Biennale and the Geopolitics of Architecture”, *Open Arts Journal*, issue 2 (Winter, 2013–2014): 2.

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Ronald Kolb, Shwetal A. Patel, Dorothee Richter, “Editorial”, *OnCurating*, issue 46 (June 2020): 9.

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Kolb, “The Curating of Self”, 67.

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Quoted in: Kolb, “The Curating of Self”, 69.

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Oliver Marchart, “The Globalization of Art and the Biennials of Resistance: A History of the Biennials from the Periphery”, *OnCurating*, issue 46 (June 2020): 22.

international funding bodies with their own soft power agendas”.¹⁶ They thus become “machines of hegemony” in their unique mediation between the “local, national and transnational”.¹⁷ These processes, according to his argument, were crucially juxtaposed by de-colonial responses from Biennials of the periphery, such as the Biennials of Habana and Gwangju. Indeed, responding to the evolving global cartographies brought by globalization, these Biennials act as “means of decentralizing the West” through models of transnational exchange, and “merging layers of subjectivation”.¹⁸ In the words of Okwui Enwezor: “In the wake of the globalization of culture and art, the postcolonial response to it has produced a new kind of space, a discourse of open contestations which do not spring merely from resistance, but rather is built on an ethics of dissent”.¹⁹

As Marchart’s analysis situates a conflictual reading of Biennials in a “central – periphery scheme”, it calls into question whether such an argument can be applied to the Venice Biennale specifically so as to reflect on the CC. The Venice Biennale is typically characterised as the epitome of Eurocentric, colonial traces of hegemonic representation for many reasons, one of them being its close historical associations with the World Fair and processes of nation-building in an era of industrialisation and colonisation.²⁰ Overall, his argument is helpful in emphasising the conflictual tensions at the centre of Biennalisation as a process, which carries both “colonial traces and post-colonial relations” into a “contested sphere” for a very “limited group of people”.²¹

Ronald Kolb similarly argues that the discursive, critical exchanges characterising Biennials, which contradict the structural forces informing their very framework, are tensions which link to agendas of neoliberalism, reproduced in and around the Biennial structure. He argues that Biennials, in their intimate relationship with conceptions of the nation-state, reproduce what Foucault describes as the “art of governing” of the *modern* nation-state and its institutions. In this context, he refers to the way that critiques of an institution function to regulate sovereign power, in order to eradicate the possibility of removing the said power altogether. In other words, the “art to not be governed like that”.²²

These recently proposed analyses situate theories of Biennalisation within Postcolonial and Foucauldian discourses. From engaging with these emerging veins of thought, alongside our research on platforms as organisational structures, the various incidents of the CC reveal the tensions at the heart of Biennials and their political contexts. These incidents are thus given contextual shaping and critical significance. Within the CC, issues of legitimation, recognition, obscuring of labour, and proximity to passive critique became clear – which speak to theories of the Biennial as a managerial apparatus within a framework of global political economics.

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Paraphrasing Marchart, Ronald Kolb, Shwetal A. Patel, Dorothee Richter, “Editorial”, 9.

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Marchart, “The Globalization of Art”, 22.

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Paraphrasing Marchart, Ronald Kolb, Shwetal A. Patel, Dorothee Richter, “Editorial”, 8.

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Okwui Enwezor, “Mega-Exhibitions and the Antinomies of a Transnational Global Form”, in *Other Cities, Other Worlds: Urban Imaginaries in the Globalized Age*, edited by Andreas Huyssen (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008).

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Marchart, 22.

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Paraphrasing Marchart, Kolb, “The Curating of Self”, 70.

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Kolb, “The Curating of Self”, 67–72.

