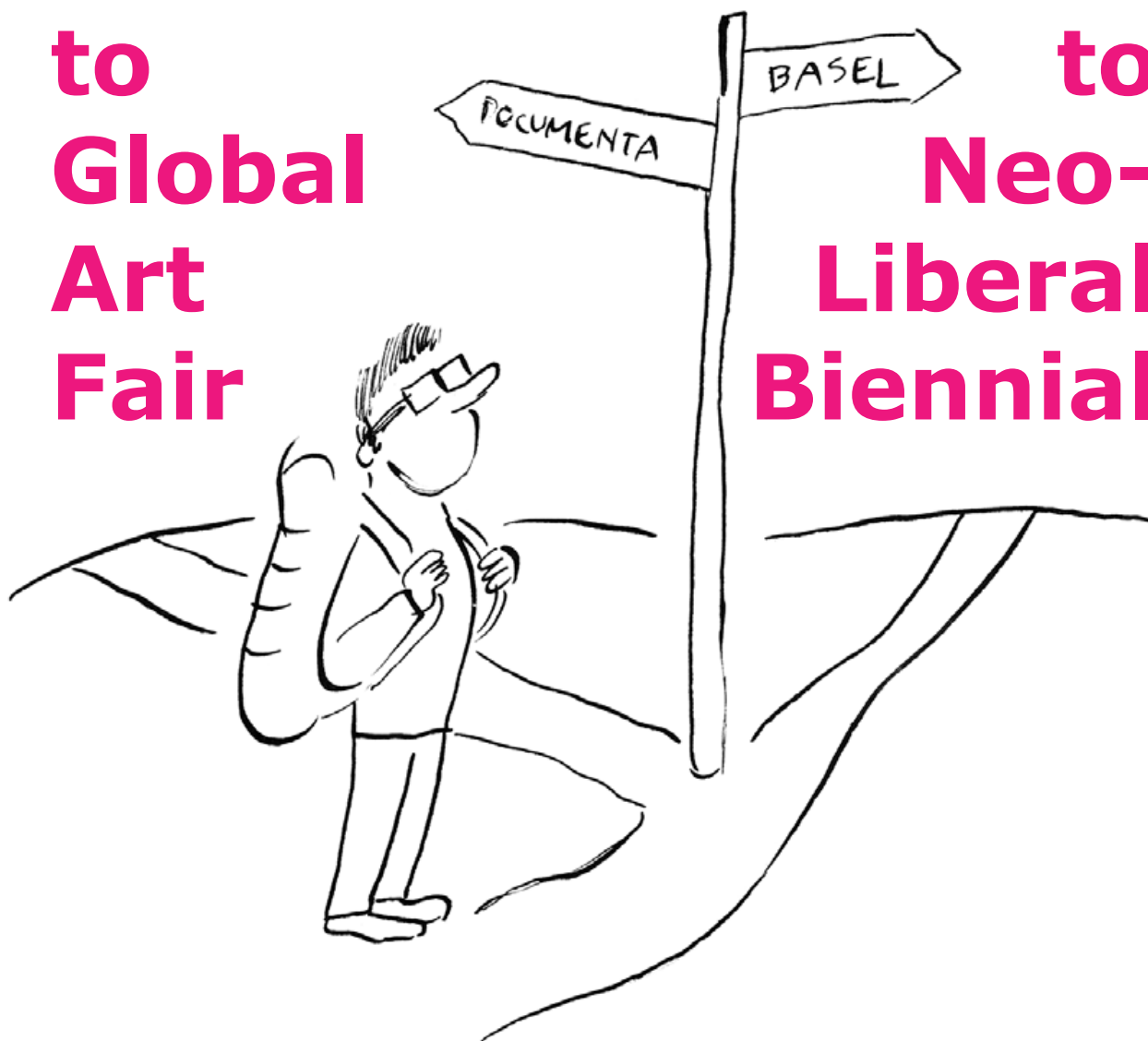


**From
Roman
Feria
to
Global
Art
Fair**

**From
Olympia
Festival
to
Neo-
Liberal
Biennial**



***On the 'Biennialization' of Art Fairs
and the 'Fairization' of Biennials***

Paco Barragán

With Artoons by Pablo Helguera

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ARTPULSE Editions

Note

In all the quotes cited throughout the book I respect the original text, even if in some cases the concept or name is written incorrectly, as is very often the case with *Magiciens de la terre*. Each author is responsible for his own text. Equally, I have maintained the names *documenta*, *ART COLOGNE* and *ARCOmadrid* as they are used in a consistent basis by their respective institutions, while in the past the names may have been written differently or differed in part. The translations from books, essays and articles referred to in the footnotes with their original titles in German, Dutch, French and Spanish are mine. With regards to citation in the footnotes, I have departed from the Chicago Manual of Style and adapted it to my own preferences.

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*La foire—voilà l'ennemi.
La biennale—voilà l'ami.*

Pablo Picasso

Introduction

An artist with a backpack approaches a crossroads and, while looking up, remains littered in a sea of doubt: one traffic sign indicates the way to documenta while the other points out Basel in the opposite direction.

This poignant *artoon* by Pablo Helguera conveys the perfect dilemma that most of us are recurrently faced with in the artworld. Do we have to take the road to documenta or should we prefer Art Basel instead? Do we choose the side of art history or, on the contrary, the art market? Is our only choice a matter of disinterestedness versus commodification?

So the 'fair' question is whether there is a way of reconciling these two extremes. Said rather crudely: are we able to shake off this rigid Cartesian *Weltanschauung* that pushes us from the most exquisite adoration of biennials to a ruthless abnegation of art fairs?

In turning to the analysis of art fairs and biennials, I should point out one caveat: this book owes its greatest debt to the abysmal lack of documentation regarding art fairs, on one hand, and the biased and one-sided perspective on biennials on the other.

