

## CuMMA PAPERS #7

CuMMA (CURATING, MANAGING AND MEDIATING ART) IS A TWO-YEAR, MULTIDISCIPLINARY MASTER'S DEGREE PROGRAMME AT AALTO UNIVERSITY FOCUSING ON CONTEMPORARY ART AND ITS PUBLICS. AALTO UNIVERSITY IS LOCATED IN HELSINKI AND ESPOO IN FINLAND.

# THE GLOBALIZATION OF ART AND THE "BIENNIALS OF RESISTANCE" A HISTORY OF THE BIENNIALS FROM THE PERIPHERY OLIVER MARCHART

## 1. BIENNIALIZATION BETWEEN GLAMOUR AND LURE

One important aspect of so-called globalization is a process that could be described as the *decentralization of the West*. It's only recently that we in the West have become aware that the rise of China and young Latin American nations (first and foremost Brazil), and the growing importance of the Pacific Rim in relation to the North Atlantic regions, have brought about a multipolar world order that has substantially relativized the standing of the so-called West. In order to understand this shift of forces, we have to look at more than just economic indicators. It also needs to be understood as a struggle for hegemony, that is, a struggle for consensus and consent: for a specific legitimate yet imaginary cartography of our world. This symbolic struggle is simultaneously carried out in local, national and transnational contexts. Within this struggle, the art field plays a crucial, and perhaps even a cutting-edge role — one that remains concealed

from view as long as the questions asked are solely concerned with the economic and not the hegemonic function of the art field. More than any other institution in the art field, biennials mediate the local, national and transnational. In this context, biennials can also be called "hegemonic machines", which link the local to the global within the field of symbolic struggles for legitimation.<sup>2</sup>

Today, there are an estimated 100 to 200 biennials, which fulfil a wide array of functions. Many contribute to marketing cities or strengthening the tourist industry. They assist in the consolidation of cultural infrastructures in metropolises, making them a more attractive location for businesses located in these places. Smaller towns or those located on the periphery of larger cities seek to draw attention to themselves by putting on biennials. As critic Simon Sheikh puts it, the advantage of the biennial format is that it is where "the lure of the local meets the glamour of the global."<sup>3</sup> This reference to the biennial as a place of "lure" and "glamour" already confirms that it's not enough to examine biennials through a purely economic lens. Biennialization not only facilitates the accumulation of capital, it also aids in constructing local, national and continental identities. In reference to this, the biennial format, as has often been observed, directly links up with that of the World Fair, which provided institutional backing for the internal *nation building* of the colonial and industrial nations during the nineteenth century. World Fairs were colossal hegemonic machines of a globally dominant Western culture.

Within this historical context, the global was conceived of through a lens of competing national — i.e. colonial — states and therefore from a perspective firmly rooted in the West. That being said, even if one considers the World Fair to be the forerunner of the biennial format — particularly

<sup>1</sup> A preliminary version of this essay was written as an inaugural lecture held upon my appointment as Professor of Sociology, with a focus on the sociology of art, at the Düsseldorf Art Academy on 15 January 2013. The version further expands on and radicalizes arguments presented in my book *Hegemonie im Kunstfeld* (Marchart 2008).

<sup>2</sup> One could say they are a case in point for "glocalization." This artificial term was created in order to underscore the fact that globalization does not simply take place and become globalization; cf. Robertson, 1998. The local and the global are intricately entwined and both the local and the global, in equal measure, constantly need to be reconstructed.

<sup>3</sup> Simon Sheikh. "Marks of Distinction, Vectors of Possibility. Questions for the Biennial." in *Open. Cahier on Art and the Public Domain*. Issue The Art Biennial as a Global Phenomenon. 2009/Nr. 16, pp. 66-79.

