THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

Curating Resistances

Crisis and the limits of the political turn in contemporary art biennials

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PhD in Art

University of Edinburgh

2015

Declaration

This is to certify that that the work contained within has been composed by me and is entirely my own work. No part of this thesis has been submitted for any other degree or professional qualification.

Signed _____

Panos Kompatsiaris

Abstract

Curating Resistances focuses upon the socially interventionist and activist agendas of two contemporary art biennials in Europe during and in response to the current economic crisis. This thesis seeks to untangle their tensions, conflicts and intimate socialities as they evolve against the backdrop of neoliberalism, austerity, crisis and the rise of Occupy cultures. Drawing upon primary ethnographic research on the 3rd Athens Biennale (2011) and the 7th Berlin Biennale (2012), as well as on the examination of curatorial, journalistic and archival documents, I argue for an approach that takes into consideration the threefold nature of these sites, as institutions, organizations and events.

A central area of investigation is the post-1990s curatorial idea of strategically occupying the institution from within and mobilising it as a space of radical knowledge production. This idea gave rise to a model of exhibition-making, that I call the 'discursive exhibition', which shapes the vocabulary and forms of curating cultures at least since *documenta X* (1997). I argue that this model was challenged during the European crisis through the post-2010 art activism that brought ideas related to class, labour and the commons to the centre of debates on art and politics.

Through their attempts to radicalise in response to such challenges, I argue that the two biennials I examine expose the limits of biennials as sites of activism and political resistance. In employing the research perspectives of place and translocality, terms borrowed from cultural geography, I argue that rather than imposing a global art language, biennials unfold through complex socio-spatial dynamics, manifesting a remarkable capacity to absorb, remediate and repurpose their surrounding environments. By discussing how a series of failed statements, border-crossings, internal conflicts, withdrawals, police interventions and press spectacles interconnect with the biennial's organizational and institutional dynamics, this thesis navigates through the translocal tensions played upon the materiality, infrastructures and economies of curating resistances.

Acknowledgements

This study has been made possible with the generous financial support of the Greek State Scholarship Foundation (I.K.Y.).

I would like to enormously thank my two supervisors, Neil Mulholland and Angela McClanahan, for the invaluable guidance, attentiveness and inspiration they provided during these four years. I also owe a debt of gratitude to the two examiners of this thesis, Jean-Paul Martinon and Richard Baxstorm, who thoroughly read and commented on the submitted manuscript. Their feedback will be a strong reference point for any published material that will come out of this research in the future.

There are a number of people whose contribution has been vital to the completion of this thesis. I would especially like to thank Angela Dimitrakaki for the constructive advice and direction throughout these years; Penny Travlou for the helpful suggestions in all theoretical and practical matters; Yiannis Mylonas for the extensive collaboration and fruitful discussions; Christos Papanikolaou, Kostas Venetis, Markos Katsianis and Irma for the spatial and spiritual backing during my fieldtrip in Athens; Vangelis Makrigiannakis and Beata Migut for being the kindest hosts and intellectual allies; Vassileia Stylianidou for the long and stimulating talks; Katerina Pantazi for the emotional support during the early phases of this dissertation.

I am also extremely grateful to friends and colleagues with whom I had valuable theoretical exchange and debates over the years. In particular I want to thank Stergios Valioulis, Sylvia Gaetti, Nikos Kourampas, Magnus Lawrie, Evangelos Chrysagis, Georgia Axiotou, Georgios Papadopoulos, Vangelis Poulios, Xavier Contier, Mary Zygouri and Marios Chatziprokopiou. Also, Jenny Gypaki whose greatness and generosity will be missed.

A special note should be made for all the cultural workers, artists and curators that agreed to talk with me during my fieldwork in Athens and Berlin.

I am deeply grateful to my family. The unremitting encouragement and self-sacrifice of my father Christos Kompatsiaris, mother Vasiliki Tokmakidou and sister Kyveli Kompatsiari stood as a source of inspiration.

Finally, this thesis could not reach its final form without the unfailing love, support and motivation of Hypatia Vourloumis who offered the most critical, thorough and caring advice throughout all the stages of this dissertation. This thesis has been immensely inspired by her courage and devotion to social change.

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Introduction

The 3rd Athens Biennale opened on October 22, 2011, the same day as hundreds of thousands of protesters marched in the city against recently imposed austerity measures. These demonstrations, in which one person lost his life and many others were injured, occurred in the context of a disintegrating urban fabric where the reality of the economic crisis, unemployment and escalating racist violence against people of colour was becoming a daily routine. As a reaction to this bleak condition the Biennale announced itself as a site of protest. Deploying the thought of the Marxist intellectual Walter Benjamin, it aimed to generate for its one-and-a-half month duration a space where progressive political organizations and collectives would reflect upon and coordinate resistant actions. In the evening of the opening of this loaded art event an unforeseen encounter occurred. Wearing a safari hat, a non-participating artist who calls himself the *Biennalist*[1] took the initiative to invite into the Biennale premises an undocumented migrant residing in the area in order to guide him through the show. As they both roamed around the floors of the venue, the awkwardness of the encounter gradually became apparent. The lack of a common language was obvious in more than one sense; there was neither a grammatical nor a conceptual structure through which the communication of radical statements or some kind of resistant action could be made possible. In this case, and also for the duration of the event, the Biennale and its vocabularies seemed to enact a site of exclusion for the most repressed and crisis-hit part of the Greek population, the migrants living around the area. While Benjamin's idea of the history of the oppressed (Benjamin, 1968), that is to say the purposeful resurfacing of oppressed historical moments so as to combat the homogeneity and linearity of dominant historical narratives, provided a guide for the Biennale's curatorial strategies, the actual subjects that constituted the oppressed *par excellence*

[1] The 'Biennalist' is a fictional character performed by the artist Thierry Geoffroy. The aim of the Biennalist persona is to reveal the contradictions and incongruities in the statements and releases of biennial exhibitions. For this purpose, he visits different biennials for a short period of time in which he attempts to shed light on the contradictory ways through which the biennial's discourse fleshes out in practice.

in the Greek public space were not only totally absent from the Biennale's premises but became largely alienated by the presence of the art crowds in the district during the event. This short encounter, and the subsequent development of the exhibition, performed the tensions inhabiting the socio-spatial configurations that both the 3rd Athens Biennale, as well as biennial cultures in general, invoke in their claims to be politically relevant and socially interventionist: What does it mean for a biennial to mobilise political energies and for whom are these energies mobilised?

The idea of contemporary biennials[2] as platforms of not only aesthetic but also political intervention is a relatively recent phenomenon. The modalities of this phenomenon are bound to the modalities of a post-1990s curatorial discourse, mainly developed in the Western Europe and the U.S.A., whose aims, vocabulary and forms can be traced back to an iconic international exhibition of this kind that took place in the German city of Kassel in 1997, the *documenta X*. *documenta X* was the first mega-exhibition that explicitly created a dialogue between critical theory and desires for artistic social intervention by making possible a constellation of parallel events consisting of lectures, publications and performances exploring and problematising processes related to economic globalisation and social inequality (discussed in detail in Chapter 3). During the 2000s, biennials and similar structures of contemporary art regularly adopted *documenta X*'s format, a format that I call, following different authors, the, "discursive exhibition", an exhibition that not only displays art but intends to generate dialogues on current social and political issues (Ferguson; Hoegsberg, 2010: 361; Adajania, 2012; Papastergiadis; Martin, 2011). In the past decade or so, exhibitions of this kind have been extensively discussed among curators and art professionals in terms of their potential for actualising critical discourses and acting as sites of resistance against neoliberal rationalities and agendas (e.g. Hlavajova, 2010; Enwezor, 2010; Basualdo, 2010; Esche, 2005). This 'political turn' in contemporary art institutions, in which it is not simply the artists who are expected

[2] Following Rafal Niemojewski (2010), the 'contemporary biennial' (or simply "biennial") here will signify the city or region-specific, "large-scale international survey show of contemporary art that recurs at regular intervals but not necessarily biannually" (:92). Documenta, therefore, which occurs every 5 years, as well as triennials that occur every 3 years, are included under this umbrella name.

to be oppositional but also the institutions themselves, can be seen as the effect of certain social and cultural processes. The understanding of the role of the curator, a figure connected to the institution in a more direct way than the artist, as a critical-authorial voice is perhaps the most obvious of them (Chapter 3). Other contributing factors relate to a new, global and widespread left-wing radicalization after the fall of the Soviet Union, culminating in the anti-globalisation movement and the anti-G8 protests in Seattle and Genoa, that again made anti-capitalism part of the political and intellectual agenda, as well as the enormous and globalising diffusion of artistic theories of social engagement, such as relational aesthetics (Bourriaud, 2002), dialogical aesthetics (Kester, 2004) and, more recently, ideas of art as militant knowledge production (Holert, 2009).

To be fair, the idea that exhibitions are spaces purposed to enact alternative modalities to ones reigning daily life through the promotion of unconventional pedagogical functions and critical thinking is well-rooted in the histories of world fairs, universal exhibitions, cabinets of curiosities, and museums (e.g. Rydell, 2006; Pollock, 2007).[3] It is in this particular historical conjunction, however, and specifically after the 1990s, that the workings of certain institutions linked to the tradition of visual arts, come to be debated in and across diverse sites ranging from art journalism, academic publications, conferences, symposia and other public forums, not only in relation to their capacity of enabling different ways of being but also in terms of their potential to resist aspects of capitalism, an economic-political system with particular practices, methods and epistemological standpoints. What makes the above current intriguing is that with the gradual withdrawal of state funding for the arts, at least in Europe, art

[3] In his book the *Birth of the Museum* (1995), the cultural theorist Tony Bennett, undertaking a Foucauldian approach, is suspicious of this narrative as regards to the functions of the modern museum. Bennett views the museum as a space of rationalization and calculation that aims to govern by producing disciplined and 'civilised' subjects. Bennett sees the development of the modern museum vis-à-vis the fair and the universal exhibition, arguing that the museum came to provide an order to collections and other displays according to the principles of science and truth. In turn, recent studies on museums have attempted to perform a break from this Foucauldian framework set by Bennett, focusing instead on the potential of museums to generate critical thinking (e.g. Pollock, 2007). While the contemporary biennial was initiated as a site of experimentation in reaction to the "conservativeness" of the white cube of modern art museums (Filipovic, 2010), and thus more according to the standards of fairs and universal exhibitions, it is of equal interest for this thesis to map, in the spirit of Bennett, some of the cultural codes, behaviours and dispositions that condition this contemporary phenomenon.

institutions depend increasingly on the market for their economic survival. In this regard, as we shall see, there is a hugely tenuous and ambivalent relationship between political biennials and the procedures of the market.

This curious phenomenon, which I examine as a site fraught with continuous tensions and contradictions subject to general social and economic processes and antagonisms, provides a central reference point for this thesis (discussed in more detail in Chapters 1 & 3). Being potentially a site of antinomy and disagreement, the relationship between political art and the market re-appeared forcefully in public discussions in different parts of the world with the global rise of an artistic activism in the years between 2008 and 2012. Around this time the institution of the biennial as a self-pronounced socially engaged agent came to be threatened, at least in Europe, with a palpable 'crisis of legitimation', that is to say of a widespread loss of confidence as to whether these institutions really perform the political role they claim (I describe the particularities of this crisis in Chapter 4). This criticism, performed by a variety of artists, theorists, art journalists, activists and writers, targets not only biennials, but also the ethical or political role of contemporary art in its relation to neoliberalism. The intention of biennials and similar institutions to enact critical theory and left-wing politics, then, conflicts with the simultaneous propagation of those very forces they wished to resist, involving the pursuit of corporate sponsorship, the reproduction of unpaid and voluntary work models, the embracing of the role of city-marketers and their appropriation by governmental cultural industries agendas (Chapter 4). In other words, the crisis of legitimation is an outcome of a questioning of the truthfulness of biennials' politically-charged discourses, pointing to a yawning gap, as the art theorist Gerald Raunig puts it, between, "the relationship between their statements (*logos*) and their way of living (*bios*)" (2009: 10).[4]

[4] This separation between the curatorial or other statements of a biennial and the latter's actual practices and routines, or between their 'logos' and 'bios', is a useful one for understanding the qualities and forms of this legitimation crisis. I wish however to emphasise throughout this thesis, and particularly through my case studies, that in reality the analytical validity is less straightforward (Chapter 5 & 6). That is because the statements are also themselves a way of living, in the sense that they act as binding forces that inform the qualities of public expectations, critical judgements and responses regarding biennials, which in turn inform the ways that they are communicated and are in a position to

Drawing upon ethnographic research on two biennials, the 3rd Athens Biennale (2011) and the 7th Berlin Biennale (2012), as well as on the examination of curatorial, journalistic and archival documents, this thesis explores how such tensions and contradictions unfold in the context of the global economic crisis of 2007, the rise of Occupy cultures and of the discourses on art and activism that followed the wake of the European economic crisis. Within this climate of insurrection and the lurking threat of social irrelevancy, both these biennials employed excessive political statements claiming to transform their premises into spaces of action, namely spaces that do not only present artworks destined for reflection and introspection but also spaces of grounded resistance and protest. The endeavours to curate and enable activist resistances, involving unimplemented curatorial statements, border-crossings, internal conflicts, withdrawals, police interventions and press spectacles, make these two biennials unique case studies regarding the relations between capitalism, art institutions, politics and activism. As regards to this latter point, the inoperativeness and in many cases the disastrous nature of the efforts to blur the distinction between art and activism seemed to eloquently manifest the limitations and boundaries of the political turn in art biennials.

In approaching these issues, this thesis will not tell the story of the biennial from the point of view of the artist, the art historian, the curator, the art critic, the art theorist and in general the art professional. While it looks through the eyes of all the above, this thesis will principally recount an ethnographic story cutting across diverse routes and pathways in an effort to familiarise and unfamiliarise this popular and increasingly trendy cultural phenomenon. To the best of my knowledge, there is no ethnographic study of contemporary art biennials. This thesis seeks to contribute to the scholarship produced on biennials by adhering to questions of an ethnographic nature: How are the cultural codes of a biennial performed and interact within particular translocal social

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communicate themselves as brands, art exhibitions, events, institutions and public goods. Moreover, the biennial statements or any statements, especially by actors with a certain institutional power and influence, cannot only be only seen as words devoid of any practical significance. Biennials attract increased visibility and, as such, they can set in motion emotional investments regarding certain issues, affecting the terms that these issues are discussed with and felt among members of the public.

settings? How is this interaction shaped by institutional and power relations as well as the idiosyncratic language of contemporary art?

While focusing upon these questions and sites, I study the biennial as an anthropological and cultural practice with its distinct rationalities, manners, routines and traditions and with which I developed an experiential relationship over the past few years. In this respect, drawing on the method of multi-sited ethnography (Marcus, 1995; Falzon, 2009), I perceive the site not only as territorially contained area, but as a set of connections, relations and associations that can be traced and mapped across numerous and dynamic spheres and situations. The biennials in Athens and Berlin are the case studies but not the only sites whose codes this thesis seeks to understand. As concentrated and dynamic spaces of action, they always point to connections with their outside, with global systems, external technologies and devices interfering with and generating the functioning of their workings. Therefore, I engage with numerous locations in which this phenomenon unfolds, such as art exhibitions, magazines, journals, websites, online articles and posts, but also anti-gentrification protests, demonstrations and occupy camps.

This thesis is interdisciplinary drawing on the fields of art theory, visual and cultural studies, human geography and political theory and wishes to intervene on the literature on biennials of contemporary art. As discussed in detail in Chapter 2.2., the overwhelming majority of texts about biennials are produced by curators or art professionals who usually maintain professional ties or have stakes in these particular institutions. By employing the position of the ‘outsider’, of a person with previous training in economics and visual studies, who has never professionally participated in a biennial, I purport to offer an ethnographic perspective on the phenomenon that aims to contribute to the decentralization of the scholarly knowledge produced about it. This ethnographic take on biennials focuses not only on the ways that these sites are conditioned by particular biennial cultures with their own customs, traditions, histories and forms, but by the ways these cultures interact and relate to larger social and political processes.

