# THE EMPIRE'S EXHIBITION AND THE CITY'S BIENNIAL:

# CONTEMPORARY IMPLICATIONS OF WORLD AS PICTURE

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Contemporary Implications of World as Picture

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Thesis Abstract

İlkay Baliç Ayvaz, “The Empire’s Exhibition and the City’s Biennial:

Contemporary Implications of World As Picture”

This thesis aims at offering a historical account of the ways of representing the world in two distinct eras, namely the liberal age and the present neoliberal system. It focuses on the emergence of two exhibitionary models: the world exhibition of late nineteenth century and the contemporary art biennial of late twentieth century.

Both spectacular exhibitions in nature, these two exhibition models emerged or culminated in remarkable pinnacles of economic progress. While the world exhibition offered a representation of a world system based on empires and colonies, the number of contemporary art biennials throughout the world peaked in 1980s, in line with the shifting neoliberal world order, in which the organizing unit is the multicultural, competitive city.

This study does not propose an anachronistic comparison between the two exhibition types or an art-historical perspective towards exhibition making. It derived from the idea that a parallel reading of these two exhibitionary models could provide an insightful ground to explore the representational diagrams of these two significant turning points in socio-economic reorganization.

The world exhibitions were representative world pictures of recent progresses in objective science and machinery, where human activity came to be perceived and displayed as culture for the first time in a more direct manner than ever. The age of world exhibitions were the age of the world picture; this picture, one might argue, would metaphorically be represented in a painting. Meanwhile, the world picture drawn by the biennials can metaphorically be seen as contemporary art itself: a less palpable, multi-layered, fragmented, complex and ephemeral world installation where the diversity, democracy and self-reflexivity are on display to represent a totality of universal art and democratization.

Keywords: World Exhibitions, Biennial, City, Empire, Representation.

Tez Özeti

İlkay Baliç Ayvaz, “İmparatorluğun Sergisi ve Kentin Bienali:

Resim Olarak Dünya Kavramının Güncel Anlamları Üzerine”

Bu çalışma, liberalizm ve neoliberalizm çağlarında dünyayı temsil etme biçimlerine dair tarihsel bir perspektif sunmayı amaçlıyor ve bu iki dönemde ortaya çıkan iki sergi modeline odaklanıyor: Geç 19. Yüzyılın dünya sergileri ve geç 20. Yüzyılın çağdaş sanat bienalleri.

Görkemli sergi formları olarak bu iki model, ekonomik gelişmenin zirve yaptığı dikkate değer dönemlerde ortaya çıkmış veya yaygınlaşmıştır. Dünya sergileri imparatorluklar ve sömürgeler üzerine kurulu bir dünya düzeninin temsilini sunarken, dünyadaki çağdaş sanat bienallerinin sayısı 1980’lerde, düzenleyici temel birimin çokkültürlü, rekabetçi kent olduğu değişen neoliberal dünya düzeniyle beraber ciddi bir artış kaydetmiştir.

Bu çalışma, iki sergi biçimi arasında anakronistik bir karşılaştırma veya sergi yapma pratiğiyle ilgili sanat tarihsel bir perspektif sunmayı hedeflemiyor. Tez, daha ziyade, bu iki sergi modelinin bir paralel okumasının toplumsal ve ekonomik yeniden düzenlendiği bu iki dönüm noktasının temsiliyet diyagramlarını incelemek için farklı bir kavrayış arzeden bir temel sunduğu fikrinden yola çıkıyor.

Dünya sergileri bilim ve üretim teknolojilerindeki gelişmeleri sunan, insan faaliyetlerinin ilk defa daha önce olmadığı kadar doğrudan bir biçimde kültür adı altında sergilendiği temsili dünya resimleriydi. Dünya sergileri çağı aynı zamanda dünya resmi çağıydı: Bu resmin metaforik olarak geleneksel pentürü temsil ettiği düşünülebilir. Öte yandan, bienallerin çizdiği dünya resmi metaforik olarak çağdaş sanatın kendisi gibi görülebilir: Evrensel sanat ve demokratikleşme bütünlüğünü temsil etmek üzere teşhir edilen çeşitlilik, demokrasi ve özdüşünümselliğin eskisi kadar elle tutulamayan, çok katmalı, parçalanmış, karmaşık ve geçici bir enstalasyonu.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Dünya Sergileri, Bienal, Kent, İmparatorluk, Temsil.

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# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

This thesis focuses on two seemingly unrelated phenomena: the world exhibition of the nineteenth century and the contemporary art biennial of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Except the fact that both are basically spectacular exhibitions, though incomparable in scale and audience size, these two phenomena have not been subject to parallel readings neither in the sociological and historical accounts of world exhibitions, nor in art-historical studies of the biennials. The very limited literature on biennials often makes quick references to world exhibitions as the original model without elaborating on the historical context surrounding the emergence of each event type. What I propose in this thesis is neither an anachronistic comparison between the world exhibition of late nineteenth century and the present day biennial, nor an art-historical overview of the biennial phenomenon. Instead, I claim that these two phenomena provide a new tool in exploring the climax of both the liberal and neoliberal world orders and the founding systems underlying these two historically remarkable periods, which I argue to be the empire and the city, respectively.

As the second half of the nineteenth century, marked by the pace of industrial developments and increasing domination of imperial powers, witnessed the initiation of world exhibitions especially in Europe and the USA, the last two decades, the 1990s and 2000s saw an extremely rapid increase in the number of contemporary art biennials around the world, particularly in non-Western countries. According to a research project carried by the Asia Art Archive, a total number of fifty-one biennials were launched during the last two decades whereas only six biennials had been initiated in the 1980s. Furthermore, it was throughout this specific period that the

contemporary art biennial underwent a transformation to embrace sociological terminology in its conceptual framework. The biennial's self-defined endeavor came to focus on understanding the socio-political condition of the neoliberal world order.

Initiated in 1987, the Istanbul Biennial was an intriguing case within this context: being not more than a national arts exhibition in early stages, the biennial first experienced professionalization and integration into the global art economy in the 1990s and lately has been transformed into a platform of debate on modernity and politics. Although I find the history of the Istanbul Biennial insightful in understanding the phenomenon of contemporary art biennial with the contradictions it accommodates, I chose to focus on the two latest editions of the Istanbul Biennial so as to pose questions around the relationship of art and politics in an age where arts appear to be organically intertwined with the neoliberal economic order. Successively themed as "Not Only Possible But Also Necessary: Optimism in the Age of Global War," and "What Keeps Mankind Alive?" I will try to elaborate on these two editions of 2007 and 2009 to explore the local symptoms of the global biennial genre.

These two exhibitionary models can be seen as diagrams of representation, miniature worlds that aim at reflecting the desired world order in a highly visual way, in an exhibitionary logic that interpellates the subject as visitor. This desire to organize unrelated elements into a systematic whole might also be compared to the function of dreams: they re-organize the subconscious, the daily life that we experience in a non-systematic manner and help us in systematizing our thoughts, desires and more importantly to create our own mythologies of ourselves. While in the nineteenth century Europe, the capital is seeking to establish a new world order,

the 1980s are characterized by a need to understand the shifting neoliberal world order, to point out the current conflicts and an attempt to re-organize critical stances.

If the world exhibitions are imperial apparatuses, the contemporary art biennials of the last two decades could be understood as "urban apparatuses", proposing an organized concentration of the recent cultural and geographical imagining of the world. Even a basic overview of the two exhibition models would prove that while the world exhibitions were celebrating the multicultural empire, the contemporary art biennial of today is critically portraying the current world order through the cosmopolitan city. My point of departure and my basic question throughout this long essay shall remain as such: if the cities were apparatuses functioning as showcases of imperial achievements within the context of world exhibitions, are cities or urban conglomerations in today's world functioning as showcases of marketable local difference while their biennials function as the substantiation of critical distance and self-reflexivity towards the issues of today's multicultural world? Furthermore, if the globally infused neoliberal system interpellates urban conglomerations as the new economic centers, in which ways do cities put forward their localities in order to position themselves within this new competitive city-based world order? How is locality profitably represented and to what extent can a biennial fulfill its claimed mission?

The conventional model of world exhibitions in which the host imperial nation plays a significantly more powerful role than the guest nations through demonstrations of technological and industrial progress increasingly turned out to be a competition on the arena of self-reflexivity and democratization. Thus, throughout this thesis, I will try to discuss the following argument: can we claim that the

imperialist and nationalist agenda of the nineteenth century world exhibition has somehow been translated into an agenda reflecting the nation's desire to question itself by means of art? If the world exhibition derives from the imperial anxiety and competition over the number of colonies, what is the founding anxiety of the biennial? Is it to show a more critical representation of the world in a local context to prove the city's capacity of observing and presenting the locality's crucial issues?

In order to discuss the abovementioned argument, I will try to seek answers to the following questions: In what respect are exhibitions regulatory projects? How does the exhibitionary logic of these distinct types of exhibitions operate? What is the nature of the relationship they construct with the objects, commodities and artworks in display? While world exhibitions are argued to create a phantasmagoria of commodities, are contemporary art biennials sheer spectacles or festivals? Does art provide a realm of resistance to the capitalist system? If the world exhibition was drawing a world picture of a capitalist era, what does a biennial represent to the audience as "world"? If the world exhibitions were showcases of industrial and technological progress, does the biennial offer a narrative of progress and if yes, which are the elements of the narrative surrounding contemporary art biennials? Is resistance and political engagement through art possible or does the neoliberal system liberally embrace and nullify all opposition against itself, especially when this opposition is within the realm of entertainment? Or, is politically engaged art embedded within the neoliberal system under the disguise of entertainment?

Before seeking answers to these initial questions, I will provide the reader with a historical background of each phenomenon: the world exhibition, the contemporary art biennial and the Istanbul Biennial. While presenting the emergence

of each phenomenon alongside the turning points and moments I believe to be crucial within the context of this thesis, I will try to open up discussion topics to be argued in the fifth chapter. The structure of this thesis thus consists of three separate chapters under which a particular attention is devoted to each phenomenon, leading to a discussion of the phenomenon of contemporary art biennial in the light of late nineteenth century world exhibitions.

# CHAPTER 2

# WORLD EXHIBITIONS

## Staging the World in the Industrial Age

The second half of the nineteenth century witnessed the emergence of a new exhibition type: The World Exhibition, also known as World Fair or Expo –short for Exposition. The first one held by the Great Britain in London, 1851, this new exhibition model consisted of a huge show where mainly manufactured products and raw materials of participating countries as well as peoples and traditions of the colonial world were exhibited under national pavilions. Fine arts, sculpture, exotic artworks and architectural products were added to the exhibits in the late nineteenth and twentieth century versions of the genre. Most recently, this initial exhibition type has been translated into "Expos with themes," and the "Bureau of International Expositions" has declared that among the upcoming shows are Expo 2010, Shanghai under the theme "Better City, Better Life" and Expo 2015, Milan, themed "Feeding the Planet, Energy for Life." Maurice Roche asserts that trade fairs and Olympic games are also among the heirs of this original exhibition type.

Throughout this chapter, I will seek answers to the following questions: What were the motives and intentions behind the invention of this specific exhibition genre? What were the implications of exhibiting the world in the industrial and imperial era? Which types of exhibitions are the recent ramifications of this genre except the obvious continuation as expos? Can the increasing number of contemporary art biennials be considered as ramifications of this genre or are the resemblances between the contexts surrounding the emergence of these two genres

noteworthy? In order to seek answers to these questions, we need to back to the circumstances surrounding the invention of the genre: London, 1851.

Following the Industrial Revolution originating in Britain, this particular period in history comprising the 1830s and 1840s was the decades when the effects of the massive developments in production, communication and transportation technologies were fully felt in daily lives of the masses. The first World Exhibition was held in London in 1851, exactly three years after Marx and Engels published The Communist Manifesto, the same date also indicating to the Chartist petition and demonstration in Hyde Park. This first international exhibition was titled "Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of all Nations" and had the national industrial exhibitions that France held since the beginning of the century as its precedents.

Although many popular sources indicate Prince Albert as the originator of the first exhibition, another figure is worth mentioning: Sir Henry Cole. After visiting the 1849 Paris Exhibition where he realized the absence of international participants, Cole proposed to stage an international exhibition in the UK. According to this central figure behind the first world exhibition, "England, beyond any other nation was prepared by the cosmopolitan character of its people and by its commercial policy, to be the first nation to carry out an International Exhibition of Industry." (Purbrick, 8)

Greenhalgh explains that by the time of the first exhibition, British railway network was almost complete and the next two decades were to witness what was later to be called "the second industrial revolution". The development and enlargement of industrial production both stimulated and was in turn stimulated by a worldwide expansion of railways and shipping. Among the consequences were "an

increase in employment and in social stability in England, the emergence of a rentier class of no small significance for the patronage of the arts, and the generation of surplus capital which was used on a massive scale to underwrite development in other countries, among them the USA." (Harrison, et al., 311) Thus the first world exhibition was the showcase of British power and leadership in technology and production.

The design for an exhibition space was commissioned to architect Joseph Paxton who proposed the Crystal Palace, a huge building later to become the architectural symbol of the Industrial Revolution with the excessive use of modular iron frames and glass panels in its construction. As opposed to brick and stone based architecture, this spectacular exhibition space offered a new perspective and represented the triumph of technology. The Crystal Palace is not only emblematic of the industrial era and modernity, it also offers a symbolic tool for periodization as it was built in 1851 and destroyed by fire in 1936: The world exhibitions to be held until the dawn of the Second World War were still to be considered as showcases of progress and modernity while the post-war expos, although remaining national in character, were to be transformed into exhibitions involving a utopian perspective, the respective themes of 1939 New York and 1939 Stockholm exhibitions being "Building the World of Tomorrow" and "Sports".

More than twenty-five nations and many colonial territories were invited to exhibit their raw materials, machinery and manufactured products in Crystal Palace for the first world exhibition. These three categories were basically adapted from the exhibition's post-revolutionary French antecedents (the first "Exposition du Produits de L'Industrie Français –Exhibition of French Industrial Products- staged in Paris,

1798). A fourth category was sculpture and plastic arts but no fine arts were exhibited as "they were not deemed relevant to the industrial and economic themes of the exhibition" (Roche, 49) and painting was excluded on the grounds that "being but little affected by material conditions." (Harrison, et al., 310) However, fine arts and painting were later to be considered as fundamental categories, especially in 1855 Paris exhibition, and that was to become the pattern for the remainder of the century. However, an exhibition exclusively dedicated to fine arts was not to be initiated until the first Venice Biennale, held in 1895.

As the inventors of the genre, the British initially planned to hold one exhibition every decade but following the 1862 London exhibition, their approach to the events altered. Starting with the Paris exhibition of 1855, the French and later the Americans took over the leadership in the genre. (Roche, 42) In Britain, the Royal Society of Arts received royal patronage visible in their new title after the success of the 1851 exhibition; in the USA, the Smithsonian Institute in Washington DC became the key institution to play this role and emerged as a crucial actor in the federal government's commitment to expos from the Philadephia 1876 expo onwards. (55) While the heavy involvement of political and economic elite played a crucial role in the organization of expos in these countries, French expos were always "heavily state-dominated projects." (53)

More than 30 major events were held from the emergence of the genre until the Second World War. One important hallmark during the inter-war period is the establishment of the Bureau of International Expositions (BIE) following the 1928 Convention of Paris that was signed during the international expositions conference. Following the institutionalization of expos, BIE has been ensuring the proper

application of this Convention and is still "in charge of overseeing the calendar, the bidding, the selection, and the organization of World and International Expos". BIE defines their mission today as to "ensure the integrity and quality of Expos so that they may continue to educate the public and promote innovation in the service of human progress." (Official web site of BIE) However, up until the establishment of this international office, especially during the second half of the nineteenth century, "there was no particular planned temporal cycle or circulation of sites for the major events, but, because of their scale and costs, they were rarely staged more frequently than, 5 to 10 years in each of the major countries, namely Britain, France and the USA." (Roche, 42) In addition to the "major" events, numerous other international and national exhibitions were held in nations around the world, including successful ones in terms of number of visitors and profits besides unsuccessful attempts. For instance, the Ottoman Empire staged an industrial exhibition in 1863, in Istanbul and planned on organizing an international exhibition in 1894 in a new exhibition space in Şişli, commissioned to architect Raimondo d'Aronco. However, this latter never happened due to the financial crises following the 1893 earthquake. (Çelik, 7) Financial difficulties were a common issue considering the fact that a significant percentage of world exhibitions (more than 60% according to Roche) ended up in loss; nevertheless this fact did not stop the national governments from encouraging and sponsoring these "official forms of grand public spectacle and theatre." (Roche, 43-4).

Besides the major events held in London (1851, 1862, 1908, 1924/5) and Paris (1855, 1867, 1878, 1889, 1900, 1927, 1937); Vienna (1873), Philadelphia (1876, 1926), Sydney (1879), Chicago (1893), Barcelona (1888), Brussels (1897),

were among the cities to follow the original trend in the late nineteenth century (see Table 1).

As there were no predefined temporal cycles for the events, each event held after the structuring pioneers related themselves to peculiar celebratory circumstances. The Philadelphia Centennial (1876) for instance, was to celebrate a century of American independence while the1889 Paris Universelle marked the centenary of the French Revolution, the Chicago Columbian (1893) commemorated the landing of Columbus in the New World, the 1900 Paris, the new century, the St. Louis Fair (1904), the Louisiana Purchase; the Franco-British (London, 1908) and the Entente Cordiale (Greenhalgh, 17). Greenhalgh further states that "standard moral justifications" were also central to the exhibitions as constant themes. Among the most prominent perennials were: "Peace amongst nations, Education (especially of the masses), Trade, and Progress." (18) While the 1850-1914 period of the phenomena has been generally characterized by the abovementioned themes, the inter-war period of 1918-39 was stamped out with the proliferation of colonial themes. Ever-present in the world exhibition genre, colonialism later began appearing as a main theme of the exhibitions organized by colonialist nations.

Table 1. World Exhibitions and Number of Visitors, 1851-1939

| Year | City | Number of visitors (in million) |
|---|---|---|
| 1851 | London | 6.0 |
| 1855 | Paris | 5.2 |
| 1862 | London | 6.2 |
| 1867 | Paris | 6.8 |
| 1873 | Vienna | 7.2 |
| 1876 | Philadelphia | 9.9 |
| 1878 | Paris | 6.0 |
| 1879/80 | Sydney | (no data) |
| 1880/81 | Melbourne | (no data) |
| 1888 | Melbourne | (no data) |
| 1888 | Barcelona | (no data) |
| 1889 | Paris | 32.0 |
| 1893 | Chicago | 27.5 |
| 1897 | Brussels | (no data) |
| 1900 | Paris | 48.0 |
| 1901 | Buffalo | 8.1 |
| 1904 | St Louis | 19.7 |
| 1905 | Liege | (no data) |
| 1906 | Milan | (no data) |
| 1908 | London | 8.4 |
| 1909 | Seattle | (no data) |
| 1910 | Brussels | (no data) |
| 1911 | Glasgow | 11.5 |
| 1913 | Ghent | (no data) |
| 1915 | San Francisco | 18.8 |
| 1924/5 | London | 27.0 |
| 1926 | Philadelphia | 6.4 |
| 1927 | Paris | (no data) |
| 1929/30 | Seville | (no data) |
| 1931 | Paris | 33.5 |
| 1933/4 | Chicago | 48.7 |
| 1935 | Brussels | (no data) |
| 1937 | Paris | 34.0 |
| 1938 | Glasgow | 2.6 |
| 1939 | San Francisco | 17.0 |
| 1939/40 | New York | 45.0 |

Sources: Roche, 43; Official web site of BIE

The 1867 Paris Exhibition was the first to establish a spatial order, rendering the hierarchy of nations visible in the exhibition space. The Crystal Palace was the model that set the genre, but what it provided was a large and unified monumental space in which all nations were to exhibit their products in separate partitioned spaces, resulting in nation booths. However, the space designated for the Paris exhibition (Champ de Mars) and the areas circling the main exhibition area were cut out for establishing a spatial hierarchy of nations (Çelik, 57). The representational city being at the center of the exhibition model, the exhibition area itself was situated at the very center of the city as well. And while the "real" city of Paris presented itself as the imperial capital of the world, the exhibition located at its center performed the duty of displaying the imperial and national objects in a consequent order. In a didactic guidebook titled *L'Egypt, la Tunisie, le Maroc et l'exposition de 1878*, the internal logic of the exhibition was explained as follows: "It is not on the Champs de Mars that one should look for the Egyptian exhibit. This is easily explained, for the country has no industry at all, properly speaking (…)" (Mitchell, 8-9) Hence, the level of progress in industrial production and technological advancements constituted the main justifying logic for the imperial structure of the exhibition where the colonial world was located at the periphery, according to the hierarchical rank.

Reflecting the desire for realistic depictions of unknown places' authentic cultures, this new order resulted in the creation of independent display areas for indigenous cultures, especially the colonies. This desire has later translated itself into involving real people staging up in their original "costumes" and daily lives. The host nation which was on the top of the hierarchy, was also at the center of the

exhibition with other developed nations while the non-Western nations were to be found at the peripheries (Çelik, 58), thus creating a theatre, a spatial representation of the world consisting of a hierarchical order based on technological progress.

