

**Caroline A. Jones****Event Structures and Biennial Culture: Oreste at the Biennale****Abstract**

Over the century from 1895 to 1999, we can measure the impact of biennials on themselves, and on the emergence of increasingly social forms of contemporary art. I argue that in their inheritance from world's (and national) fairs, biennials were engines for the transfer of fairs' "festal apparatus" to the centre of contemporary art itself. In particular, I will review the historical case of the collaborative group Oreste in the 1999 Venice Biennale, in which "relational art" (introduced in 1993 by one of the *Aperto* curators, Nicolas Bourriaud) was further tested in the biennial context. Marking the shift from boat transport, xerox machines, and snail mail to novel infrastructures called email, listservs, and the "World Wide Web," the Oreste collective created a transnational network bringing over 100 artists to Venice, and connecting virtually with more than 500 artists world-wide. This little-known group had no stylistic coherence or "ism" to proclaim; instead, they had a loose aesthetic agenda celebrating events, networks, and increasingly social forms of art, often staged in "Spazio Oreste". This they claimed from the edge of the Central pavilion where the traditional nationalist building had been punctured in 1952 for a terrace garden designed by Carlo Scarpa, symbolically marking the rehabilitation of edifice and event after the years of fascism. We can understand something crucial about twenty-first century biennial culture, by examining how local artists created a global network to localize an "artway of thinking" at the millennial turn.

**Keywords**

Oreste, Authorship, Contemporary Art, Relational Aesthetics, Collective

**\*Director's note**

As an exceptional circumstance, due to the author's expertise, the present text benefited from an open peer review from the director and the editors.

# Event Structures and Biennial Culture: Oreste at the Biennale

Caroline A. Jones

## Becoming Biennial<sup>1</sup>

Astonishingly, in the founding documents of the Biennale di Venezia from 1893, the first intentions expressed were neither strongly “biennial” nor necessarily international.<sup>2</sup> The city officials and intellectuals who inaugurated the now perpetual infrastructure were inspired by the one-off national exposition held in Venice in 1887 after the city had been chosen for the honour by the 8<sup>th</sup> Artistic Congress in Rome in 1883.<sup>3</sup> The national exposition had been staged in a purpose-built pavilion erected in the public *Giardini* (still standing five years later, and begging to be used again). Documents from the earliest deliberations among Venetian city councillors from April of 1893 envision an exhibition like the national one, but *without* Rome’s authorisation. As the minutes reveal, the councillors expressed an intention of “perpetuity” in honouring the king and queen’s wedding anniversary (a noble goal!) but only made passing reference to the idea that the show might be a *repeating* one (the key phrase is “ad ogni biennio” meaning “every second year”).<sup>4</sup> It was not until

---

1

The author is deeply grateful to the critical readings of this essay by Emily V. Bonvino, Clarissa Ricci and Camilla Salvaneschi. This new generation of scholars are contributing critically to the specification and theorisation of the interface between Italy’s complex local politics, regional cultures, and the global artworld – I am thankful for the care they took, for their kind corrections, for their informative citations and for their enriching ideas. I’m also in debt to Agnes Kohlmeyer and Pieranna Cavalchini, who introduced me both intellectually and literally to the founders of Oreste, and to Amara Antilla who widened the net.

2

Unless explicitly cited otherwise, all references and quotes from the founding documents come from the *Serie Scatole Nere, Box 1= Periodo dell’Organizzazione 1894-1895, Archivio storico delle arti contemporanee* – hereinafter *La Biennale di Venezia* (Historical Archives of Contemporary Arts, Venice Biennial) ASAC, S.N., b. 1.

3

In her book *Venice: Fragile City, 1797-1997* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), Margaret Plant reports that “The first opportunity to offer Venice as a showcase for art occurred when the Esposizione Artistica Nazionale for 1887 was assigned to Venice in 1883 by the Eighth Artistic Congress in Rome”, 215.

4

The phrase is in the manuscript notes from the first meeting of April 19, 1893, *la Biennale di Venezia*, ASAC, S.N., b. 1. So buried is the phrase that Plant asserts that the exhibition was not referred to as biennial until after the Second World War! Plant, *Venice: Fragile City*, 216.

1894 that the imagined exhibition shifted from being implicitly *national* to explicitly *international* in scope.<sup>5</sup>

That change was registered on March 30, 1894, and the show's opening was also postponed a year to allow the international *Comitato di patrocinio* (Patron's Council) to advise on the exhibition's contents and spread news of the event.<sup>6</sup> Yet the precise tempo of repetitions remained elusive. While it is perhaps only an accident of graphic design, the first exposition's poster merely announces: "1895, *Esposizione Internazionale d'Arte della Città di Venezia*", corrected only in later posters and catalogue to read "*Prima Esposizione Internazionale...*" (*First International Exhibition...*). What interests me further is what was printed underneath the poster's heading: "*SERENATE, REGATE, GARE SPORTIVE, LUMINARIE, FRESCHI, CONCERTI, BACCANALE DEL REDENTORE, TORNEO INTERNAZIONALE DI SCHERMA, GARE PIROTECNICHE, GRANDI SPETTACOLI TEATRALI, ED ALTRI ECCEZIONALI FESTEGGIAMENTI*".<sup>7</sup> These are the kinds of festive accoutrements which had, for centuries, adorned Venice's civic rituals (such as the "Marriage to the Sea" of medieval times), but more proximately, these event-structures reveal the biennial's debt to the exhausted machinery of the world's fairs.

The constellations of boating events, sports, fireworks, theatrics, and refreshments made it clear that tourism was an important part of the mix, but unlike the omnivorous world's fairs, the Venetians' future-oriented recycling of the past would focus primarily on *art*. The first summary offered to the town by the three founders (poet and mayor Riccardo Selvatico, along with politician Antonio Fradeletto and philosopher Giovanni Bordiga) had married patriotic royalism to pragmatic hopes for a future "benefitting the reputation [of the city, and] creating an art market" (that is, a market for *contemporary* art) in a town long-famous for its picture trade.<sup>8</sup> Thus the biennial would emulate the market competition staged by the world's fairs, but rather than bring in foreign vendors, hoped to seed local ones.

At least two event-structures were thus already present in the first iteration of the biennial show: tourism, with its penchant for "*GRANDI SPETTACOLI*" (great spectacles), and a *contemporary* art market that would need to be continually refreshed. Events naturally accrued to the repeating exhibition, which was celebrated in 1900, for example, by a small parade of Venetian students sweetly dressed as medieval proponents of the liberal arts, pantomiming the Italian moment when "genius" changed from an attribute of place to a divine gift bestowed on artists. Events would also be staged by works of art, as when a particular painting

5

In the meeting of March 30, 1894, the previous resolutions were amended to allow "Parte, I: [...] modificazione della parte [...] colla deliberazione 19 Aprile 1893, l'Esposizione di Belle Arti da inaugurare in Venezia nel 1895 sarà *Nazionale ed Internazionale*" [emphasis added]. In the meeting of March 27, 1894, they were still debating whether to restrict the show to Italy only: "Gli studi della sotto-commissione confermarono il concetto che l'Esposizione non debba, per ragioni tanto artistiche quanto economiche, restringersi solo all'Italia". *la Biennale di Venezia*, ASAC, S.N., b. 1.

6

The Patron's council is mentioned in a folder labeled "Relazione della Commissione consultiva, 1894", resolving the question of internationalism toward the end of the meeting dated March 27, 1894; *La Biennale di Venezia*, ASAC, S.N., b. 1. The committee will help "distance [the selection] from the favouritism of a local consensus [...] so that our Venetian exhibition has from the first moment the best guarantee of a splendid success." ("*...dissanze al fervore del loco consenso, anche l'unico membro della Commissione che aveva manifestato dei dubbi sulla possibilità pratica dell'impresa si dichiarò vinto e possunso che la Mostra veneziana ha per se, fin da questo momento, le migliori guarentigie d'uno splendido successo*"). All translations hereafter, unless otherwise noted, are by the author.

7

The sentence on the poster can be translated as: Serenades, Regattas, Sport Competitions, Lightings, Boat events, Concerts, Bacchanal of the Redentore, Fencing International Tournament, Pyrotechnic Competitions, Great Theatrical Performances, and Other Exceptional Celebrations.