the first one ever, which took place in Venice in 1895 —, the globalization of the biennial format has nonetheless substantially transformed it. It is no longer merely a format in which former colonial nations of the West bask in the glamour of their own artistic production. On the contrary, worldwide biennialization has instead contributed to decentralizing the West. For this reason, biennialization cannot simply be read as an ideological reflex to economic globalization, but instead, at the very least, also as part of decolonization struggles — which certainly did not end with the era of decolonization (especially in the post-war era), but carried on for a long time afterwards, as many former colonies continued to strive, also symbolically, for emancipation. Thus, we may currently be witnessing the dawn of a new era, where (some of) the tables are starting to turn, as crisis countries like Portugal and Spain now find themselves asking for assistance from their former colonies in Latin America. In the art field, the most prominent cases of this are so-called peripheral biennials and the struggles around the legitimacy and status of non-Western art. Not without good reason did Ranjit Hoskote, co-curator of the Gwangju Biennale in 2008, speak of “Biennials of Resistance”, and demand that a “counter-Venetian” history of the biennial be told. Such a history would also consider the emergence of the São Paulo Biennale, the Triennale-India, the Havana Biennial, the Asia-Pacific Biennale, the Gwangju Biennale and the Johannesburg Biennale:

“ All of the manifestations of the biennials of resistance that I have enumerated here articulate what we may term the emergence of a global South, a network of sites of cultural production sharing common questions, themes, and, indeed, a common precariousness. Observe that these platforms take their stand on the ground of newly evolving regionalities — whether mobilized under the sign of Latin American and Caribbean solidarity, of Afro-Asian unity, of a post-Cold War position of Asia-Pacific solidarity, or of an emancipatory politics that has transcended long-standing antagonisms, as in post-apartheid South Africa. All these experiments, as well as the biennials of resistance that continue to extend themselves despite prevailing constraints, mark a cumulative counterpoint to the Venice Biennial as the universal template for the biennial as form and medium. Their existence demonstrates that there is a substantial non- and perhaps even counter-Venetian history of the biennial form that has yet to be narrated.<sup>4</sup> ”

This is certainly not the place to outline such a heterodox history of the biennial, which has yet to be written in any case. And even if it had been, it would be impossible to tell it in just one singular article or lecture. I will therefore keep to a few aspects that, in my opinion, are crucial to writing such a history of the biennial.

<sup>4</sup> Hoskote 2010, p. 312.

## 2. ANTI- AND POSTCOLONIAL BIENNIALS

A brief genealogy of anti- and postcolonial biennials already illustrates the magnitude of the contribution biennials have made in the artistic decentralization of the West. The story begins in 1951 with the founding of the São Paulo Biennial, which still based on the Venetian model of national pavilions. Although the first Biennials were more focused on retrospectives and European modernity, as time went on, they increasingly included non-Western nations — for instance, the 1954 edition included contributions from Indonesia, Israel and Egypt, and in the years that followed, from India, Lebanon, the Philippines, Senegal, Taiwan and Vietnam, among others: “By taking part in the Biennial, these emerging nations not only confidently presented ‘their own’ cultures, they also inserted themselves into an international art history — even if this has only rarely been acknowledged by Western modernity.”<sup>5</sup> With their newly won independence, many of those nations also utilized the art field as an institutional platform to demonstrate their sovereignty. On the other hand, the São Paulo Biennial also lent the Venetian biennial model a postcolonial note.

Other biennials and festivals were established in far more radical ways. A prime example is the 1966 *Premier Festival Mondial des Arts Nègres* in Dakar. Senegalese president and poet Léopold Sédar Senghor initiated the festival as an institutional flagship of the *négritude* movement. Its objective was to provide a platform for all the facets of African art to be presented independently thereby reinforcing the self-confidence of the emerging African nations. Numerous other biennials, including the Alexandria Biennial (1955), Triennale-India (1968), Havana Biennial

(1983), Cairo Biennial (1984) and Istanbul Biennial (1987), were situated somewhere in between these two models — a postcolonial version of the Venetian model and an anti-colonial model that instrumentalized “non-Western” art traditions in the name of identity politics. In Africa, at the end of apartheid the Johannesburg Biennale (1995) was established, (of which there were only two editions), and in 1992 DAK'ART, a *Biennale de l'art africain contemporain*, was founded in Dakar.