Following Buck-Morss's phrasing, "progress became a religion in the nineteenth century, world expositions its holy shrines, commodities its cult objects, and Haussmann's 'new' Paris its Vatican city." (90) This belief in progress undoubtedly had its roots in the Enlightenment faith in man's limitless potential for mastery of his environment (Silverman, 99) and world exhibitions were spectacular evidences that "indicate civilization was advancing in some known direction" (Greenhalgh, 113) and the host nation was the leading nation to define this direction. Bennett reminds us that the exhibitionary logic and the pattern of world exhibitions "aimed to overlap" the times of "nation and modernity onto one another by projecting the host nation as among the foremost representatives of the time, and tasks, of modernity" (210). Among the tangible symbols of prosperity and technological progress were the Crystal Palace and the Eiffel Tower (built for 1889 Paris expo) emphasizing the achievements of London and Paris as modern cities and forebears of modernity. Through the spatial representations of imperial ambitions, colonial conquests and knowledge besides technological and industrial progress (Greenhalgh, 52), the world exhibitions effectively transformed themselves to mass theaters where real life was "dramatised as spectacle." (Roche, 46)

While major European cities were busy representing "the other," America was attempting to ensure "fairgoers' faith in American institutions and social organization", to evoke "a community of shared experience" and to "formulate[d] responses to questions about the ultimate destiny of mankind in general and of

Americans in particular" (Rydell, "All the World's a Fair", 3) through world fairs. The symbolic construct of American world fairs was, according to Rydell (235), centered "on the interpenetration of Darwinian theories about racial development and utopian dreams about America's material and national progress." With numerous international fairs realized in Philadelphia, New Orleans, Chicago, Atlanta, Nashville, Omaha, Buffalo, Saint Louis, Portland, Seattle, San Francisco, and San Diego, America's search for order solidified in an "updated synthesis of progress and white supremacy that suffused the blueprints of future perfection offered by the fairs." (3) As in the European model, the exhibition planners again drew upon "the prestige of science to make the presentation of America's progress more convincing" (5) while anthropology as a new scientific discipline played an important role in representing the indigenous. Rydell concludes that the American fairs not only reflected American culture, but intended to *shape* that culture, "leaving an enduring vision of empire." (237)

Within the scope of the conventional world exhibition structure, be it in Europe, Australia or the USA, the claim of being a realistic representation of the real world has operated in various ways. First of all, the exhibition logic constructed Europe –especially for the non-Western gaze- as a display object in itself (Mitchell, 32) where a person, a visitor could simultaneously be transformed into an object to be seen. Secondly, the spatial and representational order of the exhibitions created the illusion that the world was going towards a certain direction as in the metaphor of train to be caught and that nations were hierarchically located in that train from the imperialist countries to non-Westerners and colonies. This effect was genuinely assured via the unbelievably realistic details in especially the Oriental and colonial

pavilions, usually built by the imperialist nations themselves (Çelik, 9). And last but not least, Mitchell stresses (39-40) the crucial role and central location of the visitor in separating the model from the real world it claims to represent. Thus, two main distinctions, parallel to each other were underlying the world exhibitions: 1. between the visitor and the display; 2. between the display object and the represented. Both the city and the exhibition were political representations built up with a didactic style (Van Wesemael, 2001) and required the visitor, especially the non-Western visitor to become a fascinated viewer, a tourist in need for a guidebook or map (Çelik, 276). This construction of the non-Western visitor and the representational order had its impacts on city planning tendencies in colonial cities where the new order imposed by the imperialist nation seemingly left the authentic city out of the new hierarchical urban order while at the same time preserving the organic urban pattern as an authentic element. Mitchell argues that what colonialist city planning did was to divide the colonial city in two, transforming one part into an exhibition, and the other into a museum as the exhibitionary logic did for the world exhibition model. The exhibition area of the city was the place where the main institutions were hierarchically located whereas the museum area comprised of the unordered, organic street pattern and vernacular architectural elements that the Western gaze could only connect with through its display as a museum.

Ever since Tony Bennett wrote "The Exhibitionary Complex" in 1988, more scholars focused on the analysis of the world exhibitions through the concept of "panopticon." Bennett argued that a controlled collective was created in Crystal Palace where the visitors were both the viewer and the viewed as it is in Jeremy Bentham's infamous Panopticon. One of the architectural innovations of the Crystal

Palace was, according to Bennett, that the relations between the public and the exhibits were arranged "so that, while everyone could see, there were vantage points from which everyone could be seen, thus combining the functions of spectacle and surveillance." (341) The world exhibition's visual regime undoubtedly had its lasting influences on the development of future exhibitionary forms and especially in the emerging department stores. As "temporary theme parks" (Roche, 126), the world exhibitions and the department stores of late nineteenth century created a "wonderful circus which took attention away from poverty and politics and introduced another of its aspects: the visit." (Kligender, 12)

While the influence of Crystal Palace on the first department stores in terms of design is visible in the transparent walls and glass displays, resemblances in their representation, display logic and commodifying aspects are striking. Originating in the rapidly unfolding modern consumption economy, the world exhibition and the department store both defined the exhibits as commodities, "objects with representational rather than useful properties" in a world where "consumption of commodities must be understood as a process or looking at representations rather than buying actual objects. (Purbrick, 15)

While the extremely high cost of staging a world exhibition (ranging from a handful of millions to ten millions of US dollars) led the French organizers to sell tickets to the visitors and insert shops and entertainment activities within the exhibition space (Mitchell, 41) small shops based on local craftsmanship were yielding to department stores and large malls. Despite the fact that the year 1838 witnessed the foundation of two stores, which are still regarded as the first department stores (Bainbridge in Newcastle, England –known today as John Lewis

Newcastle and Aristide Boucicaut's Bon Marché), the establishment of the department store as a genre is considered to be marked by the transformation of Bon Marché into a single building store, offering a wide variety of goods in its departments. The trend was immediately followed by the Grands Magasins du Louvre in 1855 and Printemps in 1865. Offering a miniature version of the world, the department store is, along with the world exhibition, the very ground on which the modern consumer was born and where the urban tourist has its roots.

## World Exhibitions as Regulatory Projects:
## Worker as Visitor and Consumer

In order to understand the regulatory role of world exhibitions, we can focus on the 1851 exhibition as the main tool of periodization in the nineteenth century. Among the two historically and symbolically significant events that both occured right around mid-nineteenth century, the 1848 Chartist demonstration and the 1851 Great Exhibition, the first was a mass political assembly and the second a spectacular exhibition, both of which were held in Hyde Park, London, in 1848. One might ask why the second one has been widely used to understand and define the nineteenth century while the first is a much less preferred mid-century marker (Purbrick, 4). Saville argues in his book titled *1848. The British State and the Chartist Movement* that the exhibition of 1851, with other high-profile national events, assisted "the processes of indifference and forgetfulness" (202) and "contributed a state of amnesia about the political significance of Chartism and the extent of its state suppression." (Purbrick, 4) 1848 was actually a full year of revolutions. Both France and Germany witnessed a series of successful and unsuccessful rebellions later to be called as 1848 Revolutions. According to Greenhalgh, this significant moment in

European history also marked the last time "that the bourgeoisie, as a class, acted as a revolutionary force." (Harrison, et al., 309) In the following chapter, as we move on to explore the so-called boom of biennials that happened in the 1990s, we shall notice that the initiation of some carry a similar inclination (yet in a more subtle manner): contributing to a state of amnesia about the city's past and reconstructing the image of a city through culture and arts, embodied in a contemporary art biennial.

Timothy Mitchell explains a new term that started to be used in characterizing the sense of detachment and close attentiveness: "objective", stated in *The Times* at the summer of 1851, during the Great Exhibition:

> The word denoted the modern sense of detachment, both physical and conceptual, of the self from an object-world –the detachment epitomised, as I have been suggesting, in the visitor to an exhibition. At the same time, the word suggested a passive curiosity, of the kind the organisers of exhibitions hoped to evoke in those who visited them. Despite their apprehension about allowing enormous numbers of the lower classes to congregate in European capitals so soon after the events of 1848, the authorities encouraged them to visit exhibitions. Workers were given permission to leave their shops and factories to attend, and manufacturerers and benevolent societies subsidised the cost of their travel and accommodation. The result was an example of mass behaviour without precedent. "Popular movements that only a few years ago would have been pronounced dangereous to the safety of the State", it was reported after the 1851 exhibition, "...have taken place not only without disorder, but also almost without crime." The article on "objective people" in *The Times* was commenting on the reassuring absence of "political passions" in the country during the exhibition. The objective attitude of the exhibition visitor, in other words, seemed to suggest not only the true nature of the modern individual, but the model of behaviour for the modern political subject. (Mitchell, 19-20)

The objective behavior of the exhibition visitor as a modern political subject has been central to nineteenth century cultural institutions' strategies that combined education with entertainment through the aim of "incorporation of oppositional

subjects into the hierarchies of the state." (Purbrick, 4) Entirely didactic in nature, the world exhibitions, along with the national museums, were part of the state project of cultural domination over the emerging urban working and middle-classes (Roche, 76-7). Not only through encouraging but by virtually supporting their visits, the state invited working classes to see how industrial production is beneficial to all citizens and that the host nation was the leading power in global production.

Grapard reminds us that the world exhibitions were also places "where nationalism is solidified" through citizenship and subject construction: "where the English become *English citizens*, and where the French and the English together become *Europeans* in contrast to *Orientals* and other exotic peoples from around the world." (96) The visual logic of the exhibition encourages the spectator to look at exotic displays alongside the industrial products of both the host nation and other imperialist nations; this is a world picture sketched out by imperialism. Through visiting this realistic representation of the world, the fascinated visitor supposedly creates a mental picture of the world order and is simultaneously constructed as a citizen-subject. Another regulatory aspect of the exhibition visit was the imposed purpose of "usefully filling unregulated time outside work," (Kligender, 12) which has been lately translated into a middle-class leisure ideology where leisure time has to be rationally planned for self-education.

In his essay on the Stockholm Exhibition of 1897, Pred explains that the Swedish bourgeoisie had some level of anxiety about "intermingling with the working classes on the streets or in other everyday public settings." (73) When these threatening elements of society were to be brought to the exhibition as visitors for educational purposes, "then they preferably were to be brought under disciplined

conditions, under conditions in keeping with the bourgeois precept of public order and (self-)control at all times." (73) This "class appeasement" theme was often explicitly stated both in guidebooks and throughout the exhibition itself (Roche, 77). Buck-Morss argues that "[s]uch 'uniting' of peoples contributed to the illusion that industrialism on its own was capable of eliminating class divisions, achieving the common brother- and sisterhood that had traditionally been religion's goal." (91)

Conversely, it has not been too long since Karl Marx asserted that "labour not only produces commodities; it also produces itself and the workers as a *commodity* and it does do in the same proportion in which it produces commodities in general." (324) While visiting the industrial exhibition, in the presence of produced commodities on display, the producer-worker was invited to join the celebration of commodities and "contemplate himself in a world he himself has created." (Marx, 329) Therefore, the consumer-worker who "occupies the foreground as customer" (Benjamin, 36) is in Bennett's words, stupefied "before the reified products of their own labor" ("Exhibitionary," 94) and is constructed as consumer, rather than producer (Buck-Morss, 81). This construction virtually happens through the state of "paralysis in the capacity for perception, a true hypnosis" (Simmel, as quoted in Frisby, 74) created via the close proximity to a wide variety of industrial products with the "memory of the notion that one should be amused here" in mind (Simmel, as quoted in Frisby, 74). "The newly industrialized world," in Boyer's words, "which seemed to be structured completely by things, suddenly created an environment in which the individual's autonomy was lessened as she or the too became subordinated to the objects consumed or admired." (257) In his account of the Berlin Trade Exhibition of 1896, Simmel further explains the process of fascination and

overstimulation before products offered, a process later to be called by Benjamin, "phantasmagoria".

> Every fine and sensitive feeling, however, is violated and seems deranged by the mass effect of the merchandise offered, while on the other hand it cannot be denied that the richness and variety of fleeting impressions is well suited to the need for excitement for overstimulated and tired nerves. While increasing civilization leads to ever greater specialization and to a more frequent one-sidedness of function within an evermore limited field, in no way does this differentiation on the side of production extend to consumption. Rather the opposite: it appears as though modern man's one-sided and monotonous role in the division of labour will be compensated for by consumption and enjoyment through the growing pressure of heterogeneous impressions, and the ever faster and more colorful change of excitements." (Simmel, "Berlin," 298-9)

## A Phantasmagoria of Commodities

The world exhibition invites the working class and middle classes to consume. However consumption here refers to visual and imaginary consumption to begin with. The phenomenal diversity of merchandises, gigantic nature of architectural representations, realistic details, exotic experiences offered by Egyptian streets or Ottoman mosques are reduced to images to be consumed by the visitor. This order of commodities not only renders the productive process invisible to the worker but also creates a universe of representation. In Featherstone's words, the fairs offered "spectacular imagery, bizarre juxtapositions, confusion of boundaries and an immersion in a *mêlée* of strange sounds, motions, images, people, animals and things." (Consumer Culture and Postmodernism, 23) This bizarre *mélange*, presenting itself as the actual picture of the world, consists of visual, tactile, auditory elements gathered all over the world in one all-encompassing representation. The experience offered is nothing like encountering an exotic artifact in its environment or even in exhibit form. Giberti argues that the alienation from the artifacts "from

any context of origin or intended use and their placement in odd and sometimes violent juxtaposition to each other could combine to make it difficult to apprehend their meaning as artifact." (107). The visitor thus usually perceives the exhibition as totalitarian imagery, "as a blur of faintly received impressions" and not "as a clear series of precise object lessons." (107) The exhibition thus creates a "dream world" as Benjamin asserted and appeals to the subconscious world of impressions, nightmares and traumas through the blurring of senses.

Thus, alienation here operates both as a separation of commodities from their process of production and as the process of first decontextualizing commodities and artifacts to recontextualize them in a new artificial universe of representations. Elaborately discussed in the fifth chapter of this thesis, de- and recontextualization of both commodities and artworks in the case of biennials, contribute a great deal to the phantasmagorical atmosphere of the exhibition. The objects represented in the exhibitions are treated as "mysterious 'social hieroglyphic'"s and they "no longer represent[s] (…) the real labour and the real social lives of those who actually made it." (Mitchell, 18) As opposed to the production or use value, "world exhibitions glorify the exchange value of the commodity. They create a framework in which its use value recedes into the background." (Benjamin, Writer, 36) In world exhibitions and many similar entertainment forms such as department stores, theme parks and mega-events, the reign of commodity fetishism is not limited to the new ways of interacting with commodities: these cultural manifestations of industrial capitalism and modernity also undertake the task of commodifying the everyday life and the elements of the everyday which were previously uncommodified (Pred, 46) including the visitors themselves, and for the case of biennials, as we will see in the

following chapters, the cultural practices as well. The spatial manifestations of industrial capitalism are therefore no longer a realm for tradesmen's encounters or commercial transactions but their appeal is primarily to the consumers and visitors. In the *Art Handbook* of the Pan-American exposition of 1901, the "Short Sermon for Sightseers" advised its readers as follows: "Please remember when you get inside the gates you are part of the show." (cited in Harris, 59) The exhibition, as a spectacle of commodities, "was a theater without precedence, enabling a viewer to revel in its make-believe and its myth-making force." (Boyer, 258)

Since Benjamin wrote that "[w]orld exhibitions are places of pilgrimage to the commodity fetish" (Writer, 36), we seem to be fully aware of the fetishistic nature of spectacular exhibitions, trade fairs and other forms of mega-events:

> They open a phantasmagoria which a person enters in order to be distracted. The entertainment industry makes it easier by elevating the person to the level of the commodity. He surrenders to its manipulations while enjoying his alienation from himself and others. (Benjamin, Writer, 36)

Whether we use Marxian terminology and speak of "commodity fetishism", Benjamin's conceptualization of "phantasmagoria", "representation" in Foucauldian sense, Guy Debord's "spectacle", Adorno's "culture industries", we must go back to the basic logic behind the world exhibitions: representing a world that claims to be more 'real' than the actual reality. This realm of fantasy pulls the visitor into a world of representation with the promise of entertainment and distraction from his/her everyday existence. The achievement of world exhibitions is "to make the fantasy more real (and captivating) than 'reality.'" (Miles, 186) World exhibitions of late nineteenth century not only opened up this universe of fantasy where the visitor is invited as a part of the show, but also constructed the host city as the biggest

achievement of modernity and industrial capitalism, as Frisby points out, "the world exhibition was usually the most significant representation of a city's status, albeit one that rested on a temporary architecture." ("Streets", 38) Of course, the winner in that competition was Paris which was then acknowledged as the "capital of luxury and fashion" (Benjamin, Writer, 37) in this phantasmagoric universe. However, as world exhibitions contributed to the construction of a city's representative image of higher achievements of empires, I shall discuss the role of contemporary art biennials in locating their cities in global cities hierarchy through urban narratives of democratic and ethical progress in the fifth chapter.

## Emergence of the First Art Biennial in Venice

While Paris consolidated its image as the symbolic capital of industrial capitalism with its arcades, department stores and international exhibitions, another European city, Venice, started to host the world's first art biennial ("biennale" in Italian) just before the end of the century, in 1895. Although world exhibitions have their acclaimed status of representing the cultural logic of industrial capitalism and imperialist desire, the first biennial is not even mentioned either in the literature focusing on world exhibitions or in the mainstream art-historical sources. Instead, the phenomena of "Salon", the official art exhibition of the Académie des Beaux-Arts of Paris, has tended to dominate art-historical scholarship. Despite the fact that fine arts were excluded from the Great Exhibition of 1851, as a display category, for their indirect relationship to industrial production (except a number of sculptures illustrating industrial fabrication processes), every major European exhibition thereafter featured a major international art exhibition. Artworks selection and display processes were similar to industrial products and other objects: artists were

selected by national committees and the works exhibited in national pavilions were part of the international competition as industrial products were. The French Salon exhibition model involved exhibiting artworks of individual artists and while this model was widespread in Europe, the world exhibitions presented the artworks as representative of national art movements, schools or styles, a new mode of exhibiting art, which would soon become prevalent all over Europe.

Most European cities and states during this period increasingly sponsored shows in order to secure the city's or the nation's reputations as cultural and artistic centers as well as to promote local artists. As a matter of fact, the last decades of the nineteenth century witnessed an increase in, if not a boom of significant international exhibitions held regularly in major European cities, just like the last decades of the twentieth century that witnessed a boom of contemporary art biennials, this time all over the world. The basic structure of these exhibitions which consisted of national juries, national organization of artworks and prizes awarded by international juries, was ultimately solidified in the most famous and enduring amongst them: The Venice Biennale, the first exhibition to name itself "biennial" and include the host city in its title.

Up until 1895, Italy hosted three national and partly international exhibitions after an unsuccessful world exhibition attempt: 1874, Rome, Esposizione Internazionale (never held); 1884, Turin, Esposizione Generale Italiana; 1887, Rome, Esposizione Mondiale and 1892, Genoa, Esposizione Italo-Americana. Venice has not been among the cities considered to host an international exhibition. According to the information cited in the official site of Venice Biennale, it was in 1893 that the Venetian City Council, headed by major Riccardo Selvatico passed a resolution to

set up an Esposizione Biennale Artistica Nazionale (Biennial Exhibition of Italian Art) to be inaugurated in 1894. In early 1894, the council decided to adopt an "invitation system" and to reserve a section of the exhibition for foreign artists. The design of the Palazzo dell'Esposizione (Exhibition Palace) in the Giardini di Castello was realized by architect Enrico Trevisanato and the construction was completed in the following months. The 1st International Art Exhibition of the City of Venice was finally inaugurated on 30 April 1895 and received 224,000 visitors (an audience not even comparable to that of an average world exhibition).

The reason behind the invisibility of Venice Biennale's emergence in world exhibitions or art history scholarship was not the relatively small number of visitors but the fact that the Biennale's structure evolved in 1930s into a broader festival encompassing cinema, theater, dance and architecture. Moreover, although the national pavilion structure is still intact, the Biennale has been "updating" itself with the most recent tendencies in the contemporary art world with themes questioning national representation, exploring the notions of identity, multiculturalism etc. Held 53 times including the 2009 show, The Venice Biennale still stands as the original to be copied and exported and "as a sort of Olympic Games of the art world, complete with a first prize". (Skeikh, 70)

In the third chapter I will try to cover the history of the "biennial" as mega-event and make some comments on the recent trends that led to the so-called "boom" of biennials throughout the world. Deriving from the original Venice format in the first place, the way in which the contemporary art biennial adapted itself to actual social and political circumstances are striking and worth mediating on as we are to

comprehend the ramifications of world exhibitions, parallelisms between the two genres of mega-events and contemporary implications of “world as exhibition”.

# CHAPTER 3

## THE CONTEMPORARY ART BIENNIAL AS A MEGA-EVENT

The last two decades witnessed a boom of contemporary art biennials all over the world. Adding up to the new and expanding institutional formations –such as spectacular art fairs, galleries, private museums, residency programs, art spaces– the biennial offered many cities the opportunity to realize a (in some cases, more than one) mega art event that includes the host city's name in the title. Although the art biennial's origins date back to the first Venice Biennale, the pre-1980 period of the twentieth century witnessed the emergence of three major events: The Sao Paulo Biennial (1951), Documenta (a 100 days museum-event held in Kassel, Germany every five years, since 1955) and the Biennale of Sydney (1973). While the Havana Biennial (1984) and the Istanbul Biennial (1987) were the only major events initiated in the 1980s, it was 1990s when the virtual boom of biennials happened. Today, the number of biennials along with triennials and quadriennials is claimed to be 146 (Rogoff, 114) or 60 (according to data revealed by a research project realized by the Asia Art Archive in collaboration with Art Map Ltd.), however we must note that these numbers do not include some relatively smaller-scale national/local biennials, for instance the "Sinopale" of Sinop (2006) or the Istanbul Biennial of Photography held once in 2006.

Many scholars propose the year 1989 as a landmark in the proliferation of biennials. Besides the obvious marking events, namely the fall of the Berlin Wall, demonstrations in Tiananmen Square, the election of F.W. de Klerk as the president of South Africa and thus the initiation of reforms to end apartheid, this is the year during which World Wide Web was invented, David Harvey published *The*

*Condition of Postmodernism*, Slavoj Žižek published *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Milosevic was elected president of Serbia, Khomeini announced a fatwa against Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* and Francis Fukuyama published *The End of History* (Vanderlinden and Filipovic, 21-3). It is indeed true that the year 1989 marked a milestone. Nevertheless, this milestone should be considered within the context of the expansion of neoliberalism and globalization around the world. Much alike the late nineteenth century, these last two decades of the twentieth century marked the beginning of an era: the era of global capitalism heavily stamped by neoliberal state policies and new imperialism. According to the data published in the web site of the Asia Art Archive's special project on biennials, while the number of biennials launched in the 1980s around the globe was six, in the last two decades it increased to fifty-one (up until 2006 when the mentioned research was completed) with seventeen new biennials launched in Asia & the Pacific and twenty-five in Europe. Here too, we must note that the real numbers are much higher considering the biennials launched in the last four years and the number of some less known biennials that were relatively unsuccessful in drawing the attention of international art circles and media.

In this chapter, I shall elaborate on the phenomenon of contemporary art biennials and cover this mega-event type from various perspectives including the relationship of art with politics, capital, and the city. This chapter is an attempt to provide a background in order to be able to comprehend the circumstances that the Istanbul Biennial was born into.

## A Short Overview of Contemporary Art Biennials

Despite the fact that the roots of contemporary art as a reaction towards modern art's conventional techniques –namely *peinture* and sculpture– date back to pre-Second World War artistic movements such as Dadaism and surrealism, contemporary art is commonsensically considered as a post-Second World War phenomenon. In *After Modern Art*, David Hopkins explains how post-war art got involved with actual politics and began involving with different media (such as video, installation, etc.) instead of the conventional ones (*peinture*, sculpture). It would not be wrong to argue that this tendency of responding to actual socio-political circumstances has been strengthened and sometimes brought to the extreme after the end of Cold War in 1989. The art produced thereafter is often called "postmodern" besides "contemporary."

Contemporary art can basically be defined as art responding to actual social and political circumstances by means of unconventional material (human hair, parts of electronic equipments, urine, blood, etc.) and media (mainly installation, performance, video and happening). As for Duchamp's ready-mades, in the context of contemporary art, "to make art means to show things as art" (Groys, "Medium," 57). And as opposed to modern art, contemporary art "can be understood primarily as an exhibition practice" (Groys, "Medium," 57) where the notion of experience and –as I shall discuss in the following pages– therefore a renewed version of Benjamin's conceptualization of "aura" are in play. With the widening of contemporary art discourse and practices, the art biennial that was once invented as the promoter of the nation-state has acquired a different guise today. While the nationalistic political agenda evolved into a self-reflective approach to politics, the promotion of nation-

state and imperial ambitions has been transformed into the promotion of and competition among cities and "other places-to-be" (Gielen, 9), thus the proliferation of biennials over the globe.