8

Minutes of the town council for April 19, 1893, translated and cited by Enzo Di Martino, *History of the Venice Biennale: 1895-2005: visual arts, architecture, cinema, dance, music, theatre* [1995], trans. Barbara Trotto, Susan Candy (Venice: Papiro Arte, 2005), 10.

was submitted to the first biennial to provoke a controversy pitting the freedom of artistic expression and cosmopolitan decadence against provincial mores and clerical unease.<sup>9</sup> This might seem to emulate the annual “affront to the bourgeoisie” established by repeating Parisian *Salons des refusés*—those predictable scandals intended to rattle the French academy and its complacent public. But as one of the Biennale’s early historians, Lawrence Alloway, reminds us, the proximate models for Venice were not the state-authorized French Salons (even the “*refusés*” were commissioned by the state). What Venice emulated, in Alloway’s account, were the recently federated German cities’ voluntary art associations (*Kunstvereins*) and their annual exhibitions – driven by artists’ vanguard priorities and with an intentionally “Secessionist” attitude towards the state academies.<sup>10</sup>

The event structures fostered by the Biennale are what I want to address here. Below I will theorise an “event” as offering a strange punctuation in one’s ongoing sense of being – punctuation that holds the possibility for transforming the self. Here, it is important simply to note how the biennial exhibition positioned itself curiously between the “difference” of event and the “repetition” of ritual, creating the “event structures” I speak to in this essay.<sup>11</sup> The impulse to event—which I see migrating from the exhausted world’s fairs into the “trade-specific” repetitions following the Biennale’s 1895 founding – ripened in the confidence expressed over a century later by the Italian artist collective we are concerned with here – Oreste, who orchestrated a robust, event-driven intervention at the 1999 Biennale.<sup>12</sup> Fuelled by a new infrastructure called “the World Wide Web”,<sup>13</sup> their informal and efferrescent exchanges would demonstrate to the now global art world that Venice was neither a centre nor a periphery. The art world had to register a new cartography: no longer “international” with industrial-era hubs and spokes, it would be an expansive membrane of nodes in a net, pulsing with friendships, connections, networks, and *events*.

---

9

I am referring to *Il Supremo Convegno* (The Supreme Meeting), hung in Gallery “D” in the inaugural biennial. It had been submitted by Giacomo Grosso, famous professor from the prestigious Accademia Albertina in Torino, whose president had asked Biennale officials to place this work “of audacious and fantastical composition” in a good light. Grosso’s symbolist allegory of the death of a Don Juan-like character combined dark moralising with lascivious babes in a quasi-Satanic ritual. The Catholic Patriarch of Venice (Giuseppe Sarto) was predictably outraged and demanded the work be taken down; the Biennale remanded the judgment to the “committee”, which refused. See “The Grosso case”, entry on the “History” section of the Venice Biennale website, English version, quotation from a letter in the ASAC archives, as cited online at <https://www.labiennale.org/en/history-biennale-arte>, accessed March 2014.

10

Munich set the most persuasive model with its 1888 *Der III Internationalen Kunstausstellung* (third because they counted a very early 1788 show, allowing this one to become a jubilee); this city was also home to important *Kunstvereins* and of course the Munich “Secession”. For the discussion of Munich’s international art exhibition of 1888 see Lawrence Alloway, *The Venice Biennale: from Salon to Goldfish Bowl* (Greenwich: New York Graphic Society, 1968), 33.

11

On difference and repetition, see Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994). See below for further discussion involving theories of event and experience by Alain Badiou and Michel Foucault.

12

For a recent overview of Oreste’s history and the relationship between its collective and exhibitionary dimensions, see Marco Scotti, “Da Oreste alla Biennale all’archivio. Per una storia del rapporto tra dimensione collettiva e momento espositivo nell’esperienza del progetto Oreste (1997-2001)”, *Ricerche di S/Confine*, Dossier 4 (2018): 172-187. Giancarlo Norese, who was part of Oreste, recently reconstructed the history of the group, *Progetto Oreste (1997-2001)*. A kind of index, available at [https://www.academia.edu/10160936/Progetto\\_Oreste\\_1997-2001\\_-\\_A\\_kind\\_of\\_index](https://www.academia.edu/10160936/Progetto_Oreste_1997-2001_-_A_kind_of_index), accessed October 2019.

13

Internet protocols were being linked as early as the 1980s among high-energy physicists, forming a “network of networks” called the Internet; Tim Berners-Lee inaugurated the concept and software for the World Wide Web in 1989, which became functional around 1990. But it is important to recognise that while academics were the first adopters, most did not use email (for example) until the mid-1990s.

**Aesthetic shifts**

In arguments I have elaborated elsewhere, the biennial's recurring energies participated, and perhaps even stimulated, a historical shift towards the present aesthetics of experience.<sup>14</sup> The nineteenth century world's fairs had built a discourse of movable objects circulating in a civil, secular society. Such understandings continued in the Biennale editions of the first half of the twentieth century, as the great exhibitions' festal associations also fueled the biennial form. Once the biennials took over from fairs as a site for international display, art was further segregated and thus intensified into the "artworld" as we recognize it today.<sup>15</sup>

Events were seeded by the world's fairs (dominated by France and England), but there were very specific Italian variants. With the takeover of Venice's Biennale by the fascist government in Rome, for example, further "festivalisation" ensued – it was the spectacle-loving fascists who founded the Venice film festival (immediately countered by an anti-fascist version at Cannes). The goal was explicit: the film event aimed at bringing to the Lido the same kind of energy (not to mention fame and celebrity glitter) that had long been enjoyed in the Giardini during the Biennale. Also in the background of this war-time festivalisation was Mussolini's earlier plan for a permanent world's fair in Rome: *EUR – Esposizione Universale Roma* (Universal Exhibition Rome), scheduled to open in 1939 as a twenty-year anniversary celebration of fascism's putative founding. Although construction on EUR began in the 1930s, it was abandoned after Italy was mobilised for war.<sup>16</sup>

Following fascism's defeat in the Second World War, there was need for renewal and renovation of the Venice event. Reopening in 1948, the Biennale witnessed a new Cold War contest among the remnants of pre-war figuration (socialist and fascist realisms had dominated and divided the field) and various kinds of abstraction (geometric versus a new gestural or unformed style); national pavilions played out the new bloc politics. To make matters even more challenging, Venice soon faced competition, as São Paulo (in 1951) and then documenta (1955) took up the contemporary in recurring festal forms. documenta's founder Arnold Bode declared a "100-day museum" in Kassel, emphasising the temporary event structure of the exhibition. This would be updated in 1972 by the young *Gastarbeiter* brought in to be the 5<sup>th</sup> edition's curator, Harald Szeemann, who one-upped Bode by announcing documenta as a "100-day event."

This was, of course, a response to the eventful nature of 1968, which had led the young Szeemann to put on shows of Fluxus events and happenings at his sleepy Bern Kunsthalle, even as student protests dominated that season's Venice Biennale. Protesters raged specifically against the linkage between Biennale and art market, which, as we know, had been a primary goal of the event's founders.<sup>17</sup> The exhibitionary circuits of the Biennale had been supported for three-quarters of a century by a market for contemporary art – a percentage of any sales from biennial shows had paid for the development of subsequent editions, which could promote new markets for newly exposed artists, and so on. Protesters targeted this loop,

14

See Caroline A. Jones, *The Global Work of Art: World's Fairs, Biennials, and the Aesthetics of Experience* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).

15

The "art world" would be announced as such in the important essay by philosopher Arthur Danto, "The Artworld", *The Journal of Philosophy*, 61, no. 19 (American Philosophical Association, Eastern Division Sixty-First Annual Meeting, October 15, 1964): 571-584.

16

Emily V. Bovino notes, "Ironically, EUR was eventually completed in the 1960s for the Rome Olympics despite the 'defeat' of fascism". Email communication with the author, November 21, 2017.

17

For a short account, see Chiara Di Stefano, "The 1968 Biennale. Boycotting the exhibition: An account of three extraordinary days" in *Starting from Venice: Studies on the Biennale*, ed. Clarissa Ricci (Milan: et al., 2010), 130-133. See also Vittoria Martini, *La Biennale di Venezia 1968-1978: la rivoluzione incompiuta* (PhD diss., Università luav and Università Ca' Foscari, Venice, 2011).

and won immediate concessions.<sup>18</sup> First the monetary prizes were abolished by 1969, and then finally the *Ufficio Vendite* (Sales Department) was closed for good in 1973.<sup>19</sup> The cancellation of an object-centred market ideology behind recurring exhibitions was a breath-taking change.

Banishing commerce allowed the biennial structure in Venice to exhibit non-consumable art; youthful politics confirmed this drift. Venice now had every opportunity to become truly responsive to contemporary artists – more permeable to the “non-objects”, conceptual art, and eventful stagings that were elsewhere functioning as “alternative” vanguards to the commercial gallery and stodgy museum. The new openness had already been creeping into the less-centralised national pavilions, as when Lygia Clark represented Brazil in the Biennale of 1968 with her “trans-objects”, instigators of experience rather than stable forms. Brazil, galvanised by its own biennial back home, had already generated dramatically performative, non-marketable art events that would only much later make it to the Venice Biennale.<sup>20</sup> When they did, in the particularly notable intervention by the group *Oreste* I am interrogating here, it would no longer be an echo of the last century’s games, but a prophecy for the next.

