INTRODUCTION

The Venice Biennale was just opening its doors in 1895 when a strident pamphlet began circulating in Paris: *Pas d'Exposition en 1900!* This wildly successful opposition from the province of Nancy targeted the French Assembly, where funds for the 1900 exposition had to be provided and decisions made. (We know the exposition did happen, but probably not before back-room deals were cut, since there was another exposition mounted in Nancy in 1909.) But a young law student, H. Georges Berger, decided in his 1901 *Mémoire* for the Université de Paris that the politicking, the debates, and the expositions should all stop. He began by clarifying the two positions that had raged in the chamber of deputies. The opponents claimed:

> The Expos [are] active agents of this bad politics that one calls internationalism [and] cosmopolitanism, which [make] a country lose its originality, its proper character, rendering it feeble because it becomes less coherent and placing it at the mercy of its neighbors, who, better advised or stronger, have conserved intact the traditions that are most often instrumental to the grandeur of nations.³

But liberal proponents just as fervently desired the kind of international exchange the expos represented (fig. 1):

> A city such as Paris, is it not made to be admired? Should it surround itself with a veritable Great Wall of China? Should it enclose itself like the sacred cities of Islamism? . . . No, we don’t live in a cloister, behind grillwork barriers, and an influx of foreigners should not terrorize us.³

This 1901 publication with its Orientalist specters concluded that both pro and con arguments were outmoded. The *expositions universelles* had done their job. If initially they had an indispensable didactic character that countered xenophobic protectionism and fostered free trade, in the new century they merely seemed aggregations of trivial or embarrassing attractions. So Berger endorsed the suggestion of one senator who called for permanent institutions to replace the periodic expos—musées généraux and musées commerciaux—freeing regions to conduct smaller, trade specific events showing only art or only industry.³ Seemingly unaware that the first
biennial in Venice had pioneered this very thing, the young law student concluded
in favor of “those many partial expositions of all imaginable types that are organiz-
ing themselves in many places—to the exclusion of the great international solemn-
ties having the pretension of being universal.” Now we may ask whether the trade-
specific substitutes for those “great international solemnities” are themselves still
useful. An analysis of biennial culture, and its history, may give us a clue.

**STAKES AND ASSERTIONS**

Let me set out some of the stakes and assertions undergirding my history from the present. First, I share
the view that the contemporary art biennial is deeply
connected to the vast international expositions of the
nineteenth century (which, in turn, developed from
the national trade fairs of the late eighteenth century).
Granting the continuities among these exhibition-
ary forms suggests shared structures and functions,
thereby propelling the larger thesis of my paper: when
we can look beyond claims to futurity or assertions of
contemporaneity, we can begin to see the historical con-
nections linking biennials to world’s fairs, tourism, and
spectacular urbanism, with implications for the efficacy
and purpose of these exhibitions for the present.

Second, I argue that the biennial form is an enduring one—adaptable to surprising
shifts in the art world, while capable of ensuring just as many continuities. If insta-
lation and video are the genres of the new millennium, then biennials are their regu-
lating salon. We can debate the ethics or benefits of these types of exhibitions, but
demonstrably the existing art world cannot live without them. Some estimate there
are 100, others 200; some say they have passed their peak, and some argue for their
necessary expansion. They have been facilitated by supranational sources of fund-
ing (EU, Baltic, UNESCO, Africalla) as well as national agencies (German Federal
Cultural Foundation, French Ministry of Culture, British Council, Japan Founda-
tion); such funders see the benefit of the biennials’ discursive reach. Likewise, cor-
porations (Illy, Sonatel, Nivea, Tecnoc, Generali, BMW, Audi, Hitachi) provide funds
and services in exchange for a small logo in the catalogue, a place at the opening,
and a diffuse association with highbrow cultural exchange. Since I assert that these
quintessentially “contemporary” assemblies are structurally indebted to peren-
ni al international exhibitions of the past, I will propose that many of the features of
those earlier world pictures are replicated or implied in the present (among them:
preemptive universality, goals of knowledge production, ties to tourism, implica-
tions for urban infrastructure, regulation of international art-world trade routes, re-
habilitation—through the cosmopolitan city—of previously restrictive or totalitar-
ian regimes, and openings for multinational capital investment and new geopolitical
ambitions, all in paradoxical conjunction with local political purposes). At the same
time, I want to propose that the proliferation of the biennial format has itself stimu-
lated certain key aesthetic shifts that correspond to subjectivities crucial to the pres-
ent. From a discourse of movable objects established by a newly secular art world
during the Renaissance and then carried over into the nineteenth-century fairs and
early-twentieth-century biennials, art in the new millennium has increasingly come
to embrace experience—whether unknowingly echoing earlier displays or knowingly
critiquing them. In sum, biennial culture is a shorthand term I use to designate the
contemporary appetite for art as experience—and biennials are the event structures
where this taste has been cultivated, and its aesthetic codified and defined.