Even though the first biennial in the world, Venice, did not quit its national pavilion structure, it underwent a substantial change. The basic structure of the biennial still consists of national participation: countries willing to show works at the biennial choose a curator and constitute an organizing body. The installment of national pavilions, including the logistic costs, artist, production and curatorial costs, is funded by the country itself, by means of public support or private sponsorships depending on the country's cultural policies and the structure of the organization involved. For instance, the British Council has been responsible for the British Pavilion since 1938 whereas the Pavilion of Turkey for the last two editions of the biennial has been realized by the Istanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts: the advisory board of the Foundation selects the curator of the show who will be responsible for the decisions concerning the conceptual framework or theme of the show and the artist selection. While the first of the two editions was sponsored by Garanti Bank, the second was realized with the contribution of the Promotion Fund of Turkish Prime Ministry.

It was in the 1970s that the pavilions started to spread out in the city, the Arsenale adding up to the Giardini as exhibition venues. That is also the decade that thematic exhibitions, including the 1974 edition dedicated to Chile as a cultural protest against Pinochet, emerged. In the 1980s, the thematic exhibitions were already a convention, leading to first themed Venice biennial editions: Art as Art (1982), Art in the Mirror (1984) and Art and Science (1986). However, it was the

1990s editions that marked the emergence of new trends in contemporary art. Themed "Cultural Nomadism and the Four Cardinal Points of Arts," the 1993 edition of the Venice Biennial had evident differences from its predecessors: the entire show was bigger and spread throughout the city through satellite exhibitions and diverse events; the corporate sponsorship was now much more pervasive and visible and was observable not only through the larger place occupied by corporate logos but also with the institution of a "Swatch Prize". This pervasiveness of corporate sponsorship was due to the diminished public support towards the Biennial, which, according to the official numbers announced in the Venice Biennale's website, decreased from $5.7 million in 1990 to $3.8 million for the 45$^{th}$ edition scheduled in 1993 in order to have the following edition on the centennial of the Biennial.

In 1999, the Biennial initiated a large-scale renovation project in the Arsenale buildings to transform them into main exhibition spaces. The two consequent editions of the Biennial (1999 and 2001) were curated by the legendary Harald Szeemann, who has been claimed to be the inventor of curatorship as a vocation and the "great artistic exhibition" involving a central concept and new interrelationships among artworks when installed and exhibited around that concept. After these successful shows focusing on issues such as identity, migration, body politics, etc., the transformation that the Venice Biennial underwent can be understood via the Spanish Pavilion of 2003, among many others, in a crystallized manner. For the 2003 edition curated by two Spanish woman curators, the Spanish artist Santiago Sierra presented a work titled "Wall Enclosing a Space" (see Photograph 1). The work consisted of a space where only Spanish passport holders were allowed to enter through a back door. Questioning the issues of access, boundaries and nationality

within the context of the European Union especially, the work was subject to political discussion and gave a hard time to the visitors in making sense of the closed doors of a national pavilion.

Photograph 1. Santiago Sierra, “Wall Enclosing a Space,” 2003.

Sierra’s work provides a fruitful ground to understand what the contemporary art and especially the biennials offer their visitors and their imaginary international audience. By “imaginary”, I would like to imply the desire of both the artist and the curator to make a change in the world through discursive or tangible forms of art. The artist’s obvious desire is that you literally come face to face with the reality of national borders and the issue of citizenship in general through the experience of a certain inability. What is the desired outcome of this encounter? Most probably, it is that the visitor instantly starts to meditate upon the issues raised by the artwork and ultimately understands how painful it is to a disadvantaged citizen of non-EU

countries to be aware of the fact that s/he is not directly accepted within many countries' borders. Deriving from a non-didactical claim, the desire of that sort of artwork is ultimately didactic. Is it possible to transform a conservative mind into an open one through art? Even if we cannot answer this question through this example, we can at least deduce some crucial points: 1. Contemporary art is primarily an exhibitionary practice. 2. You have to "be there" in order to go through the pre-designed experience and the experience is meant to educate you. 3. Many contemporary artworks are mere gestures. 4. Contemporary art mainly derives from social sciences, which might reduce most practices into an epiphenomenon of already uttered sociological and anthropological claims.

Table 2. Biennials around the World: Initiation Dates, Titles and Countries[1]

| Year | Biennial, City | Country |
|---|---|---|
| 1895 | Venice Biennale | Italy |
| 1896 | Carnegie International | USA |
| 1932 | Whitney Biennial | USA |
| 1951 | Sao Paulo Art Biennial | Brazil |
| 1952-1990 | Tokyo Biennial | Japan |
| 1955 | Documenta (every five years) | Germany |
| 1959 | Biennale de Paris | France |
| 1972 | Sculpture Quadrennial Riga | Latvia |
| 1973 | Sydney Biennale | Australia |
| 1977 | Skulptur Projecte Muenster | Germany |
| 1979 | Baltic Triennial | Lithuania |
| 1984 | Havana Biennial | Cuba |
| 1987 | Istanbul Biennial | Turkey |
| 1987 | International Biennial of Cuenca | Ecuador |
| 1989 | International Cairo Biennial of Art | Egypt |
| 1991 | Lyon Biennial | France |
| 1992 | Dak'Art Biennial of Contemporary African Art | Senegal |
| 1992 | Panama Biennial | Panama |
| 1993 | Sharjah Biennale | United Arab Emirates, Sharjah |
| 1993 | Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art | Australia |
| 1995-1997 | Johannesburg Biennial | South Africa |
| 1995 | Kwangju Biennial | South Korea |
| 1995 | Site Santa Fe International Biennial | USA |
| 1996 | Cetinje Biennial | Montenegro |
| 1996 | Manifesta | Pan-European nomad biennial |
| 1996 | Shanghai Biennial | China |
| 1996 | Werkleitz Biennial | Germany |
| 1997 | Mercosul Biennial | Porto Alegre, Brazil |
| 1997 | Contemporary Art Biennial in the Flemish Ardennes | Belgium |
| 1997 | Florence Biennial | Italy |

[1] This table provides a selected list of major international biennials and triennials that are generally mentioned in the literature.

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1997 | Periferic Biennial | Romania |
| 1997 | Ibero American Biennial | Peru |
| 1998 | Busan Biennale | South Korea |
| 1998 | Berlin Biennial | Germany |
| 1998 | Taipei Biennial | Taiwan |
| 1998 | Biennial of Montreal | Canada |
| 1998 | Nordic Biennial Momentum | Norway |
| 1998 | Triennale Oberschwaben | Germany |
| 1998 | Gyumri International Biennial of Contemporary Art | Armenia |
| 1999 | Liverpool Biennial | UK |
| 1999 | Melbourne Biennale | Australia |
| 2000 | Echigo-Tsumari Triennial | Japan |
| 2000 | Kulturbro Biennial | Denmark |
| 2000 | Christchurch Scape Biennial | New Zealand |
| 2001 | Yokohama Triennial | Japan |
| 2001 | Yokohama International Triennial of Contemporary Art | Japan |
| 2001 | Göteborg International Biennial for Contemporary Art | Sweden |
| 2001 | Valencia Biennial | Spain |
| 2002 | Guangzhou Triennial | China |
| 2003 | Beijing International Art Biennial | China |
| 2003 | Kyoto Biennial | Japan |
| 2003 | Brighton Photo Biennial | UK |
| 2003 | Prague Biennial | Czech Republic |
| 2004 | Iowa Biennial | USA |
| 2004 | BIACS International Biennial of Contemporary Art of Seville | Spain |
| 2004 | Lodz Biennial | Poland |
| 2005 | Moscow Biennial | Russia |
| 2005 | Bucharest Biennial | Romania |
| 2005 | Vancouver Biennale (sculpture, public arts) | Canada |
| 2005 | Cape Town Biennial | South Africa |
| 2005 | Pocheon Asia Biennial | South Korea |
| 2005 | Turin Triennial | Italy |
| 2005 | Riwaq Biennial | Palestine |
| 2005 | Emergency Biennial | Chechnya |
| 2006 | Singapore Biennale | Singapore |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 2006 | Saigon Open City | Vietnam |
| 2007 | Sinopale | Turkey |
| 2006 | Architecture, Art and Landscape Biennial of the Canaries | The Canaries |
| 2007 | Athens Biennial | Greece |
| 2007 | Biennial of the End of the World | Argentina |
| 2007 | Taichung Asian Art Biennial | China |
| 2007 | Thessaloniki Biennial of Contemporary Art | Greece |
| 2008 | Asia Art Triennial Manchester | UK |
| 2008 | U-Turn Quadrennial for Contemporary Art | Denmark |
| 2008 | Folkestrone Triennial | UK |
| 2008 | Brussels Biennial | Belgium |
| 2008 | Mediations Biennial | Poland |
| 2008 | Prospect | USA |
| 2009 | Tel Aviv-Yafo Biennial | Israel |

Sources: Open; AAA Biennials/Triennials; Universes in Universe

The abovementioned “moment”s in the history of the Venice Biennial can indeed be considered as crucial moments in the overall history of biennials. Nevertheless, a grasp into the moments of emergence of some major biennials would be instructive in terms of the ways in which central and local governments’ intentions and support in initiating biennials in their cities and countries. The stories of Documenta, the Johannesburg Biennial and the Gwangju Biennial are worth mentioning within this context.

The monumental biennial of Europe, Documenta, was first realized in 1955, within post-war circumstances as an anti-thesis of the fascist propagandist exhibitions and national rivalries (Graf, 64; Ferguson, Greenberd and Nairne, 51). Following a period of recession in Nazi Germany, the event was initiated by Arnold Bode as part of the Federal Horticultural Show in Kassel so as to revive the production of art, bring German art back in to the international agenda and to re-educate the German people as a part of an assessment of Western-German democratic ideals in opposition to its Eastern, communist Other (Sheikh, 71). It is a noteworthy fact that Germany hosted no international exhibitions in the 1930s. “Instead, Hitler presided over the new form of mass spectacle that would supersede them in our own era (when world expositions have become unprofitable). The Olympic Games were held in Berlin in 1936 at the new eighty-five thousand-seat ‘Olympic Stadium’.” (Buck-Morss, 325)

Recurring every four years until 1972, and every five years thereafter, this very year has been a breakthrough in Documenta’s history for the editions’s curator Harald Szeemann transformed this spectacular show from a “100 Day Museum” to a “100 Day Event.” It is Szeemann in Documenta 5 who revolutionized the “white

cube" of the museum space and opened the way for performances and happenings to be considered as the *sine qua non* of a biennial or any contemporary art event. The last three editions of Documenta have been focused on showing art from all corners of the world instead of concentrating solely on Western Europe and the USA while the event's centrality has been simultaneously challenged by the many new biennials from various geographical locations of the world that Documenta intends to show art from.

As the first biennial of the African continent, the Johannesburg Biennial was initiated by the Ministry of Culture in 1995 until the organizing body of the exhibition, The African Institute for Contemporary Art was created after the success of the first edition. 1994 was the year when the first multi-racial elections of the country were held after the dismantling of apartheid. Themed "Volatile Alliances" and "Decolonizing our Minds," the first biennial marked the end of an isolation period and contributed to restoring the dialogue between South African art and the international art scene as Documenta was meant to for German art. Venice model being adapted for the first edition, Okwui Enwezor, the internationally renown curator of the second edition, left the national representation model. However, this second edition was closed a month before the announced schedule due to financial problems, followed by the dissolution of the Institute and no further biennials took place afterwards.

The year 1995 also witnessed the initiation of the first biennial of international scope in Asia (except the Tokyo Biennial that started in 1952 and ended in 1990): The Gwangju Biennial. Triggered by the ambition of South Korea to become part of the international circuit after hosting the Olympic Games in Seoul in

1988, the initiation of the first biennial in the country would have been expected to occur in Seoul. However, Gwangju was a city identified with the "Gwangju Massacre," a brutal incident that involved the bloody suppression of civic demonstrations by military forces in 1980. The organization of an international event with a similar title, "The Gwangju Biennial," –so it was hoped- would alter the symbolic connotations of the city's name and demonstrate to the public that South Korea was ready to face its own history and to move on. In his widely quoted speech, Gwangju's mayor declared that he hopes the Biennial will serve "to clarify misconceptions regarding the history of Gwangju, a city of light that uses art to brighten the dark reality of Korean separation." Realized under themes such as "Beyond the Borders" (1995), and "Unmapping the Earth" (1997), the Gwangju Biennial immediately gained international acclaim thanks to its government supported large budget. The Gwangju Biennial is also known for the gigantic numbers it has been associated to: the biggest average budget ($12 million) and a considerable number of visitors (1,640,000 visitors in 1995, making Gwangju the most visited biennial in the 1990s, also as compared to the most visited biennial in the 2000s, Venice 2005, with 915,000 visitors according to the Biennial's official website).

Until this point, I tried to explain the circumstances surrounding the initiation of some major -or significant in terms of their contexts or achievements- biennials and elaborated on the crucial moments in the biennials' history that constitute noteworthy breaking points. In order to understand the most recent trends in the biennial genre, I would like to conclude this section with the "Manifesta"

phenomenon and the 28th edition of Sao Paulo Biennial (2008), deemed to be revolutionary.

Manifesta is a pan-European event, consisting of publications, seminars, workshops and a massive exhibition realized biannually from 1996 onwards in different locations all over Europe. Growing out from a Dutch initiative and taking share in The Hague at the Netherlands Office for Fine Arts and later in Rotterdam, the event is supported by thirty national governmental arts organizations and ministries of culture in Europe. The first advisory board of Manifesta created an organizational structure consisting of a Committee of Honour, an International Board, Advisory Board and National Committee in order to ensure maximum independence from political, commercial and secterian influences (Vanderlinden and Filipovic, 239). Independent curatorial teams are appointed for each edition and a special emphasis on individual and institutional collaboration is ever-present. Most importantly, Manifesta declared itself from the beginning as a platform that will not be involved in organizing prizes or competitions or supporting national rivalries. Its aim is to "transgress the existing regional, social, linguistic and economic barriers in Europe." (official web site of Manifesta International Foundation) Being uniquely nomadic in nature, the event is held in "fringe areas of European culture" in order to "exemplify the important role that young artists can play in helping to make the new Europe a more exciting and culturally diverse place in which to live." (official web site of Manifesta International Foundation) As democratic and revolutionary as it may be, Manifesta's sheer intentions do not help but contribute to the discourse of multiculturalism in Europe. With eight editions held in Rotterdam (The Netherlands), Luxembourg, Ljubljana (Slovenia), Frankfurt (Germany), Donostia-San Sebastian

(Spain), Nicosia (Cyprus), Trentino-Alto Adige/Südtirol (Italy) and the upcoming edition scheduled for 2010 in Murcia (Spain) aiming to get in dialogue with the North African region, Manifesta solidified its independent and nomadic character in the art world through collaborative projects, workshops, training programs and other events.

The Sao Paulo Biennial has been initiated at the centennial of the Crystal Palace exhibition in 1951 with a Venetian model based on national pavilions until the twenty-eight edition where the curators decided to have no artworks at all. Titled "Live Contact," the show consisted of performances, film screenings, a library, publications including a newspaper and a series of conferences on the future of biennials around the world from the perspective of Sao Paulo Biennial's history and experience. The curators left the second floor of Oscar Niemeyer's famous exhibition venue completely empty, "offering visitors a physical experience of the building's architecture." (Official web site) According to the curators, "it is in this supposedly void territory that intuition and reason will find fertile soil to highlight the powers of imagination and invention." (Official web site) They claim to have created a state of quarantine to suspend the temporal process of the biennial in order to allow self-examination. Undoubtedly, this was a radical gesture. But is leaving a building empty for experience, imagination and invention, really the claim of contemporary art? Or did the biennial reach its inevitable end? Or, more importantly, what separates the biennial's ambitions from the purpose of social sciences and is there any connection between contemporary art and social sciences?

American novelist John Barth published his controversial essay "The Literature of Exhaustion" (1967), considered as the manifesto of postmodernism in

literature, in which he questions the conventional modes of literary representation and claims that the novel was "worn out as a literary format." In a similar fashion, Birnbaum asks, if the biennial has reached its unavoidable end too (237). If curators started to conceptualize their biennials, as Hans Ulrich Obrist and Stéphanie Moisdon did for the 2007 Lyon Biennial, as "meta-literary game"s, while others refuse including artworks in their shows; are the themes self-reflexivity and respect towards diversity –that the biennial embraced with enthusiasm, and which are considered to be inherent in the biennial genre– now working against itself? With biennials trying to "exhaust all possibilities at once" and "push[ing] the plurality as far as possible," did the "biennial" as a form reach a stage where it must reinvent itself? These questions remaining to be discussed in the fifth chapter of this thesis, the biennial's claim of representing diversity and multiculturalism is worth exploring.

## The Shift from National Representation
## To Representation of the Multicultural

The celebrated Swiss curator Harald Szeemann put on an exhibition in 1991 on Swiss culture titled "Visionary Switzerland" that coincided with Switzerland's seven hundred-year anniversary. He explains in an interview with Hans Ulrich Obrist (another star curator of the ensuing generation) that the exhibition traveled to Madrid and Düsseldorf and was perceived "as homage to creativity rather than as a 'national' exhibition." (Obrist, 97) He then curated the Swiss Pavilion of the World Exhibition in Seville (1992) where he "replaced the Swiss flag with large banners (...) showing parts of the human body representing the six or seven senses, and created a circuit of work that integrated information, technology, politics, and art." (Obrist, 97) The

exhibition started with Vautier's painting *La Suisse n'existe pas* (Switzerland does not exist) and ended with his *Je pense donc je suisse*. He then explains how the Austrian Minister of Culture saw these events and asked him to make "a spiritual portrait of Austria." (97)

This short anecdote reminds us that the imperialist and nationalist agenda of the nineteenth century world exhibition has somehow been translated into an agenda reflecting the nation's desire to question itself by means of art. The conventional model of world exhibitions in which the host imperial nation plays a significantly more powerful role than the guest nations through demonstrations of technological and industrial progress increasingly turned out to be a competition on the arena of self-reflexivity and democratization.

Within the last two decades that witnessed the profusion of biennials, the curators and artists' nationalities gained a greater importance. The criteria of success for a biennial came to be estimated through the diversity of artists it includes. This inclination is also apparent in the exhibition catalogues where the artists are much more represented by the cities they are born in and the cities they live and work in, which is incorporated into a common formula: "Jane Doe. Born in Istanbul. Lives and works in Amsterdam." This formula is usually effective in showing the migration patterns and cultural nomadism of the artists. Apparently, in order to survive as an artist, Jane Doe had to immigrate to a country that has residency programs and a strong arts funding structure and without the pressures of legal censorship (Stallabrass, 70). According to Roche, mega-events can be understood as "social spatio-temporal 'hubs' and 'switches' that both channel, mix and re-route global flows, as well as being periodically 'overflowed' by them," (199) and the

nomad biennial artist being one of the switches in the trans-national citizenship of these flows.

For instance, the 1993 Venice Biennial witnessed the expansion of the number of countries from which artists were represented, most of them having a hybrid citizen status. The Austrian pavilion was the indicator of the fact that Austria had acknowledged its confused national identity: among the three participating artists, only one was Austrian. (Ferguson, Greenberg and Nairne, 48) Moreover, we observe that in order to escape the ball and chain of national representation and the indictment of nationalism, the biennials are set out to emphasize the cities instead of countries or nationalities. I will further discuss this shift of emphasis from nations to cities in the fifth chapter.

Thus the biennials, along with many forms of national cultural festivals organized with the intention of promoting cities and countries, simultaneously question and criticize the actual social and political circumstances and are part of the larger debates of "diversity" and "multiculturalism". While nations are in search for catchphrases (national mottos like India's "Unity in Diversity," [Wallis, 274]) the biennial defines its task as standing within a critical distance towards official histories and ideologies. Usually taking issues evolving around "identity," "cosmopolitanism," "diversity," "citizenship," "the Other" or "borders" as themes, the contemporary biennials seek legitimacy in a "*glocal* ethics," i.e. an ethics beyond transnationalism or globalism (Keith, 126; de Duve, 47). The neologism "glocal" (global+local) implies "the bridging of a hiatus from the particular to the general, a conceptual jump across a discontinuity formulated in geopolitical terms: the city, the world." (de Duve, 47) De Duve further argues that the conceptualization of "glocal"

is merely the equivalent of the old term "cosmopolitanism" which is a combination of *cosmos* (world) and *polis* (city). While reflecting upon the terms "glocal" and "locality" ever-present in the contemporary art discourse, one should ask whether those are merely fancy words invented to escape the old connotations and restraints of "cosmopolitanism."

## Oscillations: Responding to Local Contexts and Site-Specificity

The very basic characteristic of a biennial is that it includes the city's name in its title -except for a few examples such as the Singapore Biennial or the Biennial of the End of the World- asserting the city's importance on the map of international exhibitions. Despite the international nature of the event both in terms of artist participation and audience, the location of an exhibition unavoidably determines who is included as well as how the exhibition is positioned (Ferguson, Greenberg and Nairne, 47). Furthermore, the location of a biennial also defines the context in which the exhibition is held and another criterion of success is evidently the extent to which the biennial relates or "responds" to the local context. With biennials occuring in traditional centers of art and culture alongside the non-Western, "distant" places-to-be, the notion of interacting with both the global and local and the conceptualization of "site-specificity" gains a greater importance.

The term "site-specific" has its roots in conventional sculpture when an artwork is specifically commissioned and created for a defined site. In the context of contemporary art, site-specific refers to artworks created by the artist as a result of an extensive fieldwork ("research" as it is more commonly called in the artistic jargon). The work is installed on a local site, responding to the site itself or the local context in diverse ways, implying that it would not be possible to see or experience the same

installation on a different site. For instance, while a photography project on local shops in Istanbul can be shown at any location throughout the world, the same project would be site-specific in case it is created by the artist to be shown in the very shops that were subjects of the project itself. One should visit these shops to experience the interaction of the shop owners and customers with the photos on display, which would make the project site-specific. Most public art projects and urban interventions (in form of installations, performances or happenings) should be read as site-specific.

Site-specific projects are one-time experiences. If you could not experience the installation, it is gone. Even tough it may or may not be installed again on the same site or somewhere else in the world in ten years; the experience would not be the same. Thus, in a world that is becoming increasingly homogenized and places interchangeable, site-specific works create "transitory uniqueness, difference and localization in space and time." (Roche, 7) Roche was in fact referring to mega-events of varying sorts while putting this. However, I argue that, differing from other forms of mega-events such as the Olympic games, spectacular trade and art fairs or huge festivals, the biennial is the type of mega-event that is the most ambitious in its claim to create localization and uniqueness in space and time. I believe the notion of "site-specificity" is symbolically meaningful in understanding the biennials' claims surrounding the concept of "local" and "uniqueness" and furthering the above argument.