Michele Robecchi once stated that art fairs and biennials are like "apples and oranges" in that they are "both delicious and fundamentally different." And while acknowledging that this rings clear as a bell to all of us, it cannot be gainsaid that stimulating this analogy can be extremely useful in order to fathom their real meaning as global artistic phenomena. In such a way, we are obliged to entertain a comparative study motivated by the fact that, since the '90s, art fairs and biennials have become key players of the 'culture industries' against the backdrop of a neo-liberal regime that mixes economy, spectacle and entertainment and, secondly, the fact that both have metamorphosed into one another, i.e., what I framed way back as the *fairization* of biennials and the *biennialization* of art fairs.

The art fair, which grew out of the traditional fair, is one of the most characteristic features of the art market, yet it is a subject that has inspired little art historical research. There are hardly any books and essays on the topic that can provide a historical overview, and while most existing literature has been written in the fields of sociology, economy, history, geogra-

phy and anthropology, it is unmistakably of a more general nature and not specifically focused on art and the art market.

The biennial has become one of the most respected platforms of contemporary culture within a seemingly globalized artworld. And while, as expected, it has received much more attention in the form of articles, essays and academic papers, the number of books dedicated to it is insultingly small given its significance. What is also uninventive is the annoying repetition among most publications of a select number of biennials, leaving little room for less spectacular, alternative or non-mainstream events.



“Basically Venice and Documenta are mostly about theory, whereas Basel is all about practice.”

The first part of the book consists of two chapters. The first chapter deals with the rich and complex history of the art fair and culminates with a

chart that delineates its historical frame, punctuated with the different models that the art fair has assumed since Roman Antiquity until contemporaneity—from religious to artisanal to industrial to artistic. This historical overview starts with the Roman *feria*, continues with the *pand* in Antwerp and the *kermis* in the Hague, mutates into the *world fair*, infiltrates the *salon* and ends in the 20th century with the *modern*, *contemporary* and *global fair*.

The whole of the second chapter delves into the idiosyncrasy of the biennial and traces its origins beyond the much-vaunted bureaucratic explanation of the Salon and the World Exhibition back to Olympia in Ancient Greece, the Old Master Blockbusters in Rome in the 1600s and the *Grand Tour*. The different kinds of biennials have been basically framed as four types: the *experiential*, the *traumatic*, the *resistant* and the *neo-liberal* biennial. This historical overview will equally be rounded up with a timeline containing the key elements of its development while adding new perspectives. It is perhaps churlish and unfair on my part to criticize the out of print *The Biennial Reader* conceived by Solveig Øvstebø, Elena Filipovic and Marieke van Hal, but the editors confuse 'biennial' with 'biannual' throughout its introduction and this is simply shocking!

The second part of the book, chapters three and four, addresses the persistent complexities and contradictions of both art fairs and biennials in the light of today's artistic landscape that haven't been sufficiently explored, or straight away eschewed by academia and art theorists alike. These chapters are shorter and provide a kind of state of the art as the 'biennialization' of art fairs and the 'fairization' of biennials is a recent phenomenon that rides the neo-liberal wave of today's globalization. The question now becomes: is this synergy really a new and recent phenomenon ascribable to artistic competition for hegemony or can it be critically traced to the origins and development of the art market proper?

Michael C. FitzGerald reminds us that in 1918 Pablo Picasso said to his dealer Léonce Rosenberg with militant fervor: "La foire—voilà l'ennemi. La biennale—voilà l'ami." Picasso could easily have said that, but I just made it up. What he actually said was: "Le marchand—voilà l'ennemi." In any case, bending Picasso to our purposes, it's facile for a goodly number of people to argue "the art fair, that's the enemy."

Where does this line of thought come from? The very idea of the art market, the art fair or even the biennial-as-art-fair, that is art as a commodity has always created a kind of uneasy tension in the artworld in general and academia in particular. The answer to why art history was never really interested in the socio-economic frame in which artworks came to being exceeds the scope of my investigation. Nevertheless, I don't mind getting a bit wet by recalling Winckelmann, Schiller, Kant and even Marx now and their distinction between play and work, contemplation and art production and the capital idea in art and art history of 'disinterestedness'. It is relatively recently that cultural economists like John Michael Montias and Clare McAndrew and sociologists of art like Raymonde Moulin, Alain Quemin and Olav Velthuis took interest in art and its conflicting and anomalous relationship to the market.



“His work is deeply political — he is an art fair activist.”

One of the problems that has caused me most trouble when writing this essay has been the choice of a suitable title. I admit that it's rather long, but both title and subtitle are absolutely necessary, because they convey

in an adequate manner what the book is really about: not only the origins of art fairs and biennials but also how they have morphed throughout history, assuming a heterogeneous status in contemporaneity. I am also aware that at some point of my narrative I will have to address the rather derivative discussions of the 'contemporary' and 'global art' that have (pre) occupied a small but exquisite elite of our *métier* since mid '90s.

While doing research on the topic I came across many interesting publications which I quote along the book, but what I really missed in most cases was a conceptual map or timeline that could serve as a visual frame in which to apprehend in a clear, articulated manner the key points of the subject. Too often I feel that as a reader you get lost among a jungle of written information and unbearable cross-references, and my hunch is that these charts—think for example of Alfred Barr, Jr.'s 'torpedo'—are useful in terms of codifying and interiorizing the information. Whatever the deficiencies, I have no doubt about the value of the attempt or the enjoyment I have derived from making them.

More and more I am appalled by the pretentious and morose academic tone that we have to suffer in our condition as readers when investigating art-related matters. It's hard for me to understand why art writers turn their backs on humor and irony, but also on conciseness and what I would call a *to-the-point spirit*. Being instructive is not at odds with being entertaining! And for sure Pablo Helguera's witty and comic cartoons, whose 'institutional critique' I have tried to integrate in my own narrative, have helped me in my endeavor and I hope I have risen to the challenge.

As inquisitive Foucault would have argued, I have aimed to explore those elements of which "we tend to feel [are] without history." A close reading then of such fundamental and fascinating artistic platforms like the art fair and the biennial in the Western art market by means of a *longue durée* or historical framework will hopefully allow us to compensate this 'unsatisfactory history.'