There are a few interesting points to be made here. It has often been noted that biennials emerge in countries that have yet to come to terms with national traumatic events, such as wars, civil wars or dictatorships. This is especially true in the case of documenta in Kassel (1955), founded in the post-war era, the post-apartheid biennial in Johannesburg (1995 and 1997) and the Gwangju Biennale (1995), where, during the military dictatorship, hundreds of students had been massacred. Even so, it should not be forgotten that both Johannesburg and Gwangju, although their national characteristics may vary, have been inscribed into a network of “peripheral” biennials, while Kassel on the other hand is perceived as one of the “centres” of the Western art world, if only once every five years. Although these biennials may seem comparable along one axis of interpretation, they may appear worlds apart along another axis, which is why Hoskote calls the Gwangju and Johannesburg Biennials, “Biennials of Resistance”, but not, for instance,

<sup>5</sup> Vogel 2010, p. 41.

documenta. Here, the postcolonial axis is the most relevant for us. Even within this same axis, there are still differences among the biennials of the periphery.

It is becoming increasingly difficult to seriously refer to some of the more recently founded biennials as Biennials of Resistance, even if they do favour local and national artistic production over that of the West. For instance, in 2006, the Singapore Biennial was founded during a meeting between the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. Although Singapore's intention had been to signal openness, for the duration of the biennial, a general ban was placed on demonstrations in public places.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, the recent wave of newly founded biennials in Gulf States with authoritarian governments hardly has anything in common with postcolonial struggles for independence on a national, regional or continental level. Authoritarian regimes utilize the biennial format to glamourize their image and prepare the tourism industry for the post-oil era.

These biennials are generally void of any impetus for resistance. Instead, the impetus is diverted to foreign countries, seeing as the biennials in Arabic countries — such as the Sharjah Biennial — are often used a platform for anti-Israel propaganda. It would be utterly amiss to identify any anti-colonial sentiment within such projects, because they do nothing more than comply with the anti-semitic state doctrine of the theocratic regimes that provide the financial backing for these biennials.

<sup>6</sup> Vogel 2010, p. 100.

<sup>7</sup> This includes all possible variations in between liberation and domination.

<sup>8</sup> Mosquera 2011, p. 73.

### 3. THE HAVANA BIENNIAL

In principle, it is necessary to differentiate between postcolonial "Biennials of Resistance" and those that, in reality, are no more than biennials of dominance, corruption, theocracy or repression,<sup>7</sup> even if they are held on the global periphery. The Havana Biennial is a paradigmatic example: though differentiating emancipation from domination is often difficult, it can still be done, even from *within* countries with an authoritarian regime. Although it was Fidel Castro who spontaneously had the idea for the Havana Biennial, until the third festival it had been relatively autonomous in terms of curatorial decisions. The programmatic goal of the Havana Biennial was to present art from the so-called Third World, i.e. from the global South. The goal was already realized in the festival's second edition in 1986. In Gerardo Mosquera's words, this edition was "the first global contemporary art show ever made: a mammoth, uneven, rather chaotic bunch of more than fifty exhibitions and events presenting 2,400 works by 690 artists from 57 countries."<sup>8</sup> It was the third Biennial, however, that made Havana a point of reference in the history of biennials — and, albeit for completely different reasons, its role as a reference is comparable to that of documenta 5, directed by Harald Szeemann. During the 1989 Havana Biennial, the orientation toward global art production from mainly non-Western countries coincided with a number of innovative and

momentous curatorial decisions. Firstly, it gave up on presenting artists by countries, and no prizes were awarded. Thus, the last remnants of the Venice Biennial model were fully eradicated. The most crucial decision, however, was another: the invitation not only went to artists from the global periphery, but also to diasporic artists living in the global centre. Mosquera, head curator, emphasized the importance of this step, as it enabled the concept of the Third World to be expanded, allowing a complex image of a world shaped by migration to emerge. This was clearly a sign that the global South had long since arrived in the North and West.