Being an art historian rather than a social scientist, I am primarily concerned about the
fate of art and artists in biennial culture, and the situation of the subject constructed
by the work of art. The dominance of installation art and the simultaneous rise of
biennials need to be examined as conjoint phenomena—mutually reinforcing and
linked to specific geopolitical and aesthetic conditions. This leads to my second as-
sertion: while there are many recurring exhibitions that do not use the word “bienni-
 al” in their title, it seems clear to me that as we begin to write their history, whether
they call themselves “Manifesta,” “Documenta,” “Guangzhou” / “Baltic Triennial,”
or otherwise, all such events form themselves against the backdrop of the ur-biennial,
la Biennale di Venezia. While I acknowledge the compelling argument made by Rafał
Niemieczewski that the Third World biennials (particularly in Havana and Istanbul) set
up a new model for biennials in the late nineteen-eighties—primarily through their
charged site-specific localism—I focus on the shared structures from the past that
determine so much of our present. Far from privileging the contemporary biennials
as exceptional, I might even want to suggest that their proliferation post 1990 is a sec-
ond wave, one that echoes the earlier international epoch of the nineteen-fifties and
-sixties in which numerous biennials established themselves (first that of São Paulo,
but quickly those of Paris, Tokyo, and even Sydney by 1973), not all of which survived. We have not yet recovered this history of internationalism, battered as it was by the recessions, oil shortages, and world re-orderings of the late sixties; we would do well to recall that checkered past as we attend to the global biennials of today.

Few of the critics or proponents of contemporary biennials are willing to dig into their collective historical background or epistemic effects. Critics berate the biennial structure as being either a bad way to present art (too haphazard, too market-driven) or a miserable way to see it (too crowded, too superficial). Proponents praise the utopianism of biennials, which they believe has achieved what the French celebrate as mondialisation (in distinction to commerce-driven globalization), moving toward new transnational subjectivities that dislocate center and periphery. Yet the form itself is seen as little more than a contemporary container for existing works of art. I argue instead that because of their long links to event structures, tourism, and apparatuses of knowledge production, biennials have produced and participated in a more enduring epistemic shift. Beginning in the world’s fairs and gradually transforming the art world, this shift forces an acknowledgment that the placement of an art object within a world picture determines the significance of both the picture and the object. The central question then becomes: what are the conditions of possibility for the global work of art? And more specifically, in the structures of world exhibitions leading up to the biennial form, what were the prerequisites such that a work of art could be said to have international (now global) purchase, and how does the contemporary aesthetics of experience propel this same claim?

This leads to the codification of my third assertion: ideologies of universal signification need to be unpacked. We are no longer talking about artworks as fixed bearers of a meaning that can be shipped around and then translated using an internal code. Rather, the moment a work is inserted into a world’s fair or international biennial: it should be understood as always already translated, yet only in order to speak of difference itself. This holds even for the first biennials and the world’s exhibitions that sired them. Although ideologically constructed as autonomous art objects moved into the setting of the fair in order to allow the dispassionate evaluation of comparative excellence, the truth is that meanings were often determined by the world pictures in which artworks were situated. In the past few decades, that determination has become an active site for artists’ explicit strategies and a dialogical constituent of the work of art.

**REPETITION AND DIFFERENCE**

The shift I am chronicling here is certainly related to Nicolas Bourriaud’s unfairly maligned post-Bourdieu formulation of relational aesthetics:

> Nowadays, the word “art” seems to be no more than a semantic leftover of [an earlier] narrative, whose more accurate definition would read as follows: Art is an activity consisting in producing relationships with the world with the help of signs, forms, actions and objects.11

But what I am asserting is that this “leftover” narrative of art as object was destabilized long ago—it is the theorization of relationality that has only belatedly been understood as an artistic tactic. What I want to modify in Bourriaud’s formulation is that the shift to “actions” should include those of the viewer as commonly as those of the artist, and these relations have a very long history. It is the viewer who must make sense of the world picture, in my argument, and as long as we are talking about biennials, we are talking about world pictures rather than imaginarily isolated objects (or even the autonomous anti-objects of installations, videos, and performative artworks).

Daniel Birnbaum echoed this way of thinking in his 2009 statement for the fifty-third Venice Biennial: “A work of art is more than an object, more than a commodity. It must be seen as a way of making a world.” A few marks signed on paper, a barely touched canvas, or a vast installation can amount to different ways of worldmaking. But while Birnbaum picks up on the time-honored trope of the artwork as a world, I am arguing something else: that the artwork is inserted into (in order to complete) a picture of the world, and this has consequences we must examine. Most crucially, I want to historicize Bourriaud’s theory and Birnbaum’s curation so that these influential ideas can themselves be seen as markers of the historical shift I am tracing—evidence of the moment at which they became not only possible but necessary positionings of the contemporary subject as molded and produced by biennial culture. In sum: rather than works of art I want to interrogate how art works in circuits that were once international and are now global in their systematism.

Why is biennial culture so embarrassed about its history? And why are the parallels with the nineteenth century’s groaning spectacles so frequently assumed but so
little elaborated upon? Because they are foundational, and foundations do not like to be revealed. The ontology of the biennial emerged from the ontology of the grand expositionary form. The biennial came into being as a trade-specific miniature of, and antedate to, the exhausted and over-analyzed world’s fair. The Venetians’ future-oriented idea was to focus purely on art, which had long been the easiest mode of exchange within the cosmopolitan trading cultures that nineteenth-century Venice in particular was keen to reinvent.