As discussed in Chapter 2.3, this approach attempts to examine the biennial in its threefold nature, as an institution, organization and event at the same time, providing a largely missing account of how these different aspects of the phenomenon relate to its grounded and dynamic development and constitution as a distinct kind of practice. In dissecting a particular historical moment of biennial cultures, that of the period from 2007 up to the present, this thesis further attempts to map and document the ways through which the recent economic crisis inflected the modalities and modes of being of two representative biennial exhibitions. Moreover, it wishes to take part in an on-going discussion taking place across fields such as critical sociology, political theory and cultural studies regarding the tenuous relations between experimental art practices, counter-cultures and processes of institutional appropriation and capitalist co-optation (e.g. Boltanski; Chiapello, 2005; McGuigan, 2009). In relation to these debates, this thesis seeks to enhance the current literature through grounded research and case studies, focusing on the mundane, complex and conflictual developments of power and resistance.

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One of the most recurrent and persisting frameworks employed to speak about the phenomenon of contemporary art biennials refers to the idea of 'biennialisation' (e.g. Tang, 2011; Frascina, 2013; Papastergiadis; Martin, 2011; Gardner; Green, 2013). According to this idea, biennials are the most powerful engines of artistic globalization, in the sense of being sites that can propagate, enable and materialise art's vocabularies in and across local settings. This framing is supported by statistical evidence pointing to the vast increase of the number and worldwide dispersal of these perennial large-scale exhibitions, typically recurring every two years, but also three (triennials) or five (Documenta). Indeed, whereas up until the early 1990s there were no more than ten contemporary biennials around the world, at the moment more than one hundred take place in regular or irregular intervals. The framework of biennialisation then views that the globalisation of art- the idea of the expansion and

worldwide co-authoring of the field's codes- is intensified as biennials become notable and celebrated formats for the display, production and generation of knowledge around contemporary art (Ferguson; Hoegsberg, 2010; Greenberg; Ferguson; Nairne, 1996).

The problem with biennialisation is that it often describes the rise of biennial cultures as an on-going, and often frictionless, state of things. While it may accept that frictions do exist, especially in the light of centre and periphery debates and the biennial's internal heterogeneity, it does little to account for the situated complexities through which the biennial unravels as a, "global form" (Ong; Collier, 2005: 11). Global forms, for Aihwa Ong and Stephen Collier, refer to phenomena that display qualities and capacities for, "decontextualization and recontextualization, abstractability and movement, across diverse social and cultural situations and spheres of life" (2005: 11). Despite their tendency to code, "heterogeneous contexts and objects" (:11), global forms are limited, enabling sites of tension and contestation as they are articulated and unfolded in diverse contexts. For instance, global forms, according to these authors, can include neoliberalism, ISO patterns, citizenship, the nation, technoscience and the discourse on human rights.

Approaching the biennial as a global form in the above terms, a form marked by idiosyncratic languages and modes of display, this thesis focuses on the ways its threefold nature, as institution, organization and event is staged, performed and articulated in the context of territorially-bound localities as well as larger socio-temporal dynamics (Chapter 2). Through my participatory observation in the 3rd Athens Biennale and the 7th Berlin Biennale, I investigate the social processes enabled as the biennial codes are played out upon settings of action, materiality and meaning. A fundamental point of departure then is the relations that the biennial develops with its outside, whether this outside refers to audiences, places, value systems and other global forms. In this thesis, the biennial is examined as a practice bound up with academic knowledge and marketing; resistant cultures, social movements and Marxist theory; neoliberal economic processes, city branding and urban development. Giving

rise to an ensemble of values and distributed agencies of people, objects and historical conjunctures, the biennial becomes in this sense an, "assemblage", a "product of multiple determinations that are not reducible to a simple logic" (Ong; Collier, 2005: 12). Under these terms, the idea of artistic globalisation may be conceived not only as an on-going, scalar process of imposing the logic of contemporary art to different locales, but, "as a problem-space in which contemporary anthropological questions are framed" (Ong; Collier, 2005: 5).

A central difficulty of this endeavour is to account for an analytic division between the 'global' and the 'local'. Is the language of contemporary art a global one in which certain local subjects and processes are interpellated? How about 'local' subjects who may already have access to this language? Where can the dividing line be drawn, and how stable can the separation between the 'global' and the 'local' be? It seems that the preservation of this binary, or even the employment of the concept of 'glocalization', a concept mostly focusing on processes of adaption of global systems, goods or services by certain localities (Robertson, 1995), is in the case of biennials largely inadequate. The focus on processes of adaption presupposes that a stable locality exists somehow uninterrupted by the larger global conditions that the researcher sets out to examine. Therefore, it may pose the danger of fixing subjects and objects into crystallised positions and identities, whether these refer to local or global ones. As my research in these two cities developed, it gradually became clear that it was counter-productive to approach the biennial through setting a clear division between the 'global' and the 'local'. As these events involve, enable and interact with perpetual flows and relations in terms of ideas, people and capital, the maintenance of this division seemed to obscure more than it could potentially offer.

Yet, while complicating this dichotomy seemed necessary, there is still a need to account for the interaction between the form of the biennial and its contextualization in certain social, cultural and economic regimes. On this basis, I chose to approach biennials by looking through more dynamic research perspectives, such as those of 'place' and 'translocality'. Both these notions were varyingly developed throughout

the 1980s and the 1990s, mainly by human geographers, in order to complicate and bring a new light on theorising processes of globalisation (Staeheli, 2003; Greiner; Sakdapolrak, 2013). The notion of place, according to the geographer Lynn Staeheli, is a contested one, having been employed to refer to a physical location, social location, general context, or all of these three together (2003: 58). In the influential work of Doreen Massey (1994), place is always interconnected with space. Spatial arrangements for Massey are socially constructed over time, are subject to transformation and always involve a degree of dynamism. Space cannot be disassociated from time in the sense that space cannot be seen as an, "absolute independent dimension" but rather as one, "constructed out of social relations" that occur within and throughout history, politics and power relations (Massey, 1994: 2). Place, then, as a particular articulation and moment of these relations is always open and porous rather than stable and inert, binding other places, processes, locales, and global forms that are themselves in motion (Massey, 1994: 5). Here, following Massey and others (Agnew, 1987), I understand place not as a fixed locality, but as an ever-evolving and dynamic territory comprised of materialities, social regulations and ethical regimes, including infrastructures, legal clauses, values, economic forces, migratory movements, buildings, resources and systems of administration (Ong; Colier; 2005; Massey, 1994). In examining, for example, the Berlin and Athens Biennale, the places will not be conceived as the respective cities of Berlin and Athens, but all those elements that the biennials mobilise, configure and interact with across their territorial and temporal articulations. This idea of place, in this regard, does not only focus on what the biennial does to a city or on what a city does to a biennial, but on the relations and situated interactions between a diversity of translocal conditions and elements and the forms that a biennial assumes.

The perspective of translocality was initially employed by scholars for providing more, "territorialised notions of transnationalism", accounting for localised phenomena and forms of belonging not accountable to the nation-state i.e. within cities, neighbourhoods, families and homes (Greiner; Sakdapolrak, 2013: 374). However, translocality is increasingly employed as a research perspective in its own

right (Greiner; Sakdapolrak, 2013), describing a range of dynamic and mobile configurations, from music scenes (Bennett; Patterson, 2002) to migratory encounters (Christou, 2011) and practices of poetry-making (Sun, 2010). Through labelling such phenomena as translocal, these studies challenge established dichotomies between centre and periphery or urban and rural, by stressing how ideas, knowledge, objects and symbols circulate and manifest across boundaries. Here, the notion of translocality is useful for following the various flows, movements and mobilities that characterise the biennial, and the ways they are enmeshed with the grounded life-forms of socio-spatial environments (Greiner; Sakdapolrak, 2013; McFarlane, 2009). In employing the notions of place and translocality, this thesis aims to provide a multi-dimensional account on the so-called biennial phenomenon in its diverse, plural and contradictory unfolding.

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This thesis is divided in three parts so as to facilitate a more comprehensive development. The first part titled 'The Biennial and Its Others: Context and Focus' includes two chapters that account for the focus, context and method of this research. Chapter 1 functions as the introductory chapter of this thesis, outlining the most important aspects and themes that this study explores. First, it formulates an operative framework through which art professionals, mainly curators, interpret the political interventions of biennials and similar institutions. Within this framework the question asked is *how* to engage with a biennial instead of *if* to engage. Following, it looks at the biennial as a platform that enables and circulates values. As temporal encounters, biennials reflect Arjun Appadurai's discussion of 'tournaments of value' (1988), which is to say sites that, to a certain degree, stand apart from ordinary economic rationalities where certain cultural-political values are negotiated and enabled (Tang, 2011). Due to their recognisable brand name and in a constant dialogue with place-bound tensions, translocal attitudes and life-forms, the biennial can in this respect

make visible certain practices, discourses and ideas. Contemporary art's social scripts (Helguera, 2013) are examined here as modes of interaction intertwined with a number of analytical models and terms that have recently occupied social theory, such as the idea of 'biopolitics'. The biennial, in this sense, and as I discuss in this chapter, is not conceived as merely an event, but as an assemblage of dynamic interconnections of naming gestures, histories, exhibition formats, theoretical interventions and communicational interactions.

Chapter 2 discusses the most prominent approaches to biennials in art and critical journals, exhibition publications, books and collective volumes and lays out my own methodology and research practices. I identify the three main approaches on biennials as the 'dismissive' (Harutyunyan; Özgün; Goodfield. 2011; Baker, 2010), the 'agonistic' (Papastergiadis; Martin, 2011; Enwezor, 2010; Sheikh, 2010; Hlavajova, 2010; Marchart, 2010) and the 'transversal' approach (Raunig 2009; Holmes, 2009). Wishing to enhance and intervene on this literature, this thesis looks at the biennial as an institution, organization and event at the same time, ethnographically examining it as a situated set of practices in constant dialogue with an indeterminate horizon of social interaction and meaning.

The following part, 'Biennials and Social Intervention', discusses the appearance of the political turn among biennial cultures as well as the tensions that accompany it. In particular, Chapter 3 describes the rise of the discursive exhibition, a paradigm of exhibition-making that perceives the category of vision as socially constructed, putting trust in the curatorial ability to enable interventionist discourses. The rise of the discursive exhibition informed an, "expanded, centralised position for the figure of the curator" (O'Neil, 2012: 52), according to which the gesture of curatorial selection assumed increased status and visibility. Especially since the 1990s, with the rise of such events at an international scale, the curator came to be increasingly seen as a kind of, "cultural analyst" (Bonami, 2001: 32), who brings together different elements of discourse related to cultures, locales and practices, enabling and addressing questions regarding politics, the society and recent affairs. The idea of the discursive exhibition then is tightly woven with a kind of curatorial authority and the biennial itself played a

very important role on the rise of the figure of the curator linked to that of the author. Debates emerging around the curatorial movement of 'New Institutionalism' (Chapter 1 & 3) since the early 2000s are characteristic in this regard for pushing forward an agenda according to which the curators do not simply invite critical artists but are expected to produce critical discourse themselves through their institutional engagements (Möntmann, 2006; 2008). Through comparing and contrasting the publications of two major international exhibitions, the Documenta exhibitions of the 1990s, *Documenta 9* and *documenta X*, this Chapter discusses how this shift to the discursive comes about through an increasing employment of a reflexive curatorial language, an interdisciplinary model and an antagonistic attitude towards globalization and dominant economic forces.

Chapter 4 discusses how the claims of the biennials as sites of discursive intervention were challenged following a series of worldwide upheavals, demonstrations and occupations that brought forward ideas of class, exploitation, labour and collectives. What Maja and Reuben Fowkes call the, "occupy effect in contemporary art" (2012: 11), intensified a critique against the efficacy and legitimacy of biennial cultures. Extrapolating from the logic of such emerging frameworks, I claim that the biennial model was threatened with a crisis of legitimation, questioned for its ties to neoliberalism, for naturalising unequal relationships and for hindering effective political action. Targeting the structure of such institutions, such as their unjust dependence on voluntary and unpaid work, this questioning brought about fields of tension that put pressure on the model itself. The two biennials that this thesis examines, then, took place amidst an intense period of social upheaval to which they responded by attempting to radicalise as well as retain their social relevance (Chapters 5 & 6).

The final and largest part of this thesis titled 'Curating Resistances', is devoted to my participant observation ethnographic fieldwork in the 7th Berlin Biennale and the 3rd Athens Biennale respectively. In both chapters (5 & 6) I outline the organizational and institutional dynamics of these structures, including their hierarchical divisions and

financial backing. I further discuss the radical curatorial stance that these two events attempted to assume within this strained climate and the threatening crisis of the discursive model. At least programmatically, both biennials sought to structure the exhibition around activist-actors in an effort to push artistic and curatorial claims for political intervention to their limits. The 7th Berlin Biennale, held in the summer of 2012, presented a hyper-activist attitude, involving the mobilization of Occupy activists and radical groups. Enabling a series of controversies and debates this exhibition was perceived almost quintessentially by the press and art critics as a failed experiment (Chapter 5). The 3rd Athens Biennale, inaugurated in the fall of 2011 and in the context of the Greek debt crisis, did not manage to keep its programmatic declarations that involved its transformation into an action space and the production of an experimental film. The exhibition was considered a failure not only due to the budget constraints that cancelled out a series of preannounced projects, but also because the curatorial team communicated it as an inherently failed Biennale mirroring a failed country (Chapter 6).

In both cases I use the word failure to refer to a series of tensions, conflicts and contradictions occurring in the process of these events that disclosed their inability to preserve an operative working model as art institutions in their clinging to this kind of radical agenda. In this sense, these failures are productive to the extent that they display the limits of the biennial as a socially interventionist institution. In Europe and around the world, the transcendence of this emphatically politically-charged model is today visible in the toning down of political utterances, indicated in the rise of object-oriented approaches (Venice Biennale [2013], Whitney Biennale [2014], Taipei Biennale [2014]), as well as in practices of collective curating (Athens Biennale [2014]) or engagements with affective encounters (Berlin Biennale [2014], Bucharest Biennale [2014], Liverpool Biennial [2014]). In light of the above, this thesis perceives biennials as phenomena whose political agency is always tied to place-bound debates, predispositions and leanings. Biennials display a notable capacity for self-preservation by constantly absorbing, remediating and repurposing their surrounding environments. I argue that the limits of the political turn in art biennials

help us rethink critical institutional engagements, not only in terms of the configurations of the art field, but through their relationship with wider social structures that exceed and at the same time condition their modes of being.

Part I

The Biennial and its Others: Context and Focus

Chapter 1

Why Biennial? Stages of value and social critique

1.1 The predicaments of power and resistance

In her text, 'How to Biennial? The Biennial in Relation to the Art Institution', included in the recently published edited volume *The Biennial Reader*, the critic and curator Maria Hlavajova wonders: "To Biennial or not to Biennial?" (2010: 293).[5] Responding to this dramatic tone set by the organisers of a 2009 conference on biennials in Bergen, Norway, Hlavajova answers that, not only, "we *will* biennial" but also that, "we *should* biennial" (2010: 293). The "we" here encompasses art professionals, mainly curators but also artists, critics, organisers and speakers, who, as Hlavajova suggests, should be institutionally but always critically involved with such structures. Hlavajova, artistic director of the institute *BAK* in Utrecht, one of the most prominent spaces related to the political turn in contemporary art institutions in the past ten years, reminds us that our participation in biennials is always accompanied by a feeling of guilt. This guilt emerges because these platforms are associated with a culture, "that always already embraces criticality as a harmless outlet for oppositional voices according to today's neoliberal logic", and is a phenomenon that, "so closely mirrors the flows of neoliberal capital" (2010: 294-294). Despite these affinities with neoliberalism and all its negative connotations for those who, like Hlavajova's audience, want to align themselves with social critique and the left, one *should*, however, biennial. The question, according to Hlavajova, should not start with an *if* but with a *how*. *How* can a committed art professional engage with such structures so as to counter neoliberalism and its logics from within?