### Openings

I have argued that event forms were built into the structure of biennial ephemerality itself, materialised in the *spettacoli* (spectacles) at the first biennale in 1895 and the 1900 parade of the liberal arts. These festal additions were certainly highly formalised and hierarchical. Yet as the market was banished in the 1960s, several ruptures – within the Biennale and outside it – further broke the hold of objects. These followed on the encouragement of the “open work” that had already been seeded in 1962 by Italy’s most internationally famous literary theorist, Umberto Eco, whose important *Opera aperta* theorised notions of cultural production along the lines of the “open score”, Cagean aesthetics (aleatory mergings of dance and “noise”), and art world happenings.<sup>21</sup> Although only later identified as “discourse production”, this can be seen in an aspect of the open work that was already emerging in the art world of the 1970s: formal material residues of otherwise informal and evanescent practices. Xerox books, pamphlets, polemics, purchased ads and other print forms brought meetings, happenings, and protests into discursive media. After 1968, eventful art forms and their accompanying textual media came to be in tune with the increasingly progressive politics of a young audience interested in biennials’ inherently comparative, international and aspirationally global compass.

---

18

The art fair begins here: Cologne’s Kunstmarkt of 1967 had been a small scale, purely German event. Once Venice’s market function came under a cloud after the 1968 protests, Cologne’s fair became international, and Basel’s was declared (1970). Of course, although there is no “official” market linked to the Biennale fortunes today, if one were to subtract the financial and material contributions made by global galleries to the installations at the present-day Biennale (not to mention such galleries’ funding of all the opening night parties), it would be a very, very different event. On the German art fairs, see Nadine Oberste-Hetbleck ed., *Zur Geschichte des Düsseldorfer Kunsthandels* (Düsseldorf: Düsseldorf University Press, 2014); and her essay “Zum Verhältnis von Art Brut und Kunstmessen in Europa am Beispiel der kunstKÖLN”, in *Blickränder – Grenzen, Schwellen und ästhetische Randphänomene in den Künsten*, eds. Astrid Lang, Wiebke Windorf (Berlin: Lukas Verlag für Kunst- und Geistesgeschichte, 2017), 475-490.

19

See Clarissa Ricci “Breve Storia dell’Ufficio Vendite della Biennale di Venezia 1895-1972. Origini, Funzionamento e declino”, *Ricerche di S/Confine* VIII, no. 1 (2017): 1-20.

20

I’m referring to Hélio Oiticica and his *parangolés*, among other practices of the late 1960s in Brazil. See Jones, *Global Work of Art*.

21

Umberto Eco, *Opera aperta: forma e indeterminazione nelle poetiche contemporanee* (Milan: Bompiani, 1962). For Happenings and their roots in the aesthetics of John Cage, see Allan Kaprow, *Assemblage, environments & happenings* (New York: H.N. Abrams, 1966). See also John Cage, *Silence: lectures and writings* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1961).

Slowly but surely, the fair's festal structures were being incorporated into the art itself, as even Venice eventually had to acknowledge. Foregrounded in curatorial practices by the likes of Szeemann (whose first love had been theatre), performative rituals had spread throughout the contemporary art world during the 1970s, building on the pervasive tactics of conceptual art, the transnational antics of Fluxus, the liberatory energies of happenings, the sexual-political transgressions of *Aktionen*, the technical maturation of video, and eventually, the transducing power of digital convergence. These modes and forces all tended to be politically progressive (postmodern reinvigorations of the old avant-garde). In the urgent prose of philosopher François Lyotard writing in the early 1980s: "What is at stake in a literature, in a philosophy, in a politics perhaps, is to bear witness to differends by finding idioms for them".<sup>22</sup> Those "idioms" would increasingly be negotiated in the art world via technologically-mediated durational events.

Szeemann certainly played a role in bringing this to Venice. His activities throughout Europe – most famously at event-driven versions of *documenta* in the 1970s – had cemented his role as the "go-to" guest curator for making recurring exhibitions newsworthy and contemporary. His first stab at the Venice Biennale was as a member of the curatorial team<sup>23</sup> founding, with Achille Bonito Oliva, the 1980 structure called "*Aperto*," intended to open the Biennale to younger artists of an eventful mien. Szeemann claimed to have created *Aperto* all by himself, but like much of his self-mythologising, this is at the very least exaggerated. One historian of the Biennale, Enzo Di Martino, gives the "open" move entirely to curator Achille Bonito Oliva, identifying Szeemann merely as one of "a committee of critics" who advised on the "disappointing" international survey of 1970s artists.<sup>24</sup> Szeemann's account, by contrast, is almost comically self-aggrandising: "I created *Aperto* for the Venice Biennale" – or later, "I was only able to curate it by threatening to resign and on the condition that I was able to work alongside Achille Bonito Oliva. [...] Unfortunately, *Aperto* later became a bureaucratic appendix, linked to proposals by curators and reserved for artists under 35 years of age, [...]"<sup>25</sup>

What matters is not so much the adjudication of credit, but the emergence of an idea of opening (certainly belated by the broader standards of the other arts, whether music with Cage or literary criticism with Eco). Luckily for our story, Szeemann got a second chance at "opening" the Biennale in 1999, when he was finally named its sole commissioner. This time he had help from Agnes Kohlmeyer, a German-born art historian and curator who had moved to Venice in the mid-1980s, and Cecilia Liveriero Lavelli, an art historian and filmmaker getting her PhD in Bologna.<sup>26</sup> The difference in the two *Aperto* events across the two decades is marked.

---

22

François Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute* [1983], trans. Georges Van Den Abbeele (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 13.

23

The 1980 Venice Biennale was directed by Luigi Carluccio together with a committee including Achille Bonito Oliva, Flavio Caroli, Michael Compton, Jean Leymarie and Harald Szeemann. There was yet another curatorial team for the main exhibition "Arte degli Anni '70" that included Martin Kunz.

24

Szeemann's claim to have "invented" *Aperto* can be found in the interview with Hans-Ulrich Obrist, "Mind over Matter", *Artforum* 35, no. 3 (November 1996); compare to Szeemann's marginalisation in Di Martino, *History of the Venice Biennale*, 70.

25

Harald Szeemann interviewed by Obrist, "Mind over Matter": 5; and Szeemann, "The timeless, grand narration of human existence in its time", introductory essay to the 49<sup>th</sup> Esposizione internazionale d'arte, *Plateau of Humankind*, English ed. (Venice: La Biennale di Venezia, 2001), xvii.

26

Thanks to Giancarlo Norese for enlightening me about Cecilia Liveriero Lavelli's importance in connecting Szeemann to the Italian artists. Email interview with the author, November 11-12, 2017.

**Enter Oreste**

When Szeemann returned to Venice for his research around 1998, the Venice Biennale's *Aperto* had long since lapsed, creating a gap cited (along with the apparent conservatism of documenta) as one of the instigations for the 1996 founding of *Manifesta*.<sup>27</sup> For Venice, the opening of *Manifesta* in Rotterdam may have been the jolt that led once more to Szeemann, always reliable for putting an exhibition venue back on the map. This time fully in charge, Szeemann rendered the 48th Venice Biennial more open than ever before. At the cusp of the new millennium, he wanted it to absorb all the unsuccessful *Apertos* before it, reclaiming them for the theme of "*dAPERTutto*"—the word literally meaning "everywhere," but with the word for "OPEN" functioning as a breath of fresh air in the middle of its curious orthography.<sup>28</sup> While Italian scholars interpreted "everywhere" to signal the new global vision Szeemann brought to the event, English-speakers were encouraged (by Szeemann's own statements and texts in English) to think it was more of a democratic inclusion of all ages and genders – "open to all".<sup>29</sup> Szeemann's multi-lingual versions also condemned predecessor biennials by announcing in the catalogue that it would be "breaking [...] the Biennale's self-imposed rules" with an aggressively transnational and socially networked incursion into the structure and architecture of the biennial system itself. That infiltration was a new viral organism calling itself "Oreste".

Marking the shift from boat transport, postal mailings, fax machines and long distance telephone calls sent through ocean floor cables and landlines, Oreste engaged novel infrastructures called email, listservs, and the "world wide web". The loose collective insisted that "*Oreste non è di nessuno*" or "*Oreste non è nessuno*" ("Oreste is nobody's", or "Oreste is nobody"), staging itself as a "general identity" with specific if anonymous ambitions.<sup>30</sup> Seemingly alluding to tragic

27

See René Block and Henry Meyric Hughes, debated by Hedwig Fijen, in "How a European Biennial of Contemporary Art Began", in *The Manifesta Decade: Debates on Contemporary Art Exhibitions and Biennials in Post-Wall Europe*, eds. Barbara Vanderlinden and Elena Filipovic (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2005), 189-191.