Site-specific works of art are not indeed the only means by which a biennial interacts with the local context and responds to global tendencies and popular discussions. The role of the curator who defines the conceptual framework or the

theme of a biennial is the crucial stage in this attempt. Though I shall discuss the role of the curator in the following pages, it is worth noting here that as a global agent, the curator's ambition is to customize a biennial in line with the locality while still appealing to the global art circles and media. It would be likely that a curator who selects similar themes for the Gwangju and Sao Paulo Biennials will be doomed to failure as much as a curator who is not somehow involved with the most recent trends in global discussions will.

Holmes calls attention to the issue of "interscale" in contemporary art production and argues that "if the (…) biennials have any *raison d'être* in the present, it may lie in a subtle apprenticeship of the interscale." (89-90) In defining the "interscale" as the multiplicity of scales, he involves the intimate, the urban, the national, the regional and the global, expanding the conceptualization of "glocal" into scales that have their own codes and contradictions, yet all of which continually intertwine. Thus the task of the artist and the curator is to understand and respond to the multiplicity of scales. However, even though the artist fully achieves this task, how does s/he escape from exoticism or indigenization? How does the specificity of a site or a response to the local context equally claiming to involve the interscale, the national and the global, produce artworks or knowledge capable of transcending locality?

El Shakry reminds that an artwork involving Palestine for instance is perceived, especially by the West as a "work about Palestine" even though the work refers to a "universal" issue. I argue with El Shakry that art produced in non-Western geographies are understood like "political art" in general, as these geographies are symbolically associated with political conflict. Today's contemporary art biennials

attribute a special attention and importance to showing works of non-Western artists. This tendency is rooted in democratic and ethical ideals as well as a desire to educate the audience about the actual problems of especially the Middle East, South America and Asia-Pacific. Thus the non-Western artist is simultaneously enthusiastic about participating in any major biennial (be it in non-Western or Western countries) and often frustrated by the audience responses merely focusing on her/his country's social and political problems. A similar contradictory state is valid for the curator as well: the curator of a biennial is usually declared along with her/his nationality and both local and global circles' expectations are shaped in line with the curator's city of origin and actual nationality, especially if those latter are non-Western ones.

### Art as a Vocation: The Artist and the Curator as Global Agents

Thinking of art as a professional occupation, we might instantly recall some influential figures of nineteenth century art: as an emblematic story, we might remember Van Gogh, whose work was little appreciated during his lifetime. His life was marked by his mental illness and he died at the age of thirty-seven before witnessing the huge reputation his work obtained. Today's conventional artist bears no resemblance to the naïve artist of our romantic imagination leading a bohemian life until a pathetic death. This artist producing "works" to be exhibited in spectacular exhibitions, expecting to achieve a global reputation that will lead to prosperity when art dealers and collectors start buying her/his works, is a "pro." As an independent artist, s/he travels the world, proposes "projects," applies for residencies, seeks funding or has a gallery which makes the application on behalf of her/him, just like the curator who travels from one biennial to another until s/he finds a safe haven, i.e. a contemporary art institution that will provide a secure income. In

American art critic Peter Schjeldahl's words, today's artist has "crossed enough personal and geographic frontiers to sacrifice 'identity' to global citizenship." ("Desert")

However, life as depicted above is not as easy as it may seem. The art world is a highly competitive place and often, artists "need any edge they can get, including shock value." (Freeland, 6) This obviously does not mean that all artists that create edgy works are working with the sheer intention of getting a higher rank in competition. However, that is the reason why some shocking materials and media came to be, even if not trendy, widely used: bodies in penetration, dead animals, blood, urine and semen exposed, the artist's own body becoming part of the work, etc. The shock value being part of contemporary art's claim of naked display and experience of reality, the art world system also demands from both the Western and non-Western artist that he creates works focusing on non-Western countries' political conflicts and social issues. The contemporary artist thus cannot escape the national or shock value based branding of the art market.

Although an understanding of the positioning of the artist is necessary in order to grasp how biennials operate, the curator's role as a global agent is crucial to the system as well. If we consider the internationally operating curator as the idealist but opportunist figure of the global art world, so as to understand this specific sort of opportunism, we must go deeper in his/her everyday life and tasks. In order to understand his/her position, we first have to consider that this curator is a mobile agent of the global art system. S/he is commissioned to realize spectacular shows or biennials all around the world, sometimes in places s/he never visited or does not have a clue about the history and recent circumstances of. The working pattern

repeats itself as traveling to a geographical location, conducting research on the social and political context (mostly reading and traveling), making decisions about the theme and venues of the exhibition (for most biennials, venues is not an issue as there is one central exhibition space reserved for the biennial) and locating artists who will be able to contribute/respond to the selected theme or concept which leads to the final stage in which the exhibition structure is designed by the curator and implemented by architects and technical teams. Thus, for the internationally operating curator, the process should be repeated in any place s/he finds her-/himself in and s/he must "continually respond" (Gielen, 11) to diverse social and political contexts. "Every time, new circumstances and always different ideas have to be transformed into a preferably controversial end product: the exhibition" (Gielen, 11) certainly without being repetitive and the response should definetely evoke the local context in some way, as I elaborately discussed in the previous subchapter. Otherwise the curator would be accused of having inadequate research capabilities or realizing the same exhibition in highly diversified geographical contexts.

Opportunism here would imply three things: 1. The curator must choose a concept that is new and insightful in many ways so that s/he can maintain the international reputation s/he yearns for. 2. The idea must give the impression that the curator has the capability of responding to diverse geographical and social contexts. 3. The idea should appeal to the public, creating popular echoes and most importantly high media coverage, so that it can carry the potential of being popularized. Thus, the individual regime of values is the fundamental principle around which the system of biennials revolves (Gielen, 15). The task of realizing a public exhibition is entrusted to the curator who administers the space on behalf, and

as a representative of the public. However, differing from the social scientist, social or political activist or critic, the curator is a "joyful rider" who "outlines escape routes in the heart of the neoliberal hegemony with a nice glass of wine in hand." (Gielen, 10)

As "nomadic specialists," "creatures of the global art system," curators "listen, consult, and induct local voices, but their very *raison d'être* and the environment in which they move is global and hybrid." (Stallabrass, 41) Apparently moving through the arenas of art, culture, writing, production and exhibition, the curator operates in and for the elite world of the global art system and the only response s/he asserts merely appeals to the global art world. Even though the works of curators and artists seem to be socially motivated, touching upon actual issues and conflicts throughout the world, the real consequence of this effort has to be found in the extent to which the work appealed to the art media and professionals, it is measured by the reviews it receives, by the closer attention it gets from the part of art dealers and collectors, i.e. the sales it ultimately accomplishes (Stallabrass, 42).

## The Biennial's Integration to World Economy:
## Art's New Relationship with Capital,
## City as Image, Biennial as Spectacle

There is no question that the reasons behind the contemporary art biennials' proliferation in the last decades are mainly, if not exclusively, economic. All bearing the names of their host cities, the success of the biennials cannot be explained without the enthusiasm with which politicians, managers and other sponsors have embraced the event. Culture indeed sells, attracts tourists, generates economic activity and is an integral part of the entertainment industry (de Duve, 47). And it is

precisely these market interests that make the contemporary art biennial suspect despite its efforts in proposing a critical agenda. As Gielen also states, "[a]fter all, it fits easily in a neoliberal city marketing strategy of so-called creative cities." (Gielen,9)

## Art's New Relationship with Capital

Stallabrass explains that the global events of 1989 and afterwords (namely, the end of the Cold War, the reunification of Germany, the fragmentation of the Soviet Union, the rise of global trade agreements, the consolidation of trading blocs, and the transformation of China into a partially capitalist economy) "changed the character of the art world profoundly." (10) The capital of the arts had switched from Paris to New York following the Second World War and the "art world had (…) been structured on the cold war division of East and West." (10) However, after the end of Cold War, under neoliberalism's global consolidation, while the global regulatory organizations enforced rules to protect industries and agriculture in wealthy nations, the fragile economies of developing or third-world countries were opened to unregulated trade, privatization and consequently the dismantling of welfare states. The consolidation of neoliberalism had its particular consequences in the art world such as the increase in the number of private museums, independent or private galleries, increasing organic relationships between capital and the art world, namely sponsorship, and a rapid profusion of art agencies, dealers and collectors around the world.

Throughout the 1990s, the activities of existing or emerging museums became steadily more commercial, internalizing corporate models of activity, establishing short or long term alliances with business and "modeling themselves

less on libraries than shops and theme parks" (Stallabrass, 33). As a result, the contemporary art scene came to be increasingly fashionable, creating its own celebrities, with media coverage focusing exclusively on how much a collector paid for this or that emerging artist's work. Thus, this period is characterized by new and unprecedented level of commodification of artworks with "biennials often being the test sites for developing new market products." (Esche and Hlavajova, 96)

Besides the well-known instances of Damien Hirst's one-artist Sotheby's auction record of $198 million in 2008 or Burhan Doğançay's becoming the most expensive Turkish artist with a record of $1.7 million in November 2009, I would like to cite here the story of Jackson Pollock's *Blue Poles* as it is emblematic of the transformation of the global art world from a relatively conservative one to a market oriented one. Painted in 1952, the painting was purchased by the Australian Whitlam Government for the National Art Gallery of Australia in 1973 for $2 million, the highest price ever paid for a modern painting at the time. In the conservative climate of the 1970s, this purchase created a media scandal, especially with the hostile response of the Australian *Daily Mirror* through the headline: "$1 MILL. AUST. MASTERPIECE. DRUNKS DID IT." (Freeland, 107). The headline was based on the story of the painting as told by Tony Smith, the painter's friend and reported by art critic Stanley P. Friedman: according to Smith, they were drinking and it was not Pollock but himself who started to paint the canvas. In 1995, Australia's National Gallery of Art started a membership program and printed a brochure that embodied the controversy of the time for marketing purposes. The brochure's cover showed the huge tabloid headline ("Drunks Did It!"). Yet on the inside of the brochure, the museum was inviting the public to be a member by saying: "Now the world thinks

it's over $20 million. And it's all yours from $14.50," the latter being the price of a membership. (Freeland, 107) Promotion campaigns of this kind, along with rumors and media coverage on "priceless" artworks, also change the audience's perception of art: the painting is now a freakish object to stare at.

While the art market creates its celebrities in auctions, a number of contemporary artists endeavor to find innovative ways to critically distance themselves from market rules. An interesting case is of artist J.S.G. Boggs who makes a living by selling his very realistic copies of various currencies. His practice consists simultaneously of conventional painting (he *draws* the banknote) and from performances: he makes payments with the money he draws, exchanges the bills for the exact worth of it. Always indicating somewhere on the bill that it is not real, he explains to waiters, hotel owners or his landlord that he is an artist and his skill is fascinating enough to make people accept the bill as payment. Then later when a collector wants to buy a Boggs note, Boggs only helps them in telling where he spent it and the collector has to track down the bill himself. He later exhibits the bills along with the original receipts for purchased items. Of course, confrontations with the counterfeiting police are also part of the process. Although the art market value of his bills are much higher than their face value, the intriguing part of his practice for Boggs is the process of talking to people who are unaware of his art into exchanging goods or services for his art. Boggs's work is certainly unusual in the way in which he questions the value of the artwork –indeed the concept of "value" itself– and makes a living directly from supposed "forgery". However, can his practice be considered as escaping rules of the market or a creative intervention that questions the art market as he still needs collectors to survive?


Photograph 2. A Boggs Bill

While some artists attempt at escaping the system through their practice, a number of independent institutions or artists refuse to be a part of the sponsorship system, rejecting private sector support. They usually fundraise through the independent funding institutions system in order to escape censorship and not be a part of a company's strategy of clearing its label through art. Companies sponsor art for two main reasons: 1. When a correct connection between the company's products or services and the sponsored event is established, the sponsored event becomes a successful marketing campaign although or insofar as it is properly masked. 2. In the case where there is no direct connection between the company's goods and services and the sponsored event, the relationship established with art through generous support promotes the company's righteous image (Chin-tao Wu, 219). Art museums and biennials are in such a privileged position that having an interrelated image with those institutions are overt indicators of social prestige and power. Another aspect of sponsoring art institutions is the belief in art-related institutions' apolitical status, as art is for the sponsoring company a highly aesthetic practice free from politics. Chin-tao Wu recalls the saying of a high-level manager of one of New York's prominent art museums: "We are not political." (223) Sponsoring art is usually included in

companies' marketing and public relations budgets, occasionally under the item "social responsibility" and it contributes a great deal in purging the company's image of negative connotations.

Companies have their own specialized sponsoring strategy in line with the aspects of their image they want to strengthen. The decisions of sponsoring a classical music event, a youth festival, a circus visiting the city or the Olympics obviously have diversified agendas. As for contemporary art events, both the audience as target group and the fresh and actual connotations of the event are crucial in the sponsors' decision-making process. Contemporary art museum and biennial visitors are, according to market research, mostly from the high-income profile consequently with high purchase capacities (Chin-tao Wu, 223). That is the target audience that businesses yearn to connect with. Besides, the contemporary art exhibition also creates the opportunity to host the high-profile guests of precious invitation lists in fancy receptions or diners as the stages of the sponsor's generous hospitality.

While most museums consist of private capital's investments, a biennial's funding structure is usually mixed, comprising of businesses, independent or state funded art institutions, local academic institutions and art boards, national arts councils, state bodies promoting culture abroad and ministries of culture (and tourism). This composite structure also embracing collaborations among biennials and contributions from art institutions renders visible the kind of alliances that a biennial produces: "businesses, large and small, wanting to boost their brand recognition; nations pushing their cultural products; regional bodies hoping for regeneration; and universities wanting to raise their research ratings." (Stallabrass,

33) Needless to add that common agenda is the promotion of the host city as a cultural and touristic centre.

## City as Image, Biennial as Spectacle

The image of a city deriving from its genuine or authentic characteristics and unique history has been the main marketing tools in the global city competition since the beginning of 1980s, with an increasing pace in the 1990s, especially for cities in the lowest ranks of global city hierarchies. As Sharon Zukin reminds us, "[c]ulture is, arguably, what cities 'do' best" (264); in other words, what cities "begun" to do best in order to compete in the global inter-cities competition. In every city throughout the world, we see the same uniform urban spaces and architectural forms, such as the suburb, the gated community, the shopping mall, the theme park, the airport, the museum, transforming the cities into non-places, marketing the city by means of cultural difference. Hence authenticity became increasingly essential for cities to differentiate themselves in the –if not global– world-known cities hierarchy. While some cultural strategies of economic development focus on the preservation of architectural landmarks, others "call attention to the work of artists, actors, dancers, and even chefs who give credence to the claim that an area is a center of cultural production." (Zukin, 271)

Moreover, it was two decades ago that Sassen had asserted the constructing argument surrounding the literature on world cities: global cities became command and control centers of the global economy insofar as they concentrate key activities and services and the specialization in strategic services that ensure the operating of global capitalist system. While the key activities and services Sassen referred to included the area of culture within the general notion of service sector, specialization

in global culture and arts organizations, artistic production and spectacular art events increasingly became an integral part of this competition since then.

A biennial has a peculiar position in situating its host city within the global competition. It builds up "a brand, as well as an audience and a constituency, both locally and internationally." (Sheikh, 71) While the promotion of cities through culture and arts is not a new phenomenon, in order to understand the branding of cities by means of biennials, Sheikh proposes an exercise through the Marxian conceptualization of "monopoly rent," that occurs when a producer can generate a steady increase of surplus and income through exclusiveness. This might be achieved either through being the only producer of a certain commodity in a regional economy, or "through the uniqueness of the brand in a more global economy" (72). The case of wine as a commodity is useful in translating the conceptualization into the case of biennials and their host cities. In the global market, the wine producer has to gain monopoly through a local uniqueness to be tradable outside its region and in order to compete with other brands imported into its own region. Thus, the wine has to achieve a symbolic quality besides its actual taste in order to be able to compete in the global market. For instance, the wine merchants in the Bordeaux region have copyrighted the use of the brand "Chateau" and none of the other producers of sparkling wine except the ones in the Champagne region can legally call their products "champagne."

Similarly to wine producers, the biennial's creators also have to brand their biennial differently and specifically in order to achieve not only cultural hegemony, but also to extract monopoly rent, in terms of both symbolic and real capital. Sheikh thus argues that the branding of a biennial is twofold: "partly the city as attraction

and allure giving context and value to the biennial, and partly the glamour and prestige of the biennial branding and upgrading the otherwise non-descript or even negative image of the city, region or country" (73). In today's art market, a number of established and enduring biennials are staged in historical centers such as Venice or Kassel, while new emergent places around the world, especially and massively in Southeastern Asia are being branded by the contemporary art biennials. These events not only transform the urban space, but also project the city to the world through a particular image and re-position it in the world both symbolically and economically (Roche, 10).

The host city might already be a popular touristic destination or an economic center, however these places may still need to erase a past marked by bloody events or current social tensions as a part of a larger regional or national conflict. These sites are meant to become "a happy face" (Zukin, 83) via cultural redevelopment strategies. The biennial is one of the steps in the achievement of such a project, yet one that draws a particular group of tourists (art dealers, critics, collectors, curators) who are often extremely wealthy and powerful. The biennial creates a biannual rhythm that is typically coordinated with the rhythm of contemporary international tourism and that in turn affects and shapes the event rhythm of the host city itself. Competing biennials of a particular region thus start to make an effort to coordinate their successive opening dates in order to attract international guests to the region. Within the city, most galleries and museums are increasingly scheduling major shows during the opening days of a biennial, which is considered to be the best timing in two years to realize the inauguration of a new space for art. Sheikh also notes that the biennial rhythm offers the visitor enough "time span between nostalgia

and forgetting" (64). Usually, the visitor might experience the necessity to come to a certain city annually as a burden. But the biannual rhythm offers the visitors the time they need to forget the city's attractiveness and to recall memories of the previous visit.

The contemporary art biennials' pretentions in being critical of actual social and political circumstances along with the naked opportunism of urban promoters reveal the intrinsic antagonism of the biennial. Are biennials "tools of cultural imperialism" or do they achieve their promises to create an independent realm for curatorial and artistic practices? Are they a simple reflection of the globalization of the Western white cube? (Holmes, 85) This is the paradox of curators, artists and biennial organizers: "their necessary dependence on, yet distaste for, and desire for independence from, the market." (Featherstone, 23) What I propose here is neither to blame the biennial of being a mere tool for cultural promotion, city branding and creating an enclosure of high culture, nor to validate their independent and critical existence no matter what. I instead suggest understanding the biennial as an exceptionally interesting ground on which to study the hallmarks of globalization and our neoliberal era, namely mobility and proliferation, as manifested in leisure and entertainment economies (Rogoff, 108).

The conceptual confusion that Walden stated to surround the world fairs is evidently valid for the case of biennials: are these events purely pleasure grounds or trade events, or to add to Walden's questions (247) are biennials unavoidably part of the neoliberal system they desire to be critical of? While the candid intentions of curators and organizers are incarnated in the form of talks, conferences and symposia where the sheer existence of biennials is brought into deconstructive discussion, the

extent to which these events create a dialogue is questionable. Mainly, if not exclusively attended by art professionals, it is hard to consider these events public. Enthusiastic about visiting the exhibition, the local audience mostly perceives it as leisure or entertainment. The artistic extravaganza is not part of their everyday lives as Purbrick argued for world exhibitions; it is a temporary visit of the global to catch up with; it is the suspension of the cultural practices for its contemplation (Purbrick, 5); it is a way of filling leisure intelligently, which is according to Bertrand Russell, the last product of civilization (cited in Koshar, p.2).

According to Kuspit, who suggested the term "post-art" in order to define the point that contemporary art has reached since the 1990s, the aura as the representation of art has been replaced by spectacle: Art does not have any appeal without being ridiculous. The only way for art to reach masses is to become a spectacle (Kuspit, 106-7). The cynicism inherent in contemporary art biennials is actually an intrinsic characteristic of modernism. While contemporary art reveals what is hidden in real life, it cannot escape from transforming it into entertainment. What was meant to be deconstructive is transformed into fun in this universe of spectacle insofar as it adapts the methods of the status quo that surrenders to conventional rules. Artists and curators often prefer using a terminology borrowed from social sciences instead of getting in contact with reality to translate it into artworks in "aesthetic" ways. The spectacle of biennials is entertaining to the extent that it brings into display the ordinary everyday life in a sensational manner (Kuspit, 190). Thus, if the spectacle is "the greatest illusion of postmodern ideology", entertainment is the means in which this illusion is communicated and experienced. I shall widely discuss the spectacle aspect of the phenomenon in the fifth chapter, in

the light of the world exhibitions as a fruitful ground for understanding the biennials today.

# CHAPTER 4

# THE ISTANBUL BIENNIAL

## Initiation of a Biennial for Istanbul

Initiated by the Istanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts (IKSV), the first Istanbul Biennial was held in the city in 1987, under the title "International Istanbul Contemporary Art Exhibitions." The Biennial was part of a broader project by the non-governmental organization IKSV. Founded in 1973 by Nejat Eczacıbaşı, the institution's initial goal was to offer the finest examples of art from around the world, to promote the national, cultural and artistic assets of Turkey and to use arts to create an international platform of communication through an Istanbul Festival. Coinciding with the fiftieth anniversary of the foundation of the Republic of Turkey, the first Istanbul Festival mainly included classical music, thereafter expanding to embrace cinema, theater, jazz, ballet and art exhibitions. The first distinct festival evolving from the original Istanbul Festival was International Istanbul Film Days in 1983, followed by the inauguration of the first biennial in 1987 later to be expanded into Theater (1989), Jazz (1994) and Music Festivals.

In his introductory text published in the first biennial's catalogue, Eczacıbaşı explains how figurative representation has been prohibited in Islamic traditional arts and states that "the arts of painting and sculpture were completely neglected" (8) for centuries. He places Mehmet the Conqueror into the position of being both the "progressive and enlightened ruler of fifteenth century Turkey" (8) and the only exception among all the Sultans to have an inclination towards visual arts, until the "coming of the great reformer Mustafa Kemal Atatürk". The director of IKSV,

Aydın Gün writes in his presentation text, "irrational[2] beliefs have for a long period in our history worked against the visual arts." (10) He further claims: "It is certain that the movement to modernize our culture has not reached the level and strength necessary for the elimination of those elements in our exciting culture which are not worthy of being transmitted into our future." (10) Thus, the biennial got started as an enlightenment project attempting at stressing the modernized aspects of Turkish culture and solidifying Turkish art's position within the international art world.