From this perspective, the Havana Biennial is markedly different from the exhibition *Magiciens de la Terre*, curated by Jean-Hubert Martin, which took place that same year at the *Centre Pompidou*, one of the “centres” of the Western art world. Martin’s exhibition is frequently cited as having launched the “rediscovery” of non-Western art. This was mainly because *Magiciens de la Terre* abandoned the colonialist phantasm of primitivism and refrained from viewing non-Western art exclusively in terms of its reception within European modernity — which was still very much the case for the infamous 1984 *Primitivism* exhibition at the New York Museum of Modern Art. Instead, *Magiciens de la Terre* chose to level the playing field with an equal presentation of 50% widely known Western artists and 50% largely unknown non-Western artists. However, if, instead of comparing *Magiciens de la Terre* with Primitivism, we compare it with the Havana Biennial, which took place around the same time, the shortcomings of *Magiciens* are clear. As Rachel Weiss comments, unlike *Magiciens de la Terre*, the Havana Biennial largely refrained from presenting traditional objects of art as if they were contemporary art: “The Bienal [sic!] didn’t try to draw an

equivalence between those objects and the ones made by artists; unlike ‘Magiciens de la Terre’, it didn’t orchestrate that convergence under the alibi of some universal creative spirit. It didn’t claim every contributor as a magician, but rather as a citizen, and so the zone it sketched was not some neutrally shared terrain, but rather a vexed ground as much comprised of clashing particularities as of cohering accords.”<sup>9</sup>

Observing the developments in this area, we can see that, while *Magiciens de la Terre* functioned as a kind of “gate opener” for non-Western art within the Western art field, it was criticized across the board, and offered virtually nothing to build upon in terms of display and curatorial philosophy. Surprisingly, the concurrent model developed on the periphery turned out to be more adaptable. One of the reasons is certainly that the Havana Biennial did not subscribe to the notion that non-Western art had remained untouched by Western modernity, rendering it comparable only with a supposedly universal spiritual creativity. Instead, there were first attempts at addressing the “multiple modernities” emerging on the global periphery.<sup>10</sup> Within this context the Havana Biennial not only set itself apart from the Western desire for “authentic” art, but also from the paradigm of *anti-colonial* projects that also catered to identity politics-based

<sup>9</sup> Weiss 2011, p. 32.

<sup>10</sup> Mosquera writes: “The event has always focused on modern and contemporary art, developing the notion of a plurality of active modernisms, and giving little room to traditional or religious aesthetic-symbolic productions, which at the time were frequently stereotyped as the authentic art created in Third World countries, while other work was disqualified as an epigonal Westernised production.” Mosquera, 2011, p. 77.

notions of indigenous art, untouched by the West. Notwithstanding the critique of Western dominance, the discussions in Havana departed from the notion that it was even possible to draw a clear line between the West and the rest. In this way, the focus within theory, art production and curating shifted from anti- to postcolonial strategies. This enabled a critique from within the frequently nationalist projects in former colonies, which attempted to ideologically substantiate their independence.

Under the auspices of this postcolonial critique, even the early São Paulo Biennial, with its orientation toward Western art ideals, appears less as a perpetuation of colonial relations of dependence and more a part of a strategic movement to set oneself apart from nationalistic identity politics in one's own country. It would be misleading to read this orientation toward Western art as "merely mimicked copies and pale imitations ... of the authentic thing as it is constituted in the West."<sup>11</sup> In this light, Okwui Enwezor suggests:

“ The very notion of proximity to the West as a strategy enunciated within the dialectical framework of the relations of power inherent in the development of the discourse of artistic modernity is a double-edged sword. Such a sword cuts a swath between the revolutionary and emancipatory portents of the postcolonial critique of master narratives and the nationalist rhetoric of tradition and authenticity. From the foregoing then, we can say quite clearly that the periphery does not simplistically absorb and internalize what it does not need. Nor does it vitiate its own critical power by becoming subservient to the rules of the center. 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 does not spring merely from resistance, but rather is built on an ethics of dissent.<sup>12</sup> ”

In 2002, documenta 11, directed by Enwezor, was the first truly postcolonial biennial to be held in one of the “centres” of the Western art field, taking up and working with this dissident understanding of non-Western art. For Enwezor, it was not only out of the question to take the position of the neocolonial discoverer of non-Western art, he also considered the notion of the “non-Western artist” basically a *contradictio in adjecto* — or, at the very least, a Western projection.<sup>13</sup> Not only does the Western search for so-called “authentic” art outside the Western art market's systems of circulation hold the danger of fuelling the notion of the so-called indigenous “Other”, it also fails to recognize the agency of non-Western artists in their active appropriations of Western modernity, making these artists less non-Western than the West would like them to be.