28

The full title is even more delirious: *dAPERTutto/APERTO overALL/APERTO parTOUT/APERTO überALL* (Venice: Biennale di Venezia and Marsilio, 1999). Note that Szeemann explicitly authorised the English (mis)translation of *dapertutto* as "Open to All", even though that is not correct from the Italian. See Carol Vogel, "At the Venice Biennale, Art Is Turning Into An Interactive Sport", *The New York Times*, Arts Section, June 14, 1999: "This year, however, Mr. Szeemann has expanded and renamed the *Aperto*, making it *Dapertutto*, or open to all, mixing mature artists like Louise Bourgeois, Bruce Nauman and Sigmar Polke with young unknown artists [...]". In a helpful reading by Emily Bonvino: "Visually, the word functions much like 'Oreste' does when Pietroiusti says it made him think of 'rete' (net): it's nice because 'apert(o)' is in the middle with two 'doors' on either side (*d* and *utto*). Even though it doesn't read '*aperto a tutti*' or 'open to all' [...] it definitely evokes that meaning through misreading". Email communication with the author, November 21, 2017.

29

For Clarissa Ricci, *dAPERTutto* signaled "a shift towards spatiality and globalisation. This is why Szeemann looked all over the globe for artists. He brought a big number of Chinese artists [...], stressing also the spatial enlargement of the Biennale which coincides with the new buildings utilised from this Biennale onwards: Arsenale, Gaggiandre, etc... So the word refers also to the Biennale everywhere in Venice". Email communication with the author, December 22, 2017. See also Clarissa Ricci, *La Biennale di Venezia 1993-2003: l'esposizione come piattaforma* (PhD diss., Università luav and Università Ca' Foscari, Venice, 2014), particularly pages 335-343; available online at <http://dspace.unive.it/handle/10579/4596>. On Szeemann's intentions as conveyed to the English-speaking press, see Vogel, "At the Venice Biennale". For a different view of forces for the "enlargement" of the Biennale, see Jones, *Global Work of Art*.

30

The first version occurs in the published brochure available as the Biennale opened, circa April-May 1999; the second is from minutes of Oreste group meetings in Venice, held between the October 29, and the afternoon of October 30, 1999. I am deeply grateful to "Orestian" Emilio Fantin for sharing these minutes with me in an email interview, October 2017. "General identity" from Fantin email, October 2017.



epic (Aeschylus's *Oresteia* describes the mythic cycle in which Orestes avenges his father's murder by murdering his mother),<sup>31</sup> "Oreste" was in fact hilarious in the ears of its founders – simultaneously evoking a cheap Roman trattoria and the Italian term for "network"—*rete*.<sup>32</sup> Mindful of the (originally Italian) literary collective "Luther Blissett" (whose performative pranks were mostly aimed at a "homeopathic" injection of counter-information that could inoculate the public against fake news),<sup>33</sup> the "Orestians" decided to form a different kind of conduit for their collective energies. While the pseudonymous "Blissett" came to produce an eerie composite image for himself and author a prize-winning novel, [fig. 1] his was an identity

fig. 1  
"Luther Blissett", the collective author, as visualized on [www.lutherblissett.net/img/luther-blissett-300.jpg](http://www.lutherblissett.net/img/luther-blissett-300.jpg)



31

Much more can be said about the logic of naming your collective after a matricidal hero – my thanks to Emily V. Bovino for our discussions about this logic in the context of post-war Italy's feminist movements and the anarchist strain that runs through Italian politics and culture. Bovino notes an important precedent necessitating further research – the work of radical theatre group Societas Raffaello Sanzio, whose work was shown in the 1984 Venice Biennale, and whose 1996 production of *Theater der Welt- Oresteia* in Vienna may have been known to the Orestians in 1999. See Valentina Valentini, trans. Tom Rankin "The *Oresteia* of the Societas Raffaello Sanzio," *Performance Research* 2, no. 3 (1997): 58-64, referencing Societas Raffaello Sanzio, *Orestea (una tragedia organica?)* (Cesena: SRS, 1995).

32

Email to the author from participating artist Cesare Pietroiusti, July 30, 2014: "since I had proposed a very complicated and 'stiff' name for the residency – something like 'first experimental laboratory of artists' residency and exchange blablah' someone (Mario Pieroni, one of the initiators), who wanted to make fun of me, proposed 'oreste' because, he said, it sounded like the name of a whatever roman trattoria. I immediately liked it not because of Aeschylus but because that name somehow included the term 'rete' (net, network)...". The association with the *Oresteia* was, however, on the mind of the "Elettra" group (announcing itself as "Oreste's sister") meeting in Spazio Oreste during the Biennale to form a network of independent arts institutions throughout Europe. See Giancarlo Norese ed., *Oreste at the Venice Biennale* (Milan: Charta, 2000), n.p. I am immensely grateful to Agnes Kohlmeyer for the gift of this book during our interview in Venice in 2005.

33

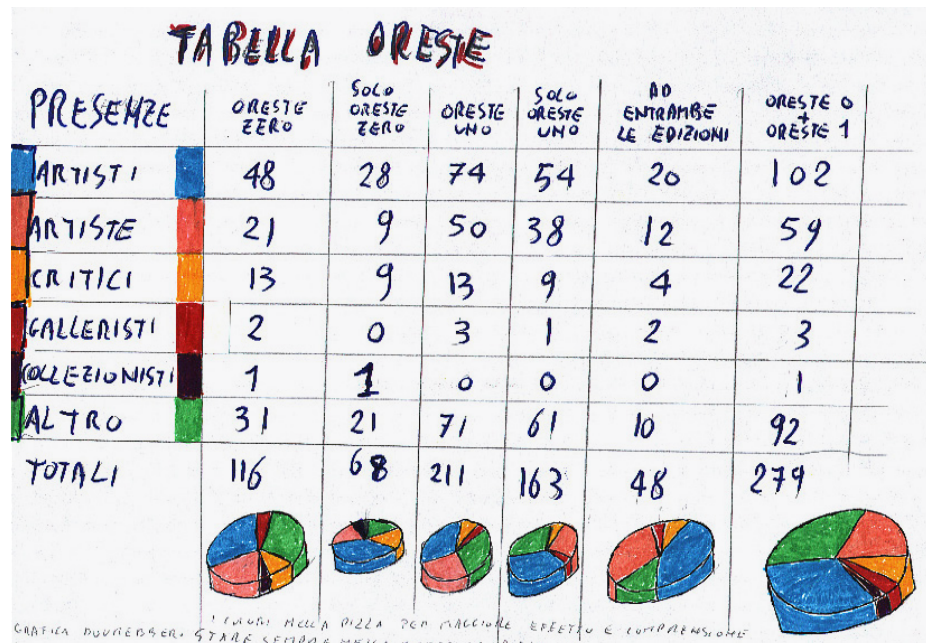
The Luther Blissett project is documented on <http://www.lutherblissett.net/>, which discusses a 1997 prank in this way: "'Homoeopathic counter-information': by injecting a strong dose of falsehood in the media, Luther Blissett showed the unprofessionalism of most reporters and the groundlessness of moral panic".

34

Minutes of the Oreste meeting, October 1999.

theoretically open to anyone for prankish appropriation. Oreste, on the other hand, “while open, maintains its own organisation (and decision-making co-ordination), clearly visible and with declared functions as clear as possible to everyone, along with a variety of activities that are also well-defined and recognizable”.<sup>34</sup> Oreste had begun around 1997 by fostering conferences and short-term residencies with like-minded Italian artists (plus some critics, curators, and even a few collectors), especially those engaged with lively, event-based art and thoughtful about the implications of an incipient networked society. [fig. 2] In the useful history by Stefano

fig. 2  
Pino Boresta, chart of participants in the short-term residencies at Paliano (Oreste “0” and Oreste “1”), during the summers of 1997 and 1998. Courtesy Giancarlo Norese.



Vittorini, Oreste really took off with a Fall 1997 conference organized in Bologna by Salvatore Falci, Eva Marisaldi, Giancarlo Norese, Cesare Pietroiusti, Anteo Radovan, Cesare Viel, and Luca Vitone (with Pietroiusti playing a determinative role).<sup>35</sup> [fig. 3] For Vittorini, the artists discussed the impact that technological innovation was having on the evolution of communication dynamics, on everyday life and on subjectivity, and how these changes would then be reflected in artistic practice. At the conference mostly artists intervened, presenting their own research and work. The activities carried out were clustered or organised in working groups so that the sharing of ideas could result in new collaborations.<sup>36</sup> Above all, the conference title – *Come spiegare a mia madre che ciò che faccio serve a qualcosa?* (how do I tell my mother that what I do serves a purpose?) – addressed the unrecognisable forms this art was

35

Stefano Vittorini, “Come spiegare a mia madre che ciò che faccio serve a qualcosa? Oreste alla Biennale Arte, tecnologia, network e ‘spazi di positiva inquietudine’: il caso Oreste alla Biennale di Venezia del 1999”, *Kabul Magazine*, Case Studies (June 13, 2016). Online at <http://www.kabulmagazine.com/come-spiegare-a-mia-madre-che-cio-che-faccio-serve-a-qualcosa-oreste-alla-biennale/>; accessed October 2017. Vittorini takes the name of the Bologna event as his title; the conference was: “*Come spiegare a mia madre che ciò che faccio serve a qualcosa?: Comunicazione, quotidianità, soggettività. Un convegno sulle nuove ricerche artistiche in Italia*” (how do I tell my mother that what I do serves a purpose?: Communication, the quotidian, subjectivity. A conference on new artistic research in Italy), held from October 31 – November 2, 1997. This was hosted by LINK in Bologna, which Emilio Fantin recalls as “one of the most important independent cultural and art production centers in Italy and abroad in the 1990s”. Email communication, October 2017. The Orestians’ conference title has also been translated as “How do I explain to my mother that what I do is useful?”. See the 20-page booklet published for *Oreste alla Biennale*, online at <https://issuu.com/noresize/docs/palinsesto>. This booklet clarifies that “Oreste 0” first met in Paliano as a short-term artist residency program, before the fall LINK conference.