When we programmed the Midissage, it became apparent that such an intervention was outside of Biennial protocol. For a range of reasons, we were confronted with the need for all events to remain within the boundaries of national pavilions, and to adhere to the respective regulatory framework of each pavilion, enforced by structures in charge such as commissioning bodies, national governments and the Venice Biennale organisation. To use abstract terms, “between” and “beyond” were not permitted. For instance, as the Austrian Pavilion, one could host an event within the pavilion, and invite representatives from the Serbian Pavilion situated just a few yards away. But one could not, hypothetically, collaborate on an event with the Serbian Pavilion in the physical space “between” the pavilions without proper adherence to complex protocol.

In one specific case, the curators of the British Pavilion organised a public discussion in collaboration with the Austrian and Peruvian Pavilions on the subject of private versus public space. In line with the themes of the talk, curators Madeleine Kessler and Manijeh Verghese sought to host this conversation on the steps of the British Pavilion, or interstitially between the German and British Pavilions. Upon this request being denied by the British Council, a possible resolution was offered by one of the curators of the German Pavilion who suggested that perhaps the intervention could be hosted within the German Pavilion, which would be able to accommodate it, in terms of space. However, it quickly became clear that the commissioning and regulatory bodies from Germany could not permit such an intervention due to their existing matrix of protocols. The solution was thus to host the conversation in the conference room of the Central Pavilion, as provided by the Biennale organisation.

This anecdote serves to prove what Stefano Harney and Fred Moten describe as the hegemony of “good management”. According to Harney, management can be characterised as the organisation and regulation of what it decides is “informal”.²³ However, it is not sufficient to broadly state that all informality, and all the contours of the “between” are not permitted. Rather, there is a process of regulation and hierarchy of who has access to “this between-ness”, and for what purposes. For instance, the Pavilion Days, introduced during the Venice Biennale 2021 and endorsed and supported by the Biennale organisation, functioned as a kind of “Midissage” for each nation’s commissioning bodies. During the Pavilion Days, the curators become transient characters of the exhibition, only to be replaced the coming year, whereas the Commissioners Group, as a platform, maintains its form. Network-building, and the generative potentials of discursive, transnational exchange is at the core of the Biennial apparatus. But its endorsed enactment is not universal – it is contingent upon the roles attributed to particular stakeholder groups. From this, to state that the CC Midissage ruptured the Biennial apparatus through enacting “the between” may be too simplistic. The CC Midissage momentarily ruptured the apparatuses which designate what is formal or informal, contained or “fluid” – and thereby, what is “allowed” to be “between”.

More than solely regulating the informal, Harney and Moten argue that the concept of management functions as a “seizing of the means of social reproduction”.²⁴ Social reproduction comprises a range of actions and processes – but broadly refers to the processes in which one is able to re-produce their ability to function and exist, healthily, in society. Some features of this include mutual support, informal acts of recognition, solidarity, and community building.²⁵ Social reproduction functions through processes of relationality, of platformed engagement, of mutual support and recognition. Again, these organisational procedures are not banned, but rather

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Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (New York: Minor Compositions, 2013): 130.

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Harney and Moten, *The Undercommons*, 74.

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Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *All Incomplete* (New York: Minor Compositions, 2021).

regulated within a rigid economy of access. *Who is allowed to engage together and why?* The difficulties in materially realising moments which enact and are formed by processes of social reproduction are, due to hierarchies of access to informality, indicative of the wider role of management today.²⁶

To work around the difficulties in hosting discussions with and between pavilions, while respecting these regulations and fundamental safety requirements, the CC developed a hosting strategy. Respective nations would agree to organise, or “host” events within the boundaries of their own pavilions. To facilitate the “between” we sought collaboration with other pavilions and interaction not literally and ideologically enclosed within the boundaries of national frameworks – we developed a communicative platform system. Each curator would send an email, summarising their planned event (time, place, title and description) to a member of our curatorial team. We then structured and arranged all of these interventions into a calendar, which was circulated to all members of the CC, in order to facilitate movement between the interventions. Furthermore, certain pavilions, those with the resources and the space, offered countries without the means to utilise their pavilions in order to realise their interventions. This became a form of alternative organisation, one which internally ruptured the regulatory framework.