The emphasis on fostering international dialogue and intercultural exchange was at the center of the project, also ignited by the desire to have a positive impact on the unfavorable reputation of the country and the emerging neoliberal economic policies. In the aftermath of an entire decade marked with political conflict and atmosphere of fear throughout the country, Turkey witnessed its third military coup in 1980, followed by the imprisonment of thousands, years marked with torture, capital punishment and violation of human rights. On the other hand, the government was busy adapting neoliberal economic policies involving structural adjustment, economic liberalization and privatization. Turgut Özal being the leading figure in the revitalization of the Turkish economy, foreign exchange was allowed and investments were encouraged during the first three years of the military regime, until the transition to democracy happened in 1983. The initial attempts led to "a regime following policies counseled by the International Monetary Fund and applied in the hope of restructuring the economy toward greater openness and liberalization" (Keyder, 13). The economic shift from a statist system to a market-oriented, liberated model had been soon incarnated into its global symptoms in globalizing cities,

[2] Although the original English translation published in the catalogue of the first biennial was "incredible beliefs", I preferred using "irrational" as the English translation of "akıl dışı".

especially Istanbul, conceived as the new center of free market regional economy: branches and offices of international conglomerates such as banks and media corporations, trading companies, shopping malls, boutiques, luxury consumption, mushrooming fast-food sector, ethnic and world cuisine restaurants, international congresses, gated communities, etc. In Keyder's words, "Istanbul in the 1980s lived through its own version of casino capitalism and yuppie exuberance." (15)

An important figure pioneering the city's transformation and integration to the world economy was Bedrettin Dalan, metropolitan mayor between 1984-1989. Among his projects were the cleansing of Haliç to become "as blue as his eyes," and the implementation of a huge revitalization project focusing on the "sanitization" of Beyoğlu under the disguise of an enormous transportation project involving a highway to solve the traffic congestion in the inner city. The most crucial and cruel step of the project was the enlargement of Tarlabaşı Street into a boulevard through the demolition of more than 350 historical buildings. The project incited a massive public debate on the politics of heritage, the Chamber of Architects constituting the main opposition against the demolition. However, despite the fact that there was an ongoing trial in order to prevent the demolitions, Dalan started the process in 1986 basing his policies on the grounds that the buildings being demolished are not "historical" (Bartu, 35). While for Dalan, the historical heritage was to be destroyed for the sake of development, narratives surrounding the demolitions were either nationalist ramifications of the fury towards local non-Muslim communities, previously incarnated in events of 6-7 September in 1955, which do not consider Tarlabaşı as a part of "national heritage", or narratives imagining Beyoğlu as a brothel to be cleaned out and sanitized. Demolitions continued until 1988 when

Tarlabaşı Boulevard was reopened as a large highway and Istiklal Avenue was transformed into a pedestrian artery, the latter still contributing to the narratives of nostalgia surrounding the avenue.

Coinciding with the Tarlabaşı demolitions, another so-called "conservation" project was initiated in Soğukçeşme Street, next to the walls of Topkapı Palace, by Turing, a non-profit organization led by Çelik Gülersoy. Realized within the same year of 1986, the project involved the demolition of vernacular houses in order to build some identical copies of the original houses with new techniques and material and the assignment of new touristic functions. Gülersoy's intention was to re-create the old street of the Ottoman period, while seeking justification in old photographs. It is worthy to note that Dalan had a strong opposition towards the project, claiming that those buildings were nothing more than squatter's houses of the time and thus there was no need for their preservation. However, the project was realized and the new street was inaugurated in 1986 and still functions as a street of hotels and restaurants mostly serving foreign tourists.

In the meanwhile, in order to ensure Turkey's promotion in the USA, the Turkish government started to work with a major public relations firm with "close ties to Reagan administration" in 1985. "For $ 600,000 a year, Gray & Company's mission was to 'improve and increase knowledge of the Republic of Turkey in the United States'." (cited in Wallis, 270). Soon enough, Gray was going to come up with an overall events program involving exhibitions, festivals, performances, lectures and seminars under the embracing concept of "Turkey: The Continuing Magnificence". A well-advertised exhibition titled "The Age of Sultan Suleyman the Magnificent" was shown in Washington, D.C., Chicago and New York within the

scope of the festival. Wallis cites that the curatorial negotiations for the exhibition involved "the State Department, the U.S. Information Agency, the White House, and the president of the Metropolitan Museum, William Macomber, who was a former ambassador to Turkey." (269) In order to understand the circumstances leading to this ambitious project, it would be critical to understand the background and Turkey's concerns about the country's global image at the time. After the military coup of 1980, political circles abroad had been arguing that the military still ruled the country. While Turkey was seeking for foreign aid, the ongoing conflict with Greece over Northern Cyprus dominated discourses on the country besides the issue of the Armenian genocide of 1915, not to mention the ongoing allegations of human rights abuses especially towards Kurdish people and movement, prison conditions, violation of human rights and torture. As Wallis asserts, Turkey was compelled to dramatize a conventionalized version of its national image, "asserting past glories and amplifying stereotypical differences." (271)

Thus, at the time when the Istanbul Biennial was initiated (1986-87), the government of Turkey was focused on the promotion of the country through culture and arts, besides its commitment to adjust neoliberal economic policies while in the local scale, the mayor implemented projects focused on development and solving the problems of an ever-growing metropolis in order for the city to achieve a global city status. In the 1980s, the only privately initiated museum present in Istanbul was Sadberk Hanım Museum dedicated to the memory of Vehbi Koç's deceased wife Sadberk. Opened in 1980, the museum went through expandings and restorations until it was awarded the Europa Nostra prize in 1988 for its outstanding museum architecture and design. The Koç family then invested in the Rahmi Koç Industrial

Museum in 1991, to be opened in 1994. In the meanwhile, Nejat Ezcacıbaşı started an initiative to found Turkey's first modern art museum in Feshane and rented the building from the Municipality in 1987. Although the architect who transformed the Gare d'Orsay in Paris into a museum was invited and construction activities immediately began, the project was canceled after the building hosted the third Biennial in 1992, due to the complications between IKSV and the municipality. The Eczacıbaşı family had to wait until 2004 to inaugurate the first museum of modern art in Turkey: Istanbul Modern, in Antrepo No. 4, preceded by the opening of the Sakıp Sabancı Museum in 2002 and followed by the opening of the Pera Museum (founded by Suna and İnan Kıraç Foundation) in 2005, and santralistanbul (Istanbul Bilgi University's museum complex) in 2007.

The motivation behind the initiation of the Istanbul Biennial under these circumstances shows a similarity with Documenta's function in post-war, post-Nazi Germany of the 1950s. Nejat Eczacıbaşı's emphasis on international and intercultural exchange was underlying the foundation's desire to promote the national art scene by means of a cultural instrument such as the biennial as well as to contribute to the modernization and liberalization process of Turkey. Investing in a biannual contemporary art exhibition form exported from the hegemonic centers was the crystallized embodiment of this desire and effort to reach Western standards and position Istanbul in its righteous place in the global cities hierarchy. While the government was seeking legitimacy in the glorious Ottoman past, IKSV was concentrating on the urban heritage of Istanbul, combining Byzantine and Ottoman heritages, as a global city and a European center. The Foundation's desire was focused on proving internationally the fact that Turkey has a contemporary and

modern culture and has attained the level of "modern" civilizations since the foundation of the Republic, while the old ways and traditions have been eliminated from Turkish culture with merely the modern elements of Ottoman arts and culture preserved.

In this chapter, I will discuss the extent to which these initial desires were subject to transformation thereafter, the ways in which the Biennial interacted with the city both spatially and discursively and finally focus on the last two editions of the biennial (the 10th in 2007 and the 11th in 2009) in order to elaborate on the contemporary implications of "world-as-exhibition" as those latter manifest in Istanbul.

## Contemporary Art in Historical Surroundings: Early Stages of the Istanbul Biennial

For the 1st International Istanbul Contemporary Art Exhibitions, IKSV embraced the Venice model in terms of artistic structure consisting of national representation and historical exhibition spaces. Chairman of IKSV, Nejat Eczacıbaşı and the Foundation's general director Aydın Gün invited Beral Madra to the organizing board of the first Istanbul Biennial. This first board included Prof. Doğan Kuban, Prof. Belkıs Mutlu and Sezer Tansuğ besides Aydın Gün as the chairman of the board. Beral Madra's task was to work as a full-time coordinator for the Biennial. Eventually, an international board was formed in order to select international artists to be included in the Biennial. Comprising of internationally well-known curators and professionals from mostly European art institutions, this board first gathered in Istanbul in 1986. Following the meetings, Germano Celant was appointed as the curator of the international exhibition. However, Madra reports that four months

before the opening, it became clear that the foundation could neither provide nor generate funding for the budget required for the international exhibition. As a consequence, Madra, besides the national, had to take over the organization of the international exhibition as well. The invitation of an international curator being ever-present as intention, the reason why the exhibition could not be internationalized to the desired extent was mainly financial.

Madra explains that generating sponsorship has not been as hard as one would imagine because of the culture of sponsorship previously created by Istanbul Festivals, organized also by IKSV. However, though many private companies were accustomed to sponsor classical music, ballet and theater, visual arts was still a new and unexplored terrain in terms of sponsorship benefits. After months of hard work and negotiations with potential sponsor companies, the exhibition budget was covered through both private sponsorships and support from cultural centers, offices and consulates of Austria, France, Poland, Geneva and Canada (Madra, 17).

Madra, the coordinator and member of the board of the 1st Istanbul Biennial, puts the grounds of the choice of historical venues for the biennial as 1. to attract public interest with venues scattered in different centers of the city. 2. to appeal the attention of the artists. 3. to obtain the support of institutions and companies. 4. to represent Turkey's art environment with as many artists as possible. 5. to represent the twentieth century art of a country that still does not have a modern or contemporary art museum. (Madra, 17) However, the fact that these buildings were not especially designed for exhibition purposes further complicated the organization process in terms of logistics and insurance besides the bureaucratic problems. As will be elaborated in the following pages, bureaucratic problems will be stated, since the

1st Istanbul Biennial until the recent 11th one, as the determining and binding factor in the selection of venues and realization of public art projects.

The selection of historical buildings as Biennial venues stands out as a decision opposing and resisting to the touristic use and misuse of historical heritage. As participating artists Anne and Patrich Poirier point out in their work, the idea that "history and culture are not merely the property of international tourism" has been central to the selection of historical venues. Madra states that "in contemporary Turkey, our entire historical heritage, traditions are being diverted from their real meanings, apparitions and values and being transformed into meaningless, idle, superficial templates and victimized to degenerated pleasures for the sake of tourism. The marriage between contemporary art and historical monuments opposes this." (Madra, 40) Thus the first biennial aimed at making a distinction between touristic and cultural use of historical heritage. Nevertheless, the fundamental dilemma of the biennial was grounded on this very distinction: the main reason for the attraction and fascination of foreign curators and artists was the mystical historical heritage and the thrill of exhibiting within this charming environment.

For the 1st Biennial, Hagia Sophia hosted artworks from Turkey while international exhibitions were staged at Hagia Irene. For the 2nd Biennial, Hagia Irene hosted the national exhibition this time whereas the Süleymaniye Cultural Center was offered for the international exhibitions. The first two biennials kept focusing on the relationship between historical spaces and artworks. However, the organizers attempted to offer different contexts to Turkish and foreign artists. Most participating artists responded or referred to the historical background of exhibition venues in various ways, especially conceptualizing the themes of history, past and

present, and bringing new interpretations to tradition and historical objects. The 2nd Biennial also included public art projects and installations again in historical spots such as next-door of the Egyptian Obelisque and the Germain Fountain, the garden of Hagia Irene, Sarayburnu and Cankurtaran, next-door of the Yerebatan Cistern.

## A Critical Turning Point

An advisory board still supervising the organization, the 3rd Biennial was the first to have a meta-curator (Vasıf Kortun) and an over-encompassing conceptual framework: "Production of Cultural Difference." Kortun, who can be considered as the first curator of Istanbul's contemporary art scene, brought a number of new approaches to the biennial's organization. This is also the first and the last Istanbul Biennial to be realized in one single inclusive venue: Feshane, an early nineteenth century factory in Eyüp, which, as mentioned before, was in the process of becoming a modern art museum at the time. Concerning the international exhibitions, a similar structure with the previous biennials was operating: individuals or institutions from each participating country were selected to prepare their national exhibitions. However, this time, Kortun was fully engaged in the selection of these bodies so as to escape nationalistic selection of artists potentially resulting in weak exhibitions as Kortun states it was the case for the Russian exhibition in the 2nd Biennial (Kortun, "3. Istanbul Bienali"). Despite the fact that the national pavilions structure was maintained, the 3rd Biennial was the turning point in the degree of internationalization, rendered visible in the percentage of Turkish artists. Kortun's goal was to even the number of Turkish artists with the other nations' participating artists, which resulted in the participation of only five important contemporary artists from Turkey.

Table 3. The Istanbul Biennial's Number of Visitors and Accredited Press Attendants throughout its History

| Edition | Year | Number of visitors | National Press | International Press |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1st | 1987 | 10,000 | 243 | 0 |
| 2nd | 1989 | (no data) | 265 | 7 |
| 3rd | 1992 | 14,000 | 217 | 80 |
| 4th | 1995 | 65,000 | 514 | 41 |
| 5th | 1997 | (no data) | 427 | 69 |
| 6th | 1999 | 40.000 | 571 | 67 |
| 7th | 2001 | 68,000 | 448 | 8 |
| 8th | 2003 | 60,000 | 779 | 145 |
| 9th | 2005 | 50,000 | 918 | 113 |
| 10th | 2007 | 91,000 | 694 | 133 |
| 11th | 2009 | 101,000 | App. 1000 | 600 |

The 3rd edition thus signaled a major transformation from a provincial exhibition towards an international one. Turkey's participation occasionally delegated to galleries beforehand was now designated to a single curator, who altered the exhibition's character by diminishing the percentage of Turkish participation, which was 55% for the 1st and 30% for the 2nd editions to 10% (Graf, 66-8). However, the number of participating countries only increased to fifteen, which was eleven in the first biennial. The event had to wait until its 4th edition to include artistic participation from 52 countries in total, leading to the achievement of major internationalization. Although the official data provided by IKSV is not considered to be accurate, the rapid internationalization can also be followed in the third column of Table 3, accompanied with informal accounts about the increasing attendance of international guests.

Kortun, in an interview (Ersan) claims that the main obstacle before the Biennial's internationalization was its small budget, compared to other biennials such as Documenta with a fifty times larger budget than the Biennial. Another

difficulty concerning the organization, according to him, was the absence of professional coordination and installation teams. He further defines the Biennial's objective as becoming an event where artists from all over the world would want to apply for. A retrospective look to the Biennial's history would reveal that the difficulties Kortun defined in 1992 were substantially solved and this objective was considerably achieved in the 4th Biennial, realized under the curatorship of René Block.

The curatorial commission to René Block was part of a larger restructuring and institutionalization project within IKSV, initiated in 1993. Involving major departmentalization and the constitution of separate corporate identities for each festival, the process resulted in specialized departments, which will be discussed in the following pages, and the assignment of a Biennial director, Fulya Erdemci. René Block was an internationally renowned curator for his collaborations with significant artists such as Joseph Beuys, Gerhard Richter and Nam June Paik and his contribution in the study and promotion of the Fluxus movement. He soon brought a brand new approach and system based on single curator and the dialogue between the artworks and exhibition spaces, instead of a national representation model. In this new system, selection of the artists was entrusted to the curator, in lieu of diverse countries' assigned institutions. Block also revised the organizational structure of the biennial and implemented coordination, application, filing and fundraising methods which has since been at the core of the Biennial's institutional culture.

Embracing the conceptual framework "ORIENT/ATION, The Vision of Art in a Paradoxical World," the 4th Biennial was realized in 1995 and especially focused on artists living in diaspora. Block stated in his opening speech that he was specially

interested in Turkey's geographical neighbors: Iran, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Macedonia, Greece, Romania, Bulgaria, Georgia and the states of the Balkans (the latter was also a subject to geographical focus in the 3rd Biennial), bringing into discussion the issue of nomadism in the art world. Block further argued that the young biennials reflect a "new cultural self-confidence of Latin America, Africa, Asia, Australia and the Orient, as well as the readiness of these new metropoles to start an ongoing international dialogue." The "orientation" emblem was the embodiment of his approach: this was a cartoon of a compass where North and South were adjacent arrows, West was missing and Istanbul itself was a direction. According to Block, the Istanbul emblem declared "the city's appropriateness as a site in a world without directions or hierarchy." In this ideal world without hierarchy, Block argued that, artistic creativity, as an alternative force, could save our society in the future.

The 4th Biennial thus not only was critical in the way in which it transformed the event's institutional structure and brought it into international attention, but also asserted two themes that seem to have influenced (if not dominated or branded) the subsequent editions: 1. Contemporary art as a salvation from or alternative to the condition of despair. 2. Istanbul as an alternative center between East and West (bridge, door, etc.) that offers an exceptional geographical and historical location for intercultural dialogue. At the same time, this particular edition contributed to the institutionalization of the Biennial by means of two strategic decisions that shall affect the editions thereafter: 1. The use of different venues selected in line or in dialogue with the concept. 2. Special interest towards and high percentages of non-Western artists' participation.

If we claim that the restructuring and institutionalization contributed to stronger fundraising capabilities, organizing skills and most importantly, internationalization, a closer look to the Biennial's new institutional structure would be necessary to explore. The art biennial phenomenon has been conventionally perceived as a continuation or articulation to the museum as an institution. For most of the cases, biennials are administered by organizing bodies such as non-profit biennial foundations, contemporary art museums, municipalities, ministries of culture, or sometimes even limited companies (Liverpool Biennial). Istanbul Biennial is considered to be a peculiar case (besides Venice Biennale) as it is administered by a foundation that also organizes other festivals specialized in film, theater, classical music and jazz alongside festivals abroad and other smaller events. IKSV has recently (December 2009) moved to their new headquarters, Deniz Palas that will host a performance center, a restaurant, a café, a shop of IKSV Design and finally a Leyla Gencer Museum.

## The Biennial's Shifting Relationship with the City

I explained in the previous section that the first two biennials were focused on exhibiting art in historical surroundings and involved historical exhibition spaces such as Hagia Irene, the Hagia Sophia Turkish Baths, the Yerebatan Cistern and various public spaces in the Historical Peninsula. However, these editions also included exhibitions in the Museum of Painting and Sculpture in Beşiktaş, the Military Museum in Harbiye, Atatürk Cultural Center and Yıldız Technical University. However, as the main focus of these editions was on "contemporary art in historical surroundings," the other venues are usually not mentioned in a handful of academic works on the Istanbul Biennial (Güler Bek's unpublished masters thesis

in art history; Sibel Yardımcı's published PhD thesis in sociology; Marcus Graf's PhD uncompleted thesis in contemporary art history and theory). In fact, it is not that the first two editions also included venues outside Historical Peninsula but the fact that the Biennial kept using Hagia Irene and the Yerebatan Cistern as venues that retrospectively emphasize the selection of historical venues in the first place, besides the exhibition themes themselves. These two spaces stayed in the venues lists of all editions until the 9th Biennial, while spaces such as the Imperial Mint (5th), Women's Library and Information Center (5th), Dolmabahçe Cultural Center (6th), Beylerbeyi Palace (7th), Tophane-i Amire Cultural Center (8th), and Garanti Platform Contemporary Art Center (8th) were among the exhibition venues for successive editions.

This strategic positioning within the city through exhibition spaces underwent three major shifts: 1. Use of a single exhibition space, Feshane, for the 3rd Biennial; 2. Involvement of Antrepo buildings as a result of René Block's significant efforts and negotiations with authorities; 3. The complete and radical exclusion, even rejection of the Historical Peninsula with the 9th Biennial, themed "Istanbul" and co-curated by Vasıf Kortun and Charles Esche.

The significance of the first shift is twofold. On the one hand, it brought the approach of a single exhibition space and on the other hand, the exhibition was held in an exhibition space in the process of becoming a modern art museum. These two points can also be argued for the case of Antrepo building: the official viewer profile investigations of the Biennial realized by GFK showed that the exhibition location preferences were concentrated on the Antrepo buildings for the 9th and 10th editions, i.e. most of the visitors preferred seeing Antrepo as the majority of the projects were

in display in this largest exhibition space. René Block's initial efforts in using Antrepo buildings as exhibition space resulted in the creation of Istanbul Modern in Antrepo No. 4, in 2004.

The third shift involved not only the exclusion of Historical Peninsula venues but also a new conceptualization of the city, completely rejecting the bridge and gate metaphors and proposing instead to think "Istanbul as a metaphor, as a prediction, as a lived reality and an inspiration [that] has many stories to tell." (Esche and Kortun, 9) The curators stated that the theme "Istanbul" referred "both to the real urban location and the imaginative charge that this city represents for the world." (9) In fact, the "imaginative charge" and the representational aspects of the city were embraced in the 5th Biennial's concept text and exhibitionary structure as well. Rosa Martinez wrote in the concept text of "On Life, Beauty, Translations and Other Difficulties":

> The city of Istanbul is a focus of vital energy set within a complex social context. Istanbul embodies all the contradictions and tensions of a megalopolis, which, at the end of twentieth century, is confronting the political tensions between globalisation and tradition. Istanbul has been thought of as a metaphoric gate between East and West, between Asia and Europe. In this respect, the city's major gateways (airport, train stations and the Bosphorus bridge that connects Asia to Europe, the historic walls and old city gates) was used for specific events staged by the artists. Site-specific work aimed to reveal the urban network in a new way. The city of Istanbul is unique; therefore the Biennial could not be reduced to one exhibition presented at a specific venue. The walks through the city should become part of the exhibition's discourse. Moreover, special emphasis was laid on the connection between the arts and the city in the 5th International Istanbul Biennial. (Martinez, 12)

The 9th Biennial nevertheless embodied this perspective of perceiving Istanbul as an organic entity to be explored both in the selection of venues and in the artistic approach. The curators state that almost half of the 53 participating artists and artist

groups have been invited to live and work in Istanbul for between one and six months, resulting in projects and artworks responding to the local context in various ways. Paulina Olowska's work, for instance, consisted of a spatial intervention on the walls of a chosen apartment in Deniz Palas, transforming the rooms into spaces for reflection. The other half of the artists were based in cities "with a strong historic connection to Istanbul, from Cairo to Prishtinë, Almaty to Berlin" (Esche and Kortun, 9) to "act as comparisons and conflicts with Istanbul itself, allowing the visitors to see the city more clearly through other urban and rural narratives." (9)

The Biennial did not use any historical monuments as venues but historical buildings dating back to early twentieth century: Deniz Palas Apartments (Şişhane), Garanti Building (Karaköy), Antrepo No. 5, Tobacco Warehouse (Tophane), Bilsar Building (Tepebaşı), Platform Garanti Contemporary Art Center (Beyoğlu) and Garibaldi Building (Beyoğlu). The curators explained this shift from the Historical Peninsula to Beyoğlu and its surroundings as a preference of sites "that have a common reference to the everyday life of the city." (Esche and Kortun, 2) This was in fact the reason why Kortun designated Feshane the main venue for the 3rd Biennial: to escape Historical Peninsula's increasingly touristic perception especially from the part of local residents of the city and not to treat the city dwellers as tourists.