Hlavajova's line of thinking echoes what the cultural theorist Irit Rogoff terms as, "criticality" in the context of art and curatorial theory. The criticality approach refers

[5] This conference set the question 'To Biennial or Not to Biennial?' to the participants, a question primarily referring to whether a biennial should be initiated in Bergen. A triennial did start eventually in Bergen in 2013, the so called *Bergen Assembly*.

to the ways in which art institutions can mobilise the, "smuggling" of radical discourses inspired by Marxism and critical theory, rather than solely being adversaries to a project of social emancipation (Rogoff, 2006: 1). The approach of criticality involves the effort to actualise such discourses; an actualisation ought not to occur only through artistic but also through educational and discursive means, such as lectures, publications and workshops (Chapter 3). Criticality can be thought in tandem with the term, "institutional work" developed by the sociologists Thomas Lawrence and Roy Suddaby to account for the ways that certain institutional agents undertake attempts to reverse or counter the dominant logics of the institutions that hired them (2006: 215; Lawrence; Suddaby; Leca, 2009: 1; see also Chapter 2 Section 3). Rather than focusing on how the institution imposes its logics on the actions of its workers, the concept of institutional work refers to the micro-strategies, tactics and negotiated efforts of institutional actors who perform agendas that may be in conflict with established ones, "smuggling", in other words, their larger visions about the world within institutional frameworks.

The engagement with criticality as a form of institutional work over the past few years (mainly across contemporary art milieus of Europe and the U.S.A., but also diffused to all parts of the world through traveling curators), has resulted in the inauguration of a multitude of exhibitions, art projects and events that aspire to enable alternative models of educational engagement and knowledge production by simultaneously downplaying their role as sites of art display.[6] Strongly linked with the model of the discursive exhibition and Catherine's David *documenta X* (1997) (both are the main focus of Chapter 3), many of these socially engaged curatorial projects are seen as part of the curatorial movement of New Institutionalism. The term, "New Institutionalism"

[6] The most commonly cited examples associated with this approach include, among others, exhibitions, programmes and events curated by Charles Esche at the *Rooseum* museum in Malmo from 2000 to 20005; Catherine David at *Witte de With* in Rotterdam; Maria Hlavajova at *BAK*; Nicolas Bourriaud at *Palais de Tokyo* in Paris; Maria Lind at *Kunstvereien* in Munich and currently at *Tensta* Kunsthalle in Stockholm; Nina Montman at the Nordic Institute for Contemporary Art in Helsinki; and Vasif Kortun at *Platform Garanti Contemporary Art* in Istanbul. For a comprehensive list and extensive discussion on these projects see the edited volume by Paul O'Neil and Mike Wilson (2010) *Curating and the Educational Turn*.

was introduced in 2003 by the critic and curator Jonas Ekeberg[7], to describe new modes of institutional engagement proposed and implemented by certain European curators since the late 1990s (among them Charles Esche, Vasif Kortun, Catherine David and Maria Lind). These curators (all of them active in the biennial scene) imagined the art institution, in Esche's words, as, "part community center, part laboratory, part school", putting less emphasis on, "the showroom function that traditionally belonged to the art space" (2013a: 27). The art exhibition here takes the form of, "a social project" (Kold; Flückiger, 2013: 6), a project that invites citizens and communities to participate in its activities instead of simply targeting a small group of art connoisseurs. Similar to what is expounded in Hlavajona's argument, these curators (claiming to speak from the perspective of the political left) ask how to cooperate with art institutions rather than whether one should cooperate with them in the first place. While the movement of New Institutionalism, or Experimental Institutionalism as Charles Esche prefers to call it (2013a), as well as the discursive exhibition and David's *documenta X*, have not transformed museums or biennials into left-wing agitprops, they did establish a certain mode of curatorial engagement and exhibition format that is dominant today in projects all over the world.

An obvious question resulting from the above ideas, put within the ethical framework that Hlavajova sets up, is how do critical curators and artists reconcile with the 'guilt' of engaging with the flows of neoliberal capital? Or, if we think about the issue not in terms of curatorial consciousness but larger systemic conditions, we could ask how exactly are these social projects more effective than the flows that these institutions valorise? How can participation in such structures enable a, "critical surplus", as Esche puts it in a recent text (2013b: 243)? And who is the one to decide each time that this may be the case?

[7] The 2013 issue '(New) Institution(alism)' edited by Lucie Kolb and Gabriel Flückiger for the online journal *on-curating.org* offers a comprehensive review of New Institutionalism and the several persons and projects related to it. The issue can be found at the following address: http://www.on-curating.org/index.php/issue-21.html#.U9ueJWOkOAo

In Hlavajova's text, she argues that if one rejects participating - if we do not eventually biennial - our 'cause', that of enabling new ways of being in the world, will be, in any case, worse-off. The argument that Hlavajova employs is exemplary of the discourse around the curating of biennials and art institutions related to criticality and New Institutionalism. As she puts it, the refusal to participate in such an institution, "is not the kind of grand heroic gesture it perhaps once was", although she is quick to emphasise that, "this does not justify the uncritical ride of those who have readily submitted their curatorial voice to the political and economic status quo with only one aim in their minds: not to engage for changing the system, but to make it work for themselves" (2010: 293). In other words, Hlavajova sees exhibition-making as an attempt to, "change the system", where the system principally refers to capitalist relations or, "the common *capitalocentric* vision" as Marion von Osten, another curator and researcher in the field put it recently (von Osten, 2010: 7). There is, however, no outside the system, no external or pure point from which critique can be safely launched; there is always already complicity with this system and to counter it one needs its cooperation. The philosopher and critic Gerald Raunig furthers this argument, suggesting that the approach of absolutely no institutional implication in attempts to change the system is at best naïve, and at worst purist. For, as he puts it, this approach ignores, "the techniques of self-government and the modes of subjectivation and contributes…to producing…the imagination of spaces free of power and domination" (2009: 173). In other words, a refusal on the basis of institutional complicity lacks self-reflection, as our predispositions, tastes, language, habits or even possible imaginings of resistance, are (at least to a certain extent) shaped from this same system of domination that we are trying to subvert.

One can draw a connection between this approach on art institutions and biennials, and the influence of two intellectuals whose views have gained momentum across the political and academic left and the curatorial theory of the recent past: Michel Foucault and Antonio Gramsci.[8] Michel Foucault's writings on subjectivity and its

[8] I will be referring to the influence of these two figures in contemporary art circuits throughout this thesis. Its relation to post-1990s exhibition cultures will become clearer in the discussion on the

production within different discursive regimes have had a profound influence on Marxism and cultural theory in recent decades. In his *History of Sexuality Vol.1* (1978) and in his later work on biopolitics, Foucault famously conceptualised and propagated among Marxist scholars an idea of power and resistance according to which there is no absolute binary between the oppressors and the oppressed. For instance, sexuality has been constructed as a scientific object in modernity, producing categories and identities in which we are already implicated as subjects of knowledge. Thus, movements of sexual liberation, according to Foucault, are already tainted by the power mechanisms they wish to resist. As he puts it, by critically alluding and criticising Herbert Marcuse's idea of resisting commodity culture only by vocally refusing it, "there is no single locus of great Refusal, no soul of revolt, source of all rebellions, or pure law of the revolutionary" (1978: 96). Hlavajova's argument that the refusal to participate is not, "the kind of grand heroic gesture it perhaps once was" ideally performs this position (2010: 293).

On the other hand, around the same time, the pre-war writings of the communist theorist Antonio Gramsci on hegemony were widely acknowledged among Marxist scholars and politicians. Gramsci conceived every hegemonic order as a "moving equilibrium" rather than a stable order of domination (Hebdige, 1979: 16) that can always be challenged and reversed by counter-hegemonic practices. In this regard, Gramscian sympathisers advocated a, "long march through the institutions"[9], that is to say, the occupation of the liberal state and its institutions so as to instigate revolutionary social change from within. According to this idea, people's common sense could be reversed and made to align with socialist ideas if bourgeois cultural institutions were occupied by revolutionary forces. Gramsci's idea found, especially through postmodern Marxist scholars, such as Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, a

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discursive exhibition in Chapter 3. I should state here that I am referring to how only certain ideas of these theorists are absorbed and performed in contemporary art networks (and more particularly in critical curating) and not their work as a whole.

[9] The phrase "long march through the institutions" was coined by the German Marxist and activist Rudi Dutschke in the 1970s. Dutschke's ideas emerged together with the radical student movement in Germany in the 1970s that gave birth to a culturally-oriented reading of orthodox Marxism through an engagement with the writings of members of the Frankfurt School, principally those of Theodor Adorno, as well as the work of Gramsci.

fertile ground in critical curating. These counter-hegemonic curatorial practices explicitly or implicitly linked to a proliferation of numerous publications, talks and statements inform the reasoning for advocating critical art institutions (the case of New Institutionalism again is characteristic here).[10] In short, the relocation of Foucault's and Gramsci's ideas to contemporary art theory helps make the argument that, as we daily participate in and reproduce, consciously or not so consciously, exploitative, unethical and abusive structures, it would be hypocritical, and unnecessarily noisy, to simply refuse to participate in an exhibition on the basis of its complicity with neoliberalism. The role of critical art professionals is to make the best of a compromised participation in institutional frameworks so as to empower the cause of social change.

The most prominent examples of recent politically-driven biennials, including exhibitions such as the 9th and the 11th Istanbul Biennial (2005 and 2009), *documenta X* (1997), *Documenta 11* (2002) and the 4th Gwangju Biennale (2002), were based on similar rhetoric. In fact, following criticality and New Institutionalism, most biennials of the 2000s were conceived as discursive agents of social intervention (Chapter 3). In this sense, we can conclude that biennials are inhabited by a contradictory logic, as sites both bound to neoliberal rationalities[11] as well as to desires to actualise left-wing

[10] It is interesting to note that Thomas Hirschhorn, considered one of the most noted political artists of the moment, produced works in relation to both these thinkers. His *24h Foucault* was a gigantic installation placed in a 2004 exhibition curated by Nikolas Bourriaud in the Palais De Tokyo and his *Gramsci Monument* was a 2013 community project in the Bronx, New York with the sponsorship of the Dia Foundation.

[11] Here the bibliography is abundant, not only regarding the proliferation of biennials but generally of cultural festivals after the 1990s. For instance, scholars in human geography have argued that cultural festivals, exhibitions or fairs usually come to be regarded as, "vehicles of economic generation or as 'quick fix' solutions to city image problems" (Quinn, 2005: 927). Accordingly, a widespread idea among critical scholars is that cultural policies in Europe and elsewhere tend to focus on economic growth as a measure of artistic value and certain social and cultural issues related to these festivals are usually dropped from the agenda, such as participation, education or civic potential (Quinn, 2005; Harvey, 2002). In this context, an art event bears the promise of adding symbolic capital to respective locales and of turning previously abandoned industrialised downtown zones into attractive opportunities for investors and real estate developers. Furthermore, critical political economists have discussed how such culture-led regeneration schemes play a role in gentrifying "deprived" areas, a class-based process that involves the displacement of less privileged classes and the dislocation of traditional communities in order to open up ways for business (Zukin, 1987; 1989; Tretter, 2009; Smith; LeFaivre, 1984). According to the approaches above, cultural festivals and artistic production in general have often inadvertently played a role and contributed to such procedures in different cities around the world with prominent examples being New York, Berlin and Barcelona (more on the relations between art

ideas. Usually the curators or at least some of those participating in biennials, wish (or claim they wish) to produce from their position of power representations or modes of being that run against the economic system that make these events possible. In fact, as we have seen, some of the most radical of them explicitly state that they wish to change the system. In this sense, the contemporary biennial balances on a precarious ground. As a mode of exhibiting conscious of its own contradictions, it assembles forces and subjectivities that simultaneously perform, schematically speaking, two relatively distinct and antagonistic types of value: an economic one, understood as those elements mobilised with the aim to secure financial stability and expansion, and an aesthetic cultural-political one, understood as those elements mobilised in the direction of social and political intervention.

1.2 Mediating values

In the three-screen video installation, *The Unfinished Conversation*, exhibited in the 2012 Liverpool Biennial, the filmmaker John Akomfrah visualises the personal journey of the cultural theorist Stuart Hall by foregrounding the ways that the personal and the political intermingle in a historical materiality marked by racial discrimination, colonial wars and fights for more equal futurities. Throughout the forty-five minutes of the piece, Hall's memories of his childhood in Jamaica, his relocation to Britain and his militant academic editing, research, teaching and activism are unravelled in a dreamlike narrative that problematises the fixity of identities, foregrounding the potential agency of oppressed minorities, common struggles and personal traumas. Through showing this work for free to the public, Liverpool Biennial performs its cultural-political value within the city and beyond, channelling

professionals and capitalism in the section 1.5). For more relevant texts on the subject see David Ley's article 'Artists, Aestheticisation and the Field of Gentrification' (2003) about the role of artists as agents in contributing to the gentrification of areas in Toronto, Montreal and Vancouver, 'The fine art of gentrification'(1984) by Rosalyn Deutsche and Cara Gendel Ryan for the role of artists in gentrifying New York's Lower Eastern Side, Sharon Zukin's *Loft Living: Culture and Capital in Urban Change* (1989), as well as the manifesto from Hamburg 'Jammin the Gentrification Machine' by Not In Our Name!' that can be found at the following address: http://www.signandsight.com/features/1961.html

art-making and the thinking through of questions about racial identities, social struggles and political agency.

For the rest of this Chapter, I focus on an understanding of how values - artistic, cultural, political or economic - circulate within biennials, discussing these settings in relation to their larger historical and social environments. I conceive value as the outcome of processes through which meaning (via objects, symbols and social forms) are invested with desire (Graber, 2002; xii). Value in this sense, rather than being universal, is fragile, shifting and potentially contested, having to do with the ways that specific social arrangements, limited in space and time, conceptualise the world and its phenomena (Graber, 2002). A biennial, within the various social arrangements in which it is placed each time, cannot straightforwardly impose certain values. It can, however, suggest issues for public attention and propose certain modalities of speech about these issues. In the case of Akomfrah, the Liverpool Biennale suggests a non-cognitive pedagogical trope, transgressing a dominant political-economic rationality that racialises class and tends to treat migration mainly through statistics. In this regard, as a prestigious platform of circulation, the biennial is a platform of values, it authorises, supports and allows objects, performances and discourses to become visible, to circulate and possibly be invested with desire.

Here, it may be helpful to bring up what the social anthropologist Arjun Appadurai in his book *The Social Life of Things* (1988) refers to as, "tournaments of value". Bringing the example of *kula*, a preindustrial system of exchange found in tribes of the Western Pacific, Appadurai suggests that tournaments of value refer to, "complex periodic events that are removed in some culturally well-defined way from the routines of economic life" (1988: 21). For Appadurai, while such tournaments, "occur in special times and places", in reality, "their forms and outcomes are always consequential for the more mundane realities of power and value in ordinary life" (1988: 21). Tournaments of value are then at the same time set apart from the ordinary, as spaces of concentrated action where symbolic values such as reputation and status are negotiated, and are grounded on the ordinary, as spaces that resemble

certain ways of social organisation and established values. In other words, they are both constitutive and constituted in relation to their social surroundings.

As a certain modern formation of such tournaments of value, the biennial may be constituted by the internal value systems of the art world, but it is also porous, continuously communicating and interacting with its outside. In this sense, using Pierre Bourdieu's theory of the cultural field, the art historian Jeannine Tang describes how a biennial needs to perform values both as an artistic exhibition and an industry. In relation to the former, according to Bourdieu's sociological account (1993) the work of art requires a degree of misrecognition or even active suppression of its financial value in order to demonstrate its value as art (Tang, 2011: 75). For Bourdieu, it is a prerequisite that the work of art needs to perform anti-instrumental and anti-economic values in order to attain the cultural recognition that may potentially translate to a future financial value. This process does not take place in a vacuum, but in concrete material conditions that relate to already established artists, movements and ideas in the field, economic interests, platforms of circulation and so on. In the field of contemporary art possibly one of the most important requirements for something to attain its value is that it is displayed, made visible in certain contexts. Within the field of contemporary art, Tang informs us, the exhibition is, "one such enabler of symbolic value" and, as she goes on to say, "the more prestigious the exhibition, curator and institution, the greater the credibility of the artist and the work in question, and *vice versa*" (2011:75). Similarly, to acquire and maintain its prestige, the biennial should perform itself as a space free from the instrumentality of the market, or at least as a space where the instrumentality of the market does not exclusively determine its modes of being. In this sense, on the one hand, the biennial's artistic specialness lies in the ways it counters a dominant economic raison d'être. On the other hand, the biennial within a largely neoliberal context needs to perform economic values, which is to say, to prove its utility for sponsors in order to secure its economic survival.