The Midissage, and the CC in general, was centered on all phenomena associated with an expanded concept of “the between”. The between in terms of space, in terms of discourse, in terms of breaking down the boundaries of national isolation. The Midissage itself marked neither the beginning nor end, but highlighted the duration of a process, of a state of “between”. It proposed a conception of time outside the rhythms of the Biennial structure, with its grand openings and endings marked by record numbers of visitors. Through the very act of questioning these landmarks, the CC proposed a temporal, and general, sense of irregularity. In doing so, the CC relied on processes of self-legitimation due to a lack of authorisation and institutional recognition, which again linked to its existence outside of Biennial protocol. Relying on structured informalities, systems of mutual legitimation, and recognition – the CC made clear that these economies are prevalent in the Biennial framework. In an attempt to navigate these economies as we organised the Midissage, the CC, self-organised and informal by nature, challenged and re-oriented the rules and boundaries that define these economies.

As a coalition of participants in the Biennial, uniting and requesting recognition for the labour of these mutually supportive actions, the CC is in a sense a union of curators, with demands, requests, and structural gestures. However, it is crucial to note that the CC was not the only crisis-driven organisational structure which ruptured the regulatory framework of the Biennial this summer. It was part of a larger process within the Biennial of worker-organisation and unionisation, which all linked back to the impacts of the COVID-19 crisis.

Many people from Venice and the surrounding area of Veneto rely on the Biennial as a source of income and employment. With the Biennial postponement in 2020, many annual Biennial workers were forced into financial precarity and reliance on ephemeral and uncertain employment, creating an atmosphere of a crisis-driven need for mutual aid and support. As the Biennial commenced, a range of incidents left many Biennial employees eager to advocate for their collective well-being, and workers’ rights. Out of necessity, employees of various pavilions began meeting, planning, and conversing via Whatsapp groups and arranged assemblies. These assemblies, which resulted in collective bartering for more support from the Biennial organisation via formal letters and manifestos, occurred in the same month as the planning and realisation of the CC Midissage – though the two initiatives

26

See Nancy Fraser, “Contradictions of Capital and Care”, *New Left Review*, issue 100 (July/August 2016).

were not themselves connected.²⁷ These two threads of self-organisation occurred simultaneously, proving that the COVID-19 crisis produced active initiatives for mutual support in an atmosphere of infrastructural crisis.

Networks are architectures. In a neoliberal economy, their adaptability makes them attractive to hegemonic market forces predicated on constant exchange. Yet networks can also be agents of social reproduction as a structure for mutual support. The inherently supportive character of networks make them architectures that often emerge and are enacted during crisis-driven or precarious conditions. Some theorists, such as Naomi Klein, argue that this can be instrumentalised to normalise crisis, or sway away from actual, structural change.²⁸ Indeed, networks are both responses to crisis, and perhaps reproducers of the social norms that justify them. This makes them into bleeding edges. With this complexity in mind, we find implicit in the events of CC the many paradoxes and tensions of neoliberal cultural economies, paradoxes intensified during times of crisis, such as COVID-19.

Within the field of urban theory and geography studies, there have been a plethora of investigations and writings proving the importance of physical clustering and networking as essential features of the creative economy. This is because the cultural sector, or in this case, the curatorial sector of Biennials, is embedded in the social and economic logics that procure it as such. Networking, social dynamics and relations of exchange in localised spaces play a foundational and crucial role in the creative economy for *sector-specific* reasons.²⁹ Some of these reasons, to cite economic geography literature more generally, are consequent to the nature of working patterns in the sector, which tend to be characterised as unstable, temporary and ephemeral. Networking is important to access work, obtain future contracts, or combine efforts to apply for self-sustaining funding grants.³⁰