As significant as this shift for the Biennial, were highly conceptual themes such as "The Passion and the Wave," "Egofugal" or "Poetic Justice" (see Table 4), the sociological implications of which were twofold: the inevitable contribution to Beyoğlu's museumification and the consequent branding of Istanbul through its biennial.

Table 4. The Istanbul Biennial: Curators and Concepts

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1st | 1987 | Beral Madra | Contemporary Art in Historical Surroundings + National Exhibitions |
| 2nd | 1989 | Beral Madra | Contemporary Art in Historical Surroundings + National Exhibitions |
| 3rd | 1992 | Vasıf Kortun | Production of Cultural Difference |
| 4th | 1995 | René Block | ORIENT/ATION: The Vision of Art in a Paradoxical World |
| 5th | 1997 | Rosa Martinez | On Life, Beauty, Translations and Other Difficulties |
| 6th | 1999 | Paolo Colombo | The Passion and the Wave |
| 7th | 2001 | Yuko Hasegawa | EGOFUGAL<br>Fugue from Ego for the Next Emergence |
| 8th | 2003 | Dan Cameron | Poetic Justice |
| 9th | 2005 | Charles Esche & Vasıf Kortun | Istanbul |
| 10th | 2007 | Hou Hanru | Not Only Possible But Also Necessary: Optimism in the Age of Global War |
| 11th | 2009 | WHW | What Keeps Mankind Alive? |

## Funding Structure

Because of their greater budgets and international scope, the biennials have diversified funding structures usually involving major public funding from either central governments or ministries of culture and municipalities. However, the percentage of public funding in the 11th Istanbul Biennial budget was according to the figure published in the Biennial guide (32-3), 35 % in total, including a 15 % share of 2010 European Capital of Culture, 15 % of the Promotion Fund of the Turkish Prime Ministry (pending application) and 5 % of Ministry of Culture and Tourism. Besides its transitory nature, the 2010 fund cannot be considered as public funding in the first place, which eventually reduces the share of public funding in the Biennial budget to 20 % including a pending application.

The main portion of the Biennial's budget (54 %) depends on both local and international fundraising activities (26 % from national and international funding institutions, 25 % local sponsorship, 3 % sponsorship in kind). While local

fundraising operations are conducted by the Foundation's sponsorship department, the international funds are directly generated by the biennial department through applications to diverse institutions throughout the world, each time starting from scratch for both cases. The remaining 11 % is mainly covered by ticket sales along with a negligible percentage of catalogue and other sales (1 %).

This condition is due to a set of reasons: in the post-1980 period, with the shrinking of the state, the neoliberal economic movement contributed to the cutting off of state support for culture in many countries ranging from strong welfare states to developing countries with a strong state tradition while at the same time it paved the way for private sector support for culture. (Ünsal, 177) Private sponsorship started to be considered as an alternative and new blood brought to the field of culture and arts while it also contributed to the lack of direct or indirect state investment in cultural infrastructures. The most significant artistic and cultural initiatives came to be more and more dependent on private sponsorship. Freeland stated that in 1992, almost $700 million was given by corporations to promote culture and arts (102).

The increasing support of capital immediately raised questions about "the autonomy of art in the age of sponsorship." Can art escape the censorship when exclusively sponsored by private companies? Or can art be autonomous under major sponsorship? Freeland explains that the director of Metropolitan Museum of Art spoke of a "hidden form of censorship –self-censorship" (103), i.e. censoring the exhibitions' contents in line with the sponsoring companies' interests. However, self-censorship is ever-present be it under public or private sponsorship (Yardımcı, 110), especially in Turkey where artists and intellectuals are in any moment potential

subjects to trials for insulting Turkish flag, Atatürk or any aspect of Turkish culture, which was the case for Hale Tenger's work exhibited in the 3rd Biennial for instance. Thus, private sponsorship does not provide an escape from state's censorship but further complicates the situation for managers. Many institutions more and more embrace the project-oriented approach involving the conception of projects along with a sponsor in mind such as envisaging a sea festival to propose to Denizbank. In today's world, some public relations agencies are specialized in the area of developing projects and finding sponsors for their clients.

Under these circumstances, art institutions act like apolitical bodies devoid of any political stance whatsoever. Despite the fact that IKSV has been founded as a child of Kemalist enlightenment ideology and had a portrait of Atatürk along with one of his catchphrases related to arts and culture in all their publications until recently, the position the Foundation took in the debate concerning the Kemalist project during the 10th Biennial revealed an apolitical stance. The Biennial's curator, Hou Hanru faced the opposition from the part of the dean of Marmara University Fine Arts Faculty in form of a press release or condemnation notice. The dean was harshly criticizing Hou's following phrasing in his concept text published in the Biennial's catalogue: "a fundamentally crucial problem is that the modernization model promoted by the Kemalist project was still a top-down imposition with some unsolvable contradictions and dilemmas inherent within the system: the quasi-military imposition of reforms, while necessary as a revolutionary tool, betrayed the principle of democracy." ("Optimism," 23)

The initial reaction of the Foundation was to publish a press release stating that they were sorry to read the dean's notice and that IKSV had been extremely

careful about the relationship between politics and the arts since its foundation and consequently did not have any troubles concerning this matter. IKSV further stated that they believed in freedom of opinion and they would rather expect the dean of a fine arts faculty to approach the biennial from an artistic perspective and concluded: "We would expect that the Marmara University Fine Arts Faculty would organize talks, conferences and even symposia in an academic platform. Hou Hanru and hundreds of artists and critics who came to Istanbul for the Biennial would willingly participate in those events." Thus, instead of taking an offensive stance and defend Atatürk, the Foundation preferred publishing a press release that did not include Atatürk's name at all. However, alongside with the position supporting freedom of opinion, the press release also stressed the fact that hundreds of high-profile people were visiting Istanbul thanks to the Biennial. The chairman of IKSV then contributed to the debate with an interview published in the daily *Milliyet*, where he felt the need to emphasize IKSV's overt respect in republican principles and Atatürk's reforms and added: "We don't do that by calling it out loud as 'we are Atatürkists' but in a way that is suitable for a culture and arts institution."

As Yardımcı also argues (107-8), the definition of "suitable" here has been affected and evidently transformed by the political parties in power since 1994[3] and the power relations built with capital through private sponsorships. This is not due to the election of conservative parties but to an encompassing need for flexibility in order to get both public funds and support, and to receive sponsorships from a wider

[3] IKSV has been criticized especially in conservative circles for simultaneously receiving funds from the AKP government and municipalities and disregarding the sensibilities of the conservative communities. While the Foundation collaborated with the Beyoğlu Municipality for the Ramadan Festivities in 2008, the opening cocktail of FilmEkimi was scheduled before the *iftar* hour during the same period, which kindled a debate on IKSV's political stance and respect towards the general public. Nevertheless IKSV did not reschedule the opening cocktail.

range of companies. As Chin-tao Wu cited the saying of a manager of one of New York's prominent art museums: "We are not political." (223) Thus, having a well-defined political stance conflicts with the global art institution's economic interests. This situation exclusively introduces contradictions in the case of biennials involving an inherent critical stance towards the neoliberal system. And the contradictions furthered after the Istanbul Biennial signed a sponsorship agreement with Koç Company for 10 years, i.e. 5 biennials.

The first two editions successively sponsored by Halil Bezmen and Asil Nadir, the biennial embraced a professional sponsorship system following the 4th edition. Although the international fundraising structure has also been developed throughout the process, I shall focus here on the corporate sponsorship as it constitutes one of the major contradictions dominating public debates around and opposition toward the Biennial. While Istanbul Stock Exchange sponsored the 7th edition and JTI the 8th, the 9th Biennial was co-sponsored by Abdi İbrahim, Aygaz and Opet. The sponsorship structure of these editions, especially JTI's sponsorship as a tobacco company attired the attention of Chin-tao Wu, writer of *Privatizing Culture*, who recently visited Istanbul to conduct her research on the Biennial's financial resources. The most striking aspect of the Biennial's sponsorship for Wu was the extreme visibility provided to a shocking number of local sponsors, compared to other biennials around the world, generally involving the major visibility of arts councils and institutions besides a relatively smaller number of corporate sponsors appearing with reduced visibility.

This extreme visibility has reached an unprecedented scale with the sponsorship of Koç Company, starting from the 10th edition of 2007, as a part of a

larger contract involving the company's ten years sponsorship. Moreover, the company contributed to this high visibility with large-scale local advertising campaigns that created the perception that the Biennial was organized by Koç Company in the eyes of the general public previously unaware of the Biennial. The campaign also altered the conceptual framework of the Biennial "Not Only Possible But Also Necessary: Optimism in the Age of Global War," into "Art Has Never Been That Optimistic" (*Sanat hiç bu kadar iyimser olmamıştı*). Thus, a critical concept has been translated into a populist one, rendering visible the fundamental tension intrinsic in contemporary art's relationship with the capital: can contemporary art be autonomous and critical in the age of sponsorship?

Art and Politics in the Age of Festivalism: The 10th Istanbul Biennial

I will focus on the last two editions of the Istanbul Biennial as an attempt in formulating two sets of interconnected questions: 1. Both suggesting overtly political conceptual frameworks and contents, also apparent in their venue selection policies, can these biennials, or can a biennial be a tool for political activism or at least bring political issues into public discussion? Does the opposition against the neoliberal system is inherent in the system itself, and what are the ways in which the biennial as an exhibition form, tries to escape the system in order to propose a critical perspective? Or, even though the biennial offers a critical perspective, how does this proposal be manifest in the exhibition space and how does the audience perceive this so-called "political exhibition"? 2. What is the discursive role of sponsorship as an obvious manifestation of integration to capitalist system in the perception of biennials? Is being sponsored by Koç the fundamental source of antagonism inherent in the Biennial or is the scarcity of public funds to blame? Is it possible for the

curator or artist who takes a critical stance towards the capitalist system to escape from criticism of city promotion?

As it may be followed from Table 4, the 10th and 11th Biennials proposed themes directly touching upon socio-political issues: "Not Only Possible But Also Necessary: Optimism in the Age of Global War," and "What Keeps Mankind Alive?" Although all previous biennials had questioned the role of art in the globalizing world, these two editions were marked by their explicit political content. For instance, the 6th edition themed "The Passion and the Wave" aimed at questioning "the significance of personal histories and of the weight of emotional investment in the contemporary world, as a growing number of artists offer us poetic catharsis rather than pragmatic solutions to political and social problems" (Colombo, 14). Dan Cameron, curator of the 8th edition wrote in the concept text of "Poetic Justice" that his exhibition was seeking to "articulate an area of creative activity in which the seemingly opposing concepts of poetry and justice are brought into play together." (Cameron, 16) He claimed "Poetic Justice" to reconsider the wide stylistic breach between two different forms of art-making: "one which takes as its subject the world and its affairs, a second one that addresses concerns which are more identified with the viewer's inner life." (Cameron, 22)

Besides the explicit character of proposed political agendas, another significant shift occurred in the nature of the event. Conferences and talks have been a part of the biennial since the 4th edition, however along with the initiation of 9B talks during the preparation phase of the 9th Biennial these turned out to be a

structural part of the organization alongside the changing publications structure.[4] The argument beneath the 9B talks was that the biennial was in fact a process, rather than a mere exhibition. The audience was invited to meditate upon this process with the curators and other agents involved. However, the biennial conferences are usually attended only by artists, curators, critics and academicians who are always-already part of the process, no matter how well the conferences are communicated with the public. The talk and conference series were also extended to other cities than Istanbul, such as Diyarbakır, Mersin and Antakya, usually including screenings of videos shown during the biennial. Thus, the Istanbul Biennial has been seeking for innovative ways to interact with its audience, but this interaction is obviously limited with the degree of public interest, which is hard to increase.

What make the contemporary art biennial an intriguing phenomenon are the ambiguity and contradictions it accommodates and intentionally offers as issues of public debate. The biennial willingly offers a temporary festivity to its international visitors and invites both the artworks and the city into play. This is a world of amazement, traveling, ambition and networking where organizers, curators and cities compete in realizing "the best biennial" of the period. However, this is also a world where curators, critics, artists and more recently social scientists and activists get together to discuss current social and political issues through popular philosophical and sociological concepts such as identity, gender, multiculturalism, ethnicity, etc. As Gielen argues, "there is certainly as much genuine interest and sincere idealism" even tough the latter has not been transformed into genuine political activism or

[4] Since the 9th Istanbul Biennial, within the scope of which an exhibition guide and a reader was published, the biennial publications has been involving catalogues or books including a compilation of essays exploring the conceptual framework and the biennial as a phenomenon.

academic/scientific production which, I assert, also implies a naive or realistic belief in a slightly inverted version of the infamous quote from the movie *Dead Poets Society*: "No matter what anybody tells you, word and ideas can change the world" into "contemporary art and themed exhibitions can change the world." To put it in Gielen's words: "If we observe the discourse presented by most globally operating curators and artists on the one hand, and their actual actions on the other, we repeatedly come up against a yawning gap between the two." (10)

"Does identity depend on defining oneself with or defining oneself against the city?" (Zukin, 197) This question that Zukin asks while commenting on the social reproduction of difference in the city through ethnicity and identity issues could be insightful within the context of the Istanbul Biennial. While Istanbul is being internationally marketed through its history, heritage and culture, the Biennial has, especially from the 9$^{th}$ Biennial on, taken a stance towards understanding, questioning, and deconstructing the real-time urban structure through curatorial attempts, artistic research and site-specific works including videos, interactive performances and installations of various sorts. Despite the fact that the Biennial is perceived from the part of both local and central government's authorities, the sponsors and the new middle classes as an event proving that Istanbul is the cultural capital it was meant to be, even a short glimpse at the curatorial approaches and artistic content would end up working against the marketed image of Istanbul: works focusing on the Armenian genocide, journalist murders, class divisions, spatial segregation, the actual situation of laws protecting women's rights, etc. However, I

argue that, no matter to what the extent these works are political in content, it is hard for the biennial to escape its exhibitionary logic that often turns it into a festival.[5]

In the case of the 10th Biennial, the critique of modernity was reflected in the choice of exhibition spaces, as explained by the edition's curator Hou Hanru as follows:

> To critically reexamine 'the promise of modernity', we have chosen some of the most significant modern edifices and venues including the AKM, İMÇ, Antrepo, santralistanbul and KAHEM. They symbolically and physically mirror the various facets and models of urban modernization in the city. In these sites, the utopian project of the republican revolution and modernization meets with the lively, ever-changing and 'chaotic' reality, at once harmonious and conflicting. They are sites where the top-down vision of the modern city clashes with the bottom-up imaginations and actions promoting difference and hybridity. ("Optimism," 26)

Furthermore, Hou Hanru assigned sub-themes to each venue, implying the critical meanings incorporated in each within his exhibition system: AKM, "Burn it or not?"; İMÇ, "World Factory," and finally Antrepo, "Entrepolis" and "Dream House." "Burn it or not?" was referring to the fire in AKM dating back to 1970s as well as carrying a secondary implication about the ongoing discussions in 2007 on whether to demolish the building or not. "World Factory" alluded to this huge trade center's role in urban economy and included artworks focusing on economy, production and labor. Antrepo was divided into two sub-themes: "Entrepolis," incorporating the multiplicity and diversity within the city and "Dream House" which consisted of a second floor in the building, with a touristic Istanbul view certainly appealing to international visitors.

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[5] American art critic Peter Schjeldahl offered the conceptualization of "festivalism" in order to understand the phenomenon of contemporary art biennial. In chapter five, I will try to discuss the festivalistic aspect of the biennial in light of the concept "phantasmagoria" which has often been connected to the world exhibition phenomenon.

Hou stated that "[a] biennial of contemporary art seeking to be engaged with the urban life of Istanbul also should not sleep. Instead, it should offer the public a space to spend their nights and to enjoy the beauty of the city." ("Dream," 410) The Dream House cleverly offered a night experience to both local and international audience, with comfortable cushions included in one of the artworks, chairs and headphones in another, alongside the Topkapı Palace and sea view as a bonus. Hou justified the project both as a revolt against the formal working hours, the bureaucratic order in which art is consumed as an everyday commodity and as an "antidote to normality": "Instead of promoting efficiency, people are invited to experience the effective, the spiritual, the sensitive. Contemplation, dream, fantasy and love are indispensable in a fully lived urban life." ("Dream," 410) Thus, Dream House was supposed to offer this spiritual, sensitive night and day experience where the visitor was invited to contemplate, share and live her/his fantasies.

Photograph 3. "Dream House," 10th Istanbul Biennial, 2007.

In the meanwhile, the inclusive concept suggested "to revitalize the debate on modernization and modernity and put forward activist proposals to improve social progress." (21) Hou further claimed that "a bottom-up, truly democratic project of modernization and modernity that is based on the respect of individual rights and humanist values" (22) was necessary in order to bring Turkish society out of its contradiction which was the solution he offered for the global situation in transition as well. Optimism, for Hou was "not only possible but also necessary," for it implies that there is a way out of the global war situation.

A comparison of Hou's "optimism" with Ernst Bloch's conceptualization of "hope," would be relevant: Bloch defines "hope" as "the opposite of security," "the opposite of naïve optimism," yet as "the consciousness of danger and at the same time the determined negation of that which continually makes the opposite of the hoped-for object possible." ("Utopian," 16-7) Thus in Bloch's conceptualization, consciousness is embedded in hope while optimism is the naïve belief that everything is going to be better. Huelsenbeck reminds us that the "modern member of the masses is characterized mainly by self-satisfaction" and that his motto is "everything is fine and is getting better all the time." (177) The modern individual believes in progress, not only technological, but ethical, democratic progress: "The invention of television confirms his unshakable optimism no less than the detonation of H bombs." (177) Huelsenbeck further states that the relationship of the ruling masses to art is tinged with the same optimism: "Since he persistently confuses entertainment (…) with art, he thinks that mankind has never led such a wonderful life artistically." (178) And as Bülent Tanju argues, "[o]ptimism (…) is stimulated from the belief that modern being has a total form. It is expected from

the player, whose physical appearance has also been disciplined according to this form, to recite the given scenario, on the urban stage, without any differentiation." (110)

Let us think about global warming for instance: In today's world where we constantly face the reality of global warming, through documentaries, news on TV revealing striking and dramatic data, whereas the masses refuse to believe in the phenomenon. With scientists incessantly reminding us that in case governments do not take the necessary measures or sign global agreements leading to these crucial precautions, the consequences will be severe. However, we are still happy when it snows and see it as a sign that negates the existence of global warming. This firm belief in totality and progress is our religion. And in case we tend to believe in the global warming phenomenon, then we have faith in scientists or powerful governments' technologies that will certainly find a cure for that too. Thus optimism does not appear to be a critical way of thinking but an ideology that reproduces the faith in progress.

What does art offer as solutions to the global war situation? I will cite one example that virtually offers a "solution" and then move on to a few other artworks in order to seek answers to this question. Burak Delier, an emerging figure in contemporary art scene with his political and activist stance, created his own weapon to confront life and consumption values imposed through violence and oppression. His project, exhibited in İMÇ during the 10$^{th}$ Biennial, aims at questioning the "values of the system" and "designs and produces equipment which protects those who want to defend their subjective and local values and those who

attempt to write history in reverse against the clandestine and open violence of the consumption-focused pseudo-democracy of neoliberalism and nationalism." (191)


Photograph 4. Burak Delier, "Parkalynch," 2007

Titled "parkalynch," the overcoat designed by Delier is meant to protect against mob violence such as lynch and police violence, as the name suggests. Delier produced a limited number of parkas for the Biennial and hung them in a storefront at İMÇ. I would like to read this creative attempt as a stress on the necessity of revolt no matter what the potential of violence. In this work, I think it is possible to find a strong embodiment of the concept in proposing a temporary solution in order to survive within the existing system, not a fundamental opposition yet a mere emphasis on the presence of potential violence in Turkey.

Another project that offers a solution to actual problems was the Tijuana based architect Teddy Cruz's research and proposition on illegal housing in

Tijuana, this time in a more tangible manner. Cruz based his work on the research he has been conducting on San Diego-Tijuana border. He exhibited the visual illustrations representing the flows (human and material) through the border and proposed a hinge mechanism as a mediation tool for the prefabricated illegal housing based on infrastructural waste. Being at the same time a lecturer in San Diego University, Cruz's work can be situated right on the increasingly blurring line between social sciences and art. Actually, the only aspect that classifies the project as "artwork" is the fact that it was shown at a biennial exhibition. Cruz's case diversifies from the majority of art projects produced by professional artists in terms of the artist's background. Professional artists today engage more and more in anthropological fieldwork or social research without calling their practice social sciences.

De Duve asserts that "(...) our global world has turned us all into amateur anthropologists of our own culture, in its global uniformity." (52) I argue that within the context of contemporary art, the curator becomes a meta-theoretician while the artists are the social scientists providing the necessary field notes for the curator to base his/her deductions upon. As I will elaborate in the following pages, the competitive contemporary art world forces the artists to become anthropologists of their own cultures so as to provide first-hand data about different localities. Kuspit argues that what he calls "post-art" is escaping the realm of artistic aesthetics, beauty, and spirituality, to become an area in which artists act as news reporters or analysts who establish direct connections with the signified. (53-54)

An interesting example for projects responding to local contexts is Rainer Ganahl's video project exhibited in the 10$^{th}$ Biennial. In order to create "Silenced

Voices – Bicycling Istanbul's Topography of 21 Murdered Journalists," the artist stayed in Istanbul for a while to conduct research with the help of the biennial team and a local assistant. Then, he rode on bicycle between locations where journalists have been murdered in recent decades to leave flowers on each site and created a video of this ride. He further attached the name of the murdered journalist and the date of murder along with a possible murder reason ("political," "unknown," etc.) on the flower he brought to the location. The artist explained the reason why he realized this ride on bicycle as follows: "the bicycle not only had been an important modernist machine leading towards mass mobilization and motorization but is now again a utopian vehicle demanding for cleaner and healthier ways of mobilization and transportation." (324)

A series of questions can be raised about this project: What is the desired effect of this video besides the explicit emphasis on journalist murders? It indeed is informative for the foreign visitor while it might serve to remind the local visitor about the murdered journalists and for the engaged visitor who spares time to watch the entire video, it might be informative as it also shows the actual locations. However, what makes this video more than a tribute to murdered journalists? Or, more importantly, what makes this video artistic and not pedagogical? However, the exhibition's sensual impact was perhaps greater than one would imagine as a visitor put in the following words: "I spent three hours at Antrepo. I was so deeply touched by the political content of the works that I started to cry as soon as I left the exhibition and could not get back to real life for a while." Peter Schjeldahl's point is worth mentioning at this point in order to understand this total exhibition experience:

> All art exhibitions are in themselves works of art. They compose objects in space for enjoyment in time. They embody arguments about those objects. The arguments of mediocre shows are trite. Those of bad shows are condescending to both the objects and the audience, often by way of didactic wall texts. We should not be called upon to think at an art show. Instead, ideas should occur spontaneously, welling up in us as pleasure seeks an accounting. We should never have to wonder why, where, or how an object is presented. The presentation should speak for itself, as art does, by making sense in terms of taste and love. ("Desert")

I will try to unfold the visitor's experience and reaction in two possible ways: 1. In a more mundane level, the exhibition offered many accounts on social and political conflicts around the world. The visitor thus comes face to face with the "reality" provided by the exhibition. In case s/he is not following the actual political agenda, the exhibition becomes a pedagogical experience through which "reality" slaps to her/his face until s/he exits the exhibition area, where the exhibition stops and real life begins. Back in real life, the visitor is fully satisfied as a citizen who fulfilled her/his duty, which is being concerned about the situation of the world. 2. In a sensuous level, the political biennial provides a catharsis through its exhibitionary logic where the video on journalist murders is one of the many political works in a row. The visitor is both fascinated and overwhelmed by the intensity of colors, dimensions, sounds, images, forms, motions, i.e. the overall turmoil created by the visitor crowd. S/he thus perceives the exhibition as an entertaining totality.