Judging from this antinomic character, the biennial is a special type of such tournaments, since at least some of its participating actors intend to consciously

communicate values that will turn it against its general conditions of production (those that relate to touristic economies, precarious labour landscapes and creative cities rhetoric). By returning to the question of how to use the institution to change the system, and looking at the biennial as a site of exchange where patterns, connections and routes of different values interweave, we can ask: how and by whom are these values communicated, through what processes are they legitimised, or, how are certain 'paths' and 'diversions' (to use Appadurai's terms) performed within this context? When the biennial, "enables symbolic values", in Tang's words, it does so by making a project visible; picking it up from an ocean of practices and information and displaying it for a certain period of time or simply allowing it to happen in its premises. At the same time, it enables values by making possible the social interaction necessary for its further valorisation. While interrelated, let us treat these two processes as relatively distinct, broadly referring to two different questions. First, how is it possible that an exhibition with the name biennial is in a position to enable values, and second, through what processes do values circulate within these settings?

1.3 The creative act of naming and the making of histories

Following Gilles Deleuze, the sociologist Nikolas Rose states that, "naming is itself a creative act: it assembles a new individuation of concepts, symptoms, moralities, languages; it confers a kind of mobile and transferable character upon a multiplicity" (Rose, 1999: 28). When applied to an art event, the name biennial ascribes a formal resemblance to a multiplicity of disparate and contradictory forces, flows and desires, individuating them, converting them into a concrete and transferable linguistic sign. While these events are heterogeneous, significantly varying in terms of funding, aims, visibility, politics, and economic and cultural contexts, the name biennial endows them with an aura of likeness. In fact, the employment of the name biennial is a linguistic appropriation of a success story: that of the Venice Biennale. This was the first exhibition of visual arts to carry the name. It started operating in 1895 and had

strong ties to world fairs of the 19th century.[12] Followed by the Sao Paolo Biennale in 1951, and then by another small wave of biennials since the mid-1970s (such as those of Paris, Tokyo and Sydney, some of which were short-lived), the name biennial has gradually inscribed itself into the mental landscapes of the art world and its public, as a periodical site of art display that assembles the latest selection of cutting-edge art.[13] Thus, the name biennial (or biennale), used by a range of periodical art exhibitions proliferating throughout the globe especially over the last thirty years, enables symbolic values by actively seeking to relate and attach itself to an imaginary constellation of already established values related to cosmopolitanism, cutting-edge art, modernity and so on, which are in turn inserted within the new value regimes of various local contexts. Since the name is not copyrighted, anyone can participate in this creative act of naming, assuming they have some appropriate connections in the art world and are able to secure some funding. When this name is appropriated by a host city and turns local, it is performed (in the sense of entering into an open dialogue with a site and its affective and discursive surroundings). In turn, each specific local biennial is perceived by its organisers as a brand that cultivates its particular and differentiated brand identity, its particular soul, effect, trace and signature that have to be made more or less clearly recognisable to respective audiences or niche markets over the course of time.

A history that sees the biennial proliferation and popularisation as platform of art display only in relation to the development and effectiveness of its name has some limitations, however. Most importantly, it does not explain how a fundamentally bourgeois site, where beauty was once seen as a matter of refined taste and enculturation, claims, or at least is in a position to claim, that it can become a site able to overturn capitalist imaginaries. In fact, according to contemporary writers, curators and theorists, the biennial today can act as mediator for, "an agonistic repoliticization

[12] The world fairs or universal exhibitions inaugurated in the mid-19th century in the Western world, notably in Paris, Chicago and London, refer to large scale events taking place in particular cities that bring in and display latest technological and industrial achievements. Apart from stimulating commerce, they are also supposed to display the development and technological advancement of the nation and the host city.

[13] Some parts from this section and from the section 2.2 are taken from my paper 'Curating Resistances: Ambivalences and Potentials of Contemporary Art Biennials' (2014) (See bibliography).

of cultural labour" (Hlavanova, 2010) for, "enacting a diasporic public sphere" (Enwezor, 2010: 439) or even be, "a force for the breakdown of class distinctions" (Basualdo, 2010: 133). This Marxist-inspired thinking that circulates in the value system of the contemporary biennial is very different to the one surrounding Venice Biennale in its initial inception in 1895. According to its first statement, Venice Biennale, with its ties to world exhibitions and fairs of the 19th century, aspired to be, "a collection of soberly measured original and nominated works" including "many of the most distinguished artists of Europe" (West, 1995: 404).[14] If we compare this statement with the curatorial statements of the two biennials that I examine in this thesis, we can assume that we are talking about sites of yawningly different value systems. The 3rd Athens Biennale wished to, "transform the biennale into a sit-in and a gathering of collectives, political organizations and citizens involved in the transformation of society, an invitation to create a political moment rather than stage a political spectacle"[15], while the curator of the 7th Berlin Biennale, Artur Żmijewski, stated that, "the Biennale should not be preoccupied with the number of visitors to the exhibition spaces but with the real problems it is able to deal with. This is the political role of the Biennale."[16] The signifier of art through which the biennial addresses itself to the public, is, therefore, framed in radically different, if not, oppositional ways in the early manifestation of the phenomenon and the contemporary one.

Trying to question a strict name-based approach, the curator and critic Rafal Niemojewski (2010), suggests that the biennial in its contemporary version does not originate from the model of Venice, which according to him more closely resembles today's art fairs. Instead, Niemojewski argues that Venice, with its system of national representation, apart from its name and periodicity has very little to do with the biennial proliferation after the 1990s, which significantly differed in terms of format, content, scope, aims and politics. In fact, for Niemojewski, the term, "contemporary

[14] The translation from the original Italian text is mine.
[15] This statement comes from the first press release of the 3rd Athens Biennale on May 3, 2011 and can be found at the following address: http://www.athensbiennial.org/cgi-bin/biennial-list/mail.cgi/archive/athensbiennial/20110503220018/
[16] This passage comes from a text written by Artur Żmijewski and uploaded on the 7th Berlin Biennale website on September 5, 2011. The whole text can be found at the following address: http://www.berlinbiennale.de/blog/en/comments/artur-zmijewski-2-15158

biennial" may well include events that do not occur biannually, such as the Documenta, perhaps the most widely known art exhibition of this kind and occurring every five years in Kassel since 1955, or the various triennials around the world. According to Niemojeswki, if one wishes to look at predecessors of the contemporary biennial one should turn attention to the fifth edition of the Documenta that took place in 1972 with the title, *Museum of 100 days*.[17] This exhibition was the first curated, large-scale, international show similar to the discursive exhibitions of today that I describe in detail in Chapter 3. The independent curator Harold Szeemann, inspired by the artistic and political revolutions of the 1960s, "expanded the traditional limits of art exhibition", making it, "a lively forum for discussions, performances, experiments, and social action" (2010: 94). Despite its strong affinities with the Documenta it was, however, another biennial that provided the "blueprint", as Niemojeswki puts it, of the contemporary biennial: that of the Havana Biennial, or Third-World Biennial, initiated in 1984 (2010: 96).[18] For Niemojewski, the Havana Biennial, provided a model for contemporary biennials in several respects, principally in, "its relevance from the perspective of exhibition and curatorial history, the conjuncture of historical circumstances in which it came into being, and its distinctly different reading of modernity" (2010: 99). First, Havana Biennial was born in a period when globalisation, postmodernity and neoliberal capitalism were rapidly intensifying. In this respect, Havana and the contemporary biennial proliferation share a common temporal framework, most principally, the rapid transition to globalised economies, the gradual end of the Cold War and the rise of neoliberalism. Second, Havana Biennial employed from the beginning an extensive format including conferences, panels, symposia, lectures, performances and publications; it was thus similar to the biennials of today in terms of their durational character. Finally, the subjects with which Havana Biennial has been preoccupied since its conception, such as relations between centre and periphery, cultural hybridism, ecology, diaspora and focus on local

[17] Documenta V, the fifth edition of Documenta, took place in 1972 in Kassel. It was curated by the independent curator Harold Szeemann, and it is generally considered a turning point in contemporary curating as it was probably the first show of such scale to include an extended educational programme.
[18] For a comprehensive survey on Havana Biennial's history, politics and organization see Weiss, R. 2011. *Making Art Global, Part 1: The Third Havana Biennial 1989*, *Exhibition Histories Vol. 2*.

contexts, are a constant in biennials after the 1990s. For these reasons Niemojewski sees the Havana biennial as, "one of the early instances of a new type of heterogenous discursive sphere capable of addressing current art practice while simultaneously exploring some of the most complex predicaments of our time" (2010:98). Within this context, biennials largely depend on the figure of the curator for delivering their ideas. The curator, who can even be seen as a, "recent reincarnation of the model of the independent intellectual" (Basualdo, 2010), is regarded as the main author of the event. This time though, curators are not the authorial figures that possess, "supposed authorial primacy" over the rest of the participants that take part in a show. The curator is primarily a cultural mediator pertaining to the, "organization of emerging and open-ended cultural encounter, exchange and enactment" (O'Neill; Wilson, 2010: 19). The current model of the biennial then, according to this view, refers to a heterogeneous and on-going constellation of events, objects and performances that aspires to produce discursive and affective interventions in the public sphere (O'Neill, 2012). This reading of the biennial's genealogy sees the histories of Venice and the world exhibitions as largely irrelevant to today's format (more in Chapter 3).

However penetrating, by insisting on searching for biennial's point of origin, Niemojewski's narrative overlooks the relational ways that such complex singularities come into being, and the ways they are formed more as, "an effect", as Foucault puts it, rather than as direct product of certain practices (Foucault, 2008: 49). While neither negating Venice's nor Havana's important influence on contemporary biennials, this thesis avoids searching for an originating cause of their emergence, stressing rather, how the multiplicity of the phenomenon relates to the ways that localised and place-bound tensions interact with the biennial as a global form. This global form, which I understand as a contested site fraught with contradictions, is inspired, rather than being totally determined, by certain theoretical conjunctions, practices and traditions that came to be integrated within the international art circuit during the 1990s (Chapter 3).

In any case, the biennial, based on a successful name and a currently popular but historically heterogeneous model of exhibition-making, is able to provide legitimacy

to certain practices, projects and objects by offering them a place and thus visibility. Since this legitimacy relates to its globalising brand-status, as Hlavajova (2010) also notes, the biennial is an event possessing a certain institutional power. It is indeed perceivable as an institution (albeit a rather special one since its brand name is not copyrighted, unlike say a corporate name or the name of a museum) in the sense of it being an identifiable form of practice among urban publics upon which participants invest emotionally and financially.[19] The authority to manage certain social relations (by showing support to certain individuals, projects and discourses) translates to the biennial's institutional power, a power that can be tactically employed through the 'institutional work' of curators and other participants. This institutional power remains quite abstract here however; it is in need of fleshing out and contextualisation within the larger landscapes in which it operates. While it refers to the legitimacy of the biennial as cultural practice it does not say much about the social interactions related to this practice. That is to say, it does not particularly elucidate the distinct processes of valorisation within a biennial. This leads us to the second issue posed above, which helps us to come to terms with how subjects and objects are expected to function in such settings: through what processes do values circulate within a biennial?

1.4 Performing social scripts

In his recent book, *Art Scenes: The Social Scripts of the Art World* (2013), the artist and critic Pablo Helguera suggests that within today's art world the production of value depends more on the performance of certain codes of communication, what he

[19] Recently a group of high-profile biennial professionals launched the *International Biennial Association* (IBA), an umbrella organization in which individual biennials have to apply and pay fees for their memberships in exchange for promotion and official recognition. This is perhaps the first serious attempt to uniform and regulate the biennial as a cultural practice by associating it with a single institutional body. Interestingly, in the First IBA General Assembly that took place in Berlin from the 10th to the 13th of July, 2014, in the context of the 8th Berlin Biennale, Hlavajova was the keynote lecturer. There she discussed the views of prominent thinkers associated with the left, including the sociologist Zygmount Bauman as well as Lenin, Foucault and Gramsci, in relation to the biennial and the IBA, insisting on her prior views and adding that critical curators should engage in times of crisis in an even more activist way with such structures.

calls, "social scripts", and less on the mastery and skilfulness of the artworks themselves.[20] Value within this transnational network of practices called the art world, Helguera claims, follows the same dematerialising logic of the art object: it is produced through linguistic utterances taking place in the field, which are often antagonistic and conflicting, but in any case multiple and performative (in the sense of being able to do certain things or have certain effects on artistic landscapes).[21] Helguera associates this phenomenon with the transition to the post-object condition in visual arts, according to which, the form that the artwork takes is subordinate to the idea and not vice versa. Michael Fried's notion of "theatricality" (1998 [1967]), associated with minimalist art, that is to say with art that displays an extreme self-consciousness and seeks to activate temporal effects to the viewer related to the intellect, thought and to speech, instead of absorb them pictorially, provides a useful analogy for conceptualising the status of the art world today. For Helguera, we can talk of an 'art scene', upon which certain dramaturgies are performed that have significant effects in the way objects and subjects within this world are valued.

As Helguera argues, value in the art world is not as much determined by economic forces and the market as it is often believed. The market only capitalises on already constituted values, which are previously enabled in varied art institutional sites. Biennials represent some of these locations, and their credibility strongly relates to the prestige and cultural recognition each one of them possesses. For Helguera, some of the contemporary scripts within such art locations include dominant, but often contradictory, conceptions of the artist as entrepreneur, as socially engaged agent or as benefactor of the community (2013:21). In each case, value according to Helguera is mainly performed through forms of communication, where communication does not only refer to strategic, self-conscious performances of art professionals planning to advance their marketability and position in the art world. It also, if not mainly, includes utterances that are often improvisational and unplanned; what the philosopher

[20] For a very comprehensive overview on the transition to the post-medium art see Martha Buskirk, The Contingent Object of Contemporary Art (2003).
[21] As Helguera further argues in his book, "the construction of value in the artworks is determined less by the objects themselves than by the nature of our interpretative performances, having a trickle-down effect on practically every aspect of art in society." (2012: 2)

Paolo Virno calls, "idle talk", "speech that happens without any clear referent" (O'Sullivan, 2012: 256).[22]

In what sense do values within a biennial depend on such activities? First and most importantly, curatorial work is heavily invested in the justification and framing of its choices in a way that makes sense to publics, critics and fellow curators. A good, and thus valuable, curatorial idea has to be, according to the art sociologist Pascal Gielen, "appropriate" as well as, "innovative" for its contexts (2009: 39). In addition, artistic work within these contexts concerns the communication of ideas or feelings either directly through the art object or through the framing of that object. Similarly, speakers, seminar organisers and performers are engaged in interpretative activities, either directly through their performances or by discussing them after they have taken place. Likewise, tour guides and invigilators transmit knowledge about the exhibition to the public by interpreting works or concepts. This is also the case with the press and art critics, who are similarly communicating the exhibition or parts of it in the media. Beyond official channels, in the course of a biennial, other forms of social interaction occur, what Gielen refers to as the, "murmuring of the artistic multitude" (2009), in his book by the same title, which can take place in numerous sites, either onsite, in openings or events; or off-site, in social media or in everyday chatter. These interpretative activities or performances have the capacity to suggest and possibly institute localised tendencies, trends and fashions, or, "regimes of truth"[23] (1980:131), to put it in Foucauldian terms, localised belief mechanisms that suggest what is legitimate, valuable and worthy. The strictly hands-on labour that takes place in a

[22] In this sense, Bourdieu's theory of the field of cultural production that views cultural producers as rational competitors within a restricted field of action shows its apparent limitations here. If linguistic and performative communication is a crucial carrier of symbolic value within art institutional sites then it becomes hard to imagine participants perform perfectly rehearsed scripts each time they communicate. Furthermore, all participants may not be fully aware of the rules and available 'positions' in the field. While Bourdieu's idea of the 'cultural field' provides a compass for this thesis in examining branding techniques, dependencies from stakeholders and attempts to translate cultural to economic capital in relation to the biennial, it proves limited in analysing the *processes* through which objects, projects and people are contested, affirmed and evaluated within a biennial setting.

[23] Contrary to universal truth, a regime of truth, according to Foucault performs historically specific discourses that function as localised means for legitimising modes of talking or thinking about objects and subjects .The production of truth in certain social formations is in a constant dialogue with powerful institutions and thus political power, as a regime of truth depends on "the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true" (Foucault, 1980: 131).

biennial, such as the setting up and production of the exhibition is largely secondary in respect to these processes of value creation.