The repetition built into the biennial must be leveraged by linking it to an ever-renewing present and future; in this way difference is promised, if not always secured. Rosa Martínez’s statement for the 2005 Biennale in Venice is typical of the positioning of biennials exclusively for the future:

A biennial . . . looks beyond the present and into the future. . . . Biennials are the most advanced arena for this expanded field precisely because they do not function like museums. Museums are temples for the preservation of memory . . . . Biennials are a context for the exploration and questioning . . . . of the present.14

Biennials’ perpetual construction of their futurity is rooted, of course, in the very “preservation of memory” that Martínez abjures. As Deleuze argued in Repetition and Difference, the recurring holiday that “differentiates” itself from the routine of passing days is constituted as such _only in repetition_.15 The storming of the Bastille is not yet Bastille Day—likewise, it is only in repetition that a biennial can be a biennial. While the concept of a recurring fair was not explicit in the first international _grandes expositions_ (such as that of 1851 in London, for example), their roots in previous recurring national fairs were soon revealed and a rhythm was quickly established (especially in French practice, where the _grandes expositions_ occurred regularly every eleven years).

It is astonishing but true that what we hold to be biennials’ most rudimentary characteristics—that such exhibitions are international and recurring—only slowly took shape in the planning of what is acknowledged as the world’s first art biennial.16 In documents from the earliest deliberations among Venetian town councilors in 1893, there is an intention of “perpetuity” but only a passing indication that the institution being established (and annually funded) was to present a _repeating_ exhibition (“ad ogni biennio”).17 And as late as 1894 it was still assumed this would be a _national_ show (modeled on the national exposition of Italian art that had been mounted in 1887, also in Venice’s Giardini).18 The change to an international scope was recognized by the town council on March 30, 1894, when councilors voted that this biennial event would be “Nazionale ed Internazionale.” Vagueness remained endemic, however; while it is perhaps only an accident of graphic design, the first exposition’s poster merely announced “1895, Esposizione Internazionale d’Arte della Città di Venezia,” which was corrected in the later posters and catalogue to “Prim’Esposizione Internazionale.”

In the summary of poet and mayor Riccardo Selvatico aired in that town council meeting held in St. Mark’s Square on April 19, 1893, the founders (Selvatico along with politician Antonio Pradeletto and philosopher Giovanni Bordiga) proposed that the city create an “institution of public utility and benefit” with the intention to “recall perpetually” the “twenty-fifth wedding anniversary of the Italian King and Queen”—Umberto and Margherita of Savoia. Thus repetition-as-commemoration was inserted at the heart of the putatively future-oriented event, glancingly determined to be biennial. Administrators at the meeting agreed with the blatant flattery of the commemoration,19 but married the patriotic royalist goal to their pragmatic hopes for a future “benefiting the reputation of [it] . . . creating an art market” for the city.20 In two years of planning, the repeating structure was confirmed, a committee of Venetian artists and politicians was formed to counsel the mayor’s office on the best form for the exposition, and finally the opening show was postponed to 1895 to allow for it to be fully _international_.21

The future of that internationalism was promised by a cycle of repetition (honoring a past event), by the recurrent excitement generated by medals and prizes (familiar from the world’s fairs), and by the vision of a new art market (also continuing the commerce that the _grandes expositions_ explicitly waged). Such claims for futurity must always be placed in relation to a past, usually apostrophized as “the museum.” In the case of Venice, the “museum” was Venice itself. The perceived decadence of the museum-city had been festering ever since Napoleon’s takeover (and art extraction) a century before—hopefully to be reversed by biennial culture. But while the museal embodiment of Venice was to be combated by the intended dynamism of biennial practices (event, prizes, market), the two were in fact united through touristic devices such as the guidebook, the camera, the municipal map, urban transportation, and signage systems. The importance of such practices had been established by the Grand Tour, extended by the great fairs, and then carried
directly over to the biennial, as indicated by early posters, which often depict the guidebook-toting art-lover consulting her authoritative text (fig. 2). But even as they are linked by tourism, biennial practices need to be discursively distinguished from “museum culture.” The museal desires a stable consistency that produces unique and sustained relations to the local. The biennial, despite its manifestly repetitive nature, was intended to instantiate the freshly renewing and unprecedented. Relations to the local in biennials are foundationally insecure and productively dynamic, a staging reflected in the wonderfully witty 2005 Venice Biennial poster showing bemused tourists in decidedly non-Venetian settings consulting their map in search of the grounds of that year’s Biennal (fig. 3).

THE parallels I am outlining here can be drawn among centuries of recurring exhibitionary forms, but need to be parsed for their significance in the present. Some suggest structural relations that endure over time; others reveal punctuating events and ruptures that establish new traditions on the historical continuum. Take the Arsenale and Corderie (or “rope-making factory”) in Venice, for example. When successive curators of the Venice Biennial pushed to open the former military and industrial buildings behind the Giardini in the nineteen-eighties, that initiative formed one moment of origin for today’s expanded urban biennials. The gesture was also part of the shift to experience, in that standard art spaces (heavily decorated nineteenth-century galleries slowly mutating into twentieth-century white cubes) were blasted open in such military-industrial architectures, allowing the proliferation of experimental and open-ended forums rather than forms. The *Aperto* function set in place by Harald Szeemann and his collaborators (Achille Bonito Oliva and Agnes Kohlmeyer) for the 1980 Venice Biennial paired the rough space of the postindustrial with the emerging attributes of the postmodern: youthful experiments in process yielded uneven but dynamic experiences for the visitor, and objects gave way to environments and performative provocations.