After all, art and the market through its most dynamic and conflicting models unquestionably stimulate a complex and historically contradictory dialectic. And it will remain that way, especially after hallucinatory COVID-19 situation.

Chapter 1

A Genealogy of the Art Fair: From Roman *Feria* to Global Art Fair



“And where do you hope your institution will be in the next forty thousand years?”

While fairs are historically one of the most characteristic features of commerce, the bibliography regarding art fairs is surprisingly non-existent. This reveals once again the fundamental uneasiness of questioning one of the core values of the art world: that art is priceless and that we never talk *about* money! As a matter of fact the opposite holds true: we talk *against* money. And this anti-commercial stance erects a wall that you’re not supposed to escalate because talking about art and economy also entails talking about the art market, and finally, the ultimate sin of art as commodity.

Now the fair question is: where does this uneasiness, unwillingness and tension stem from?

I shall play unsafe and as a first answer advance that mainly Germans are openly to blame for this weird, strange and permanent *living-in-denial*. It feels good to have someone to blame for it. Anyway, going beyond the German's 'disinterestedness,' art and the market, as I said in the introduction, grew up together in a complex and historically contradictory dialectic.¹ And this conundrum merits a *foucaultian* approach.²

1. Origins of the Fair: Trade, Markets and Money

Although most gifted art practitioners locate the emergence of a real art market with the advent of capitalism in Antwerp around 1470, it is more than wise to trace the origins of our fair to pre-modern times, as it goes hand in hand with the origins of religion, trading, traditional markets, market economy and money.³

Be it "instinctive," out of "warfare and predation," as "gift-giving or silent-trade," from "surpluses" or as a "logic development of the property concept," trading is, according to George W. Robbins, "to be found in the nature of man and of his adaptation to his environment through the institutions he builds" while its prerequisite is "the development of the ability to value things in terms of other things rather than in terms of spiritual or mystical beliefs."⁴

The two main theories of the origins of markets, suggests B. W. Hodder, discern between the need of a "local exchange" and local markets or, on the contrary, "external exchanges" with other people for complimentary goods that generate long-distance trading; but the development from a "simple marketless society" to an "intermediate society" requires a "high density of population and a political structure powerful enough to secure and maintain the market peace."⁵

1 See Paul Mattick, "Illusions of Disinterest," in *Art in Its Time: Theories and Practices of Modern Aesthetics* (London: Routledge, 2003), 39-46; Otto Karl Werckmeister, "Marx on Ideology and Art," *New Literary History* 4, No. 3 (1973): 501-519; Isabelle Graw, *High Price: Art Between the Market and Celebrity Culture* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2009), 72-76.

2 Michel Foucault, *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1980), 139.

3 With relation to the relevance of Antwerp to the art market see Elizabeth Alice Honig, *Painting and the Market in Early Modern Antwerp* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998); Filip Vermeulen, "Exporting Art across the Globe: The Antwerp Art Market in the Sixteenth Century," *Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek*, Vol. 50 (2000): 13-29; Maryan Wynn Ainsworth, "The Business of Art: Patrons, Clients, and Art Markets," in M. W. Ainsworth and K. Christiansen (eds.), *From Van Eyck to Bruegel: Early Netherlandish Painting in the Metropolitan Museum of Art*, (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1998), 23-37.

4 George W. Robbins, "Notions of the Origins of Trading," *Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 11, No. 3 (Jan., 1947): 235-236.

5 B. W. Hodder, "Some Comments on the Origins of Traditional Markets in Africa South of the Sahara," *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, No. 36 (Jun., 1965): 97, 104.

Very quickly, commodity markets demanded money to spread and become successful. Coins with inscriptions or heads were introduced in ancient Greece in the sixth century B.C. by a "number of wealthy families [that] were vying for political supremacy in various regions," states Erica Schoenberger, representing a "political genealogy, not an economic one."⁶ The Greek city-state introduced gold coinage in order to counteract the power of the aristocracy and, progressively, it served—argues Schoenberger—two goals at the same time: Greek democratization and imperialism.⁷ In Greek society trading was an unworthy activity reserved to metics or 'barbarians.' Warfare became the preferred method of expanding the empire and the resources of the polis, especially during Pericles.⁸