36

Stefano Vittorini, “Come spiegare a mia madre”.

fig. 3  
 “Orestians” preparing for their first conference, “*Come spiegare a mia madre che ciò che faccio serve a qualcosa?*” at the house of Anteo Radovan in Bologna. Visible left to right are Cesare Viel, Giancarlo Norese, Eva Marisaldi, and Cesare Pietroiusti. Photograph by Silvia Alfei, posted on the Oreste Tumblr site [progettooreste.tumblr.com/](http://progettooreste.tumblr.com/). Accessed November 2017. Courtesy Giancarlo Norese.



taking, fuelled by socially engaged, activist, and collaborative practices. Initially, the “purpose” served by Oreste was to question the individual as a unit of creation or interpretation: “only artificially can he consider himself as isolated”.

In conjunction with that goal, Oreste was redefining the *kinds of spaces* where art could happen: “analytical and experiential work groups can have a function [to] represent a non-place or a ‘heterotopia’ as Foucault would define it”.<sup>37</sup>

Oreste began to take shape as an entity both networked and physical, social and technical, virtual and material. As one of the early collaborators, Cesare Pietroiusti recalled, “certainly [there was] the willingness to verify the existence and solidity of somehow a network of relationships between people. Among people who want to work together, to put into play their own ideas, their own time”.<sup>38</sup> There was also a clear new vision of how “art” could work. What distinguished Oreste’s mode of organisation from the apparently singular artist (*à la* Blissett) was their fundamental commitment both to coordination and decentralisation, fostering multiple independent cultural activities rather than consolidating production under a (pseudonymous) author-name. In an important October 1999 meeting (undertaken while the Venice projects were well underway), Orestians confirmed their commitment to document the loose but somehow “authorised” Oreste events at the Biennale, and by so doing “to privilege curatorial, decision-making autonomy of the various ‘local’ projects”.<sup>39</sup> The use of quotation marks around “local” is suggestive (given the internationalisation of Oreste underway at the Biennale). “Local” could span both the globally-accessible web activity of Oreste on “UnDo.net” as well as specific spatial interventions involving an abbey and a railway, or the place-based “Orestepoesia” in Duino (with artist Meri Gorni). Complicating “local” from the beginning, many Italian cities were part of the Oreste mesh.

The meeting in October 1999 was held in order to plan a post-exhibition publication that could document the blizzard of events (the biennale was to close on the 7<sup>th</sup> of November that year): “The release of the book, which will be

37

As theorized in the article solicited for Oreste from psychoanalyst Elisa Ottaviani, “Oreste Sapiens-Sapiens”, in Norese, *Oreste at the Venice Biennale*, 22.

38

Cesare Pietroiusti interview, as cited by Vittorini “Come spiegare a mia madre”.

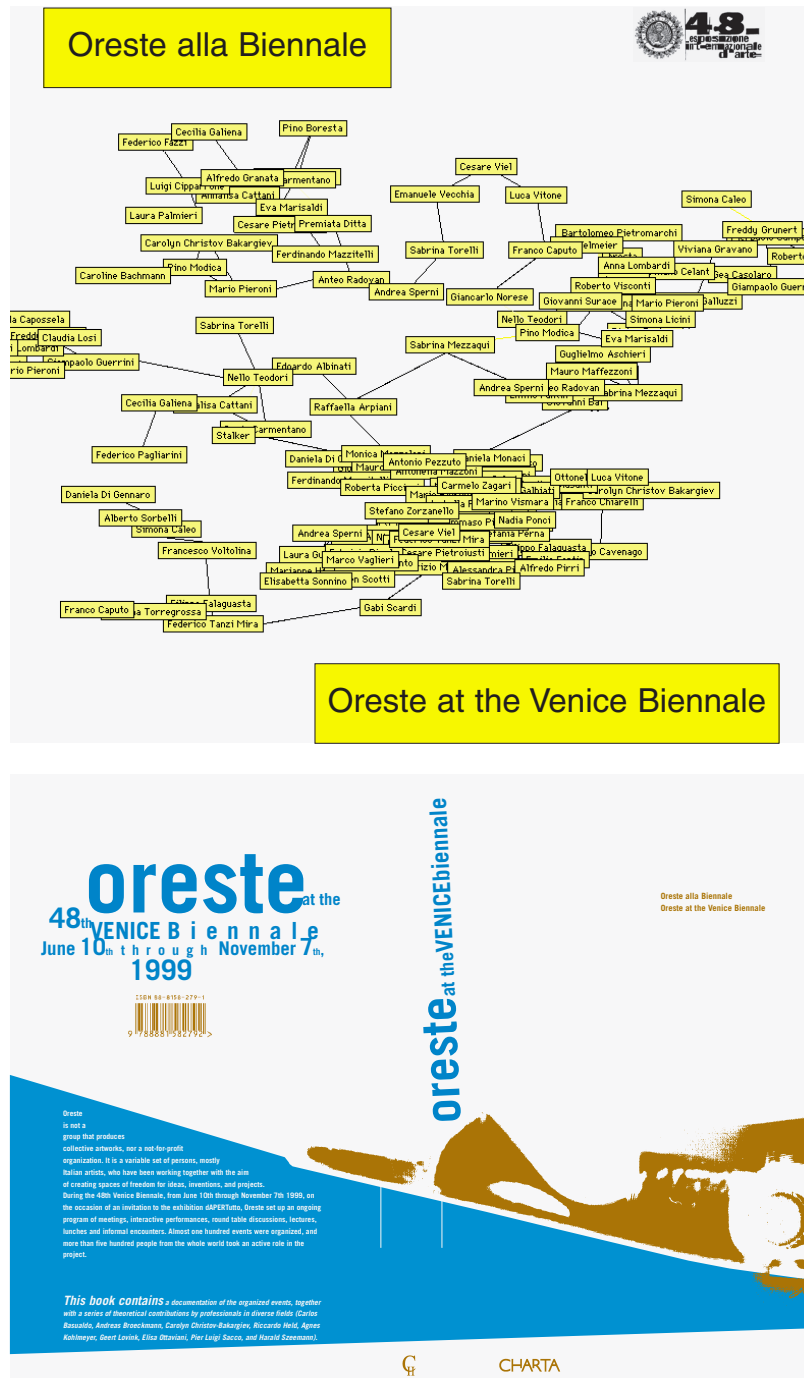
39

Minutes, October 1999.

bilingual (or multilingual) is urgent, to give an internationally visible follow-up to the work done in Venice”.<sup>40</sup> The group had already published a booklet-type guide to their schedule during the Biennale; a year after the exhibition itself they followed up with *Oreste at the Venice Biennale*. Published by Milan’s Charta, it was a trim compendium documenting the wide array of actions that marked “‘the rite of passage’ for Oreste, from that nascent state to the collective identity” registered at the Biennale, now to be committed to print.<sup>41</sup> (While Giancarlo Norese was the book’s editor, his name is nowhere on the cover, reflecting the idea that sections would be given to the autonomous groups participating in events, who would, again, “curate” their own pages). [fig. 4] The initial booklet had shown a hive of networked relations

fig. 4

Oreste, covers for publications relating to the 48<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale. Top: home page of the online project [www.undo.net/oreste](http://www.undo.net/oreste), reproduced on a booklet listing all activities hosted by Oreste at the 1999 biennale. Bottom: book, also designed by *UnDo.net*, edited by Giancarlo Norese, and published after the biennale (Milan: Charta, 2000).