Often set in cities grappling with the history of totalitarian regimes, post-nineteen-eighties biennials such as those in Johannesburg, Gwangju, Istanbul, or Havana deploy the art experience to frame and aestheticize aging urban facilities (whether schools, military depots, industrial plants, or religious establishments) that were never “public” in quite this way before. At the same time, infusions of biennial culture produce a potential future for these buildings (most often military-industrial in origin), exorcising a sometimes painful past by de-localizing sites and introducing nonlocal visitors. I take as exemplary this quote from the press release for the 2005 International Istanbul Biennial: “[Curators Charles] Esche and [Vas] Kortun will not be using any of the historic monuments located in the historical peninsula, preferring to work in sites that have a more common reference to post-industrialisation, the physical legacy of modernity and the shift to a consumer economy.”

Thus we may compare Venice’s Corderie to an Istanbul tobacco warehouse, while acknowledging shared desires to position Third World cities as postindustrial (though they may never have been fully industrialized in the first place). Again, it is not the viewing of discrete art objects that the latter-day biennials will offer, but experiences of an expanded urban situation. Investigating and understanding the significance of such urban geographies is a necessary task.

Even in Venice, the significance of claiming the Giardini for the first biennial exposition was overdetermined. Napoleon’s 1797 “liberation” of Venetians from the “tyranny” of the world’s oldest republic had been accomplished by the invading commander’s magnificent gesture of creating a public garden out of the fields and churchyards of the island’s eastern end by clearing an area of its other uses and naming it the *Giardini pubblici*. When the founders of the biennial chose this same physical site—used also for the national exposition of 1887 (awarded to Venice in 1883 by the Eighth Artistic Congress in Rome)—they confirmed a resounding nationalist gesture, seizing this charged terrain and effecting “the most decisive change for the area since Napoleon’s original decree in 1807.” Venice, the former republican city-state capable of snubbing Rome’s authority for 500 years but humiliatingly conquered by the French at the turn of the nineteenth century, could now demonstrate its importance to the young nation of Italy. Venice would not be staged within the Veneto as one town among many, but would continue to perform its old ostentatious role. As a portal to the world, it could both be a leading component of the nation-state (thereby flattering its king) and assert its time-honored international identity as a...
cosmopolitan center of the liberal arts and free speech. In this way we see the pattern of so many other biennials: São Paulo founded its biennial (and modern art museum) in 1951 to assert an identity within the nation (competing with Rio) as well as to turn a capital-friendly face to Cold War America through its embrace of “Rockefeller artists” endorsed by New York’s Museum of Modern Art; Havana, its former cosmopolitanism on hold due to Cold War ostracism and Soviet patronage alike, emerged as a prefiguration of Gorbachev’s glasnost and perestroika to represent Latin America and the Third World more generally with what was assertively proclaimed a “Havana biennial” in 1984; likewise the Istanbul (not Turkish) biennial was founded in 1987, a post-apartheid Johannesburg (definitely not South African) biennial was inaugurated in the year of the first free elections (1994), and a swath of regional biennials were begun in post-Tiananmen China.

As these patterns reveal, the biennial is an enlightenment project that secures a kind of nationalistic in the very act of transcending it. The founding of a biennial pledge to renew knowledge perpetually, stakes a claim for the cosmopolitan urban center to rejoin a wider international community (the common phrase is “put our city [back] on the map”), and makes a pedagogical promise to visitors to bring them the world (in the form of an encyclopedic and renewing art exhibition). But if they are marked by this originary episteme, the biennials of the world are no longer dominated by the Euro-American version of enlightenment. Indeed, an invocation of “enlightenment” may seem perverse when we consider the recent proliferation of the exhibitionary form in party-state systems (China) or dictatorships (United Arab Emirates). But I would argue that these are anomalies that prove the rule, with the rule being an invitation tendered by a locality to a global art world for an event that might, through the force of culture and discourse, balance geopolitics and leverage military risks. The rule combines local pride with “city branding” in order to attract both nationals and foreigners whose patronage might replace extraction-based economies with a future of tourism (or, in Tour-famous Venice, update existing tourism with an art market). The rule sees education in art, imagining this benefit will be appreciated by a local population and will pay off in the “creative industries” to come. To the extent that these activities continue to follow the energies of the Enlightenment (which I maintain they do, even outside the militarized democracies of the West), we might need to recall that the Enlightenment took many forms. Take that modeled by Frederick the Great, whose provincial monarchic military accomplishments were paralleled by his eagerness to join a world of cultural possibilities wider than those presented by Prussia’s largely feudal agricultural economy. Would Voltaire’s tenure at Frederick’s Sans-Souci in Potsdam be analogous to the international curator building an art world for the Emirates’ Sharjah?