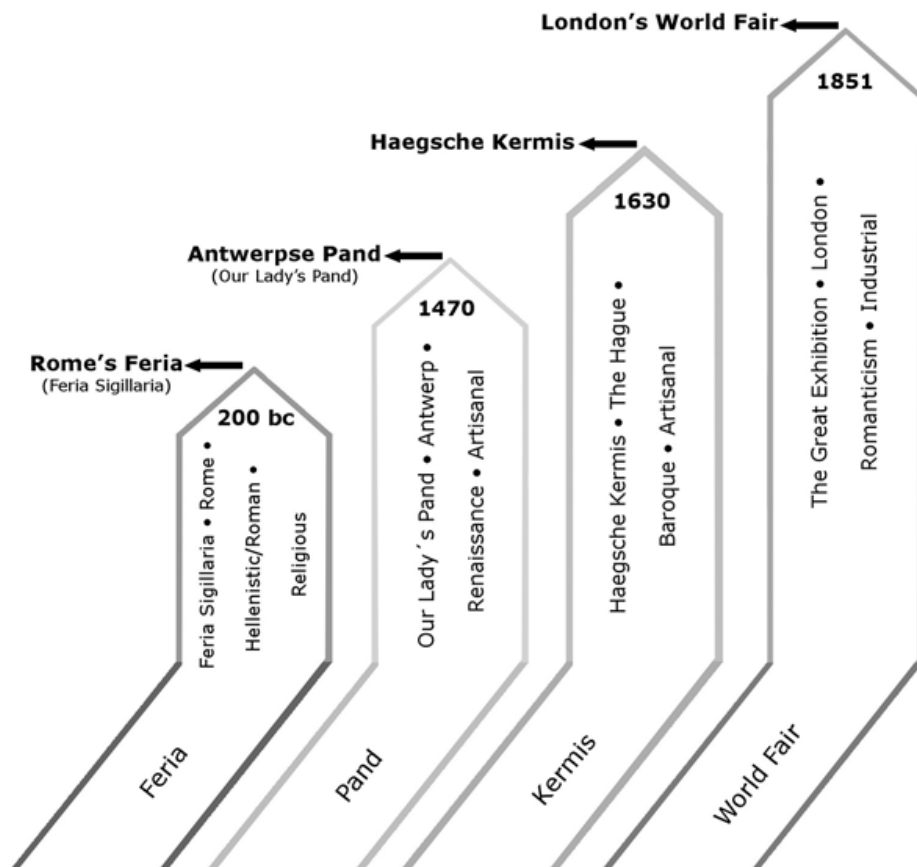


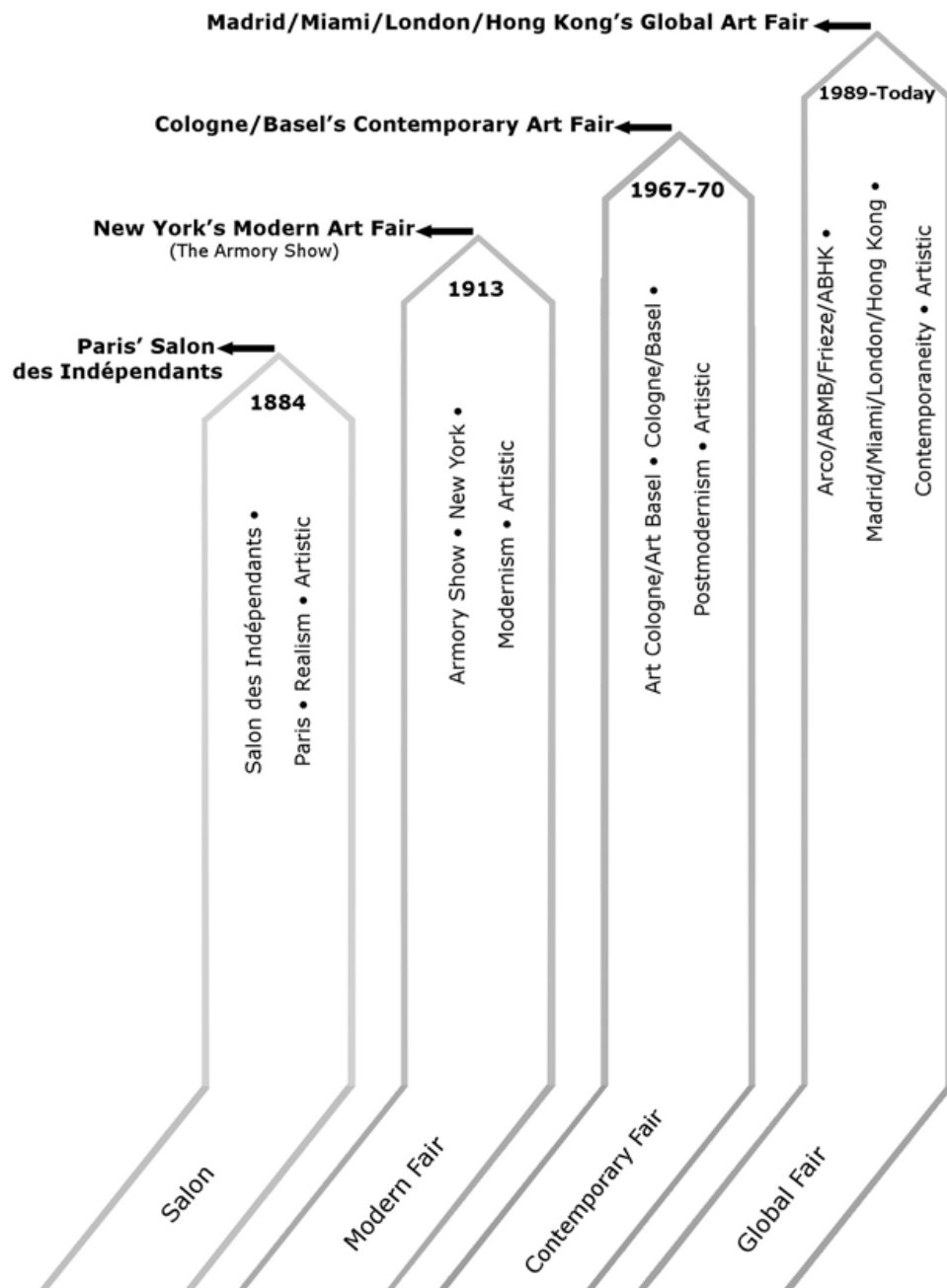
6 Erica Schoenberger, "The Origins of the Market Economy: State Power, Territorial Control, and Modes of War Fighting," *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 50, No. 3 (Jul., 2008): 667-668.

7 Schoenberger: 669.

8 Vincent Azoulay, *Pericles of Athens* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 51-66.

Genealogy Art Fair: From Roman Feria to Global Art Fair





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Chapter 2

A Genealogy of the Biennial: From Olympia Festival to Neo-Liberal Biennial



“He says he is curating a biennial and wants to know if anyone here does video.”

A foreigner with his typical rectangular curator glasses arrives at a village in the middle of the *bush bush*. We could easily locate the scene sometime in the '90s when the biennial age came to being on 'mule-back' of globalization. We see some trees and huts in the background. The natives in the foreground wear loincloths and the white Anglo-Saxon visitor wears pants and a blazer. While he waits with preoccupation as to the success of his quest after such a stormy and hazardous journey, the right hand man of the tribe's chief translates the purpose of the visit: "He says he is curating a biennial and wants to know if anyone here does video."

This artoon by Helguera conceives through a single but ironic sketch many ideas related to the very idiosyncrasy of the biennial and its (recent) history. Further interpretations or suggestions from my part are unnecessary.