<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ottaviani, in Norese, *Oreste at the Venice Biennale*, 23.

on its cover (taken right off the opening page of Oreste's website as crafted by UnDo.net). The second more comprehensive catalogue features the smudged and suddenly archaic profile of a portable typewriter.<sup>42</sup>

The cooperative Oreste described itself on the book's back cover as a transnational network of "roughly one hundred and sixty-four members" making appearances in Venice, incorporating a significant fraction of the younger artists in Italy and intensely *branché* with "more than five hundred people from the whole world" who participated virtually or otherwise in the project.<sup>43</sup>

I have speculated elsewhere that the key curatorial contact for Szeemann – that is, the condition of possibility for his even learning of Oreste's existence – may have been Kohlmeyer, who was living in Venice and conversant with the local scene.<sup>44</sup> Or, it may have been visionary art dealer and collector Mario Pieroni, affiliated with the original group. Or perhaps it was curator Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, married to one of the key collaborators, a participant in Oreste's summer sessions and a theorist summoned to write in the final catalogue.<sup>45</sup> For Norese, the contact was Lavelli, "a good friend of mine, who was at the time the assistant of Szeemann".<sup>46</sup> Likely it was all of the above, echoed by the artists themselves who would have cited their association with the mysteriously named 'Oreste' as Szeemann made trips to Rome (where he met with Pietroiusti), Bologna, and elsewhere during his research for the main international show.

When Szeemann finally decided he wanted Oreste for the Biennale, it posed a dilemma for the loose collective. If Oreste aimed to renegotiate the art System in ways that might completely change business-as-usual, would joining the Biennale hamper that rather revolutionary goal? Admitting that the group "discussed and reflected a lot about the relationship between institutional and independent politics in an art context" and that "our participation at the Venice Biennale could have been contradictory", artist and Oreste organiser Emilio Fantin recalls a clear consensus in the end: "we thought that we could not escape this challenge in order to change the relationship with institutions [and] set up an international network [...]". Furthermore and perhaps most significantly, "we trusted Szeemann".<sup>47</sup> Norese too recalls "hundreds of emails", but has a more complicated account of the decision. Oreste understood its participation in the Biennale to be:

...a kind of "pharmakon", *we were led in to be sacrificed* [...] We then decided to establish a taboo: the prohibition to show our individual works in one of the most important places for artists to be. So we duplicated the situation we were used to while being together in our encounters: talking, eating and drinking, sometimes even smoking inside the biennale... and organising a series of about 100 events during the whole duration of the exhibition, and not only during the opening days.<sup>48</sup>

The *pharmakon*, in Norese's telling, calls up all the complex philosophical discourse around the term: poison, medicine, scapegoat. For Jacques Derrida and others

---

42

Probably one of the iconic Olivetti portables that defined good design through the 1960s and 1970s.

43

Back cover, Norese, *Oreste at the Venice Biennale*.

44

My speculations are in Jones, *Global Work of Art*, 191.

45

See the charming "all star" film from the first summer session of Oreste in Paliano (called "Oreste 1"). The film is now digitized and on vimeo at <https://vimeo.com/226950741> — *Progetto Oreste Uno* (1998), "Paliano, 1-29 luglio 1998", 3+ minutes. A laughing Christov-Bakargiev is in an early frame.

46

Norese, email interview, November 2017.

47

Emilio Fantin in an email exchange with the author, October 2017.

48

Norese, email interview, November 2017. Emphasis added.

writing on the concept in the 1980s, it was crucial that these contradictions are not to be resolved. The cultural production (the “*pharmakon*”) both inscribes memory and erases it, both “cures” and “infects”, is the scapegoat that is arbitrarily charged with evil in order to restore order, etc.<sup>49</sup> Notably, the radical theatre producers who revived the *Oresteia* in 1995 also thought in these terms: “The actor in the company is the victim required to celebrate the ritual of degradation and regeneration of the performance-event”.<sup>50</sup> In that sombre and hilarious spirit, Oreste would be the infectious agent injected into the Biennale, corrupting its authorial apparatus, and hence serving as the remedy for a pernicious art world disease.

The group did its infectious best. It organised, enabled, provided spaces for, welcomed, and eventually documented a range of events and gatherings. These happened in *Spazio Oreste*, situated on the edge of the Central Pavilion where the high-profile international exhibition had long been staged. Oreste’s incursion energised the spot (in space “A”) where the crusty old edifice opens onto a small terrace designed by Carlo Scarpa in 1952, a gem-like garden intended to purge the toxic fumes of fascist occupation with a healing spatial tonic. [fig. 5] Scarpa had intended the space for lounging – but now there would be “lounging as art”.

fig. 5  
Carlo Scarpa, sculpture garden for the Venice Biennale, 1952, as photographed by Eamonn Canniffe, ca. 2006. The glass doors open onto gallery “A” of the Padiglione Italia; these two areas constituted “Spazio Oreste” during the 48th Venice Biennale in 1999.



“Art vs. Economy: A Cultural Emergency?” was one meeting on July 9, 1999 (with Turkish curator Beryl Madra and a “cultural management” expert from Istanbul, Serhan Ada); “Contagious Lunch – Live” was orchestrated in the same space on the next day (by a pair of Swedish artists supported by the Swedish Art Fund). A program on the “San Francisco Video Scene” was mounted intermittently,

49

“The *pharmakon* is the movement, the locus, and the play...” From Derrida, *Disseminations*, trans. Barbara Johnson (London: The Athlone Press, 1981), 127; see also René Girard on the *pharmakos* or scapegoat in Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977).

50

Valentini, writing of the post-Artaudian theatrics of the Societas Raffaello Sanzio, in Valentini “The *Oresteia*”: 59.

discussions were held with “foreign students in Italy” throughout the Biennial’s duration, and an interactive performance was offered in October by German artist Regina Frank, trademarked “The Artist is Present®”.<sup>51</sup> Later in the month at the same Spazio Oreste, a recap of what French sociologist Nicolas Bourriaud had recently dubbed *l’esthétique relationnelle* was offered by two Italian artists incorporating themselves as “artway of thinking”: “*Con molto piacere* (which they translate as “you are welcome”): *Assaggio d’arte relazionale* (a taste of relational art)”.<sup>52</sup> Typical of the confused, passionate, and provocative meditations on the connected but still largely powerless globalised artist was this intervention by the “Foreign Investment” group claiming participants (in their nervous typography) from “London \* New York \* Liverpool \* Berlin \* Istanbul \* Zurich \* Kyoto \* Singapore”:

#### FOREIGN INVESTMENT

This auspicious and select group has been driven together by destiny, the melting of the poles, the urgent imperatives of a world in which art has been staled [sic- stalled?] by property and commodification, and in which shared authenticity is rare.

CULTURAL CAPITAL / OUTRAGE AND EXCHANGE<sup>53</sup>

Perhaps for the first time since its founding, the Venice Biennale’s main “international” show was invaded by raw transnational agency – self-organising, hospitably curated, open to spontaneous events, and utterly of the moment.

Utilising the tiny space of the Scarpa garden (and its adjacent oval-shaped gallery) as a conduit for open works, the group brought visitors back more than once. The garden was a randomising event-structure, fostering the growth of “collective organisms” (as psychologist Elisa Ottaviani put it). Here were chance encounters where visitors could be surprised by relational art, might become “the involuntary protagonists of an artistic performance”, might enjoy “the offering of a piece of bread fresh from the oven”, or at the very least find a place to sit and breathe, all the while taking in the inspiring oxygen of “an artistic-economic experiment”.<sup>54</sup> Fantin recalls it this way:

Our space was often crowded not only because we had a very intense schedule but also because we often shared food, drinks and conviviality. It was a mix between an *agorà* where people could discuss and elaborate new projects and a familiar space where people can sit down and talk with some other visitors, artist or guards. Some crossed the space without even realising that it was an art space, but thinking it was a bar or an info point. Many others, exhausted from the biennale tour, sat down and often fell asleep.

Because we spent a lot of time in the space, we became

---

51

Should we notify Marina Abramović of trademark infringement problems at her 2010 MoMA retrospective under the same name? See Norese, *Oreste at the Venice Biennale*, n.p.

52

Nicolas Bourriaud, *Esthétique relationnelle* (Dijon: Les Presses du Réel, 1998), worked out originally in a set of essays published in *Documents sur l’art* in 1995, and put into practice in his exhibition *Traffic* at CAPC Bordeaux in 1996. The “relational” Oreste authors identifying themselves as “artway of thinking” are named Stefania Mantovani and Federica Thiene, and post an Italian internet domain in 1999: <artway@tin.it>. See Norese, *Oreste at the Venice Biennale*, n.p. Their current website is <http://www.artway.info/>, with documentation of the Venice intervention at their associated Flickr site.

53

Norese, *Oreste at the Venice Biennale*, n.p. The UK-based group is still extant; their current website is <http://www.foreign-investments.com/main/>.