To put it bluntly, biennials and world’s fairs conduct politics by other means. But my paraphrasing of Carl von Clausewitz’s famous statement about war is only to emphasize that these events stage themselves as pacifist alternatives and engagements that aim to make war less likely. In this respect, biennials are no different than sporting competitions and diplomatic exchanges that sublimate military desires. Indeed, the modern Olympic games were erected at exactly the same moment as the Venice Biennial in 1894, when the French aristocrat Baron Pierre de Coubertin got seventy-nine delegates from nine nations to meet together in Paris (fig. 4). The Comité International Olympique was formed, and in a brilliant stroke of internationalism the Greek-born Parisian Demetrius Vikelas was selected to be its first president, with Athens as its first venue. Some have argued that Coubertin was aware of the recurring exhibition form established by artists’ associations in Germany (the Berliner Kunstverein, for example, rather than the then ineffectual French state salons), which fused in his mind with the ancient Greek model of recurring athletic festivals to produce an argument for the rehabilitation of the games. Not incidental in all this was the French defeat in the Franco-Prussian war, which Coubertin blamed on the lapse of athletic vigor in the French nation. Like the Biennial, international competition was imagined as a way of both sharpening national skills and neutralizing the risk that national mettle would be tested in war. As Coubertin stated in 1892: “Let us export our oarsmen, our runners, our fencers to other lands. That is the true Free Trade of the future; and the day it is introduced into Europe the cause of Peace will have received a new and strong ally.”

This all may seem utopian, but recall that French senators had complained that the whole territory of Luxembourg had been lost while the nation was fussing over grandes expositions, a development some would praise as a sublimation of aggressive expansion. What is statistically striking is the sheer number of these events offered during the period of Europe’s most competitive industrialization, expansion, and colonization. Determining whether the expositions helped avoid conflict or accelerated the onset of the First World War, however, is beyond the scope of this essay.
Given the complexity of such interlocking objectives undergirding fairs and biennials, can we at least identify the social practices that constitute their culture? I have proposed examining the aesthetics of experience, with its hints of pilgrimage and tourism, as a first approach. These rituals were already in place when la Biennale opened in 1895, a preexisting set of economies that had witnessed the replacement of the Grand Tour by universal expositions, Crystal Palaces, and world’s fairs complete with imported natives, industrial innovations, exotic goods, and package tours. In this far longer history, we can follow the city’s transformation in the nineteenth century from attractive assemblage of utilitarian and historic buildings to explicitly arranged spectacle, with the physical conversion of once useful sites into aesthetic and touristic domains—key structural components of what has become “biennial culture.” I have suggested that some elements were innovations in the longer tradition of mounting exhibitions in public gardens—new patterns linking Venice’s Corderie, the Berlin Biennials’s converted margarine factory, or Istanbul’s tobacco warehouse. But already in the world’s fairs that produced the template for biennial culture we can locate recurring forms of urbanism, particularly in the mother lode of recurring expositionary spectacle: Paris, France.

Why was the military training ground of the Champ de Mars, for example, the logical site for a century of ever-more-space-hungry Parisian grandes expositions? Because as soon as the French Revolution produced the possibility of civic control for this military territory, it was requisitioned as the highly symbolic site for revolutionary fêtes and republican guard parades. As soon as there were citizens to be molded, this site was appropriated for rituals of mass subjectivation. Like Napoleon’s Giardin in Venice, the park planned for the people of the French republic still harbored a remnant of its military function (an École militaire that can still be seen in operation at the end of the Champ de Mars, which is comparable to the military installations that still skirt the Venetian Arsenale). It was the Venetians who took the rue des Nations concept of the 1889 (and 1900) Exposition in Paris and allowed it to become incrementally permanent in their Giardin, committing the logical error of populating Napoleon’s urban garden (and site of military spectacle) with pavilions that fixed spatial relations in a world picture doomed to anachronism (fig. 5). But if this initiative confused recurring with permanent, inviting dejection and neglect in the biennial’s off seasons, the pavilion structure also proved enormously generative in the aesthetics of experience that has become explicit in contemporary art.

The confusion between permanent and recurring is understandable given the legacy of the world’s fairs, where selected buildings had sometimes been constructed to be permanent (or later declared so, as with Eiffel’s tower). Indeed, the universal expos would leave their mark on countless cities and create the modern field of urban planning—in fact, this was often the covert or explicit aim of the exposition to begin with. Paris in particular utilized the eleven-year rhythm of recurring expositions to accomplish major infrastructural development: several bridges across the Seine, the creation of new avenues, the building of a metro, railway extensions, and sewage improvements—all accomplished with the allocation of state funds and the flow of international capital that came with the fairs. London built a commuter railway when it relocated the Crystal Palace to Sydenham; Chicago developed a city plan for its waterfront; San Francisco and St. Louis got museums. In Venice, it was the Fascist administrators of the biennial in the nineteen-thirties who pushed for a train connection to the mainland and expanded the franchise of the “Venice Biennial” to include the glamorous medium of film in a biennial cinema festival that was to alternate with the exhibitions of art.

This impetus for urban development and city branding is an obvious continuity between the grandes expositions and the biennials. Another is these exhibitions’ role in fostering the various (national, regional, and local) economies in which art, and artists, circulate. We like to forget, for example, that the roots of all of these exhibitionary forms lay in market fairs, in the first instance the French Convention’s decision to sponsor a national fair in Paris after the Revolution. Conceived by the Marquis d’Avéze, commissioner of the three former Royal Manufactory—the Sèvres porcelain plant, the Gobelins tapestry works, and the Savonneries carpet factory—the national fair was seen as a way to move inventory internally at a time when the other European countries had blockaded French ports. This first entirely national fair was so successful that the government decided to repeat it. As Minister François de Neufchâteau put it in 1798, “Our manufactures are the arsenals which will supply us with the weapons most fatal to British power.” As late as 1900, world’s fairs exhibitors didn’t ship all those things back—goods were tendered to those who had paid for them at the fair, with the organizers getting a commission on every exhibit that sold. As we’ve seen, the Venice Biennial established itself at its origin as a market—and functioned that way, with sales yielding commissions to finance the exhibition until activists in the nineteen-sixties declared such commerce anathema to art.
SUBJECTS, INFRASTRUCTURES, CULTURES