<sup>11</sup> Okwui Enwezor. *Mega-Exhibitions and the Antinomies of a Transnational Global Form* “Enacting the Diasporic Public Sphere: Mobility, Mediation and Proximity to the West.” In: *The Biennial Reader*, pp. 438

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, pp. 438-439.

<sup>13</sup> This is no coincidence, considering that in reality a significant number of so-called “non-Western artists” live in Western metropolises.

#### 4. THE CENTRALITY OF THE PERIPHERY – A CHANGE IN PERSPECTIVE

If it were true that the Havana Biennial model – more so than the curatorial philosophy of *Magiciens de la Terre* – has proven to be more fit to build upon and effective in the long term, would this not imply that biennial history be completely reconsidered from the ground up? I believe it is time for a change in perspective – not least because it also offers a way out of what I would like to call the *provincialism of the centre*. Living in the centre alone does not constitute provincialism. Provincialism is the province's unshakable belief in itself as the centre. However, the unshakable belief that one lives in the centre remains provincial even if one actually lives in the centre. Hardly any city in the world is more provincial than New York. It is with good reason that Adriano Pedrosa observes that putting on purely "native" – meaning local or US-American – exhibitions in places like MoMA/PS1 and the Whitney Museum reinforce the notion that the world outside New York (or the USA) hasn't got much to offer, because the interesting artists all live in Brooklyn anyhow.

And yet, expanding its outlook on the world would be nothing but beneficial for the New York art scene. In 2012, the Triennial at the New Museum appeared as a glimmer of hope, as Pedrosa – somewhat prematurely – puts it: "In a city overcrowded with exhibitions and overflowing with provincial self-importance, curator Eungie Joo effectively brought a sliver of the global into the profoundly local cake. She looked beyond the North Atlantic pond and presented many artists for the first time in the United States. Only five out of 50 were U.S. natives."<sup>14</sup> By presenting many non-Western artists, unknown

in the United States, Joo followed in the footsteps of Enwezor's D11, and curated a "postcolonial" exhibition at the heart of the centre. The hope of de-provincializing the centre, however, remained unfulfilled, as the Triennial encountered considerable resentment from the New York art scene. Just like when rumours spread through the grapevine in a small town, the common opinion was quickly settled: the Whitney Biennial (curated by Jay Sanders and Elisabeth Sussman), which took place at the same time and showed mostly well-known US-American artistic positions, was much more interesting, and the *New Museum Triennial* wasn't even worth going to.<sup>15</sup> This is a prime example of the provincialism of the centre.

<sup>14</sup> Pedrosa 2012, p. 44.

<sup>15</sup> This was indeed the case, but not regarding the artistic positions in a strict sense. The 2012 Whitney Biennial emptied out the entire fourth floor of the Whitney Museum to present "time based arts", which included dance. This allowed the "performative turn", and even with the "choreographic turn", which had both been a discernible part of the fine arts for a long time, to be put into practice. However, although somewhat isolated, the most interesting performative piece was a production at the rival exhibition in the New Museum. *Salons: Birthright Palestine?* by the Israeli group Public Movement consisted of a series of discursive-performative political "salons", with relatively strict choreographies and was, in my opinion, the most successful performance piece in recent years (and, incidentally, also the Triennial's most expensive production.)

## 5. A COUNTER-HISTORY

The provincial resentment of the “centre” should not however lead us to falsely conclude that exhibitions with a global focus are *passé*. In reality, the opposite is true; they are happening everywhere. The West just has yet to realize its own decentralization. What this means for the exhibition and biennial industry is that, for some time now, “peripheral” biennials have succeeded in presenting themselves in much more engaging ways and are starting to outshine their counterparts in the “centre.” In this regard, Sabine B. Vogel observed that the Istanbul Biennial — in terms of professional accreditations and resonance in international debates — has become the most popular biennial after Venice: “The Istanbul Biennial has increasingly established itself as the centre of global art that addresses themes in the field of contention between politics and economics.”<sup>16</sup> The art field’s coordinate system — just like global power relations — is starting to shift, to turn. This does not mean that Venice or Kassel will lose their significance, but rather that they will clearly be seen as what they really are: an expression of a specific European provincialism<sup>17</sup> long embedded in a North Atlantic cultural defence alliance, which became obsolete when the Iron Curtain fell. Although the phases of the symbolic, economic, military and political decentralization of the West may not be taking place simultaneously, they are still very much entangled in one another.