A biennial provides an intense experience for the art professional as well. Including not less than a hundred projects, a basic calculation would prove that it requires more than a full visiting day and a lot of complementary reading. For the audience other than art professionals or engaged visitors, giving a full day of their leisure time to a single event is not a "rational" choice. Although the Biennial

initiated a ticket offering limitless entrance to all venues (besides other "privileges") the percentage of the visitors who purchased this ticket was, for the 10th and 11th Biennials, 6 %. It might be noteworthy to recall Bourdieu and Darbel's research on museum visitors in the mid-1960s: they concluded that aesthetic pleasure is contingent on the individual's prior knowledge of the relevant artistic codes. Previously uninitiated visitors are only able to refer what they see in the exhibition to their experience of everyday life. Consequently, the average time spent on a visit often depends on the education level and social class: "from 22 minutes for working-class visitors, to 35 minutes for middle-class visitors and 47 minutes for upper-class visitors." (Bourdieu and Darbel, 37)

Therefore, we can deduce that, visiting the biennial, for most of the visitors, is a total experience where one does not, or cannot, concentrate on each work to get informed about "diverse contexts." Purbrick reminds us that "visiting an exhibition distracts from the repetition of daily matters and looking around the exhibited collection encourages reflection upon objects by prohibiting their habitual use: suspending the practices of culture for its contemplation." (5) This "mode of processional theatricality" leads in American art critic Peter Schjeldahl's conceptualization of "festivalism": "Mixing entertainment and soft-core politics, festivalism makes an aesthetic of crowd control. It favors works that don't demand contemplation but invite, in passing, consumption of interesting—just not too interesting—spectacles." (18) Thus the Biennial becomes a spectacle, a festival in which the visitor is both entertained and satisfied as a citizen to have fulfilled her/his duty of socio-political awareness.

I would like to recall here Ernst Bloch's remark on the experience of reading detective stories: "The setting in which detective stories are enjoyed the most is just too cozy. In a comfortable chair, under the nocturnal floor lamp with tea, rum, and tobacco, personally secure and peacefully immersed in dangerous things, which are shallow." ("Utopian," 245) The experience of politics in a contemporary art biennial draws resemblance with Bloch's "cozy setting": it is a secure and easy way of getting involved with politics, or to put it in Žižek's words, "opium without opium." Žižek furthers his argumentation as follows:

> On today's market, we find a whole series of products deprived of their malignant property: coffee without caffeine, cream without fat, beer without alcohol... And the list goes on: what about virtual sex as sex without sex, the Colin Powell doctrine of warfare with no casualties (on our side, of course) as warfare without warfare, the contemporary redefinition of politics as the art of expert administration as politics without politics, up to today's tolerant liberal multiculturalism as an experience of Other deprived of its Otherness (the idealized Other who dances fascinating dances and has an ecologically sound holistic approach to reality, while features like wife beating remain out of sight)? ("Conversations," 105)

The biennial experience provides the visitor a sanitized and homogeneous environment where "the Other" is solely encountered inside a screen or a frame. The exhibition thus creates a virtual reality experienced as reality itself. The visitor can enjoy soft-core political content in a sterile environment where it is deprived of its substance that makes it dangerous. Visiting a political biennial would offer an equally satisfying experience as participating in a mass demonstration, without facing potential violence.

Art and Politics in the Age of Sponsorship: The 11th Istanbul Biennial

Offering a radically different curatorial approach in terms of exhibition structure and artistic content, the 11th Biennial symbolically became the grounds on which public

discussions on the relationship of art with capital were raised upon. Realized with a theme borrowed from Bertolt Brecht's *The Threepenny Opera*, "What Keeps Mankind Alive?", the 11th edition of the Istanbul Biennial was held in three venues: Antrepo No.3, Feriköy Greek School (a defunct school that was for the first time used for an art exhibition) and Tobacco Warehouse which has been transformed into an art gallery since its first use as exhibition venue for the 9th Biennial. However, the curators revealed in biennial publications, for the first time in the biennial's history, their initial "top 5 venues wish list, not realized due to bureaucratic, financial and security reasons": 1. Istanbul Museum of Painting and Sculpture; 2. The ex-Istanbul U.S. Consulate General Building; 3. Ottoman Bank Research and Archive Center; 4. Haydarpaşa Train Station; 5. Park Hotel.

The top 5 venues wish list was not the only previously unrevealed information that was made public in biennial publications. The Biennial's budget was for the first time publicly shared (2.5 million Euro) along with statistics concerning artists' nationalities, budget items and shares, income and expenditures, the percentage of curatorial fees (1.2 %) and costs (5 %), etc. However, these attempts including the overt politically engaged artistic content did not prevent the Biennial to be criticized because of Koç Company's visually dominating sponsorship. The oppositions were embodied in *Express* magazine's cover of September 2009 issue: a redesigned version of one of the Biennial images asking "What Keeps Capital Alive?" Also including an interview with the curators, WHW, the issue's editorial ended with the following sentences:

> "This is how capital lives, it survives through exploitation. The heroes of the cruel exploitation in Turkey are not only philanthropists but artlovers as well. As they build Ramadan tents for the poor, they offer a biennial to well-offs and the

> opponents of the system. Furthermore, with a spice of Brecht. What can one say, except repeating what Mayakovsky said in *A Cloud in Trousers*: Out with your love, out with your art, out with your religion." (3)

Besides, the majority of the questions directed to the curators were based on this very contradiction: Koç's sponsorship and politically engaged art, especially under Brecht's name. In the meanwhile, the international media praised the 11th Istanbul Biennial as being the most political biennial ever realized, without slightest mention of sponsorship issues.

Therefore, the Biennial locally faced a persuasiveness and sincerity issue rooted in the sponsorship of one of the largest conglomerates of Turkey, the founder of which was a sympathizer of the harshest neoliberal economic policy implementations and the military coup of 1980. Moreover, as I explained earlier, Koç Company's aggressive advertising and marketing campaigns further complicated the situation by blurring the lines between the organizing body (IKSV) and the company itself. The company's Biennial reception with high-profile attendance appeared in high society magazines with photo shots of celebrities, and created more confusion in the eyes of the general public.



Photograph 5. "Beğenal"s Alternative Biennial Poster (left)
Photograph 6. "Beğenal"s Alternative Biennial Poster and Concert Announcement (right)

In the meanwhile, the official opening of the event witnessed a protest from the part of an anti-globalist group named "Beğenal" [6], also including artists. The group had previously produced an alternative poster of the Biennial with the slogan "This is How Mankind Pukes," illustrating a man throwing out the logos that originally appears on the biennial poster: "çok," "ürkcell," "cezacıbaşı" (funnily altered versions of the logos, Turkcell as "scarecell", "Ezcacıbaşı" as "head of punition" and so on). The curators were soon to notice the posters and welcomed the opposition with great enthusiasm, even distributing the "Beğenal" flyers at the entrance of a venue. The group had also announced that they will be staging a protest at the official opening. They finally appeared with bullhorns and the moustache

[6] A word game deriving from "bienal," meaning "pick and buy" or as directly translated, "take the one you like."

masks they produced by inverting Koç's logo in the shape of a ram (as the word "koç" literally means "ram") horn.

The protestors were well prepared for their protest/show with creative and entertaining songs and slogans. Foreign guests thought the protest was a performance that was part of the biennial. There was no sign of tension in the local audience either. The organizers were also smiling and observing, as the protestors were singing, laughing, and having fun at the opening of the Biennial. No security intervention, no tension, not even judgmental expressions until some of the protestors entered the exhibition space and tried to put stickers on the artworks. That was when security guards had to intervene to prevent any harm.

It is noteworthy that the curators are appointed by the Biennial's advisory board, therefore since 2007, each appointed curator will realize their edition under the same company's sponsorship and each independent curator will impose their own agenda, regardless of Koç's sponsorship. At this point, a crucial question to be asked is the following: What was it that the protestors were really protesting? Was it Koç's sponsorship, which is a simple consequence of the increasing organic relationship of arts with capital and the lack of public or independent support to art? Or was it the curators who chose a theme revolving around Brecht under the sponsorship of Koç?

Meanwhile, the reaction of sponsors seemed to be marked by indifference. Can this scene be read as symptomatic of the neoliberal system's embracement of any opposition against itself with tolerance and often encouragement? Is resistance embedded within the system as an inherent quality? Does the system require resistance and the ideology of multitude that implies that everyone has to express themselves without being judged, in order to reproduce itself?

As Žižek also asks:

> Calls for the defense of particular (cultural, ethnic) identities being threatened by global dynamics coexist with the demands for more global mobility (against the new barriers imposed by capitalism, which concern, above all, the free movement of individuals). Is it, then, true that these tendencies (these lignes de fuite, as Deleuze would have put it) can coexist in a non-antagonistic way, as parts of the same global network of resistance? ("Real," 148)

Did we, through our dependence on the entertainment corporations, become "totally subjugated to the control of capital and (…) cannot even imagine modes of resistances"? (Mouffe, 33) Did aesthetics been "so completely harnessed towards the development of a hedonistic culture that there is no space left for a subversive experience"? (Mouffe, 33) Lately, the autonomy of art and its power in generating resistance has been widely denied. Boris Groys states that according to this dominating discourse, "[i]n the best case art could be used merely for designing, for aestheticizing the already existent oppositional, emancipatory political movements – that is, it could be at best merely a supplement to politics." (13) However, Groys actually does not agree with this argument, he believes that art does have an autonomous power of resistance despite the fact that the existing art system, its forms of exclusion and inclusion, its rules and conventions are indeed reflections of the dominant social conventions and power structures. Within the existing system then, is there another possible outlet for the artwork than being a commodity or a tool of political propaganda? Or does the political art practice have to stop being art if it desires being more than a supplement to politics?

# CHAPTER 5

## A PARALLEL READING

In the preceding chapters, I have tried to discuss the world exhibitions, the phenomenon of contemporary art biennial and the Istanbul Biennial with the help of several interrelated concepts. In this chapter, I will seek for a deeper understanding of these interrelations through linking the two phenomena in various ways. My intention however, is not to present the contemporary art biennial either as a ramification or as heir of the world exhibition genre or to compare the two phenomena. It is to meditate on the two types of exhibition in terms of their exhibitionary logics, spatial and temporal orders, and in the way in which they picture the world within their exhibition systems. It is to propose a parallel reading of these two phenomena, to comprehend the contemporary art biennials in the light of world exhibitions through their narratives of progress and the desired order.

I nonetheless do not intend to understand the contemporary art biennial as a mere tool for city promotion and branding but as a form of critically and artistically exploring the social and the political while being inevitably embedded in the existing neoliberal system. I believe the inherent contradictions of the biennials are worth examining in order to explore the narratives of progress they offer and the order they propose. Last but not least, I would like to add here that this thesis does not approach the contemporary art biennial from an aesthetic or art-historical perspective, but attempts to a sociological reading of this type of event in the insightful light of world exhibition phenomenon. This chapter is an attempt to inquire into a set of concepts to realize a parallel reading of both periods through the order proposed by the exhibitionary forms that mark these turning points in history.

Roche classifies the contemporary mega-events in terms of their origins, which he describes as “Expo-event type” and “Olympic event type.” The international trade fairs or world-level international sports competitions can and should indeed be considered as the contemporary heirs of expos and Olympic games in terms of the emphasis on technology and development of the first type and international scale of the second. In his comprehensive research on mega-events, Roche does not mention a “Biennial type” whereas he does not forget enumerating examples of international culture and arts festivals. However, I would like to assert that the “Biennial type” can be understood and read not only as a continuation of or heir to the expo phenomenon but also as a model of exhibiting and understanding the world through an international and spectacular exhibition even tough neither the number of visitors (millions or ten millions vs. hundred thousands) nor the scale is comparable to the Olympic games. The contemporary art biennial phenomenon as a new, changing and evolving way of exhibiting and perceiving the world, should be studied analogously with the world fairs that Roche calls the “expo type” in terms of the ways in which “truth” or the “experience” are on display. I will try here to open up a discussion by means of commenting on various aspects of the two phenomena under fragments, in order to explore this analogy through an ensemble of interrelated concepts.

## Spatial and Temporal Order

The world exhibitions proposed a spatial order rendering the imperial achievements and colonial hierarchies spatially perceptible for the first time. As described in the second chapter, French exhibition space, the Champ de Mars was the embodiment of that logic with the host empire at the center and colonial exhibitions at the

peripheries, an ideal form later to be borrowed by other imperial exhibitions. This spatial and representational order implied that the world was going towards a certain direction and that the host nation was the leading power within this hierarchy of empires in terms of technological and industrial progress and the number of colonies.

Contemporary art biennials deriving from the original Venice model are still based on the national representation model as in the Venice Biennial. While most biennials have their own exhibition spaces where each biennial is held, the Istanbul Biennial differentiates itself from this model through its use of space within the city. Each time the Biennial is held, the curator makes the selection of venues according to the announced conceptual framework. The artworks are located within venues not in a hierarchical order, but in an order reflecting the curator's desires in emphasizing specific interrelationships. While national representation fades out as exhibitionary logic in the case of the Istanbul Biennial, the urge to represent of as many non-Western nations as possible is central to the exhibition structure.

Thus, order itself is part of the themes reflected upon within the self-reflexive logic of the biennial. The underlying hierarchical exhibitionary order that Timothy Mitchell points and criticizes in *Colonising Egypt* is an always-already internalized critical knowledge in any contemporary art biennial. In negating national representation and hierarchical order, the biennial attempts at destroying the subservient position of the geographical periphery and at depriving the exhibition from any geographical or spatial center. The questioning of such a hierarchical logic is both the subject and the starting point of the relationship that a biennial constitutes between the exhibition and the viewer.

The temporal order asserted by the biennials is a biannual one, which offers enough time span to forget, remember and become nostalgic of a city in order to create the desire to visit it again, except the appeal of the intriguing concepts and artistic contents of each biennial. The biennial happens once, and as I will discuss in the following pages, it consists of pure momentary and ephemeral experience. Its afterlife depends on how well it has been archived, catalogued and written about as well as the extent to which it is spread through the personal memories, informal anecdotes, rumors and fantasies (Esche and Hlavajova, 101). While each world exhibition held in a city presented the most recent advancements in technology and production, each biennial offers the visitor the most actual diversity of terms to cope with the present. Although the biennial's overt goal is to present a selection of the most recent artistic developments throughout the world especially to local audiences, this spectacular exhibition type virtually offers to the international art circles a new conceptualization to understand the present. Thus, I argue that if the world exhibition is a simple past tense event where recent progresses in various areas are displayed, the biennial belongs to the present and future continuous tenses' temporality, opening up a space for defining the present day as well as for near future prophecies.

## De- and Re-contextualization

I argued in the second chapter that the world exhibitions involved the decontextualization of commodities from the realm of production to be recontextualized within the context of consumption, thus the constitution of consumption as a separate sphere, rendering the commodity's production past invisible. The implications of decontextualization within the context of world exhibitions were twofold: 1. The constitution of consumption as a separate sphere

leading to spectacle and the alienation of the worker constructed as visitor-subject, both peculiar features of capitalism (Purbrich, 15); 2. The geographical decontextualization that underlies the representation of the colonial in the world exhibition.

In the case of contemporary art biennials, the curator's still vague role is mainly to "cure the powerlessness of the image, its inability to show itself by itself." (Groys, 58) Usually, some percentage of the works in a biennial have been previously exhibited in solo shows along with statements from the part of the artists, defining a specific context for the artwork. Nevertheless, the curator takes the liberty of decontextualizing these works in order to situate them in a new context supporting the general conceptual framework of the exhibition. A biennial is the showcase of a curator's talent in creating interrelationships through spatial and artistic interventions. While the genuine statement of the artist often fades into the background, a new realm of parallel readings has thus been created. This is the realm of floating ideas, images, sounds and dimensions, of the overstimulation of nerves. Although via a different path from the world exhibition, this is still the realm of spectacle.

## The Loss of Aura versus Experience

Walter Benjamin argued that the aura of the work of art has been withered in the age of mechanical reproduction, as an inevitable outcome of the proliferation of copies. ("Work of Art") While his discussion focused on the loss of aura in painting and the possibility of aura in photography, I will try to understand the notion of "experience" asserted by contemporary art through Benjamin's conceptualization of "aura." In an age where reproductions of famous paintings are hanging on the walls of local coffee

shops, not to mention middle-class apartments, can the experience provided by contemporary art be copied and distributed? Along with the proliferation of new media in contemporary art practice, is the "aura" of the work of art restored?

These new media I am referring to consist of installation and performance in general. While the idea behind an installation is not hard to grasp through documented images and accompanying texts on the work, the experience aspect is yet to be explored in the temporal and spatial reality of an exhibition. However, while a well catalogued and documented solo show might be easier to relate to, a biennial offers a much more complex experience in terms of the interrelations between installed works of art. A biennial remains relatively unarchivable in nature compared to a solo show or a group exhibition. Other than the restitution of the aura, the exhibitionary logic of a biennial offers a one-time experience in terms of temporality and spatiality. Even tough a past biennial can be explored through its archival material, its claims on that particular moment in history are in the past and cannot be experienced again, even if it is installed exactly as it was originally installed in the same exhibition space. Thus as the world exhibition drew a picture of the world in a particular moment in history, the biennial draws a yet fragmented, multi-layered and self-reflexive picture of the present. Perhaps the past is dead within the context of world exhibitions and biennials, as opposed to William Faulkner's famous saying in *Requiem for a Nun*, "The past is never dead. It's not even past."

These spectacular exhibitions both refer to the ephemeral nature of progress while constructing different narratives of it, as I will discuss in the following pages. However, the 11$^{th}$ Istanbul Biennial overtly differs from the "present continuous

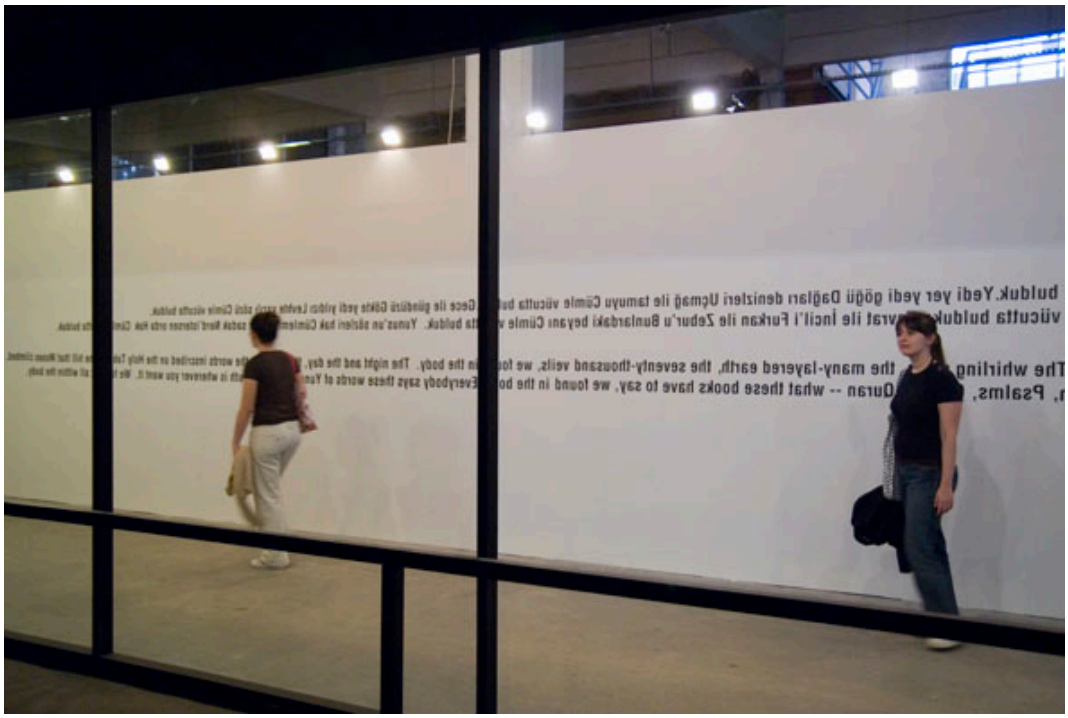
tense" biennials in terms of its artistic content, gathering artworks dating back to 1970s alongside recently produced ones. This specific edition thus aimed at giving an art-historical context and situating the newest works within a socio-political history of the world. Hence, one might argue that the critical claims of the biennial keep reinventing the exhibitionary practices through increasing self-reflexivity and awareness.

## Didacticism versus Pedagogy

The world exhibitions were didactic in nature: they intended to teach the public how to behave in public spaces and how to become citizens of a harmonious, progressing society. In the second chapter, I argued that these exhibitions were regulatory projects that constructed the worker as consumer and visitor by offering a didactic environment provided to educate them on different cultures' progress levels and the exotic cultures of colonial territories. So, it is legitimate, in the context of our discussion, to ask: What happens in the case of contemporary art biennials? Are these exhibitions, which are critical in nature, anti-didactic or do they assert a pedagogical agenda that is inherent in the statement of contemporary arts?

I have argued in the third chapter through the example of the Spanish Pavilion in the Venice Biennial of 2003 that contemporary art offered a possibility of unlearning by means of experience. Another insightful instance might be Ken Lum's project titled "House of Realization" exhibited in the 10th Istanbul Biennial. Consisting of a darkened chamber enveloped by three corridors, the work made use of mirrors and a poem by thirteenth century Anatolian Sufi Yunus Emre to offer the experience of being under the eyes of someone else without realizing it. While walking through the corridors, the visitor reads the poem written on the opposite wall

of a full-length mirror. At every moment, visitors are confronted with the reflection of their bodies while reading the poem. It is in the darkened chamber at the end of the path that they realize that they have been watched by visitors already ahead and they in turn become the watchers in the darkened room behind the mirrors.