We have begun to clarify the sets of values and cultural practices inculcated by such large-scale international exhibitions. Seeded by the event of the fair, these practices could involve impressive diplomatic events, scholarly conferences (in fact, the form was invented at the grandes expositions), spectacular images, celebrated works of art, collectible objects—the literally materialized “memories” that are souvenirs—as well as new experiences (and thus new subjectivities) for the middle class. The label “tourist” is far too simple—it collapses distinct demographic categories that could range, in the case of the 1900 Paris Exposition Universelle, from provincial Frenchmen to foreign heads of state; industrialists or engineers checking out the competition at the Palace of Transportation, the Palace of Machines, or the Palace of Chemical Industries; children trailing behind their suffragist mothers at the education conference; or even young Picasso coming with friends from Barcelona to see the exposition, thereby clinching their collective decision to move to Paris a few years later. Photographic album souvenirs could have been acquired by the culture-seeking businessman/diplomat, the traveling Boston historian Henry Adams, or conceivably even a Dahomeyan villager living in the “Colonies et pays de protectorats” display. Crucial to understanding the impact of such events is that attendance surpassed the population of the French nation. The repeating surges of exhibition architecture and engineering turned Paris into modernity’s “société du spectacle.” We see in the architectural iconography of the fairs a persistent thrust to make of the city a spectacle, and to provide spaces in which that urban panorama could be consumed.

That aesthetic of festive industrial urbanism bled seamlessly into the postindustrial aesthetic of today (fig. 6). Take the case of the Palais de Tokyo, where the city of Paris sponsored its first modern art museum and then in 2002 began to solicit an internationally renewing contemporary art scene—a site for something very much like “biennial culture.” It’s worth remembering that the Palais is a remnant of one of the successive grandes expositions—in this case, the 1937 World’s Fair. Architectural critics praising Lacaton & Vassal’s 2002 renovations describe the liberation of this building from the shards of a decaying proto-Fascist past to an entirely experiential “future.” A critic commenting on the renovation offers an extraordinary metaphor of just what that new experience is for visitors in the renovated world’s fair building: “[The architects’] vision of social space is pervasive, inspired, partly, by the Djemaa El-Fnaa market square of Marrakesh—a space of movement and change, constantly formed and reformed by the whim of its actors.”

Of course, I want to emphasize the exceptional conjunction of an inspiring Moroccan market with a formerly imperial French exhibitionary space, not too far from the Café Maroc that refreshed visitors to the 1900 Exposition. These are the “coincidences” that reveal the extensive and surviving armatures of world pictures: the categories of exotic amusements that were conferred by the French empire for its citizens and visitors to the Exposition Universelle in 1900 became sublimated into colonial outposts at the world’s fair of 1937 only to return again as the marketing of difference, offered within the perpetually renewing aesthetics of experience for twenty-first-century subjects of biennial culture.

NATIONS, ARTISTS, SHIFTS

These continuities between past and present are not seamless, nor do they unfold in some ideal uninterrupted fashion. Indeed, the twentieth century witnessed the dramatic shift with which I began, when the energies of the world’s fairs were appropriated by the trade-specific biennial form. But the shared presumption of the exhibitionary structures themselves, from the expositions universelles to today’s “platforms” of experience, is that the (modern, Western) artist would both represent his tribe and become transcendentally international. This fundamental paradox spans the nineteenth century’s adoption of Jozef Israëls as “the Dutch Millet” (wielding the then-international style of French Realism in order to speak of low-country particularity) and the twenty-first century’s hunger for polemical pavilions (from Yung Ho Chang’s decaying bamboo structure of 2005 for China to Sandi Hilal and Alessandro Petti’s “Stateless Nation” pavilion for Palestine in 2003). Generated deep within modernism and its geopolitics, the cosmopolitan mark(ing) of difference continues today.
PAVILIONS, AESTHETICS, EXPERIENCE

I have argued that a vast historical arc links the search for world pictures and experience in the Grand Tour with the great exhibitions that industrialized that legacy for everyone. National pavilions and biennials only made manifest the earlier formulae by which the artist would become “representative,” demanding that objects and artists transmit national or ethnic meaning even while insisting that they use international styles to do so. Art history has produced a narrative of artistic developments after the Second World War that leads away from objects altogether, and I have speculated that some part of that development owes its force to the increasingly experiential nature of biennial culture. Recurring international exhibitions had established robust links between tourism and art, fostering the seductive marketing of experience that fuels contemporary biennial culture today.

I have proposed that it is no coincidence that the codification of installation art in the nineteen-nineties came at the same cultural moment as the increase in global biennials and the problematization of national pavilions. Such major transformations are never simple in their causes. But I argue that the shift to experience seeded by an embodied and material installation art has been codified by recurring exhibitionary forms in an unacknowledged canon of biennial culture—while posing itself in dynamic relation with the spectacle that is the enduring legacy of the massive international exhibition. That is, if “experience” is forwarded to counteract spectacle, it necessarily also enters the spectacular frame of the urban setting in which the biennial contextualizes itself: experience embedded within an urban spectacle that is itself mobilized as a tourist experience, all further staged within a larger world picture that “the X Biennial” always invokes.