In the case of the Venice Biennale, networking becomes a crucial source of value in a framework which is, by definition, ephemeral, meaning the work is economically unsustainable in the long term. To network is to secure the possibility for future chances of sustenance in an industry held together through formal, informal and social ties. Additionally, social dynamics are fundamental to the creative sector in that they “enable cultural intermediaries to set values and trends”.³¹ The setting of values is fundamental in the context of cultural work that engages with political, ethical and social questions – such as “How will We Live Together?” Without sounding too candid, the answer to the question is and must be conceived collectively to hold substance and weight. The CC was a result of this necessity, or urgency, towards forming and articulating shared values.

27

Workers across the Biennale were engaged in a struggle with the Biennale organisation about access to free testing upon the introduction of the Europe wide green pass. The green pass would require all who entered the Biennale premises to be either vaccinated (with two vaccines), or tested. During this time, the vaccine roll out was still very much a work in progress, which meant that many workers had not yet received their vaccine, and were forced to test in order to enter their place of work. Institutionally seen as an “external” private requirement, this service was not provided by the Biennale organization to workers, but only to “Biennale employees”. It forced the workers who maintained, guarded, and ran each pavilion, to stand hours in waiting lines, and pay fees of up to 40 euros for tests, in order to enter their places of work and materially realise the exhibition(s).

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See Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (New York: Knopf Canada, 2007).

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Roberta Comunian, “Exploring the role of networks in the creative economy of North East England: Economic and cultural dynamics”, in *Encounters and Engagement between Economic Cultural Geography*, edited by Barney Warf (New York: Springer, 2012), 143–157.

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Helen Blair, “You’re Only as Good as Your Last Job”: The Labour Process and Labour Market in the British Film Industry”, *Work, Employment and Society*, issue 15 (2001): 149–169.

31

Tom Fleming, “Supporting the Cultural Quarter? The Role of the Creative Intermediary”, *City of Quarters: Urban Villages in the Contemporary City* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002).

However, with all of the positive benefits that can come from network making, there are risks of exclusivity at the core of “network think”. As described by Hannah Knox, Mike Savage and Penny Harvey of the University of Manchester, in applying social network analysis and anthropology as networks are operationalised, they

paradoxically [begin to] operate as a bounded community rather than as a network, and that one implication is that it does not unravel significant difference in approach amongst its own ranks... Given that, then any attempt to define a bounded group (within which one can examine the whole network) will ultimately contradict the network idea itself.

In essence, to call something a network is a paradoxical exercise, an open structure which nonetheless requires definition and therefore sets up barriers. In the case of the CC, this was a collective created for curators within the context of a particular Venice Biennale. These questions of accessibility and definition formed the core of discussions once the Venice Biennale 2021 came to a close. How would the network be thus defined? Would its binding too ultimately prove to be the Biennial itself – a particular group that took part in the Biennial at that time? How would the network move and change? To resolve these questions became a complex exercise, as the conditions of each member of the collective of course changed as the Biennial concluded. As the network slowly began to fizzle away, we began to question, collectively, if, how and where the substantive and generative future of the CC would be situated.

In “Bodies in Alliance and the Politics of the Street”, Judith Butler writes that “we miss something of the point of public demonstrations, if we fail to see that the character of a space is being disrupted and fought over when crowds gather”.³² Expanding, she claims

bodies in their plurality lay claim to the public, find and produce the public through seizing and reconfiguring the matter of material environments; at the same time, those material environments are part of the action, and they themselves act when they become the support for action.