54

“Collective organisms” in Ottaviani, “Oreste Sapiens-Sapiens”, *Oreste at the Venice Biennale*, 23. “Involuntary protagonists” in Agnes Kohlmeyer, “Who is Oreste, By the Way?” in *ibid.*, 18. Economics Professor Pier Luigi Sacco described Oreste as an “artistic-economic experiment”, in his contribution “The Economics of Oreste,” in *ibid.*, 27.

friends with the guards and talked to them about different issues without the preoccupation to explain them what was or wasn't "art". By the way, many meetings and conferences were held together with performances, concerts and poetry readings. Art proposals were fused in everyday life.<sup>55</sup>

Thousands entered the Biennale for free by using the word "Oreste" at the entrance as a password. Guards were happiest when assigned to Spazio Oreste for their shifts. Artists found housing in the small apartment Oreste rented for international guests coming to participate, and many random visitors took advantage of the free internet connection available in the space.<sup>56</sup> Congratulating himself for giving space to such "an adorable initiative", Szeemann was ultimately humbled by its five months of ceaseless activity: "Oreste offered to the Biennale a nucleus of positive agitation. Thanks".<sup>57</sup> As Agnes Kohlmeyer put it, Oreste was "simply devoted to the peaceful sharing of experiences".<sup>58</sup>

### Epistemic Elisions

This idea of a "nucleus" for "agitation" and "peaceful sharing" echoes some of the intriguing psychoanalytic musings of Elisa Ottaviani, who worked with Cesare Pietroiusti to help Oreste theorise itself even before the Biennale opened. The "nucleus" originates etymologically with the biology of the kernel – the seed or nut whose shell defines it, yet must be burst, generatively, for the new organism that is its *telos*. In her discussions with Pietroiusti from April 1999, Ottaviani speculates that Oreste will be giving up its amorphous "phantasmatic body" by entering the biennial format. Visualising the effects of institutionalisation, Ottaviani pictures the bounding membrane inscribed around the group as "a 'skin' which can delimit and contain it, giving it a form". She warns that such a consolidation – such a commitment to a boundary – "will involve a sensation of loss [...] of mourning." (We can think of this as the affective life of the *pharmakos*, facing the impending sacrifice). Such anticipated losses could be turned to positive ends, Ottaviani theorised, by symbolically coding the early "nascent group state" (from the conference in Bologna, or the summer sessions in Paliano) as "group myth". The myth could then contribute to, and potentially control, the "process of symbolisation" set in motion by the international Biennale, its gallery, and its promotional apparatus.<sup>59</sup> Clearly, art history participates both in the making of myth, and in the diagnostics attached to the poisonous cure of the *pharmakon*.

In the end, how did "the skin" shape up? Was the Biennale "cured" of its market relations? In the 20-page booklet first published to guide visitors to Spazio Oreste at the Biennale, the group announced in English:

Who is Oreste? Nobody is Oreste. It is not a group that produces collective artworks. It is not a trade union for artists. It is not a non-profit organisation. Up to now it

---

55

Emilio Fantin, email communication with the author, October 2017.

56

Norese reports the "extremely expensive" bill for the Internet, about \$800, partly because the Biennale wouldn't cover everything, but also partly because a guard had been secretly downloading porn from the Oreste computer (racking up high baud rates in 1999!); similarly, the apartment "worked well until something happened in the house". Email interview, November 2017.

57

Szeemann, "Oreste at the Biennale," in Norese, *Oreste at the Venice Biennale*, 28.

58

Kohlmeyer in Norese, *Oreste at the Venice Biennale*, 17.

59

Ottaviani, "Oreste Sapiens Sapiens," in Norese, *Oreste at the Venice Biennale*, 23.



has been a variable set of people, prevalently made up of Italian artists [...].<sup>60</sup>

This set of negatives with one positive at the end matches the parallel disclaimer on the back of the much thicker *Oreste at the Biennale* publication from 2000: “Oreste is not a group that produces collective artworks, nor a not-for-profit organisation. It is a variable set of persons, mostly Italian artists”.<sup>61</sup> Is this, as Stefano Vittorini argues, a “negative dialectics” that somehow jibes both with philosopher Gianni Vattimo’s nihilistic *pensiero debole* and with Bourriaud’s neo-liberal relational aesthetics?<sup>62</sup> It would be hard to do both. Although some of the loosely corralled participants eagerly cite Bourriaud, equal numbers of the core Orestians developed intellectual objections to the French sociologist’s breezy aestheticisation of social networks and participatory art.<sup>63</sup> (Italian critic and curator Roberto Pinto was a more proximate vector for these participatory ideas, in any case).<sup>64</sup> The more left-leaning Vattimo is recalled only as a general part of Oreste’s context rather than an explicitly admired philosopher. Still, “weak thought” may indeed be a resource for comprehending Oreste at the Biennale.

Seemingly soft and unprotected, the “skin” of Oreste’s new public body lends itself to tender probing as we attempt to understand the epistemic import of the group’s anti-egotistical event structures. With his *pensiero debole* first appearing in Italian in 1983,<sup>65</sup> Gianni Vattimo counts as one of the most important of the left Heideggerians emerging in Europe during the post-war period. Generationally marked by postmodernism, his “weak thought” (originally more like “weak *ontology*”) was a much darker meditation than Bourriaud’s on where we might find ourselves after Heidegger’s announced *Entgotterung* (the decoupling of modern existence from the gods under the rule of the World as Picture). In this anti-modernist vein, Vattimo’s philosophy was hardly acquiescent with our generally commoditised existence in late capital (as Bourriaud’s sociology has been interpreted); yet it escaped the apocalyptic tone characteristic of late Marxian fulminating (*à la* Frederic Jameson or Jean Baudrillard). Described by its translators into English as “strangely disorganised” in its interdisciplinary reach, Vattimo’s weak thought refuses to act as the *kapo* or *magister*, navigating its “most delicate task” of finding another form of thinking that escapes from master narratives while working in the “crepuscule” or twilight of modernity.<sup>66</sup>

There does seem to be a “family resemblance” here with Oreste’s insistently decentralised mesh of events, abandonment of the object, refusal of author names, and commitment to open work. Moreover, the humility of this position jibes well with the sacrificial cures of radical theatre and performative art identified with the *pharmakon*. Appropriately, the “weakness” Vattimo intends, as with Oreste’s openness, allows for the emplacement and becoming of *others’* speech acts, and allows *other* places to be imagined (the heterotopias lauded by Ottaviani).

---

60

*Oreste alla Biennale*, Booklet, 1999 online at <https://issuu.com/noresize/docs/palimpsesto>. Note that while the booklet provides an English translation of “*non è di nessuno*” as “Nobody is Oreste”, I have, earlier in this essay, pointed out that the “*di*” could also contribute to a translation as “Oreste is nobody’s”.

61

Norese, *Oreste at the Venice Biennale*, back cover.

62

Vittorini, “Come spiegare a mia madre” invokes *pensiero debole* as crucial for understanding Oreste; the author does not name Gianni Vattimo, but he is the philosopher who originated the concept of “weak thought”.

63

“I don’t agree with his [Bourriaud’s] analysis and historical record”. Email communication to the author from Emilio Fantin, October 2017.

64

Norese, email interview, November 2017.

65

Gianni Vattimo, *Il pensiero debole* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1983).

66

Peter Carravetta, “What is ‘Weak Thought’? The Original Theses and Context of *il pensiero debole*”, in *Weak Thought*, eds. Vattimo and Pier Aldo Rovatti, the authorized English translation of *Il pensiero debole* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1983), trans. and ed. Peter Carravetta (Albany: SUNY Press, 2012), 2.

Vattimo insists on being open to what happens, when it happens: “There are no transcendental conditions of possibility for experience [...] suspending our ties to historical-cultural, linguistic, and categorical horizons”.<sup>67</sup> This echoes theories of the event and experience developing around that same moment in separate works by Alain Badiou and Michel Foucault, particularly the latter’s important conversations on Marx with journalist Duccio Trombadori, published in Salerno in 1981.<sup>68</sup> Such deeply influential theories reinforce my concluding question: while Oreste as an operative entity seems to be over, can we be so sure that its infectious virions don’t continue? Implicit in this essay is my conviction that Oreste’s energies continue in the best of today’s social, collective, experiential, and eventful art.<sup>69</sup>

There is much more to be said about Oreste’s hermeneutics, and about the implications of their ethical practices. Limiting myself to this synoptic overview, I have expanded on Vattimo’s “weak thought” primarily to note its resonance for fellow scholars of Oreste (such as Vittorini), rather than claiming it as some kind of “influence” on the collective. Similarly, my invocation of Deleuze (difference and repetition), Badiou (evental structures), and Foucault (on experience as transforming the subject) are cited because these theorists help us understand the force of the event in the art context. What I want to emphasise in concluding my brief history of Oreste is the absolute contemporaneity of what this handful of “mostly Italian persons” were up to in 1999. Recognising the event structures implicit in the biennial format, Orestians would become “sociable machinists of culture” (as media theorist Andreas Broeckmann celebrated them), engaging in “process-oriented communication and cooperation projects”.<sup>70</sup> But such constructive metaphors may hide the playful corrosions the group was capable of. Oreste’s networking and later publishing activity brought in compelling contemporary theorists to explain what they had done, amplifying whatever impact they could generate in print for that “urgent [...] internationally visible follow-up” to the lively presence in Venice.<sup>71</sup> Those theorists, such as Broeckmann, saw how the “minor media” of charts, schedules, booklets, internet websites, bread-baking, live performances, software, and emails, when mobilised in a space of aggregation and conversation and amplified by the centuries-old medium of print, could take what was “a minority, a cloud” – by definition, amorphous and marginalised – and through patient accumulation and aggregation, propel something forceful. Citing Guattari and Deleuze, Broeckmann links Oreste with the “becoming-minor” that the two French philosophers imagined for postmodernity:

Whenever a marginality, a minority, becomes active  
[...] it engenders a singular trajectory that is necessarily

---

67

Gianni Vattimo, “Dialectics, Difference, Weak Thought”, from Vattimo and Rovatti, *Il pensiero debole*, 13, as translated in Carravetta, *Weak Thought*, 40.