Despite this circularity, the aesthetic of experience is not inherently totalizing. Discursively, its claims to counter-spectacle are linked to the liberation from national pavilions, or at least to a thorough critique of them. This brief history identifies Hans Haacke’s noteworthy smashing of the German Pavilion’s floor in 1993 as one of its inaugural moments. The experiential aesthetic, on this account, began with this violent antivisual gesture; the experience was visually “empty” but acoustically rich, as ambient sounds of visitors’ feet were heard crunching over shards of marble brought from buildings Hitler had renovated in 1937 (Haacke’s intervention explicitly performs “politics by other means”). Apotheoses of antispectacular experience may include Tino Sehgal’s contribution to that same German pavilion in the 2007 Biennial, where gallery attendants sang to visitors: “Tino Sehgal! Tino Sehgal! It’s so contemporary, contemporary!” As the sponsors’ website describes it, Sehgal is “assembling meaning through directing people rather than creating objects.” If we understand the national pavilion to be a set piece of architecture, then Haacke was indeed initiating its ruination, and Sehgal announcing its obsolescence. But if we understand the national pavilion as a concept, an ideology, and a funding structure, the longer and more complicated history unfolds.

So although more contemporary biennials such as those of Istanbul or Guangzhou claim that Venice’s creaky national pavilion system is obsolete (a position that São Paulo took in establishing the world’s second biennial already in 1991), the truth is that the pavilion component of biennial culture in Venice has proved useful. Pavilions have allowed the problematization of both spectacle and the ethnic state, because artists of established cultural capital (such as Haacke) are allowed free rein to deploy their experiential aesthetics within them. Until the curtain closes on the larger theater of nations and geopolitics, biennials and national pavilions will continue to have conceptual and political roles to play.

This is where I leave you with a final provocation from my own politics of biennial culture. I want to be honest in admitting that I think biennials are an excellent way to pursue “politics by other means.” I’d rather have a reformulation of the abandoned 1978 Baghdad Biennial (although without the Shah’s tortured Westernism this time) than war in Iraq. Usually we are required to accept biennials as the salve after violence, not as its alternative. Yung Ho Chang’s dissolving bamboo pavilion for Venice is a perfect emblem in this respect. Undercutting the harsh edge of Chinese imperialism, the architect deployed traditional Third World building materials in a fragile but sophisticated algorithmic progression—as if computer-aided design were made of sticks and string. We need concepts of nation to make sense of a “Chinese pavilion,” yet our long-term desires for the world picture have entered a new phase in which the very terms “nation,” “internationalism,” and “global exhibition” must be subjected to permanent critique. There is no better place for that critique than the...
Theater of globalism that is the biennial. As evinced in the 2009 Istanbul Biennial, utopian questions of art's necessity could also be linked to the pragmatics of experience: "the proof of the pudding is in the eating"—judgments or "proofs" that can be provided only by the consumers of this cultural sustenance. The experience-seeking subject that these exhibitions have helped to produce is thus responsible for making judgments, but also for weighing the larger implications and longer histories of such encounters. Necessary in our present world, biennials are also necessary for questioning their own necessity. Spectacles to consume but not be consumed by, biennials and biennial culture must now include ruminating while renting rooms, critically reflecting while chatting, and for artists, curators, and visitors alike—understanding the continuity of our desires for the world picture.
NOTES

This essay is a revised version of a lecture given at the Bergen Biennial Conference, September 17–20, 2009. The author is deeply grateful to the organizers of the Bergen Biennial Conference for the opportunity to submit the arguments presented in this essay, many of which are central to the early chapters of my book-in-progress, Decades for the World Picture: The Global West (Research by several of the conference participants has been crucial to working on the topic of biennials; in particular, I would like to thank Vittona Martin for her pioneering work on the Venice Bienalle, as well as her generous help in facilitating my own research in the Bergen archives.

1. In "1895, the municipal council of Nancy passed a resolution opposing the proposed exhibition in Paris. In 2. Léon Goulet, editor of Nancian journal LEZ, republicates, published a scathing pamphlet, Pas d'Exposition en 1900, in which he fiercely stated the feelings shared by many opponents of the Parisian fair. His most critical points were that the provokes lost revenues during the fair, and that the fair "had killed the Paris "international," or triennial extending to "disappointment and deplorability." Alfred Chastel,"Culmination. At the Venice Exposition Universelle of 1900," reproduced from World's Fair Magazine, Vol. 1, no. 3, 1897 in a revised expanded version (January 2000) at http://charon.stet.edu/publications/PA/RISEXPOSITIONS/1900EXPO.html.


4. Ibid., p. 155. Actually, this project was called "Les Expositions universitaires internationales" and was only a partial success. The 1895 Exposition Universelle had suffered a staggering loss of eight million French francs. According to the authors, the major problem was the lack of funds. The National Library had appointed a commission (confusingly referred to as "Prince Napoleon") to supervise the fair and to determine the causes of its failure. It suggested that the days of the Great Universal Exhibitions were numbered and called for special exhibitions, dealing with one particular subject only, should replace them." Allwood, The Great Exhibitions (London, 1977), p. 35.