1.5 Biennial, labour and artistic subjectivity

The predominance of such communicative actions as regards to value-creation in the art world brings forward a number of issues related to the art institution and its broader position within the economy. As it is now commonplace in discussions around contemporary art and its economies to regard processes of hands-on labour as secondary in relation to value-formation (e.g. Roberts 2007; Shukaitis 2012; Gielen 2009), the way that these issues have been theorised within the art world in the past few years generates tensions and conceptual complexities for critical participants in the field. The labour contained in contemporary art platforms is often regarded as an ideal post-industrial practice bearing the capacity to generate financial value for a variety of high-profile economic actors, from collectors to real estate agents, through non-standardised, flexible, disorganised and emotional engagements (Graw 2009). Given the general politicisation of contemporary art at least since *documenta X* (1997), it is no surprise that in the past decade contemporary artists and theorists have often mobilised and drawn from Marxist and neo-Marxist vocabularies in order to frame the complex nature of artistic labour and its deep interrelation with neoliberal work models (Graeber 2008; Gielen 2009; Shukaitis 2012; Noys, 2013). Described under various, overlapping, terms, namely cognitive capitalism (Boutang, 2012), communicative capitalism (Dean, 2012), bio-capitalism (Morini; Fumagalli, 2010) and semiocapitalism (Berardi, 2009), the current economic paradigm is thought to mobilise such affective, intellectual and psychic energies of the participants in the domain of work, relying on the incorporation of subjective feelings, thoughts and emotions to productive ends (Dean, 2012; Terranova, 2013).[24] Contemporary art

[24] Some parts from this section and from the sections 2.3, 2.4, 6.1 & 6.3 are taken from my paper ‘‘To see and be seen’: Ethnographic notes on cultural work in contemporary art in Greece’, *European Journal of Cultural Studies* (2014) (See bibliography).

workers, in this context, are seen as the most advanced workers of such economic regimes, as the perfect, "cognitariat", arranging and valorising signs within an ocean of information and semiocapital.[25]

In addition, "the pleasure in work" (Hesmondhalgh; Baker, 2010), or work as the, "central locus of psychic and emotional investment" (Smith, 2013: 36), is repeatedly portrayed under these terms as exemplary of a new dominating mode of capital accumulation. Autonomy, or better the promise for autonomy and self-realisation in the workplace, according to such accounts, becomes the carrot that demands sacrificial imperatives from cultural workers (Ross, 2000: 38). Isabelle Lorey, for instance, sees the, "free choice" of cultural workers to move from one job to the other, to be unfixed or even to dissent against the rigidity of the old social forms, as deeply embedded in neoliberal mental frameworks (2009: 187). According to Lorey, due to the belief of their own freedom and autonomy cultural producers are so prone to exploitation that they are almost presented by the state as, "role models" or, "model entrepreneurs" for creative economy enthusiasts (2009: 197). Contemporary movements against unpaid work in the arts rely to a greater or lesser degree on the above interpretative framework (see Chapter 4 for more on this).

Here, a term like, 'biopolitics' is key for providing a contextual backdrop against which artistic labour can be conceived as the exemplification of a neoliberal working practice.[26] In the context of biopolitics as articulated by Foucault (2008) and by later commentators (e.g. Read, 2010), ideas of self-fulfilment and self-realisation become a technology of subjectivation through which the lives of the population can be canalised to reproduce capitalist relations. In this sense, the biopolitical mode of production, concerns not only the production of commodities as objects but also as relations, lifestyles and subjectivities through which control and systemic preservation is achieved (Read, 2010: 26). By believing that they realise themselves in the objects and relations they produce, art professionals have been regularly seen as the tipping

[25] See for example the post 'Art and the Cognitariat' by the art critic Dave Beech http://dbfreee.wordpress.com/2013/09/19/art-and-the-cognitariat/

[26] One could add here terms such as 'governmentality', 'immaterial labour', and 'cognitive capitalism.'

point of such biopolitical arrangements and configurations. In Paolo Virno's terms the, "virtuosic" subjectivities are those labouring subjects that embrace performative and artistic skills.[27] Virtuosity for Virno typifies, "the totality of contemporary social production" (Virno, 2004: 52), and thus characterises not only artists but, increasingly, all labouring subjects. Along these lines, contemporary art seems to be spearheading this process. Alexei Pelzin notes that contemporary art, "provides the quintessence of virtuosic practices" since the contemporary artist is probably, "the brightest expression of the flexible, mobile, non-specialised substance of contemporary 'living labour'" (2010: 81). In this way, again, contemporary art professionals represent the most advanced sector of the workforce, the archetype of the contemporary worker.

This elevation of the contemporary art professional to the worker who performs and exemplifies the contradictions of post-Fordism unleashes tensions having to do with privilege, status and identity. By pushing the above ideas to their conceptual limits, it seems that there is no outside and that the capitalist apparatus has indeed colonised the deepest desires and passions of art professionals in a way that they may not be even capable of realising: caged in the spiralling cobweb of a ubiquitous totality desires to create are always already captured. This makes Gabrielle Horn, Director of the KW Institute of Contemporary Art, where the Berlin Biennale takes place, wonder, in an extreme moment of self-reflection: "How do we confront the appropriating, neutralizing, and instrumentalizing of critical potential? Am I a gentrifier? And are Berlin-Biennale curators minions of cultural policy?"[28] Here, Horn not only affirms that 'we' are trapped within the capitalist machinery, but points to an, "ordinary psychopathology" (Terranova, 2013: 45), regularly confronted in such settings. This "psychopathology" is where the art professional performs, in a schizophrenic manner, the collapse and blurring of the boundaries between the role of the victim and that of the perpetrator. Since subjectivity is shaped by capital (to a degree that we are not capable of exactly knowing), we may think that we are the victims, who actively resist

[27] Virno, however, is one of the few post-operaismo philosophers characterising the current moment as a mixture of formal and real subsumption. See for example Virno, 2009 and Pelzin, 2010.
[28] This excerpt is taken from the post made by Gabriele Horn, Director of KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin in the website of Berlin Biennale on September 2011. The full text can found at the following address: http://www.berlinbiennale.de/blog/en/allgemein-en/gabriele-horn-2-15220 .

capitalism, but in fact we may be the perpetrators, the gentrifiers who work in the direction of valorising capital.

This is the guilt that Hlavajova refers to, the undertones of which I encountered very often during my fieldwork.[29] Esche similarly describes himself as a, "curator guilty of all the sins of complicity" with the neoliberal apparatus (2013b: 244). The way out of this vicious circle for critical biennial professionals where participation already equals co-optation is to claim some level of contingency and focus on the *how* this 'critical surplus' can be produced. The political question for them in other words becomes, to go back to where this chapter started, *how* does one participate, *how* does one use the institutional power of a biennial?[30]

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To sum up, this chapter attempts to account for an operative framework that sees biennials as stages where aspects of Marxist and critical theory seek to be actualised. A piece like Akomfrah's on Staurt Hall, enabling a non-essentialist and militant way to think about questions of race and class, ideally performs this actualisation. As a prestigious assemblage of naming, exhibition making and communicational interaction, the biennial can potentially publicise and propagate such values. In terms of the possibilities of this actualization, for art professionals, we come back to the initial question: How should we biennial? The practice of criticality, that of occupying the institution in order to change it from within, assumes that the collectivity it authorises (the critical art professionals) is in a position to make the biennial critical or

[29] A constant tension within biennials, as we will see more clearly in the ethnographic chapters, relates on the one hand with an employment of a rhetoric on social transformation and on the other on their reliance on a language derived from a neoliberal vocabulary having to do with practices of 'branding' and 'creative economy'.

[30] Drawing on the writings of Paolo Virno, Pascal Gielen suggests that the "emotional tonalities" of cynicism and opportunism are effective modalities of operation in such settings, a kind of cure for combating the 'guilt' (2009:36). Using these concepts in a value-free and non-judgmental way, Gielen describes the cynics as those who consciously turn a blind eye to the distance between the critical discourse produced and the neoliberal reality in which they operate. The opportunist wandering curator, grabs every opportunity to organise exhibitions even within unfamiliar to them social and cultural contexts.

not. The idea of the curator as the ‘maker’ of the biennial is pervasive within biennial cultures, although this maker is also seen as a negotiator between different bodies, as someone who is not in full control of the final product (Esche, 2013b). In the chapter that follows, I lay out the approach, method and research practices of this thesis in order to examine the biennial, not only as something made by art professionals, but also as an assemblage that remains in constant excess to this making: a situated set of practices in constant dialogue with translocal, place-bound frictions and regimes.

Chapter 2

Whose biennial? : Ethnographic methods on biennials

2.1 Complex interweaving

The 9th edition of Manifesta, the roving European Biennial of contemporary art founded in 1996, took place in the spring of 2012 in the area of Limburg, Belgium. The exhibition venue was a large-scale industrial complex, formerly housing Waterschei, one of the most important mines in Europe that attracted thousands of local and migrant workers from the early 20th century onwards. The mine gradually reduced its activity as Belgium went through de-industrialisation in the 1970s, closing its doors for the last time in 1987. The theme of this Manifesta edition had to do with just such processes of economic restructuring, focusing in particular, on how recent transformations in the Belgian mining industry intersect with new forms of capitalist development. The artworks on display were (or were framed to appear as) critically predisposed against capitalism and its apparatuses, highlighting the under-reported 'human element' behind mandates of development. Within this framework, many of the works displayed explicitly condemned capitalism on the basis of its dehumanising and unethical aspects. For instance, Katleen Vermeir and Ronny Heiremans' video, 'The Residence' was a self-described, "biting commentary on gentrification and the contagious nature of capitalism", and Raqs Media Collective's double-screen video projection, 'The Capital of Accumulation' wished to testify, "the continuing process of scavenging by which capitalism tramples the globe".[31]

The day I visited Manifesta, a small business-oriented conference not open to the general public, was taking place in its premises. A participant of the conference, whom I met during one of their cigarette breaks, informed me that this one-day event wished to present opportunities to entrepreneurs and real estate agents who were

[31] Both these quotes are taken by the captions of the artists' works as they were displayed in the exhibition.

considering investing in the area of Limburg. The event was facilitated by a local firm called VKW Limburg, which according to its website, is a, "leading employers' organisation for entrepreneurs in Limburg", organising every year, "more than 220 activities for more than 10,000 entrepreneurs, top managers and decision makers" and working, "diligently to achieve a good entrepreneurial climate".[32] As the building attracted important local and international visibility through Manifesta, the organisers and delegates of this event saw in the former industrial complex an opportunity to invest in real estate. Interestingly, the conference room where the event was held was only a few meters away from Katleen Vermeir and Ronny Heiremans' video on 'gentrification and the contagious nature of capitalism'.

Another encounter I had that day was with a local man that I met outside the former industrial complex (currently Manifesta's venue). The man was in his fifties, born and bred in the area of Limburg and working for Manifesta as an invigilator and production assistant. Somewhat nostalgically, he recounted how he started working in the mine in the 1970s, following in the steps of his father who used to work there for the biggest part of his life. After the complex closed down he lost his job, similar to his father who was fired a little before his retirement. Before the area was hit by de-industrialisation, the conditions of the labour market, according to this talkative gentleman, used to be significantly better for the local working class, as security and guaranteed work was provided for most, if not all, inhabitants of Limburg. Having no particular job specialisation, ever since this time the man could only rely on temporary and diverse employment (a case in point was his current job for Manifesta). One could expect that this man would be the ideal audience member for the theme of the exhibition. However, he was completely indifferent toward the content of the show. As someone who felt that he and his family experienced the harmful effect of economic restructuring in Limburg, he was surprisingly left totally untouched by the ways that a contemporary art biennial engaged with the issue.

[32] These excerpts were taken from the VKW Limburg official webpage. The full text can be found at the following address: http://www.vkw-limburg.be/About_VKW_Limburg/5655/VKWlimburg

The research method I employ in this thesis aims to account for similar complex and contradictory interweavings to the one I encountered in this Manifesta edition. These include the simultaneity of propagating anti-capitalist rhetoric, investment opportunities and precarious forms of labour. The choice of ethnographic methods rises out of the need to elucidate on the complexities and synchronicity of logics that prevail in such sites, while paying attention to the tensions brought about by their performance (Bryman, 2012; O'Reilly, 2012). Approaching this shared space from an art theoretical or historical perspective would mean endowing more emphasis on artistic lineages and less on the connections biennials develop within places of embodied history, materiality and knowledge. The increase of what the scholar Sidsel Nelund calls, "situations of translocality" in the realm of contemporary art (2013: 756), that is to say dialogical and relational artistic and exhibitionary formats, which are site-specific but increasingly informed by global networks of knowledge and histories, calls for a flexible research method able to follow the paths, conjunctions and complexities of such manifestations. While certain limitations of this approach, including its weakness to adequately historise the art historical lineages of the biennial or account on its aesthetic aspects, will become apparent as this chapter evolves, this thesis, unlike dominant approaches so far, suggests a qualitative, long-term and systematic take on biennials. In particular, this take is focused on the two case studies I explore as they unfold within their respective contexts. The method that I employ then attempts to capture the biennial phenomenon within a specific spatial and temporal framework, and to examine it as a multifaceted entanglement of agencies and simultaneity of diverse and often conflicting logics, actions and articulations. Before moving on to a more detailed analysis, however, let us first look at the main body of literature produced so far on biennials and social change.

2.2 Approaches on biennials

In the past ten years, writings on biennials have circulated at an accelerating pace in academic journals and art magazines. Most of these texts employ analytical and

methodological tools that are principally from critical theory, art history, Marxism and post-structuralism. The publication *Biennial Reader* (2010), consisting of individual texts on biennials and their politics, was the first book that attempted to tackle the phenomenon in a more systematic manner. The editors, Marieke van Hal, Solveig Ovstebo and Elena Filipovic, argue that a new field of inquiry called, "biennialogy" (similar to museology) is needed, so as to treat, "this contemporary phenomenon as a separate subject of study" (2010: 16). In their introduction, they suggest that systematic studies on biennials are necessary today, for a contemporary demystification of the autonomy of the artwork and thus for helping us avoid overlooking the crucial, "ideological and aesthetic impact of the context, dramaturgy, and discursive armatures that bring an artwork into public view" (2010: 17). Apart from the scholarly material produced around it (the main focus of this section), the field of contemporary biennials is also 'expressed' through recently founded international bodies that claim to represent it as a distinct form of cultural practice. Here, we can indicatively mention the *Biennial Foundation* (BF) which, among its other functions, "establishes contact between disparate biennial organizations and facilitates the exchange of information, experiences and expertise within a global network of partner organizations",[33] as well as the *International Biennial Association* (IBA), a platform, "for establishing, researching and exchanging knowledge and information necessary for institutions and professionals, who plan and curate periodic art events such as biennials and triennials, artists, researchers and others concerned with contemporary art".[34]

Although a more elaborate focus on the operation of these bodies is not within range of this thesis, a future study on the ways they attempt to centralise the hitherto (largely unordered) worldwide development of biennials could be particularly useful for similar discussions. Here, the main focus is on literature exploring biennials and art institutions in relation to their capacities for enabling social transformation. This

[33] This excerpt is taken from the section 'Objectives' found in the website of the Biennial Foundation. The full text can be found at the following link: http://www.biennialfoundation.org/about/

[34] This section is taken from the section 'Mission Statement' found in the website of the International Biennial Association. The full text can be found at the following link: http://www.biennialassociation.org/new/introduction.php

literature tends to be roughly divided in three main categories, the presentation of which is descriptive for the scope of this thesis. I separate these three approaches in terms of their epistemological points of departure and the ways they position biennials in the context of general social antagonism: the, "dismissive approach" that prioritises the determination of the economic over the cultural (Harutyunyan; Özgün; Goodfield, 2011), the, "agonistic approach" that foregrounds the potential of cultural critique within a contingent social order (Mouffe, 2013) and the, "transversal approach" that perceives such events in terms of their potential conjoining with activist movements (Raunig, 2009; Holmes, 2009). As we shall see, the last two approaches are dominant within the biennial field so far.