68

Alain Badiou, *Being and Event* [1988] trans. by Oliver Feltham (London: Continuum Books, 2005); Michel Foucault, “How an ‘Experience Book’ is Born”, in Foucault, *Remarks on Marx: Conversations with Duccio Trombadori*, trans. R. James Goldstein and James Cascaito (New York: Semiotexte, 1991): 30-45. While the Semiotexte edition of *Colloqui con Foucault* (Salerno: 10/17 cooperativa editrice, 1981) is flawed — including spelling Trombadori’s name wrong in the title! — it remains an essential touchstone for English-speakers, not fully replaced by the more timid translation in the authorised *Dits et écrits*.

69

Norese: “As any other form of biological life, Oreste died in spring, or summer, 2001. I believe in metempsychosis”. Fantin: “I think that the Oreste experiment is not over, it continues in different contexts as for example in this interview, and it constitutes a very special training ground in which new concepts can be elaborated, reinforcing the potential for our collective consciousness in term of constantly activating a dialectic between ‘I’ and ‘we’”. Email interviews, November 2017 and October 2017, respectively. Many of the artists involved in Oreste went on to form *Viaindustriæ*. A documentation of their activities from 2007-2017 can be found in the exhibition catalogue *Manufatto in Situ: 10 paesaggi/ 10 landscapes*, ed. Emanuele De Donno (Foligno: VIAINDUSTRIÆ publishing, 2017).

70

Andreas Broeckmann, “Sociable Machinists of Culture,” in Norese, *Oreste at the Venice Biennale*, 10.

71

Minutes, October 1999.

deterritorialising because, precisely, it's a minority that begins to subvert a majority, a consensus, a great aggregate. [...] here, this point, this object, begins to proliferate [...], begins to amplify, to recompose something that is no longer a totality, but that makes a former totality shift, detotalises, deterritorialises an entity.<sup>72</sup>

Less well documented is that Deleuze himself was informed in this theorising by radical theatre producer Carmelo Bene (linked in scholarship to that 1995 *Oresteia*). Bene intended to destabilise classical myth in his productions, rendering them “minor” and hence open to a “figure of minority conscience latent in everyone”.<sup>73</sup> We might see Oreste as operating in precisely this way.

Did Oreste deterritorialise the Central Pavilion on which it perched for those five feverish months in 1999?<sup>74</sup> For a while, yes – this “adorable” nucleus bloomed with multiple languages and initiatives, persuading curator Carlos Basualdo it had invented “a possible site of agency for a subject that would not be flexible as in today’s capitalistic worker, but that neither would be rigid and massive, as in the traditional romantic artist, or in the equally rigid communitarian attempts of thirty years ago”.<sup>75</sup> It is this condition of the subject that emerges as Oreste’s most important contribution. In the recent reminiscence of Emilio Fantin:

I think that Oreste can be seen not only as an experience of “engineering an alternative” for spaces, infrastructures and modalities in art contexts, but also as an experience in which emerges the intuition of a new dimension of the “subject”. What anyone could have gotten from this experience is the capacity to lower her/his own ego in order to switch from the idea of individual “subject” to the idea of a singular-plural subject – to quote J. L. Nancy. This issue animates the debate about commons and community which nowadays represents a possibility for improving our philosophical, social and economic vision and our way to live together.<sup>76</sup>

Whether the seed released by Oreste was utopian or corrosive, it sprouted and contributed to a contemporary ecosystem of discursive and collective potential. The point of an historical inquiry such as this one is to reanimate the possibilities and assess where they might still lead.

Oreste’s “positive nucleus” (through which the plural subject might burst) would be imitated, but without its organicism. Similarly nucleating activity became codified in more architectural terms by the next generation of curators: as a “platform” for social energy, political discussion, and dispersed knowledge production (Okwui Enwezor’s 2001 *documenta 11* with its thematic and geographically-far-flung *Platforms* is emblematic). Oreste marks one point of entry to this development, its *Spazio* imaginary constituting a spatial cousin to those much more ambitious

72

Guattari and Deleuze on “becoming-minor”, as cited in Broeckmann, “Sociable Machinists”, Norese, *Oreste at the Venice Biennale*, 11.

73

See Carmelo Bene and Gilles Deleuze, “Un manifesto di meno”, in *Sovrapposizioni*, (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1978), 90, as translated in Valentini, “The *Oresteia*”: 64.

74

I am using the contemporary name for this structure, although at the time it was known as the *Padiglione Italia*, as noted above.

75

Carlos Basualdo, “A Location for Utopia: A Brief Note”, in Norese, *Oreste at the Venice Biennale*, 10.

76

Emilio Fantin, email communication with the author, October 2017. The reference is to Jean-Luc Nancy, *Être singulier-plural* (Paris: Éditions Galilée, 1996).

*Platforms* that nonetheless risked becoming the formalism of a new millennium.<sup>77</sup> In 1999, however, one could not imagine projecting this from the ethics of the Orestians' anti-egoism, from their modestly documented achievements, or from their left theoretical commitments.

We can understand something crucial about twenty-first century biennial culture through Oreste's actions on the brink of the current century. By reflecting on how these local artists created a global network to localise an "artway of thinking" at the millennial turn, we can see both the promise and the ongoing difficulty of protecting the open work in globalised circuits. It is because of the biennials' links to event-structures, tourism, and apparatuses of knowledge-production, I've claimed, that the century-old machinery in Venice could produce and vitally participate in the longer-term epistemic shift we now inhabit – taking us from objects to experience, propelled by the ethics of the open work.<sup>78</sup> Beginning in the world's fairs and gradually transforming the art world, this shift forced an acknowledgment that the placement of an art object inside a world picture both changes the art, and the desiring viewer, highly leveraging both geopolitical representations and the subsequent significance of the art.

"Biennial culture" has been my shorthand to designate the practices and appetites fuelling artists' and viewers' commitments to *art as experience* – and correspondingly, biennials are the event-structures in which this taste has been cultivated, its aesthetic codified and defined. Oreste offered a uniquely utopian approach to this emergent aesthetics of experience, refusing the collapse into spectacle predicted by French post-structuralists such as Baudrillard (appropriating Debord), and resonating instead with the crepuscular efforts of Vattimo's weak ontology. For Norese, "...we were a lot of people who spent time to meet not only for taking decisions but also for the pleasure to meet. And to me, the images of these meetings are the real, concrete form of art of Oreste".<sup>79</sup> I have primarily been concerned with the trajectories of *art* and *artists* in this biennial circuit, but I am also after the desires of the *subject* constructed and pluralised by these workings of art. Oreste propelled an altogether unique imaginary of the subject-in-common, while resisting its consolidation as anything "universal". That history continues, in our retelling and repurposing of its aims.

---

77

For which see Pernille Albrethsen, "Platform Formalism", originally published in *Nordic Art Review* (September 2003), once archived at *16beaver*, New York-based website, <http://www.16beavergroup.org/mtarchive/archives/000873print.html>, where I accessed it March 2006. Also see Johanne Lamoureux, "From form to platform: the politics of representation and the representation of politics", *Art Journal* 64, no. 1 (2005): 64-73. For an interesting take by the organiser of "Platform 1: Democracy Unrealized" for Enwezor's Documenta, see Oliver Marchart, *Hegemonie im Kunstfeld. Die documenta-Austellungen dX, D11, d12 und die Politik der Biennalisierung* (Köln: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2008).

78

See Jones (2016) for the longer argument.

79

Email interview, November 2017.

## Author's Biography

Caroline A. Jones is Professor of art history in Architecture at MIT. She studies modern and contemporary art, with a particular focus on its technological modes of production, distribution, and reception, and interfaces with science. Dr. Jones has also curated exhibitions *Sensorium* (2006), *Video Trajectories* (2007), and *Hans Haacke 1967* (2011) at the MIT Visual Arts Center; solo-authored

publications include *Machine in the Studio* (1996/98), *Eyesight Alone* (2005/08), and *The Global Work of Art* (2016). She has edited or co-edited *Picturing Science, Producing Art* (co-edited, 1998), *Sensorium* (2006), and *Experience* (2016). She is currently researching bio-art and planetary symbiosis.

---