The bare fact is that most accounts of biennials remain largely within the confines of the art historical domain, hardly making any connections to wider religious, social, political and historical issues.

It is true that the biennial as a subject has had much more attention than the art fair in the form of articles, essays and *papers*, but that bibliography is quite small as there haven't been too many books devoted to the topic.¹

It remains terribly clear to all of us that the biennial, unlike the art fair, is on the right side of history. But, as the old saying goes: "All that glitters is not gold."

1. Origins of the Biennial: Biennial is not Biannual!

The confusion of *biennial* and *biannual* is so widespread among students, PhD candidates, art professionals and biennial theorists that I feel obliged to clarify this linguistic error and go after its genealogy in order to make the reader aware of what (s)he should avoid at all costs. It makes you look really bad. And I will try to explain why.

Etymologically speaking, *biennale* stems either from Latin *biennis*, which in turn consists of *bi* (twice) and *annus* (year), indicating an event happening every two years, or *biennium*, which means 'a period of two years'.² We are talking of events that take place every two years, like the Venice Biennale or the São Paulo Biennale. There are even biennial plants: plants that take two years to grow from seed to fruition and then die. The English word is *biennial*, which can either refer to the event or its periodicity (the fact that it takes place every two years). Many of the biennials have

¹ See, for example, Lawrence Alloway, *The Venice Biennale, 1895–1968: from salon to goldfish bowl*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1969); Marieke van Hal, Viktor Misiano and Igor Zabel (eds.) "Biennials," *MJ–Manifesta Journal*, No. 2 (Winter 2003–Spring 2004); Charlotte Bydler, *The Global Art World, Inc.: On the Globalization of Contemporary Art* (Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis, 2004); Barbara Vanderlinden and Elena Filipovic (eds.), *The Manifesta Decade: Debates on Contemporary Art Exhibitions and Biennials in Post-Wall Europe* (Brussels and Cambridge, MA: Roomade and MIT Press, 2005); Bruce Altshuler, *Salon to Biennial: Exhibitions that Made Art History, Volume I: 1863–1959* (London: Phaidon Press, 2008); Jorinde Seijdel and Liesbeth Melis (eds.), "The Art Biennial as a Global Phenomenon: Strategies in Neo-Political Times," *Open*, No. 16 (March, 2009); Elena Filipovic, Marieke van Hal and Solveig Øvstebø (eds.), *The Biennial Reader: An Anthology on Large-Scale Perennial Exhibitions of Contemporary Art* (Bergen and Ostfildern: Bergen Kunsthall and Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2010); Vittoria Martini and Federica Martini, *Just another Exhibition: Histories and Politics of Biennials* (Milan: Postmedia Books, 2011); Bruce Altshuler, *Biennials and Beyond: Exhibitions that Made Art History, Volume II: 1962–2002* (London, Phaidon Press, 2013); Caroline A. Jones, *The Global Work of Art: World's Fairs, Biennials, and the Aesthetics of Experience* (Chicago: The Chicago University Press, 2016).

² Michiel de Vaan, *Etymological Dictionary of Latin and the other Italic Languages* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 43.

preferred to use *biennale* as a clear reference to the Venice Biennale, the archetype for these big artistic events. Some, however, do recur to the English *biennial*: Istanbul Biennial, Liverpool Biennial, Whitney Biennial.... Biennale or biennial is also used as a catchword or portmanteau for recurrent international events such as triennials, quadrennials, documenta (every five years) or even Skulptur Projekte Münster (every ten years). But if the term has been stretched that much, I don't see why it shouldn't be used for recurrent annual international events!

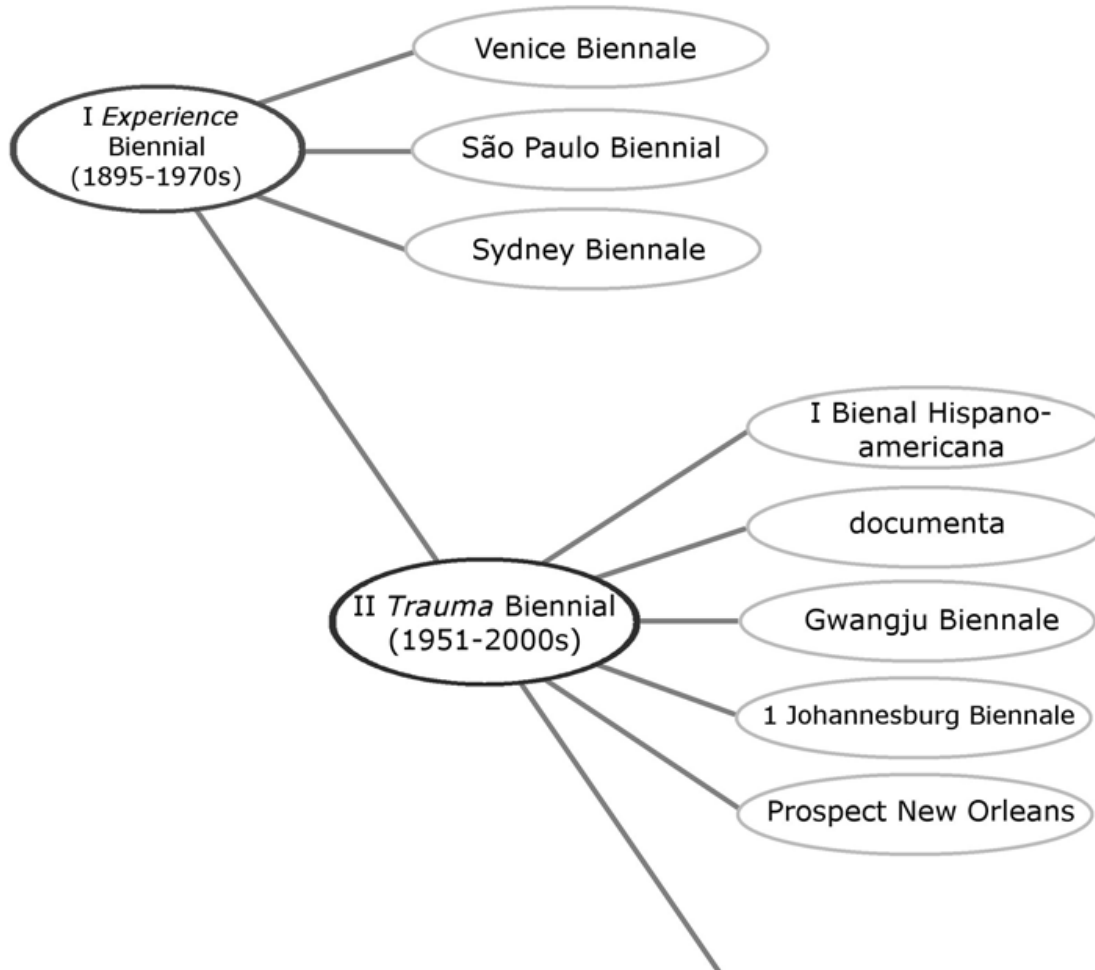
It's not my intention to explain to the reader something I understand (s)he knows perfectly well, but to my surprise the introduction of *The Biennial Reader*—the book that claims to be *the* book on biennials—wrongly uses *biannual* instead of *biennial*. "And for many," the editors (Elena Filipovic, Marieke van Hal and Solveig Øvstebø) write, "'biennial' refers less to a specific periodicity (namely, an art event produced *biannually*, as its etymology suggests) than to a type or model of large-scale, perennial, international manifestation that has become so common in the landscape of exhibition-making today."³ (*Cursive is mine*.) At the end of their introduction they write once again, referencing the Whitney Biennial, "In 1973, it became a properly *biannual* event and then, only in very recent years, an international one."⁴ (*Cursive is mine*.) And this made me very suspicious. In romantic Palladian: How can an event that is *biennial* (every two years) be *biannual* (happening two times a year)? So this affirmation is a sheer contradiction. What the editors of *The Biennial Reader* affirm is that a biennial is a large-scale event produced biannually! This would mean that the Whitney Biennial, the Venice Biennale, the Gwangju Biennale, the Istanbul Biennial *et al* would happen twice a year and not once every two years, but we all know that is false.