<sup>16</sup> Vogel 2010, p. 56.

<sup>17</sup> I am speaking, more precisely, of a continental European provincialism, as documenta has no real significance in Great Britain, which also remains steeped in its own provincialism.

<sup>18</sup> Mosquera 2011, p. 76.

Biennial history therefore needs to be re-written from the periphery. Within this history, if the Havana Biennial were a significant reference, this would not only be because of its curatorial decisions. The 1989 edition tried out a concept that is found in the philosophies behind many biennials today: it rid itself of the corset of an art exhibition in the strict sense. It began incorporating urban spaces, experimenting with different event formats, and opening up possibilities for participation:

“ The third Bienal [sic!], like the second one, I insist, was not conceived as an exhibition but as an organism consisting of shows, events, meetings, publications and outreach programmes. It assembled a big main international exhibition, eleven thematic group shows (three by Cuban artists and eight by artists from other countries), ten individual exhibitions (two by Cuban artists and eight by artists from other countries), two international Conferences and eight international Workshops.<sup>18</sup> ”

By taking what was once just an exhibition and unravelling it into an array of various sub-exhibitions, venues and event formats, a model was created in Havana that is still distinctive of today’s biennials. The main focus is not placed on the spectacle as such — which a biennial certainly also always is — but rather on the investigative and discursive interest in a specific problematic field. The 1989 Havana Biennial had already taken on a theme – *Tradition and Contemporaneity* – that was reflected in the above-mentioned discussions concerning anti-colonial politics and non-Western modernities. This self-reflexive mode enabled the project and the possibilities that the Havana Biennial opened up to become the focus of the debates themselves. (Similarly,

the 28<sup>th</sup> São Paulo Biennial in 2008, curated by Ivo Mesquita and Ana Paula Cohen, took the biennial format itself as a theme — meaning the function of biennials within the global art field —, re-examining it under changed circumstances.)

Hardly any biennial that thinks anything of itself can get away with refraining from taking on a similar topic or leitmotif, no matter how loosely conceived. Although Havana was certainly not the first biennial with thematic contours, its theme was negotiated on a scale broader than ever before. If, through a Eurocentric lens, we were to consider Catherine David's 1998 dX — with its 100-day/100 guests programme — as "the" biennial that gave discourse a more substantial place within the programme than any previous biennial, one look at the Havana Biennial reveals another genealogy entirely. The "discursive turn" (Ferguson and Hoegsberg, 2010), which has gripped the exhibition field for years now, may have actually come from the periphery and not the centre. As Rachel Weiss states:

“ [T]he integration of a major international Conference into the Biennial's structure represents a decisive step towards conceiving of biennials as discursive environments, in which the actual display of artworks is part of a much broader project of research and knowledge production.<sup>19</sup> ”

This observation is important, because it forces us to rid ourselves, once and for all, of the notion of primitivism, the idea that art created outside of Europe is founded on feeling and not intellect. At any rate, such ridiculous notions can only exist because European awareness of the intellectual traditions and life in Latin America, Africa or Asia has been, and still is, extremely marginal.<sup>20</sup>

Okwui Enwezor's D11 finally challenged this primitivist notion in the "centre" as well. Enwezor purposefully placed Hanne Darboven,