Photograph 7. Ken Lum, “House of Realization,” 2007.

As this example implies, the contemporary art biennial provides the visitor with the possibility of reaching self-awareness through experience. Beyond the annoying feeling provoked by the work, the ultimate outcome is pedagogical. The work shows us in a powerful way the reality of surveillance in the control/discipline society we live in and invites us to meditate upon our relationship with our bodily existence. As a conclusion, I argue that the contemporary art biennial is pedagogical in nature not by means of educational programs involved, but through the transformation it expects from the audience towards increasing awareness.

The phantasmagoria of commodities is what constitutes "spectacle," which is in Guy Debord's words a condition in which "[a]ll that once was directly lived has become mere representation." (12) David Harvey reminds us that "Bread and Festivals" was the ancient Roman formula "for social pacification of the restless plebs." ("Urban," 270) This formula has been transferred into capitalist culture, according to Harvey, through for instance "Second Empire Paris, where festival and the urban spectacle became instruments of social control in a society riven by class conflict." (270)

Featherstone asserted that both department stores and world exhibitions "provided sites of ordered disorder which summoned up elements of the carnivalesque tradition in their displays, imagery and simulations of exotic locations and lavish spectacles." ("Consumer," 23) Despite the fact that the carnivalesque tradition is carried on in world exhibitions, the spectacle moreover involves a distancing of the object and a corresponding aestheticization of it (Stewart, 107). Stewart argues that in carnival, "the grotesque is an exaggeration and celebration of the productive and reproductive capabilities of the body, of the natural in its most sensual dimensions. But in spectacle the grotesque appears not in parts but in a whole that is an aberration." (107) The viewer of the spectacle, as opposed to the participant in carnival, is absolutely aware of the distance between self and spectacle. "The spectacle functions to avoid contamination: 'Stand back, ladies and gentlemen, what you are about to see will shock and amaze you.' And at the same time, the spectacle assumes a singular direction. In contrast to the reciprocal gaze of carnival and festival, the spectacle assumes that the object is blinded; only the audience sees." (Stewart, 108)

Within the boundaries of spectacle as drawn by Stewart, the visitor is interpellated as consumer. Nevertheless, within the context of a biennial, the visitors are invited to actively relate themselves to the artworks on display which are ultimately intended to generate a sense of self-awareness of the spectacle. For instance, the 11th Istanbul Biennial has been organized according to Brecht's didactic play principles, where the exhibition was referring to itself as exhibition. However, within the limitations of entertainment industry where the exhibition asserts itself as spectacle, the viewer is instantly part of an audience (the contemporary synonym of crowd) and the exhibition becomes as many other sites of cultural disorder in the city, "the source of fascination, longing and nostalgia." (Featherstone, "Consumer," 23) Thus the biennial creates an "aesthetic hallucination of the real" through "intensities, sensory overload, disorientation, the *mêlée* or liquefaction of signs and images, the mixing of codes, the unchained or floating signifiers of the postmodern 'depthless' consumer culture" (Featherstone, "Consumer," 24)

Greenhalgh argued that on the 1798 Paris national exhibition, the most memorable aspects of the event in contemporary eyes were not the exhibits themselves but "the splendour of the setting around them." ("Ephemeral," 5) Through these strange combinations of carnival and ceremony, of circus and museum, of popularism and elitism, the sheer tradition of world exhibitions emerged: a mixture of carnivalesque tradition and spectacle. While the world exhibition was a mass spectacle presented to large crowds, the biennials provide niche entertainment tools for specified audiences, just as the flexible modes of production of the post-fordist system offers tailor-made commodities for the fragmented societies, or just like the city of the neoliberal era offers ghettoized communities for upper-middle

classes. Thus I argue that the biennial is, as opposed to the world exhibitions, a high culture event and seems to remain so in the near future, first because it provides a sense of soft-core and safe political resistance realm inherent in the neoliberal system and second as a form of niche entertainment instrument that satisfies and tames the audience.

## Staging the Empire versus Staging the City

World exhibitions were imperial apparatuses. If that is the case, would it be right to argue that the contemporary art biennials are urban apparatuses or would it be a reductionist assumption? While the biennials' contribution to city branding, urban economy and tourism is a given, the contemporary art biennial claims to be "the site of a new cultural-geographical imagining." (Rogoff, 115) Much as the 1990s witnessed the proliferation of the biennial genre, the second half of the nineteenth century saw European cities and states sponsoring shows to secure their reputations as cultural centers and to increase sales for local artists. (Altshuler, 12-13) While discussing the competitive representations surrounding Vienna and Berlin, Frisby argues that the imperial exhibitions of 1889 and 1908 in Vienna celebrated the monarchy rather than asserting Vienna as a world city: "such exhibitions took on the form, in part, of a regulated celebration of a multicultural, multiethnic and multilingual land empire, one that was decidedly different from the German Empire." ("Streets," 38)

I will try to base my inquiry on two intertwined focal points: 1. Cities as showcases of imperial achievements versus cities as showcases of marketable local "difference"; 2. The proliferation of art biennials throughout the world, versus the concentration of world exhibitions in Europe and the USA. While the control over

the global organization of production is increasingly spreading out among industrial powers and crossing the North-South division, a new competition over global order, in which Asians, Latin Americans and Near Easterners actively participate, emerges. (Bright and Geyer, 74) The renewal and spread of lateral competition establishes new focal points of production and power. Under these circumstances, the contemporary art biennials have become symptoms of newly emerging peripheries and marginalized cultures: the boom of non-Western biennials can be considered as a signal that these places-to-be are beginning to perceive themselves not as margins but as centers. While the globally infused neoliberal system interpellates urban conglomerations as the new economic centers, cities increasingly put forward their localities in order to position themselves within this new order.

## The Age of the World Picture

The contemporary world is characterized by the asymmetry between the globally operating capitalist market and regionally operating political powers. Sheikh reminds us that the international art system with its emphasis on glocality, provides a "terrain on which to envisage and to install new projects of political sovereignty –be they utopian, dystopian or both." (65) Hence, each biennial can be understood as a model of this new world order because "every biennial tries to negotiate between national and international, cultural identities and global trends, the economically successful and the politically relevant." (65) Sheikh further argues that the contemporary art biennials are the spaces of two closely interconnected nostalgias: nostalgia of universal art and nostalgia of universal political order. It is undoubtedly true that the non-buyer visitors of contemporary art biennials are searching for an "idealized curated image of contradictory art trends, aesthetic attitudes, and strategies of

representations." (Groys, 9) Thus the biennial stands out in our post-modern, post-ideological, post-aesthetic age as the representative image of the perfect balance of power.

The world exhibitions were assembling commodities throughout the world in a confined space as if in a single picture. As Simmel puts it, "a single city has broadened into the totality of cultural production." (299) This was the single picture of technological and industrial progress, being manifest in a totality of commodities. In order to understand the nature of these two distinctive world pictures, I will try to open a discussion through Heidegger's conceptualization of "the age of the world picture." Richard Rorty explains this age as "the age in which everything is enframed, made into material either for manipulation or for aesthetic delectation. It is an age of giantism, or aesthetico-technological frenzy." (69) Heidegger sees all the activities of building 100-megaton bombs, slashing down rain forests, trying to create art more thoroughly postmodern than last year's, as aspects of the age of the world picture, an age in which "human beings become entirely forgetful of Being, entirely oblivious to the possibility that anything can stand outside of a means-end relationship." (Rorty, 69)

Heidegger explains that the essential phenomena underlying the modern age was science, machine technology, the event of art moving into "the purview of aesthetics," human activity being conceived and consummated as culture and the loss of gods (115). A closer look to each phenomenon the philosopher describes would provide an essential tool to understand the background of both the phenomenon of world exhibitions and spectacular art events, especially the biennials. Science and progress are indeed the most well-known and widely discussed phenomena that

ascribe modernity's essence along with the machine technology. However, what Heidegger refers to within this context is objectivity and research based science. He argues that "[n]ature, in being calculated in advance, and history, in being historiographically verified as past, become as it were, 'set in place'. Nature and history become the objects of a representing that explains. (…) Only that which becomes object in this way is considered to be in being." (116)

Heidegger's theory proposes to understand machine technology not merely as a consequence or application of modern science but as "an autonomous transformation of praxis, a type of transformation wherein praxis first demands the employment of mathematical physical science." (116) This most tangible symbol of industrial revolution and capitalist times both lies behind the main political economy theories of the time and is the means or logic underlying the world exhibitions. The third phenomenon related to the art field implies in Heidegger's words that "the art work becomes the object of mere subjective experience, and that consequently art is considered to be an expression of human life." (116) Considering the fact that the twentieth century witnessed numerous discussions in many disciplines on the intentions of the artist versus the viewer's perception, this phenomenon also provides a fruitful ground to discuss today's contemporary art practices. To what extent could art fulfill the task of expressing, reflecting real life in aesthetic form or could art provide us a panorama of our own lives and the lives of others?

Heidegger's conceptualization provides an insightful ground to discuss the phenomenon of contemporary art biennial in light of the world exhibition. As he argues, the world picture does not mean a picture of the world but "the world conceived and grasped as picture," (129) considering the fact that "there can be no

world picture." (130) This theorization virtually involves the concept of representation: the age of the world picture is the age when among objects and commodities, man also becomes the representative of that which is. (132) The world exhibitions were representative world pictures of recent progresses in objective science and machinery, where human activity came to be perceived and displayed as culture for the first time in a more direct manner then ever. The age of world exhibitions were the age of the world picture; this picture, one might argue, would metaphorically be represented in a painting. Everything that has been done, every step in the progress was on display, with a distinct spatial hierarchical order, as if nations were lined up according to perspective in a painting. Meanwhile, the world picture drawn by the biennials can metaphorically be seen as postmodern art itself: a less palpable, multi-layered, fragmented, complex and ephemeral world installation where the diversity, democracy and self-reflexivity are on display to represent a totality of universal art and democratization.

## Narratives of Progress

I have discussed the narrative of progress surrounding the world exhibitions in the second chapter of this thesis. The world exhibition was telling us the story of great empires, with their railway networks, leading role in industrial production, increasing domination over colonial territories, and each time updated manifestations of their levels of technological progress. Although I have asserted in the third chapter that the contemporary art biennials of the last two decades constructed their themes and artistic contents around concepts such as diversity, migration or identity, it is crucial to ask whether the biennial offers an encompassing narrative. The most obvious common theme appearing in the biennials' conceptual frameworks would be self-

observation, self-reflexivity, self-awareness: the biennial shows itself as a problematic hybrid monster as may be followed in the "Self-Imagining of the Third Guangzhou Triennial, An Exercise in Negation":

> Neither Western nor non-western; neither global nor local; neither international nor national; neither left nor right; neither the third world not the third space; neither tourist spectacle nor ethno-scape.
> Not cosmopolitanism; Not multi-culturalism, Not tribalism; Not post-colonialism; Not identity politics; Not sociological report; Not relational aesthetics; Not regime of the Other; Not alternative modernity; Not hybridity; Not showcase of new stars; Not metropolis of art; …
> In addition, the Triennial has prepared a platform for a Questionnaire Exercise, through which artists can approach curators, critics and fellow artists to discuss the predicament of contemporary artistic production. It is hoped that through the concerted effort of the art world we can clarify many false issues and presumptions embedded in art practices, thereby permitting fresh questions to surface.
> Through the Exercise in Negation and the Questionnaire, the Triennial invites all colleagues in the art field to help imagine ways to realise the 2008 Triennial. For the curators, the important thing is to liberate discourse through discourse, and to liberate artistic production by scrutinising our intellectual tools. It is our wish to bring curators and artists together in order to think through the visual. (Official web site of the Triennial)

The Guangzhou Triennial is indeed not the only spectacular contemporary art event to involve an exercise in self-negation; most biennials today are organizing discussions, workshops, and projects in order to discuss the meaning of realizing and explore the possibilities of a biennial. The biennial's world picture tells us the story of an universe that undergoes a process of democratization, where arts represent diverse sorts of conflicts from around the world to make us think on the present situation of the world and asks the question: "where are we going from here?" Thus, I argue that the biennials construct specific narratives of progress yet this time narratives of an ethical and democratic progress as a way to escape from the

neoliberal world system and to open up an area of resistance. Considering the intrinsic contradictions of the contemporary art biennial, including its increasingly organic relationship to capital, global interconnectedness of art circles and art reappearing as a professional vocation, can this hybrid monster offer an alternative to the existing system? Can it still pose questions to shake its visitors to the core? It seems that the biennial itself will take over the task of seeking answers to these questions and will keep informing us about the present and future.

# CHAPTER 6

# CONCLUSION

The last two decades witnessed a rapid increase in the number of contemporary art biennials around the world. This increase was accompanied by an ever-greater effort from the part of biennials in understanding and making sense of the world we are living in. As an Istanbul dweller and a staff member of the Istanbul Biennial at the time, the phenomenon aroused my attention with its inherent contradictions. I decided to focus on the ambiguous position of the biennials and attempted to shed light on the phenomenon by the aid of another exhibition type: the world exhibition of the nineteenth century.

In fact, the emergence of the first art biennial in the world (the Venice Biennale) coincides with the proliferation of world exhibitions. Initiated by the British in 1851, the world exhibition genre pervaded throughout Europe and the USA in the second half of the nineteenth century to spread out around the world up until today. The Venice Biennial was first held in 1895 with an exhibition structure that resembles the world exhibition's national representation logic: artworks were exhibited under national pavilions, as representatives of diverse nations' progress in the arts. Many biennials of the twentieth century embraced the Venice model whereas the contemporary art biennials of the last two decades drew a major deviation from this original model. Venice still stands out as one of the most significant biennials today. While the national pavilions structure of the show is intact, in line with the new approaches in contemporary arts, the "Biennale" also underwent a considerable transformation.

Therefore, in order to understand today's contemporary art biennial, we must first explore the premise of "contemporary art". First emerged as a reaction to modern art's conventional techniques and the boundaries of the white cube, contemporary art proposes to relate itself to actual socio-political circumstances through the use of new media. Among the "new media" involved are installation, performance, video art, happening, etc. These new techniques alongside a new perspective in terms of themes and subjects covered, redefined the relationship between the artwork and the viewer as well. Whilst especially painting is claimed to endure the loss of aura through the development of mechanical reproduction techniques, what contemporary art offered was not reproducible at all. This aspect led to a greater emphasis on the concept of "experience": the relationship between the viewer and the artwork was not about the gaze anymore; it was about bodily presence around the artwork.

The concept of experience is a central theme within the context of contemporary art biennials, even more so than a solo contemporary arts show or a group exhibition, for the reason that, what the biennial presents are not a number of disconnected artworks but the connections, the interrelations between the exhibited works. Thus, if a contemporary art show exhibits the works of an *artist*, a biennial is about exhibiting the achievements of *curators*, the new professionals of the global art world. Among the agents of this global network are art dealers, funding institutions, governmental bodies supporting the arts, and sponsors, besides an increasingly professionalized community of artists and curators. These latter travel around the world to interact with various localities and develop "projects" responding to diverse contexts. While the gallery and the museum still play a crucial role within this

system, the biennials constitute focal points concerning the promotion of local artists, the careers of curators and the invention of new centers of arts.

A closer look at the history of biennials would instantly reveal the fact that these spectacular exhibitions on the one hand increased in number in non-Western cities, and on the other hand brought the consequent emergence of new places-to-be into the attention of global art scene. For a hundred years since the emergence of the Venice Biennial, only seventeen biennials had been in existence (some of them are now defunct) whereas the last two decades witnessed the initiation of more than fifty biennials around the world, leading to the striking number of 146 today. According to the research of Asia Art Archive, while seven biennials were launched in Europe during the 1990s, eight were initiated in Asia & Pacific. Despite the fact that the data do not include some smaller-scaled or less internationalized biennials, it still shows that the Asia & Pacific nations are becoming competitive within this respect. For instance, South Korea's decision of realizing a biennial in Gwangju (and not Seoul) supported the development of the city as a global center of arts while contributing to a reformulation of the city's image associated with the Gwangju Massacre of 1980.

Similarly, the Istanbul Biennial has been initiated in 1987, in the aftermath of 1980 military coup in Turkey. While the country was embracing the global neoliberal economic policies during this specific period, it was also coping with the negative international reputation grounded in the military coup, capital punishments, violence, torture, and violation of human rights in general. Imported from Europe, the biennial format offered not only an opportunity to support local art production and artists, but also provided the prospect of emphasizing the nation's modernized image and repositioning Istanbul within the hierarchy of world cities as a historical

and enchanting locality. The first two biennials thus stressed the theme of exhibiting art in historical surroundings whereas the 1990s witnessed a partial exclusion of heritage centered themes, leading to a total negation of museumified exhibition venues branded by a certain "Orientalising-eroticizing" gaze in the 2000s.

Nevertheless, I do not argue here that the biennials contribute to a state of amnesia about past events causing negative images. Instead, my argument centers on the self-conscious aspect of contemporary art biennials. In other words, I argue that, as contemporary art increasingly became involved with the actual socio-political circumstances, its most spectacular showcase has been increasingly marked by displaying self-awareness itself. Thus organizing a biennial in a city like Gwangju or Istanbul (or Kassel of post-WW2 Germany, or Johannesburg of post-apartheid South Africa) implies that the host city embraces its past and is ready to question its very context. Unlike the world exhibitions, and 1851 London exhibition in particular, the biennials do not *deny* the past but *reaffirm* the presence of conflicts to offer new perspectives and to open up a critical realm.

While the histories of world exhibitions, biennials and the Istanbul Biennial provide a solid ground to discuss the causalities surrounding these mega-events, I chose to focus on the two latest editions of the Istanbul Biennial within the scope of this thesis. I believe these two editions are symptomatic of the contemporary art biennial phenomenon in general in terms of the phenomenon's intrinsic dilemmas. Thus through a deeper inquiry of these latest editions, I posed two basic questions I believe to be crucial: 1. Is politically engaged art a form of resistance or is contemporary art doomed to remain within the realm of entertainment when exhibited under the biennial format? 2. Is self-reflexive political art possible in the

age of sponsorship? Throughout this thesis, I tried to seek for answers to these questions while putting forward new ones; yet I have to note here that my aim has not been either to blame or to reaffirm the biennial as a phenomenon.

While seeking answers to the abovementioned questions, I focused on two main characteristics of the biennial in a parallel reading with the world exhibition: the "world picture" these mega-events presented and the relationship they established with the visitors/crowd/audiences. What I proposed throughout this thesis was not a simple comparison of the two phenomena. Instead, I tried to bring the world exhibition in dialogue with the contemporary art biennial and attempted an exercise of parallel reading. I do not claim that the biennial is a continuation or ramification of the world exhibition. I nonetheless assert that as spectacular mega-events in exhibitionary form, the two phenomena provide a more meaningful discussion topic than a parallel reading of world exhibitions and Olympic games. Therefore, I focused on the exhibitionary order underlying these two phenomena and explored the ways in which they might shed light onto each other.

While all sorts of mega-events address to a global audience, the world exhibition and the biennial carry the ambition of containing and representing the whole world. The order created in a world exhibition was overtly hierarchical in displaying technological and industrial progress. Hierarchies of leading empires, developing nations and colonial territories were exhibited, explicitly representing and rendering spatially visible the relationship between the oppressor and the oppressed to reveal the host empire's evident leadership. A biennial claims to present these relationships to reveal the inequalities and conflicts created by the capitalist system. Ironically, a biennial can be considered as a postmodern, fragmented, self-conscious

version of the world exhibition. While the world exhibitions contributed to the alienation of the worker as producer and interpellated the worker as consumer and visitor, the biennial intentionally creates an alienation effect, constantly reminding the audience of the realities of the neoliberal world order. In this respect, the biennial might be a construed as a disenchanted world exhibition. It pledges to expose the hidden relationships of power inherent in our daily lives through an aesthetic experience; yet this is the very characteristic of the biennial that respectively constitutes its basic tensions.

The first contradiction that I tried to elaborate on is the tension between aesthetics and politics. The biennial offers a critical perspective through themes evolving around identity politics, role of cities in global economy, diversity, migration, violence, gender and inequality. However, while aesthetics fade out to the background especially in documentary art projects, the boundaries between arts, social sciences and journalism are blurred. Furthermore, considering the fact that there is limited transitiveness between the social sciences academia and art practices, contemporary art biennials tend to become a mere epiphenomenon of social sciences. By borrowing concepts from meta-theoreticians, the curators try to assert both intellectually appealing and popular themes for the exhibitions. Adding up to the ideology of "responding to the local context," most biennial themes derive from a local or regional issue to point out a global situation.

The world exhibitions were presenting the crowd recent developments in technology and achievements in imperial domination. These mega-events focus on the "perfect present," whereas the biennial tells us the story of an "imperfect present" marked by inequality and conflict around the globe. The 10$^{th}$ Istanbul Biennial for

instance, even endeavored to offer a solution: let us acknowledge that we are living in an age of global war but still be optimistic about the future. The majority of the works exhibited in the biennials invites us to witness the ugly truth. However, is it the truth on display or the ability of artists and curators (read it as organizers, authorities and sponsors) to face the truth? Does the biennial construct a narrative of democratization and ethical progress? To what extent is democratization possible in the format of a biennial, captivated in an organic relationship with capital? Or is this organic relationship with capital not even worth mentioning, as there is no escape from the capitalist system in today's world at all?

Throughout this thesis, I tried to open up discussions with the help of the concepts of phantasmagoria, spectacle, festivalism and entertainment. I believe the sensual atmosphere of phantasmagoria created in the world exhibitions (and department stores) of the nineteenth century is what constitutes the spectacle, the obvious separation of the viewer from the object. While the spectacle is still a relevant concept to understand today's biennials, I argue that the concept of entertainment offers a fruitful tool. Entertainment implies that the exhibition is embedded within the neoliberal economic system and is within in the sphere of consumption. Through being a spectacular exhibition in format, the biennial is, despite its critical perspective or political content, a form of entertainment. Deeply embedded in the neoliberal economic system through private sponsorships, the biennial will ever be a suspect: Is it a tool for city promotion? Is it a legitimization apparatus for the sponsors? Is it another trick of imperial powers?

I nevertheless argue that it is these very contradictions that make the biennial an intriguing phenomenon. The biennial will evidently contribute to the promotion

and branding of cities through culture and arts while remaining intertwined with capital. In the meanwhile, are the audiences going to unlearn their prejudices through biennial visits? Is the biennial going to transform itself into a non-exhibition, involving solely workshops, discussions and public projects? Are local audiences going to embrace the biennial as a critical and democratic platform? I believe the phenomenon as such will be subject to more comprehensive studies focusing on different aspects of exhibition making and audience reception. Meanwhile, whether the biennial will become the main institutionalized form in which contemporary art is exhibited or an independent and critical platform meditating upon current issues, is still to be wondered.

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