If it was used in another context unrelated to biennials, I could perfectly turn a blind eye. But when I come across texts or theses by the most respected biennial theorists, biennial institutions and, especially, master's and PhD students from Johannesburg, London and New York to Singapore, then one has to come to the conclusion that something is really wrong in *Biennialland*. As a matter of fact, this error is quoted not only acritically but also disseminated worldwide. So much so that it becomes an urgent matter that needs to be addressed and corrected, regardless of who is

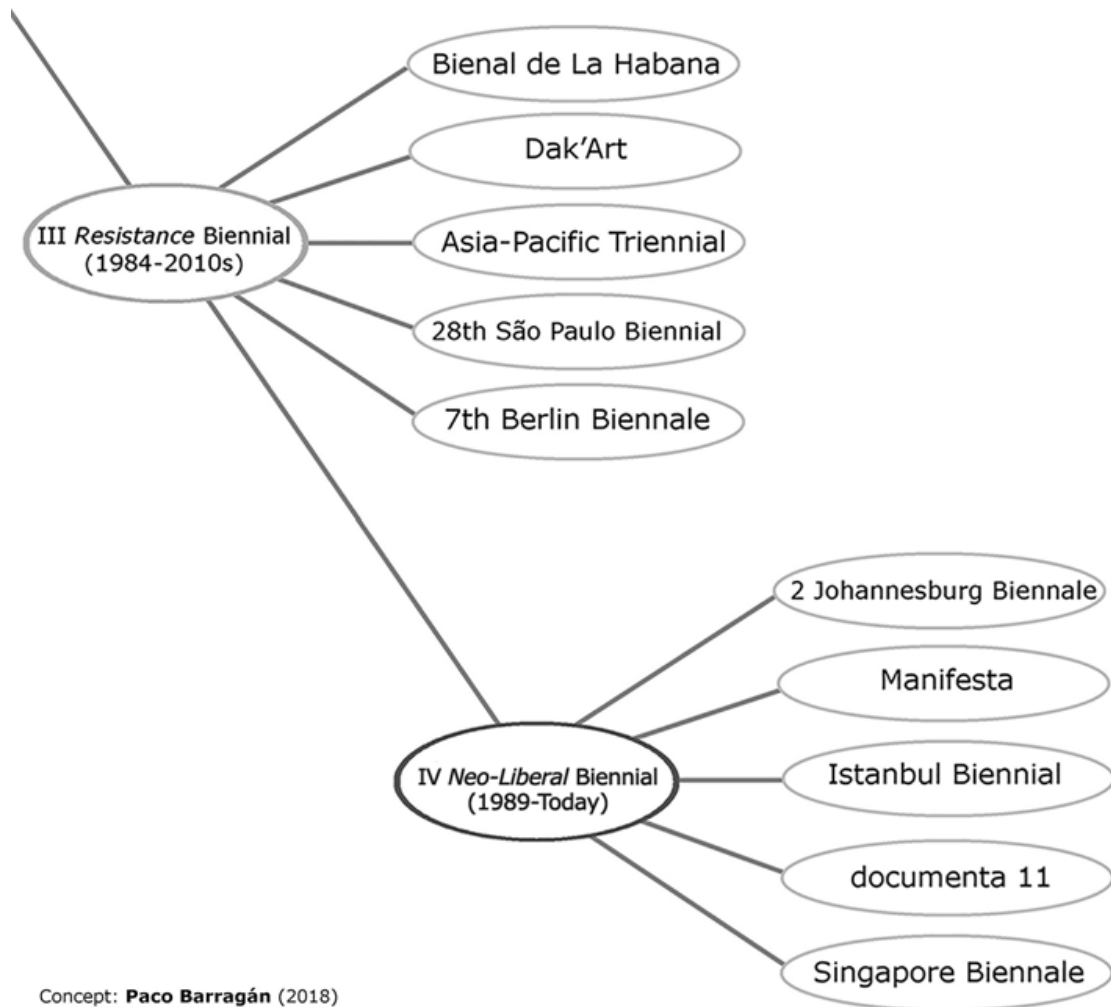
³ Elena Filipovic, Marieke van Hal and Solveig Øvstebø (eds.), *The Biennial Reader* (Bergen/Ostfildern: Bergen Kunsthall/Hatje Cantz, 2010), 14, 25.