While not always necessarily opposed to each other and while there are writers and curators who use their theoretical insights interchangeably, the framing of these approaches provides a reference point for positioning this thesis within the literature on biennials and social engagement. Moreover, as variations of these arguments circulate widely in art journals, conferences, publications, talks and other art institutional sites in the past ten years or so, these approaches are important for shaping discourses that rationalise the aims and scope of such art institutions, as well as justify their reasoning. Thus, the discourse that these approaches produce does not only purport to account for the phenomenon, but (as far as it is actively circulating among art, curatorial and biennial cultures) plays an important role in constituting opinions, suggesting modes of interaction and motivating patterns of thought within the field. In this sense, the approaches below, apart from helping to position this thesis within the relevant literature, serve as an object of my ethnographic focus.

2.2.1 Dismissive approach

The dismissive approach (rather marginal in texts circulating around the biennial circuit) is mostly written by art critics and social scientists and less by curators. As it mainly denounces the biennial phenomenon, it can be mostly found in social scientific

journals or in the activist scene. It reacts both against dominant trends in cultural policy during the past twenty five years that sees cultural production as a reservoir of economic value as well as to mainstream commentators that regard the art biennial as something inherently progressive. In his 2009 article, 'Why Kitchener-Waterloo Has a Biennial, but Toronto Does Not' the journalist Murray Whyte, exemplifies, albeit inadvertently, both these trends against which the dismissive approach protests, writing that the biennials, "are on for extended periods of time, so you can really leverage them as tourist events…just having a biennial is a flag firmly planted in the community that says, loud and clear: Art matters here".[35] The line of reasoning that this journalist reproduces, that is to say the instrumentalisation and capitalisation of biennials for the pursuit of profit, is mainly the target of what I call 'the dismissive approach'. In this sense, this approach mostly sees art biennials in relation to their exchange value, focusing on the ways they provide economic, symbolic and cultural capital for a heterogeneous range of participants such as artists, institutions, funding bodies and cities.

This argument is emphatically apparent in the article 'Event and Counter-Event: The Political Economy of the Istanbul Biennial and Its Excesses' (Harutyunyan; Özgün; Goodfield, 2011) published in the journal *Rethinking Marxism*. The article grapples with the 11th edition of Istanbul Biennial (2009), an explicitly politicised exhibition, which borrowed its title, *What Keeps Mankind Alive?* from a Berthold Brecht poem. Attacking the curators for appropriating Brecht, "while producing a capitalist spectacle" (2011: 489), the authors argue that despite the rhetoric on liberation and emancipation that the show mobilises, it still functions as a capitalist, post-Fordist spectacle that serves to validate the specific interests of its sponsors, such as the multinational giants Koc and Turkcell. Their view holds that effective political action can only be taken outside an event such as a biennial, as the latter, due to the structural

[35] This quote is taken from the text 'Why Kitchener-Waterloo has a biennial, but Toronto does not' by Murray Whyte published in Aug 27 2009 in the news portal *thestar*. The full text can be found at the following address:
http://www.thestar.com/entertainment/2009/08/27/why_kitchenerwaterloo_has_a_biennial_but_toronto_does_not.html

affinities with neo-liberal modes of development, post-Fordist work paradigms and the institutionalised art world, is unable to shake in any direct way the foundation of the political system. Such contradictions between the ideological and economic conditions of the biennial, as well as the post-ideological paradigm in which it operates as, "an easily consumable product promising to fulfil the exoticised expectations of the touristic gaze" (2011: 478), ultimately hinder any convincing potential of emancipatory politics. According to the authors, the streets and self-organised initiatives are the most appropriate places where real ruptures in the political order can be enacted. For Harutyunyan, Aras and Goodfield, these ruptures are able to forge new social relations and practices from below, as with the protestors against the IMF meeting that took place in Istanbul at the time. In short, their position is that new radical art will emerge from new social relations that are built in the streets in opposition to such capitalist-funded spectacles.

In a similar manner, the art critic George Baker in his text, 'The Globalization of the False', published in the *Biennial Reader* (2010), provides a reading of the biennial that resonates more with Theodor Adorno's critique of the culture industry and Guy Debord's critique of the spectacle. In this regard, Baker associates the rise of the biennial form, "with a total institutionalization of the practice of art, the onset of art's total administration or total bureaucratization" (2010: 449). In turn, the art sociologist Pascal Gielen, in a rather more nuanced tone, dismisses the proliferation of the biennial as, "suspect" as it easily fits in with the heterogeneous interest shown in it by companies, managers and politicians (2009: 36). The biennial for him is a, "post-institution of immaterial labour" (2009: 35), an organisation that resembles structures that rely on temporary, precarious and flexible forms of labour. For Gielen, such structures are complicit with neoliberalism for exploiting the intellectual, cognitive and affective capacities of their workers.[36] The excessive boom of biennials, according

[36] Since the publication of Michael Hardt's and Antonio Negri's *Empire* in 2000 the concept of 'immaterial labour' has gained momentum in Marxist analysis. Immaterial labour, perhaps another word for service labour, encompasses a large range of activities in capitalism that produce communication instead of durable goods. The concept has also been the subject of fierce criticism (e.g. Graeber, 2008)

to Gielen, enforces, "structural amnesia", "often ignores locality", "offers little room for historicity" (2009: 44), while participants, often operate in cynical and opportunist manners. A work invoked by Gielen and other commentators following a similar line of argumentation, is *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (2005) written by the French sociologists Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello. The main argument of this work is that ideas of participation, creativity and social inclusion became integral to the spirit and development of the post-1968 capitalism. The integration of this spirit to the capitalist apparatus brings about new forms of control and exploitation having to do with enjoyment and self-realisation in the domain of work. Biennials and the cultural industries in general, not only tolerate such relations but often actively reproduce them.

2.2.2 Agonistic approach

On the contrary, the agonistic approach (which is the most dominant in the biennial circuit and is mostly foregrounded by curators and organisers), while often criticising the biennial for adhering to neoliberal policies, also sees in them a potential for developing progressive, radical politics (as was discussed in Chapter 1). According to Chantal Mouffe (1989; 2013), an author very often quoted in this context, the constitution of every social order is ontologically contingent, contradictory and diverse, and thus the encounter with or the participation in cultural events, sponsored even by multi-national corporations, can potentially carry seeds of emancipation. For Mouffe, social identities are sedimented around collective identifications, norms and orders, but only contingently and temporarily, being unfixed and in constant motion. Echoing Gramsci's (2005) concept of hegemony, this approach sees the social as an open battlefield where antagonistic positions engage in a constant struggle for domination.

Mouffe, who in her book *Agonistics* admits that she received frequent invitations to, "art schools, museums and biennales", argues that, "in the current stage of post-Fordist capitalism, the cultural terrain occupies a strategic position" (2013, xiv). She cites that the reason for this is that the, "production of affects" in our societies is of paramount significance to the path of left-wing hegemony (2013: xiv). The dimension of antagonism - the political - is, according to Mouffe, ontological and constitutive of all human societies, and an ever-present possibility for conflict and exclusion. Through cultural mediations, however, antagonism can take the form of, "agonism", that is to say a struggle between adversaries, instead of one between enemies, leading to a more open, inclusive and pluralist form of social organisation (2013: 7). Emancipatory politics then should not strive to eliminate all antagonism through a belief in a utopian (communist) society to come (which, according to Mouffe, is in any case impossible), but to deepen democratic structures by making visible the ever-present possibilities of social antagonism. In this sense (and following Gramsci) Mouffe argues for, "the central place occupied by the cultural domain in the construction of 'common sense'", and highlights, "the necessity of artistic intervention in order to challenge…the present order" (2013: xvii). In this sense, dismissing the biennial on economic grounds ultimately fosters a determinist conception of politics, relapsing into a base-superstructure dualism that overlooks the particularities of social interaction. This rather widespread rationalisation of the biennial's role within the contemporary art discourse, then, stresses how its situated potential for social transformation is foregrounded through their critical and progressive occupation by left-wing ideologues.

It is not an exaggeration to claim that nearly all texts that look at biennials from this angle demonstrate an increased self-reflexivity. They all highlight the contradictory or antimomic role of biennials as both agents of resistance and spectacular displays, and before outlining possible dangers, they regularly affirm that biennials have indeed some potential, if properly managed, to enable changes in the system (e.g. Papastergiadis; Martin, 2011; Enwezor, 2010; Sheikh, 2010; Hlavajova, 2010; Marchart, 2010). For example, in the article, 'Hegemonic Shifts and the Politics of

Biennialization' (2010), Oliver Marchart uses the above theoretical scheme to account for how the biennial apparatus can be appropriated and used for advancing a broadly conceived left-wing hegemony. For Marchart, while the 10th and 11th editions of Documenta worked in the direction of left-wing hegemony in the art world, shifting the focus toward the political, *Documenta 12*, in contrast, reconstituted the hegemony of the aesthetic. In this sense, biennials, as apparatuses of civil society, can, "lend symbolic legitimacy to marginalized discourses", and thus promote anti-hegemonic social values (Marchart: 473). The biennials here are seen as an instrument within a larger struggle for progressive hegemonic politics, providing platforms where intercultural exchange and pedagogies can be actualised within an increasingly globalising public sphere (Papastergiadis; Martin, 2011).

This line of thinking is reproduced in discussions on New Institutionalism, which, as we saw in Chapter 1, promotes ideas of curatorial strategic intervention for changing art institutions from within by challenging and experimenting with their format. The question then, to repeat Hlavajova is not, "to biennial or not to biennial", but, "*how* to biennial" (Hlavajova, 2010). This approach therefore focuses, not so much on the exchange value that biennials create for capitalism, but in the *use value* that they may potentially have for audiences or users (De Certeau, 1984). Although often not explicitly referring to this approach, as such, high-profile curators within the biennial scene share to certain degrees some of the above theoretical and epistemological considerations. For example, in a text republished for the *Biennial Reader*, Okwui Enwezor, a curator famous for his post-colonial interventions since Documenta 11 in 2002,[37] sees the biennial as spectacular display while at the same time stresses its potential for instigating diasporic counter-hegemonic narratives (Enwezor, 2004). Similarly established curatorial voices associated with New Institutionalism, and that have held in the past, and still hold, key institutional positions within the global

[37] Apart from Documenta 11 Enwezor has been in the past few years one of the most internationally active curators. He is director of the artistic centre Haus der Kunst in Munich, adjunct curator of International Center of Photography in New York, Fellow at the Whitney Museum in New York, and has curated, among countless others, very demanding shows in the past decade, such as the 7th Gwangju Biennale (2008), the Sevilla Biennale (2006), and the Paris Triennale (2012). Enwezor is currently the artistic director of Venice Biennale 2015.

contemporary art circuit, including the likes of Vasif Kortun, Charles Esche and Nikolas Bourriaud, have often mobilised similar epistemological frameworks in their writings and curatorial statements. Bourriaud, for instance, has recently called his approach, following Mouffe, "agonistic curating",[38] stressing how art institutions can produce alternative modalities of thinking and doing. Similarly, Esche in his 2005 edited collection of texts, after quoting Mouffe, stresses how critical curators should be strategically involved with art institutions through what he calls, "modest proposals". For him, modest proposals are strategic, they, "make use of existing objects, conditions and situations and manipulate the elements into different, more aspirational or purposeful configurations" (2005: 16). The actualisation of these proposals within art institutions can become an effective means for provoking progressive political thinking within public spheres at large.

2.2.3 Transversal approach

The last approach I discuss here is the transversal approach, an approach that is more explicitly activist. While in certain respects it overlaps with the latter (like in the belief that participating in an established institution can bring positive results to social change) the transversal approach focuses more on the qualities of practice and especially of encounter, rather than in some sort of long-term, programmatic occupation of institutions for advancing a project of left-wing hegemony. In fact, the concept of, "transversality" was originally conceived by the philosopher Felix Guattari as a form of politics that would rupture tendencies towards institutionalisation and reification (Guattari, 1996: 121). The art philosopher Gerald Raunig and the art historian Gene Ray largely introduced, or better summarised for the scope of art institutional theory, this approach in their edited volume *Art and Contemporary Critical Practice* (2009). This book was a reaction against what they saw as the

[38] Mouffe's article 'For an Agonistic Public Sphere' (2002) was published in the book of Documenta 11 *Platform l: Democracy Unrealized*.

present canonisation of the movement of institutional critique, embarking in an effort to revitalise it by looking at the practice of contemporary social movements.

The authors perceive the field of art as a kind of scaffolding that can potentially navigate through different disciplinary fields enabling forms of resistance against neo-liberalism. However, these changes happen not through an occupation and appropriation of existing institutions but rather, enabled through a, "permanent process of instituting" (Raunig, 2009: 4), involving flexible tactics of transformation, exodus and self-government that remain unfixed in relation to long-term strategies of reversing the mainstream. For Raunig, transversalism is not a programmatic statement but a, "mode of action" that refers to the construction of, "constellations that are *a-centric*, which do not move on the basis of predetermined strands and channels from one point to another, but right through the points in new directions" (2007: 205). These new directions have an emancipatory logic (Raunig, 2009: 5), searching for weapons to combat and escape contemporary constellations of power. Militant fleeing, for Raunig, is always combined with a permanent radical social critique that avoids becoming institutionalised, regimented in a set of values and norms. The Gramscian hegemonic model then is not so much applicable here, as it tends to abide in certain ends, e.g. the accomplishment of left-wing hegemony. For example, the critic Stefan Nowotny argues that the problem of, "all superficial theories of hegemony…is an insufficient reflection on the level of the means themselves" as in hegemonic politics, "certain forms of ends" become fetishised, something that, "ultimately obscures a critical examination of the means themselves" (2009: 22). The transversal approach then does not accept a clear-cut separation between ends and means as the agonistic tends to do (i.e. means: institutions-ends: left-wing hegemony), and in this sense it is more sensitive against possibilities of self-institutionalisation.

Another critic linked with this approach, writer of many articles in art journals, publications and in his personal blog,[39] is the activist and art critic Brian Holmes.

[39] Brian Holmes writes a personal blog that he regularly updates. It can be found at the following address: http://brianholmes.wordpress.com

According to Holmes, in the age of post-Fordist capitalism a powerful mode of radical organising refers to the practice of militant networking, that is to say, of enacting networks that can link, "actors and resources from the art circuit to projects and experiments that don't exhaust themselves inside it, but rather, extend elsewhere" (2009: 58). Holmes uses the term, "extra-interdisciplinary investigations" to describe the navigation within and beyond, interlinking and trespassing, the boundaries of art and social activism (2009:53). Through these investigations, the category of art, or of the art institution, is altogether challenged -as these projects are based, "on a circulation between disciplines, often involving the real critical reserve of marginal or counter-cultural positions - social movements, political associations, squats, autonomous universities - which can't be reduced to an all-embracing institution"[40] (2009: 58-59). For example, on the occasion of a debate with activists opposed to the 2009 Istanbul Biennial, Brian Holmes argued that the artworks in the exhibition could only develop in collaboration, "with people in a whole range of institutions - schools, workplaces, theaters and leisure facilities, psychiatric and other hospitals", but also with people, "who are not part of institutions, people engaged in self-organised associations on the anarchist model".[41] The transversal approach in other words sees the art field as a field in constant motion, in a permanent state of becoming which can tactically be used so as to promote activist and resistant cultural models.

[40] Holmes' article is included in the book *Art and Contemporary Critical Practice* (2009). Holmes, as well as several of the book's authors, develop their argument in opposition to an article written by the artist and writer Andrea Fraser titled 'From the Critique of institutions to an institution of Critique' first published in *ArtForum* in 2005. In this article, Fraser presents a rather confining view of the art institution, arguing that it has the capacity to absorb and neutralise any critiques directed against it. In other words, for Fraser, any attempt to "escape" the art institution is futile; one is always already institutionalised.

[41] His debate with the activists occurred under a post in his personal blog titled 'Istanbul Biennial'. It can be found here http://brianholmes.wordpress.com/2009/09/01/istanbul-biennial/

2.3 Toward an ethnographic reading of biennials as institutions, organisations and events

2.3.1 Choosing ethnography

In crafting dialogues between biennials and social change the approaches sketched above reveal the ambivalent qualities of this widespread phenomenon. Each approach tends to take a normative standpoint about how critical professionals should react against these platforms. Thus, apart from their scholarly value, they are also well-suited to addressing and informing cultural practitioners wishing to expand or develop some professional activity within the art field. They seem less able, however, to shed light on the discursive, symbolic and material processes in relation to which biennials are performed in and through concrete social, physical and symbolic landscapes. For instance, while the agonistic and transversalist approaches are well-suited to address potentials of critique, they rarely take seriously questions of privilege and access; of who is privileged enough to access this global exchange, or what transformation of the common sense might mean and for whom. How do the codes and logics of a biennial, for example, materialise in and across places of constituted values, meaning and infrastructures? The dismissive approach, on the other hand, by linking these sites unquestionably to capital and spectacle, fails to illuminate processes of social interaction, or on how artistic and curatorial ideas flesh out, unfold or possibly disturb contexts of established ideas and practices. More crucially, these approaches fail to substantially account for how biennials evolve dynamically as a grounded, site-specific practice.