Bernd and Hilla Becher or the political conceptual art of Maria Eichhorn in a constellation with Latin American political conceptual art (Luis Camnitzer, Artur Barrio or Cildo Meireles) and the work of African artists such as Bruly Bouabré in order to dismantle the racist cliché that artists outside Europe are more "emotional", thus positioning Latin American and African art as *conceptual art*.<sup>21</sup> With the four discursive platforms that took place before the actual exhibition in Kassel, documenta was decentralized even further, and in a variety of ways. First of all, it shifted the outdated relationship between art and discourse. Although the greatest amount of the available resources still went into producing the exhibition itself, on a symbolic level, it was only one of the five platforms, therefore, the discursive formats (workshops and conferences) outnumbered it by far, on a symbolic level. *Thematically*, documenta was decentralized because the platforms were no longer concerned with debating the problems of the art field but rather questions such as democracy, truth, and reconciliation in transition societies (as in South Africa), the development of African megacities, or Caribbean *créolité* or creolization. *Spatially*, it was decentralized, because documenta was no longer only located in Kassel, as the discursive platforms took place in Vienna, Berlin, New Delhi, Lagos and St. Lucia. This led, if you will, to a de-Kasselization of Kassel. That is to say: the province that imagines itself to be the centre of the art world, albeit only once every five years, was decentred.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Weiss 2011, p. 14.

<sup>21</sup> I must add that, by now, these traditions have indeed come into contact with Western intellectual traditions. The concern here is not authenticity, but plain and simple recognition and acknowledgement of specific art and discourse produced in countries and regions beyond the North Atlantic. Cf. Eulisse 2003.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. For more on these decentralizations, see Marchart 2008.

## 6. CONCLUSION

Much points to the fact that the global history of the future is being written from today's periphery. The power of definition held by the West, which imagined itself as the centre of world affairs, is waning. Looking back, we are slowly beginning to understand that even in the past, the so-called periphery anticipated developments that would later be of great significance to the centre. I would not go so far as to say that a causal relation exists between the influence of the model of the third Havana Biennial and other biennials today, for instance. Jan Hoet's visit to the Havana Biennale left no obvious traces on documenta IX in 1992. The relations are more complex. The general process of the decentralization of the West makes the Havana Biennial's early and successful curatorial practices seem suddenly appealing elsewhere. The idea that an exhibition should create some form of interaction with the city where it takes place (and not to simply descend like a UFO); all of the current negotiations around "participation"; the renewed interest in strategies in art education within the context of the *educational turn*, which was incidentally already anticipated at the third Havana Biennial and didn't arrive in the centre until D11 and d12<sup>23</sup> — the oh so critical, discursive and politically savvy West cannot claim a patent for any of this.

The fact that artistic practice and its institutional vessels (such as biennials) are supposed to reflect their relations to the political and social context they are embedded in is, for the most part, widely accepted today, along with the notion that biennials should neither descend like UFOs nor be capitalized on for location policy goodies. This however does not mean it is not happening all over the place. Despite all the critique that can be

made in terms of the economic-political function of biennials and the gentrification of "biennial art" — including charges that they themselves do not live up to their claims of *site specificity*, as it is often dealt with mechanically or using standardized methods (only to appear again like a UFO that just descended), or that they are not as political as they say they are — it should not be forgotten that biennials have decisively contributed to our current understanding of artistic practice as an instrument of social and political knowledge production. However, in terms of institutions within the art field, the most important steps have been taken not by the biennials of the West, but by those of the periphery. And, though he may be speaking *pro domo* as a biennial curator who is in high demand, I agree with Hou Hanru when he says:

“ Biennial culture, I would argue, has become the most vital condition for the conception and production of contemporary art. Specifically conceived to reflect recent developments in art scenes and contexts, biennials provide freedom for artists to engage with changing social, political, and cultural realities, beyond the constraints of traditional museum and gallery exhibition models. Biennials are also opening up new public spaces for artistic production outside the dominant market.<sup>24</sup> ”

<sup>23</sup> Cf. schnittpunkt et al. 2012.

<sup>24</sup> Hanru 2012, p. 45.

OLIVER MARCHART is professor of sociology of art at Düsseldorf Art Academy. He works in the intersecting fields of political theory and art theory. His books include: *Post-Foundational Political Thought. Political Difference in Nancy, Lefort, Badiou and Laclau* (Edinburgh University Press 2007); *Laclau: A Critical Reader* (edited with Simon Crichtley, Routledge 2004); and the forthcoming *Post-Foundational Theories of Democracy. Re-Claiming Freedom, Equality, Solidarity* (Edinburgh University Press 2014).

#### CUMMA PAPERS #7

Oliver Marchart  
*The Globalization of Art and the "Biennials of Resistance". A History of the Biennials from the Periphery.*

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 Mike Garner

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 Laura Kokkonen

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