⁴ Filipovic, Van Hal and Øvstebø (eds.), 25.

Typologies of Biennials



'experience,' 'trauma,' and 'resistance' biennials cover the arch between the 1890s and the 2000s; from the 1980s into the new millennium it is the 'neo-liberal' biennial that both substitutes and subsumes the former three. Recalling Francis Fukuyama, we can confidently argue that liberal democracy and its offshoot—neo-liberalism—is what enjoys widespread



legitimacy.⁹⁸ And it's under a dialectics of commodification and transcendence, commerce and disinterestedness, cosmopolitanism, market and utopia that the contested biennial has to be understood in order to grasp the never-ending paradox to which it is subjected.

98 Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: The Free Press, 1992), 37.

Chapter 3

On the 'Biennialization' of Art Fairs



“It’s not a video piece — they started streaming the World Cup in that stand.”

While to the majority it is crystal clear that Venice and documenta are about theory/art history, whereas Basel is about practice/art market, art’s current situation eschews these kinds of binary oppositions and easy generalizations. Although generalizing can be at times very practical, we need a more nuanced exercise here in order to portray the complexity and contradiction of today’s neo-liberal art system. It is important because it affects us all on a daily basis. So, it’s about time to get rid of simplistic and reductive *commercial versus non-commercial* judgments. We need to look from a perspective that enables us to understand the mental constructions of both spheres.

Pierre Bourdieu screams for our attention here. In his magisterial *The Rules of Art*, he delineates certain elements that can explain the ambiguity of the artistic field. In the conquest of autonomy, the need to manifest its

independence from political and especially economic powers was the *conditio sine qua non*. The “literary and artistic field is constituted as such in and by opposition to a ‘bourgeois’ world,” but such break “inclines writers and artists to form an ambiguous image of their own position in the social space and of their social function.”¹ This ambivalence towards our own social position still holds true today, and so does the binary opposition intellectual art-bourgeois art. Like the literary field, the artistic field is “the site of the antagonistic coexistence of two modes of production and circulation obeying inverse logics. At one pole, there is the anti-‘economic’ economy of pure art. Founded on the obligatory recognition of the values of disinterestedness and on the denegation of the ‘economy’ (or the ‘commercial’) and of ‘economic’ profit (in the short term), it privileges production and its specific necessities, the outcome of an autonomous history [...] is oriented to the accumulation of symbolic capital, a kind of ‘economic’ capital denied but recognized, and hence legitimate — a veritable credit, and capable of assuring, under certain conditions and in the long term, ‘economic’ profits. At the other pole, there is the ‘economic’ logic of the literary and artistic industries which, since they make the trade in cultural goods just another trade, confer priority on distribution, on immediate and temporary success.”² ‘Symbolic’ capital versus ‘economic’ profit, public versus private, long term versus short term, autonomy versus market; we can recognize here the *biennale-art fair* divide.

Another problem that affects the art world head-on is the formation of value. Whether we like it or not, art is a commodity. Of course, it is a very exceptional one that functions more and more like the rules of the traditional economy. “Everything that has an everyday value as a commodity,” argues Diedrich Diederichsen, “can theoretically also become an object of speculation. But most of the transactions made with commodities in the realm of the visual arts do not (initially) involve speculation, so that they are more comparable with the regular economy of production and consumption, buying and selling.”³ So we have the ‘everyday value’ and the ‘speculative value’ of the art commodity, both of which express themselves under the notion of price within the art market.

Art and its institutions cannot escape commodification, especially in the neo-liberal heyday. The relationship of museums with consumption has

1 Pierre Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art* (Cambridge: Polity, 1996), 58.

2 Bourdieu, 142.

3 Diedrich Diederichsen, *On (Surplus) Value in Art* (Berlin: Steinberg Press, 2008), 32.

become more than natural. The spaces devoted to shopping are bigger and bigger, and at each visit the visitor has a wider array of articles available: books, exhibition-related souvenirs, a cafeteria. Some visitors go straight to the restaurant.



“I don’t understand why people say my work is elitist — I always ensure I hire lots of working-class studio assistants.”

Museums are contexts that create signification and recognize artistic value. So do biennials, which tend to act as temporary museums. Art fairs, like galleries, don’t. Or at least that is what we tend to believe, until Larry Gagosian embarks on an artist he particularly likes! Think of Alighiero e Boetti, Mario Merz and Lucio Fontana, and how Gagosian has fostered their market value, but also their international ‘museum’ recognition. And what to think of the massive *Unlimited* section of Art Basel? Does the work, in

Chapter 4

On the 'Fairization' of Biennials

The neo-liberal regime in which the art system is embedded has not only affected a mutation of the art fair but also its counterpart: the biennial. The 'biennialization' of the art fair saw a parallel development in the 'fairization' of the biennial. Was this new? Was this bad?



“Are you kidding? Getting to show in the biennial here is way easier than finding a hotel room.”