An ethnographic approach to the biennial phenomenon, then, may prove a useful augmentation and intervention in relation to the above, in the sense of being able to offer meticulous descriptions on the ways in which various institutional actors operate in the context of power relations and disciplinary constraints, and also on ways in which the biennial is performed temporally, as a cultural practice, amidst certain periods of time, and spatially, within spaces of materiality and meaning. In addition, Maureen Mahon argues that ethnographic approaches applied to forms of cultural

production are useful for elucidating on the ways through which power operates both, "as a productive and restrictive force" and how the agency of social actors is performed within, "institutional, historical, and sociological constraints" (the colloquial and banal practices through which values, discourses and identities are shaped), and the effects of globalising and localising tendencies through the, "circulation of economies, cultural forms, ideas, and people" (2000: 467-468). An ethnographic approach, then, through a sustained engagement with the particularities of a recurring cultural practice, seeks to untangle how its dynamic forms unfold in relation to its various surroundings (Bryman, 2012). Informed by these suggestions, this thesis approaches the biennial phenomenon via an engagement with the concrete relations through which biennial cultures constitute and are constituted.

More particularly, this thesis intends to examine and generate knowledge about biennials as they develop in their threefold nature: as institutions, organisations and events. Contemporary art biennials, this thesis argues, are *all* these three elements at once, and, as such, a long-term analysis on their practices cannot afford to overlook any one of them. Firstly, they are institutions, insofar as they hold symbolic power that authorises artistic practices, a power they regularly strive to maintain, legitimise and expand (Born, 1995). Secondly, they are organisations in terms of the social, professional and moral relations through which they are structured, involving sets of hierarchies, lines of command and common routines (Frost et al., 1991). Finally, they are events in terms of the periodic, recurring character of their mega-exhibition, their most important manifestation, which, significantly, represents their most visible and public form of expression. Below, I briefly describe the ways in which this thesis approaches the biennial in relation to all these three elements.

Before moving on to the following section, I should note that the possible weakness of using an ethnographic approach to study the biennial is an obvious one: by focusing on a concrete socio-historical period and on certain biennials, it is less well-placed to account for how the artistic and aesthetic aspects and drives involved in wider settings of exhibiting cultures have the power to affect, shape and move the public. Also,

through its concentration into a limited space and time, it seems to be less equipped to provide a macro-theoretical model through which to think through the historical development of the biennial form. The positioning of the works within traditions of exhibiting, art historical canons and modalities of expression or the exhaustive theorisation of the phenomenon are, therefore, beyond the immediate reach of this method. In this regard, this thesis embarks on applying an ethnographic reading on the biennial, while simultaneously recognising the important insights that different approaches (from Marxist and sociological to art historical) can bring to the phenomenon.

2.3.2 Approaches on institutions, organisations and events

Without aiming to offer here an exhaustive literature review on the subject, in traditional sociological accounts institutions are thought to be created in order to serve certain social functions, helping, for example, to align, "individual and collective interests" (Holm, 1995: 399). In this view, institutions somehow mirror social needs and have a purely operational purpose: to hold a social arrangement together. For instance, studies informed by Max Weber's idea of, "the iron cage", which is to say the rationalised modern logic that ensnares individuals in systems of efficiency and control, tend to see modern institutions as, "highly rationalized myths" that have the capacity to direct social activity in particular ways (Meyer; Rowan, 1977: 343). Institutions are here conceptualised as composites of rules, regulations and social norms that make life functional and upon which the actors of the society should conform (Meyer; Rowan, 1977; Scott, 2001; DiMaggio; Powell, 1983). Within post-war Marxist theory, (bourgeois) institutions can similarly function as sites of domination and ideological control (as for instance in the influential work of Louis Althusser on the, "ideological state apparatuses"[42]). Exceptions within this canon, involve different Marxist traditions associated with scholars such as Nicos Poulantzas,

[42] Ideology, for Althusser, was expressed by a system of institutions, educational and others, which were used to maintain and perpetuate the structure of the capitalist system. Ideology, here. represents "individuals' *imaginary relation to their real conditions of* existence", and not as in Marx simply "false consciousness". See Althusser, Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays (1971).

who theorised the institution of the state as a site where the contradictions of capital become manifest, and thus ripe for tactical revolutionary intervention (Poulantzas, 1980). Cornelius Castoriadis, who saw institutions as imaginary social constellations, suggesting a programmatic turn to processes of self-institution founded upon principles of autonomy and self-determination, also sits within this category (1998). In addition, scholarship produced within the strand of cultural studies influenced by the work of Gramsci, Poulantzas and Foucault (the work of Stuart Hall is an obvious candidate here), tends to see institutions as instruments of capitalist domination, which can, however, be used strategically so as to promote progressive race, class and gender politics.

Without losing focus on such insights and the regulatory role of institutions they assume, I am mostly interested in the institution in terms of its moving, conflicting and shifting positions, rather than its determinate role within a particular social order. For this reason, I turn to scholarship that conceptualises institutions as porous entities that strive to maintain and prove their usefulness in relation to certain, often changing, social circumstances (e.g. Lawrence; Suddaby, 2009). A useful account in this regard comes from the sociologist Andre Spicer (2010). Spicer suggests that in order to find a role for themselves and expand their legitimacy, institutions - artistic, scientific, political or otherwise - constantly attempt to manufacture problems. In turn, they announce themselves as experts in order to resolve these problems (2010: 29). For example, it is in the strategic interest of the institution of medicine to extend the category of the medical problem to a wide range of states and activities, from alopecia to madness, so as to continue proving its social usefulness. Spicer (2010) offers the term, "extitution" to refer to all these areas of formless quality in social life that institutions seek to domesticate in order to maintain legitimacy, expand their scope or overcome a crisis of de-institutionalisation. Following Deleuze, Spicer, however, describes this institutional opening to new areas of life as a process always caught up in tensions. Attempts to expand the institutional scope always, "open up new areas for institutionalization", while the failure of the institution to deliver its promises, "creates many cracks and fissures in which non-institutionalized life grows" (2010: 26). From

this perspective, one could conceptualise the emergence of the political turn in contemporary art biennials as the rationalisation and circumscription of a problem-area, coming to justify curatorial intervention and expand the areas upon which curatorial practice can be regarded as 'useful'. The activist qualities mobilised by the biennials I look at (in Chapters 5 and 6), could be similarly seen under these terms, as efforts to re-arrange the model in the context of the economic crisis by giving artistic form to external processes related to resistant cultures and social movements. In other words, what mostly interests me in this thesis regarding the above, is how the institution, as a set of values, norms, roles, infrastructures, agents and logics operating within a certain temporal and spatial framework, is able to transform or adjust itself as a result of some larger social change. And in turn, I ask, what are the potential limits of this transformation or adjustment?

Performing a similar point of view, several ethnographic studies on Western art institutions, of which the biennial is principally a part, have largely focused on the multi-dimensional ways that institutional legitimacy is sought to be preserved. Examples of such studies include Sharon McDonald's 2002 study of the Science Museum, London, that looks at how the implementation of neoliberal policies from the British government in the 1980s forced the museum to re-organise its activities and explore new areas of financial backing while simultaneously maintaining its social relevance. In a similar fashion, Penelope Harvey's, *Hybrids of Modernity* (1996) sees the Universal Expos as colonial institutions that strive to adapt in the changing reality of a post-colonial world. Georgina Born's 1995 study on IRCAM, the avant-garde centre of musical research and electronic production funded by the French state, is one of the first comprehensive ethnographic studies on a high art Western institution, and one that substantially informs the methods and scope of this thesis. In, *Rationalizing Culture* (1995) Born tries to show how the contradictions in which modernist musical discourse found itself in with the rise of postmodernism during the 1980s, are negotiated and expressed within a prestigious, state-funded musical institution like IRCAM, which at the time was directed by the renowned avant-garde composer Pierre Boulez. Born demonstrates how IRCAM, through its public statements, productions,

collaborations and the influential command of its director, constantly strived to maintain its legitimacy as an institution supporting and enabling the circulation of 'serious' music. As high art Western institutions, have, according to Born, the tendency to, "absorb and conceal contradiction" (1995: 7), ethnography can, "uncover gaps between the external claims and internal realities, public rhetoric and private thought, ideology and practice" (Born, 1995: 7). In this sense, ethnographic accounts can shed light on how certain patterns or scripts are involved in forms of institutional power, untangling the ways through which institutional authority is preserved or expanded.

In order to examine the institutional logics, dynamics and practices of the biennial, however, I find it useful to focus on the ways that the latter is arranged, not only as an institution that strives to maintain legitimacy, but also as an organisation involving actors that establish hierarchies, routines and professional relations. The relationship between institutions and their organisational aspects has often been approached within the framework of organisational studies by looking, for instance, at the ways in which institutional logics induce certain normative behavioural patterns in institutional actors (Meyer; Rowan, 1977; Lawrence; Suddaby; Leca, 2009: 3-6). According to this line of thought, as far as institutional preservation and survival is at stake and despite the fact that institutions may be inhabited by oppositional and conflicting dynamics, the actors will most often act in accordance to institutions interests. Recent scholarship in the field, however, also stresses how actors within institutional settings may also attempt to use their positions of power to make them work for causes not directly related with pre-ordered institutional aims (e.g. Hirsch; Bermiss, 2009; Lawrence; Suddaby, 2006; Spicer, 2010). In order to restore agency and explore the dynamics of organisational settings, (as we saw in Chapter 1) Lawrence and Suddaby offer the term, "institutional work" to refer to, "the purposive action of individuals and organizations aimed at creating, maintaining and disrupting institutions" (Lawrence; Suddaby, 2006: 215). Practices of disrupting the institution or escaping it, may, in this sense, contribute to new lines of institutional formations with differing rationale, scope and approach. While then more traditional approaches may see strategies of re-purposing

institutional aims as attempts to maintain or re-enforce the institution, the institutional work approach that interests me here pays attention to the ways that actions themselves affect institutions and their larger environments (Hirsch; Bermiss, 2009).

While it carries the risk of romanticising certain individual acts, the idea of institutional work as an action with a certain potential to transform, is ethnographically useful for accounting on the ways that efforts to re-articulate the institution play out in larger socio-spatial dynamics. For instance, in an attempt to distance themselves from usual institutional practices in a climate where the biennial-model leaned toward processes of de-institutionalisation (Hirsch; Bermiss, 2009: 262), which is to say a generalised condition of legitimacy-crisis, both biennials I look announced themselves as, 'non-biennials' (Chapter 4). It was not, however, so much the biennials announcing themselves as such, but the curators of these biennials, or, in other words, actors that occupied short-term and indeterminate roles within them. The question then of whether institutional actors re-affirm, disarticulate or escape the institution through their actions remains open, as regards to larger social, temporal, spatial and organisational dynamics.

In this sense, I am also interested in a long tradition in organisational ethnographies that examines organisations as groups of people not necessarily bound within a formal institutional structure. The existence of distinct patterns of organisation, for instance, has been extensively discussed in relation to subcultures, or marginalised groups (e.g. Whyte, 1993; Brotherton; Barrios, 2004). Already from William Foote Whyte's study of the Italian migrant community in Boston known as Cornerville (1993 [1943]), organisations are in this tradition perceived as formal or informal structures of hierarchies characterised by elements like leadership, friendship, status, prestige, power, alliances and recurring patterns of interaction. Within this framework, studies such as Howard Becker's *Art Worlds* (1984) and Paul Atkinson's, *Everyday Arias* (2006) have demonstrated how art works are more the outcomes of collective work and social organisation rather than individual genius. As an organisation, in this sense, the biennial phenomenon can be also seen as an encompassing, "community of

practice" (Squires; De Vanter, 2012) that hails objects and subjects in its codes, histories, practices and values. It is commonly accepted within biennial cultures, for instance, that the curator is an autonomous creator whose selection and enabling of projects, artworks and events is to be evaluated as an authorial practice with a value on its own (Chapter 3, Section 3). This, however, is not only a strictly organisational aspect, i.e. the potential of a short-term position with advanced autonomy to induce change, but also an institutional one, insofar as the process of selecting curators is very often based on efforts to preserve and expand the biennial's legitimacy (as for instance in the case of Bourriaud in Athens Biennale described in Chapter 6). Also, for instance, in Athens Biennale the role of the organiser and curator usually overlap, and, in this sense, in comparison to Berlin Biennale, the outcomes of the former are more controlled and their effects less contingent. An ethnographic study of organisations then focuses on the quotidian ways that these codes are performed between participants in such a culture, as well as the situated conflicts, controversies and tensions their institutional performances bring about (Ybema et al., 2009).

The biennial, however, is also mainly a periodic event, and therefore the actual exhibition is crucial for its institutional status and organisational form. Ethnographies of events are designed to account on the encounters and interactions occurring within a period when an organisation goes through a period of intense visibility and display. Apart from seeing the event, in this case the biennial exhibition, as merely a ritualistic display of an organisation, event ethnographies tend to pay attention to the informal interactions occurring in the course of an event, such as the chattering, casual conversations and encounters, which are the, "inevitable outcome of multiple actors in the same time and space frame" (Skov; Meier, 2001: 279). Immersion into events, in this sense, can offer accounts of the, "cognitive, affective and conative elements of an event, that is the thinking, emotion and behaviour that are linked to it" (Holloway, Brown; Shipway, 2010: 80). The anthropologists Natalia Delgado and Luciano Cruz (2014) recently suggested how, "multi-event ethnographies" can offer in-depth explorations of how members of an organisation orchestrate plans in concentrated efforts in time and space so as to advance an organisation within fields of prestige and

power. In the nascent field of event ethnography, the term, "field-configuring event" has been recently used to describe events, varying from fashion shows to film festivals to biennials (Delgado; Cruz, 2014; Delacour; Leca, 2011), that have the power to constitute tastes, predispositions and preferences within the field as a whole. This attribution, however, appears misleading without some prior circumscription of the field against which an event like a biennial responds. My ethnographic focus on the biennial as event studies how these events do not mean to respond to a univocal field of contemporary art, but assume a multimodal and fragmented mode of address directed to global as well as local audiences, sponsors, public authorities, art circuits and networks. Seeing the biennial then as an institution, organisation and event at the same time pays attention to how vital issues of prestige and status overlap or interact with the biennial's hierarchical structure, curatorial approach and larger socio-temporal values, norms and conflicts.

As a note of elucidation, I need to emphasise that the idea of the field of contemporary biennials (or other terms such as 'biennial culture' and 'biennial circuit'), often invoked throughout this thesis, is not perceived as a restricted system or a structure with crystallised and self-contained internal laws, rules and regulations.[43] Rather, it refers to a moving, fluid, dynamic and translocal network of cultural practices informed by certain theoretical traditions, performances, discourses and asymmetrical power relations. Following James Clifford's observation that it becomes increasingly, "hard to conceive of human diversity as inscribed in bounded, independent cultures" (1988: 22), this thesis looks at the ways that discourses and practices that emerge in the fieldwork can be read vis-à-vis discourses and practices played out in the social field at large. In this sense, the discussion that follows the presentation of the research material (after Chapters 5 and 6) is also speculative, exploring the limits and

[43] Bourdieu's notion of the 'field' (1997) is useful for this study as it was a concept developed in order to demonstrate how individual artists and cultural producers do not act in a free-floating way but operate within a specific field of possibilities. Bourdieu, by conceptualising the field as an objective substratum that exists and to an extent regulates value, attempts to combat approaches that tend to celebrate the genius of individual creators. However, this approach is also delimiting as it assumes in advance that all the actors of the field have absolute knowledge of how it is structured and as a result decide to intentionally to intervene in relation to it. For a relevant insightful and constructive critique to Bourdieu's approach see Georgina Born (2010).

possibilities of what the biennial field 'does' or can potentially 'do' in and across social landscapes.