Throughout this article, we have referred to the CC as a reinvigorating force within the Biennial apparatus. We have also referred to the CC as a coalition, a self-organised, expanding network, an alternative “public” within the context of the Biennial. “The space” to which Butler refers, in this context, becomes the framework of the Biennial, not just the Giardini or Arsenale, but the Biennial as a space of cultural exchange. Following her argument, the incidents and origins of the CC should not solely be deemed a rupture to an established hegemonic space. Instead, it should be emphasised that the act of gathering within the Venice Biennale framework actually negotiates the character of that space: its potential to expand inclusivity, to expand access, to foster diversity and exchange. Butler also asks: “how does plurality form, and what material supports are necessary for that formation? Who enters this plurality, who does not, and how are such matters decided?” To sustain itself, the CC, as a plural, communal body – or perhaps as a structure or idea, would consistently need to interrogate the tensions and conditions of its own plurality and facilitate the coming together of different groups at different moments. The emergence of the CC proves that amidst hegemonic underpinnings, the Biennial as a platform can provide the conditions for its own change. But the question became – what would the CC rupture outside of the institution within which it was

32

Judith Butler, “Bodies in Alliance and the Politics of the Street”, *Transversal Texts* (September 2011), <https://transversal.at/transversal/1011/butler/en>, last accessed December 2024.

conceived? To what kind of structure would it need to relate, if not a particular city – or a simulated, temporary locality? What kind of publics could it facilitate?

To refer back to the language used at the beginning of this article, the Curators Collective was a network formed both within and against (or rather in between) the protocols of the Biennial institution. If the CC is thus defined as a series of happenings that challenged the rigidity of the Biennial structure, the overarching question became, how would such a collective sustain itself outside of the context of the Venice Biennale? As an alternative network related, inevitably, to the platform that brought curators and activities together in the first place – how might such an endeavour sustain itself outside of that contextual axis?

In addressing these questions, multiple interconnected strategies were conceived by members of the collective. One such strategy was to open up the CC, as a platform structure, to another *generation* of curators. Facilitated through direct communication with pavilion curators, individuals were contacted and incorporated into the CC framework for their own use. This incoming collective formed its own series of events in sync with the opening of the 18th Venice Architecture Biennial in May 2023. These activities aligned with a Biennial articulated through “rupture”. Indeed, Lesley Lokko’s *Laboratory of the Future* was a Biennial which, with urgency and precision, addressed post-colonial balance, with the majority of its 89 contributions coming from Africa and its diaspora. In the words of Chris Foges, this Biennial was an “uncomfortable and uplifting” exhibition confronting architecture’s complicity in post-colonial violence and environmental destruction.³³ The exhibition directly confronted the colonial histories of what Biennials entail, while also employing its status as a platform to make visible and recognise subaltern and diasporic perspectives within the canon of architecture. These efforts feel like a prominent ripple in an expanding global wave, not only within the Biennial in Venice, but across the cultural world. This is a shift towards engagement with institutions alongside efforts to inhabit them and enrich them with new protocols. During the Venice Art Biennial 2022, an informal *Firsts Solidarity Network* of national pavilions was established as “an artist-led initiative comprising of artists who are a first-time representative from a marginalised or under-represented group in their respective country or a first-time country participant at the Venice Biennale”. This solidarity network formed a “route” through the Biennial for visitors – one which quite literally ruptured the directional lines of the Biennial through direct engagement with representation and the colonial implications of being “first”.

With these practices and efforts in mind, the CC has become, more than anything, implicative of a wider, evolving process. Its evolutions and iterations speak to the themes guiding what cultural production means today. It was a series of happenings that evolved into persons, conversations and efforts rendering the CC a vehicle and emblem of an evolving process. Rather than reproductions of static models, the cultural sector continues to evolve in critical cohesion with the geopolitical crises that exist atop and adjacent to it. These cohesions are by no means universally smooth and require constant re-configuration and evaluation. But the effort to connect, conceive and respond together – and question the meaning of exchanging together in space for a defined period of time, or in a particular structure – is an activity that can continue to unite the cultural community into widening, evolving and expanding networks of international solidarity for years to come.

33

Chris Foges, “National Pavilions take on Venice Biennale’s decolonisation and decarbonisation themes”. *The RIBA Journal*. 16 June 2023.

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