Before we try to frame the context and possible answers to those questions, a terminological delimitation imposes itself regarding the term proper of 'fairization.' With the concept 'fairization' I defined the ongoing

'commercial' or 'commodified' nature of biennials whose performance was more aligned with art fair's strategies, directed towards the market and sales. Albeit its radical theoretical discourse, the biennial has turned into a sophisticated instrument of artists' promotion and art historical validation that, ultimately, enhances market value, prices and sales. Biennials are embedded in a complex and complementary mix in which artistic canonization goes hand in hand with sales, city branding, cultural tourism, spectacle and even gentrification. I coined the neologism 'fairization' in 2008 in *The Art Fair Age* because it portrayed more clearly this contradictory condition of parasitic behavior between biennials and art fairs.¹ I also stretched the duality by turning it into a kind of tongue-twister within the same phrase: the 'fairization' of biennials and the 'biennialization' of art fairs.² The use of 'festivalization' is problematic, as it hints to a more general process of organization and formation of urban space and social activities based on festivals as a strategy for cultural revitalization of contemporary cities.³ Of course, the idea applies to big local and global events like biennials, but it could also hint too much in the direction of Mikhail Bakhtin, and his idea of the festival and the carnival as a way of opposing official culture and revealing the truth.⁴ Within the field of art, it sounded too much like Peter Schjeldahl's famous concept of 'festivalism,' which had an obviously different take: 'Festivalism' or 'festival art' stood for non-sellable environmental or installation art in opposition to 'painting.' Back in 1999 Schjeldahl, unhappy with this development of contemporary art, rhetorically asked: "Will governments, corporations and other institutions keep supporting this sort of art?"⁵

Globalization, of course, brought along the 'festivalization' of art and culture, and also the 'fairization' of the biennale. Now, let's analyze how this process turned out.

1. Are Biennials the New Art Fairs?

If we believe Carlos Basualdo and the much-quoted text he wrote under the beautiful title *The Unstable Institution* (2006), a biennial exhibition lacks "a direct association with galleries or museums," being "the commercial fate of the works, for example, neither evident nor even strictly

1 See Barragán, *The Art Fair Age*, 18.

2 See Barragán, "Neo-modernity, Neo-biennialism, Neo-fairism," 281.

3 See for example Andy Bennett, Jodie Taylor and Ian Woodward (eds.), *The Festivalization of Culture* (London: Routledge, 2016).

4 Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984).

5 Peter Schjeldahl, "Festivalism," *The New Yorker* (5 July 1999): 85. Online version: <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1999/07/05/festivalism> (accessed 21 January 2019).

necessary for the simple reason that the bulk of the financing behind the event and the production of many of the projects is largely independent of collecting (either private or state-funded)."⁶ Yet, 13 years later and with neo-liberalism at full swing, we now know how private commercial galleries and collectors fund and sponsor many 'biennial art' and also team up with museums and other private foundations to make it happen. Kate Brown and Javier Pes explain very clearly how local governments and arts councils have (un)willingly given up their prominence to top galleries and private collectors, putting both artists and curators in an awkward position. Artists are very often indirectly blackmailed with this whole idea of a reputation boost by participating in a biennale for which they more often than not pay for the production of their own artwork.⁷ International biennial curator Francesco Bonami puts it even more crudely when reflecting about today's state of the art: "Once, to be invited to the Venice Biennale or at the Whitney was for an artist of different generations or financial status a true achievement and an honor. Today, it's often a nuisance for them. Curators are pariahs, forced to beg an artist, even a longtime friend, to accept an invitation."⁸ There are even governments like Chile's that request the co-financing of the Chilean Pavilion at the Venice Biennale. The call in 2018 for the financing of Voluspa Jarpa's project in Venice had been answered by seven private collectors who would buy works and by some foundations like Fundación Antenna and Fundación AMA, among others.⁹ In other cases fake national pavilions are simply bought out, like in the case of Kenya and Costa Rica in 2015 by Italian curators, in which artists could buy their participation. In both cases there were hardly any artist from Kenya or Costa Rica. The Venetians surely know how to make money by hiring spaces in the city that are rented by countries without a permanent pavilion, or by other unscrupulous curators that charge abusive 'hanging money' to be part of the shows.¹⁰ "The unstable nature" of the biennial, as Basualdo argued, due to the "ups and downs of modernity" has even become more unstable and market-dependent these days.¹¹

6 Carlos Basualdo, "The Unstable Institution," in Paula Marincola (ed.), *What Makes a Great Exhibition* (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Center for Arts and Heritage, 2006), 55, 58.

7 Kate Brown and Javier Pes, "Biennials Are Proliferating Worldwide. There's Just One Problem: Nobody Wants to Pay For Them," *Artnet* (21 March 2019). Online version: <https://news.artnet.com/market/venice-biennale-hidden-costs-1493455> (accessed 5 April 2019).

8 Francesco Bonami quoted in Brown and Pes.

9 Voluspa Jarpa, e-mail conversation with the author (4 March 2019).

10 See for this controversy, for example, Sarah Cascone, "Venice Loses Two National Pavilions, as Kenya and Costa Rica Pull Out," *Artnet* (1 May 2015). Online version: <https://news.artnet.com/exhibitions/venice-biennale-kenya-costa-rica-pavilions-cancelled-293852> (accessed 5 April 2019).

11 Basualdo, 56.

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Although I started writing in 1996, it's especially since 2009 with the creation of *Artpulse* by José López (director) and Raisa Clavijo (Editor-in-Chief) that I was able to have my own sections—*Push to Flush* and *Dialogues for a New Millenium*—and articulate some of the topics I address in the book on a consistent and regular basis. It was logical then that what I consider my most ambitious, researched and articulated book would be published with them.

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Photo courtesy Johan Wahlstrom

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From Roman Feria to Global Art Fair, From Olympia Festival to Neo-liberal Biennial: On the 'Biennialization' of Art Fairs and the 'Fairization' of Biennials constitutes an essential and much needed book with relevant historical, social, economic and art historical information about the genealogy of art fairs and biennials from ancient Greece and Rome to contemporaneity. Paco Barragán's ambitious and profound research sheds new light on the origins and typologies of both art fairs and biennials and the contradictory phenomena of the 'biennialization' of art fairs and the 'fairization' of biennials in the twenty-first century. The book is further complemented with a series of charts and timelines that provide clear, easy access to the information and Pablo Helguera's *artoons* function as a kind of poignant and witty 'New Institutionalism.' With a

humoristic, down to earth style, Paco Barragán challenges the reader, offering a wide array of sources and proposing an essential historical perspective on two of today's most relevant and most polemic art platforms.

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