5.Berger 1901 (see note 2), 160.

6. This number is almost impos- sible to verify. Robert Storer, at the con- ference, made the argument on biennials in his "A C," the Creation of the World, 1910 (Prado, Madrid); the outer panels of the Trophee de la Biennale, 1910 (National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.), estimated 200. Some biennials seem to appear and disappear: others shift venues or genres: some scholars are willing to count biennials as decisive arts or design or architecture, while others restrict their enumeration to those showing contemporary art.

7. My thanks go to Rabin Nermo- jokan for our many conversations on the subject over the past five years. His recent paper was recently summarized in his lecture at the Bergen Biennial Conference, Bergen, September 17–20, 2009. A revised version of this paper appears in this volume as "Venice or Havana? A Polenica on the Genese of the Contemporary Biennale."


10. Ibid., pp. 112–13.

11. Ibid., p. 155. Actually, this project was called "Les Expositions universitaires internationales" and was only a partial success. The 1895 Exposition Universelle had suffered a staggering loss of eight million French francs. According to the authors, the major problem was the lack of funds. The National Library had appointed a commission (confusingly referred to as "Prince Napoleon") to supervise the fair and to determine the causes of its failure. It suggested that the days of the Great Universal Exhibitions were numbered and called for special exhibitions, dealing with one particular subject only, should replace them." Allwood, The Great Exhibitions (London, 1977), p. 35.

12. Berge 1901 (see note 2), 160. Robert Storer, at the confer- ence on biennials organized in December 2002 by the Venice Biennale, put the number at 1:10. Rosemary O'Neill, co-organizer of the February 2006 Col- lege Art Association panel on "Installation Art in the Global West," estimated 200. Some biennials seem to appear and disappear: others shift venues or genres: some scholars are willing to count biennials as decisive arts or design or architecture, while others restrict their enumeration to those showing contemporary art.

13. For an early example of the art- work of the "Berlin World," see Frank Dekker, "The Creation of the World, 1910 (Prado, Madrid); the outer panels of the Trophee de la Biennale, 1910 (National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.), estimated 200. Some biennials seem to appear and disappear: others shift venues or genres: some scholars are willing to count biennials as decisive arts or design or architecture, while others restrict their enumeration to those showing contemporary art.


17. Ibid., p. 231.

18. Ibid., p. 231.

19. Ibid., p. 231.

20. Ibid., p. 231.


22. Related by radical curator Franci- netto, the "American avant-garde group" had been instrumental in insisting on internationalism, which they proposed could be guaranteed by a "comitato pa- triottico" (or "patron's council") consisting of invited international artists. Inter- vivings, Francinetto and his colleagues seasoned the comitato with Seres- tobari, Sobrato, and international Realists artists from the chief European countries; at the last minute someone added a few conservative acrylics. Thus, artists who would have been in contention in their home situation (Max Liebermann, a Munich Secessionist in touch with colleagues across Europe, versus Anton von Werner, a painter of nationalistic history makers and director of the Munich Academy) were brought together on the Venice roster as members of the German "Teuton." 23. See Elena Fisicaro, "The Global White Cube," in Vandellein and Fisicaro (eds.), Domestic Scapes of the Art World (2005). This essay has been reprinted in the present volume.

24. In 1999, Scenna reviewed his own shows at the Frieze Art Fair ("Piracy/mob" or "something like "open-free-art," removing the age limit on "young artists," qualifications and opening up still more of the newer regions of the "Garde in this case, it appears. But you could experience Paul McA- Craken's "Museum of a non-Furniture factory (relying on a La-Z-Boy and being fed donuts coming from the machine) or other procedural and/or experiential works.


27. "Venice acknowledged its entry into the European continent's "public sphere" by occupying the Gaetani, the ancient art in the public gardens rather than through the traditional models of the "public" republic, such as privat oil or city commissions for a agora's chapel or diplomate hall.

28. The art activity of the United Arab Emirates, notably the Sharjah Bi- ennale, is part of a vast set of initiatives by the UAE, including huge new re- search universities (Khalifa University in Dubai) and branch campuses (Abu Dhabi's branch of the Louvre). These can be viewed cynically, as be- ing aimed primarily at butressing a Cameron government's efforts to cultivate a series of neoliberal democracies who will then invest in the enlightenment aspirations of the Emirates to the extent that if the latter are endangered by, say, an espionage nuclear West, there will be a cultural investment in the region justifying mili- tary interventions. (Ranieri Martinelli?) The fact that the Venetians are not citizens, do not have a democracy, cannot vote for their government, and represent a large fraction of those who rule the region (most of whom are foreign workers living in squatter quarters) has thus far surfaced in the tumultuous or art world world these biennials, despite common practices of political activism in these groups.


32. The Venice Biennale seems to be the last film festival, but scholarship on this is in its infancy. Comes, was formed explicitly in the image of the Venice, intended to begin in 1939 in opposition to the fascist control of the Venice event; it forced its suspension to 1946. The success of the Venice strategy in the fascist period is marked by the U.S. film musi- cal Top Hat, made in 1935. Not yet at war with Nazi (or fascist or its various European regimes), Hollywood stars Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers could still be shown to the Venetian Lotto for a bit of glamorous fun.