In the past decade, art and anthropology initiated a strong scholarly relationship, on the one hand, through the popularisation of anthropological theories of art and material culture studies mainly in Anglophone art departments that prioritise object-oriented and relational approaches, such as Alfred Gell's *Art and Agency* (1998), and on the other, through the incorporation of ethnographic approaches as integral components of artistic practice (Foster, 1996). The so-called ethnographic turn in contemporary art (Coles, 2000) has provided some fruitful debates between art and ethnography, looking at how these two areas of knowledge can contribute to fresh understandings of artistic engagements with cultures and communities (Wright; Schneider, 2010). There are, however, very few studies attempting to see contemporary art as a sphere of action through ethnographic lenses. Sarah Thornton's popular book *Seven Days in the Artworld* (2012) and Don Thompson's *The $12 Million Stuffed Shark: The Curious Economics of Contemporary Art* (2009) are such attempts, but they are neither (strictly speaking) scholarly works, nor do they see the field in relation to its wider surroundings.[44] As there are no ethnographic accounts on contemporary art biennials so far, this thesis wishes to take up Helguera's call for a social anthropology of contemporary art that will focus on how the, "collectively constructed values" of the field interact with the world and its phenomena (2013: 2).

2.4 Fieldwork and research material

My main ethnographic work occurred in two different biennial editions, the 3rd Athens Biennale (2011) and the 7th Berlin Biennale (2102). The empirical material of my fieldwork principally derives from participatory observation in these two events,

[44] Likewise, Sidsel Nelund's recent article 'Doing Home Works: Extended exhibitions, ethnographic tools, and the role of the researcher' (2013) suggests that the employment of ethnographic methods will benefit scholars in art research. Nelund, however, refers mostly to an ethnographic reading of artworks and art exhibitions within an art historical framework, which is not the immediate focus of my thesis.

involving personal visits to venues and happenings; informal discussions with visitors, critics and residents of the areas and cities; a collection of written, audio and visual material related to them, as well as around forty recorded semi-structured interviews with participants lasting from fifteen minutes to one and a half hours. I spoke with participants that occupied different roles, including those of artists, curators, invigilators, assistants, lecturers, activists and biennial workers, in an effort to map the phenomenon in its complexity and diversity. Using the method of, "snowballing" (Bryman, 2012) to reach participants, according to which, an initial contact can lead to reaching more informants, I approached friends or acquaintances that led me to communicate with participants or other relevant institutional actors. In both biennials, I chose to first converse with high rank members of the institution and the organising team some months before the opening of the show, so as to begin my research by taking into account their institutional, organisational and curatorial agenda. For the same reasons that Born gives,[45] including the possible alienation of other informants, I consciously avoided engaging in friendly relations or regular meetings with directors and other high-rank personnel during the course of the show.

The nature of my informants in these two biennials is slightly different, which can partly be seen as the effect of the employment of snowballing and the contingency this method entails. In Athens, although I talked with the curators and organisers, one seminar organiser and three artists, the participants I mostly interacted with were low-rank workers, such as invigilators, assistants, receptionists and tour guides, most of them in their twenties. This led to an additional focus on the issue of volunteerism and labour conditions. In contrast, in Berlin I spoke with few lower-ranking workers (one of them was a friend and primary informant), having mostly the chance to engage with

[45] Born writes that it would have been extremely difficult to, "be perceived by ordinary workers as on their level" if she was seen as allied to such a powerful presence as Pierre Boulez, IRCAM's director (1995: 9). Also, she mentions that focusing on Boulez would mean to reduce IRCAM's complex socio-cultural relations to one figure. In any case, in both the biennials I examined, the directors and head curators somehow lacked the status and cultural prestige of Boulez. The most 'famous' participants taking part in these exhibitions were Nikolas Bourriaud, the co-curator of Athens Biennale, and Arthur Żmijewski, the curator of Berlin Biennale. I did not manage to talk with Bourriaud, as he was absent for the whole duration of the show, but eventually, after many procrastinations, I spoke during the final days of the 7th Berlin Biennale with Żmijewski.

the activists as well as with some of the artists involved. In some cases the roles of organiser and participant blurred, and thus they were not very clear to me in advance.[46] Apart from the on-site fieldwork, I researched past activities of these biennials through archives, such as previous catalogues and publications, whilst also tracking the ways they developed their online communication. To do the latter, I followed the social media accounts of both these biennials (mostly on Facebook and Twitter) from 2011 to 2014, gauging their communiqués and the general social context in which they operate. As such, I discuss documents ranging from Facebook updates and articles on these two exhibitions to reports, posts and communiqués that they themselves circulated. In this sense, my ethnographic fieldwork is multi-sited and its methodological framework informed by literature related to historical and multi-sited ethnography (Hamilakis, 2007; Marcus, 1995; Falzon, 2009). Multi-sited ethnography, according to Mark-Anthony Falzon, aims to investigate social phenomena, "that cannot be accounted for by focusing on a single site" (2009: 1) by mapping their diversities, complexities and interrelatedness. A site may in fact include any situation where some aspect of the phenomenon is manifested or a connection with it occurs within a place, ranging from news reports, protest actions or informal discussions (Hamilakis, 2007). Throughout the past few years I developed an experiential relation with art exhibitions and their political utterances, tracing their mediation in multiple physical and virtual sites, such as articles, discussions, debates, magazines events and openings (Hamilakis, 2007).

Finally, I should briefly add how my personal identity, as reflexive ethnography emphasises (Clifford; Marcus, 1986; Clifford, 1988), played a role in the process of collecting the research material. As the ethnographic account needs to manifest certain coherence to address a certain problematic, the fieldwork experience needs to be put into categories in relation to the larger questions that a project tackles. Echoing Clifford, the classic anthropological question that arises then is, "how is unruly

[46] In Berlin Biennale, for example, one of the co-curators of the exhibition, whom I was not aware of, was also vocally present in the activist assemblies taking place in the main venue, making it hard to recognise his identity.

experience transformed into an authoritative written account?" (1988: 25). Besides this, as Clifford argues, every description, "every translation of experience into written form" (1988: 25), is itself an act of interpretation, and thus an act of authority. In this sense, the events that are being recounted here, apart from being necessarily interpreted from the ethnographer's point of view (Marcus, 1995; Clifford, 1988), are selected to fit the larger questions addressed in this thesis.

My fieldwork in both biennales took place during a turbulent period for Europe involving the outbreak of an economic crisis, as well as the formation of a structure of feeling among critical discussions on contemporary art moving explicitly against capitalism and the market (Chapter 4). This is something noteworthy, as it is not only reflected in the practices circulating in the art field, but also in the ways that the research material for this thesis has been gathered. Both in the case of Athens and Berlin, the objects, subjects and discourses that drew my attention to these spaces (as well as the ways that I related to them), were inflected by larger discourses and modes of being triggered by the crisis; its governmental management and the emergence of various related micro-struggles and resistances. Traces of such resistant voices were omnipresent in the biennials as a, "social microcosm" (Born, 1995: 35) at the level of expression, affect and discourse. For example, the appeal to economic reason, occupying a dominant place in mainstream public discourse in Europe through austerity politics, was strongly resisted within the value system of the 7th Berlin Biennale. Thus, whilst conducting fieldwork there I was often addressed as a 'Greek', a national subject understood as a victim of the markets with access to some sort of deeper insight about capitalist exploitation. Doubtless, my victim status was also upheld by the fact that, as a rather white-dominated, mostly European space (in some few cases one could argue even hyper-masculine), the Biennale lacked those post-colonial or queer voices that decentre Eurocentric discourses on exploitation. Being a male researcher pursuing a PhD at a university in Northern Europe and being interested in social transformation was, in most cases, an identity that could, at least at a primary level, offer access to an art exhibition with a left-wing agenda and almost exclusively European or American participants and themes. In Athens, on the other

hand, my informants generally saw me as a relatively privileged university researcher and less as a victim of the economic crisis. Due to the feverous demonstrations and forms of political organisation that were taking place in the city at the time (as I describe in detail in Chapter 6), the discussion with the participants also constantly veered towards the relations between art and social change. The occupation of a nearby theatre called *Empros* by a team of young artists and activists, that took place one month after the opening of the 3rd Athens Biennale, was an event that shaped to an important degree my perception of the Biennale's role as a self-proclaimed agent of critique. Often participating in the occupation's events, including daily performances, lectures and symposia, I was constantly moved to compare the tactics, strategies and relations developed in each site.[47]

Thus, this research avoids making claims to, "ethnographic authority" (Clifford, 1988). My subjective leanings and predispositions as a cultural producer and scholar writing about and occasionally participating in various ways in contemporary art structures, already share some similar grounds with the cultures I purport to unfamiliarise. In this respect, the process of collecting and analysing the material engages in a constant dialogue with my own personal relation with contemporary art, fieldwork experiences and the historical and theoretical frameworks that inform this study (Marcus, 1995: 96). In any case as a result of the above, I was not a neutral observer during my fieldwork, as I could relate to the subject matter of both biennials and rather easily create a common ground in most discussions with the participants, whether the above aspects were directly articulated in our discussions or were just present at the level of sense, affects and emotions. Overall, my fieldwork experiences were conditioned by certain conscious decisions that I judged as preferable in order to tackle the themes I set out to investigate, but also by my personal instinct, interest and curiosity.

[47] This brought the Athens Biennale to a somewhat weaker position in my eyes, as its hierarchical structure prevented the active participation it originally advertised in its press release, something that was more effectively taking place in the occupation a few meters away from it (Chapter 6.4.3).

Before proceeding with my two ethnographies, I first designate aspects of the biennial as it develops in terms of its global form. In Chapter 3, I offer a historical-theoretical account of the dominant formats and practices of contemporary biennials, discussing dominant theoretical frameworks and exploring archival material related to the two Documenta exhibitions from the 1990s (1992 and 1997). In Chapter 4, I describe how the economic crisis engendered a crisis of potential de-institutionalisation in the biennial format by mapping recent publications of critical art and curatorial theory, activist discourses as well as practices of resistance in the context of the recent economic crisis.

Part II

Biennials and Social Intervention

Chapter 3

The Discursive Exhibition: Social Visions, Curatorial Authorship and Documentas in the 1990s

3.1. The discursive exhibition

This chapter explores current characteristics of contemporary art biennials. Rather than mere sites of art display, biennials are conceived today as expanded and multi-layered platforms of public intervention. The notion of the, "discursive biennial" (Ferguson; Hoegsberg, 2010: 361; Adajania, 2012; Papastergiadis; Martin, 2011)[48] is a descriptive term I employ to refer to the post-1990s curatorial emphasis on the exhibition as a site of dialogue, conversation, exchange, education, pedagogy and open-ended encounters through symposia, events, participatory artworks, guided tours and lectures (O'Neill; Wilson, 2010). The turn to discursive exhibitionary formats in global art circuits, as art critic Mick Wilson comments, stands as an arena where relationships between practitioners, institutions and audiences become reframed and reformulated (2009: 206). A central point of this reformulation is the understanding of images, artistic or otherwise, as carriers and producers of social relations (instead of autonomous, singular expressions of gifted individuals) (Foster, 1988). Vision, then, the practice of looking at images, depends on the general contexts in which spectators and images are positioned. Since the 1990s, as this chapter discusses, such ideas strongly informed curating cultures, resulting in widespread conceptions of the art exhibition as a site of constructing rather than merely reflecting visions about the world. The main and indisputable authors of these constructed environments are the curators, possessing enhanced creative autonomy that often turns them to luminous and acknowledged semi-celebrities (O'Neill, 2012: 32). The discursive exhibition thus

[48] In light of the so-called 'educational turn' several attempts have been made to describe the characteristics of these types of shows. See for example the title O'Neill; Mick Wilson (2010) *Curating and the Educational Turn*. The name 'discursive exhibition' is probably the most widespread to describe this exhibitionary model and is preferred here as it also resonates with the notion of 'discourse' as found in the work of Foucault.

relates to a grasping of curating as an expanded practice that has the capacity, or indeed the duty, to think through its positioning within larger environments of social relations, as well as questions of political transformation, social change, equality, self-reflexivity, emancipation and pedagogy (O'Neill, 2012).

Designating a certain, "mode of address" (Sheikh, 2012: 6) regarding its format, purpose and objective, the discursive exhibition bears traits that are now omnipresent in all contemporary biennials, involving interdisciplinary educational events and expectations for public intervention. The discursive exhibition relates to Foucault and Gramsci, as discussed in Chapter 1, in several respects: First, via Foucault, and post-structuralism in general, it draws no substantial analytical distinction between art practice and theory; they can be both brought together under the label "discourse" (Wilson, 2009: 202). Foucault proposed the word discourse, preferring it from the abstract notion of ideology, so as to describe the embodied character of statements, ideas and beliefs that circulate around public space, and their capacity to shape modes of being (Miller; Rose, 2008: 3-4). Discourse, as a technical term, refers to a set of statements, propositions and ideas that suggest ways to think and talk about a subject that induces social practices, predispositions and tendencies. Contrary to the notion of ideology, which in Marxist tradition is regarded as a dominant system of ideas that distort reality by naturalising unequal social relationships (and thus is mostly repressive), discourses may be dominant as well as oppositional (Foucault, 1978: 101).[49] Thus, by being sites that enable discourses, instead of ideologies, discursive exhibitions can sit in antithetical ways to dominant cultures (Adajania, 2012: 50). Second, via Gramsci and postmodern Marxism, the socially-engaged discursive exhibition, perceives the social as an antagonistic terrain engaging in a kind of Gramscian, "war of position" (or a "passive revolution"), a war over meaning and values (e.g. Laclau; Mouffe, 2001: 36). In this context, by working within and taking

[49] As Foucault puts it in *History of Sexuality Vol.1*: "We must make allowance for the complex and unstable process whereby discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy" (1978:101).

advantage of the institutions of civil society, discursive exhibitions wish to foster social change and raise awareness. Finally, as we shall see later on, via both Foucault and Gramsci, these exhibitions employ a thematic and transient nature aiming to generate a body of knowledge, whether theoretical or practical, aesthetic or cognitive. This body of knowledge wishes to define and construct (most often in open-ended way) certain modalities of thinking and talking about certain issues and things. The discursive exhibition has a strong durational aspect, evolving over time and allowing, "for open-ended, cumulative processes of engagement, interruption and possibility" (O' Neill, 2012:128). As a temporal exercise in art and politics, it embodies, as the curator Nancy Adajania remarks, "the hope that the discourse generated can leak outward from the art world to form communicative engagements with the arenas of civil activism and political protest" (2012: 50). The self-reflective, open and dialogical exhibition form, now hegemonic in biennials, is, as we shall see, inseparably bound up with questions of social engagement that draw on post-colonial, minority and anti-capitalist critique.

Within this context, this chapter seeks to analyse how publications from the 1992 and 1997 editions of Documenta perform and relate to such shifts. I regard these publications as artefacts of special significance for several reasons. First of all, they derive from what is generally considered as *the* most influential recurring contemporary art exhibition that can safely be described as a field-constituting event, insofar as the field is defined as the global contemporary art landscape. Occurring every five years in the German town of Kassel, Documenta, the "art world's equivalent of the Olympics" (Stallabrass, 2012: 123), is generally thought to encapsulate the artistic and social particularities of extended cycles of time, speculate on and construct the nature of the art-to-come, as well as piece together a fragmented space, mobilising enormous artistic and intellectual forces to innovate on experimental modes of address (Downey, 2003: 85; Grasskamp, 1994: 163). In this sense, by recapitulating the artistic and social energies of a period of time, Documentas significantly impact the ways that art will be debated and practiced in the future. Second, *documenta X* (hereof *dx*) that took place in 1997 was radically different from

its predecessor, and proved particularly effective in spreading the model of the discursive exhibition (Ferguson; Hoegsberg, 2010: 365; Stallabrass, 2012; O'Neill, 2012). *dx*, reclaimed, according to the art critic Mónica Amor, "the political project of the avant-garde" and stood, "in opposition to…the structure of the mega-show" (1997: 95), vocalising disobedience against globalisation and capitalism (a practice that *Documenta 11* furthered in 2002 under the direction of Okwui Enwezor and the influence of post-colonial literature). As a side note, we should mention how this curatorial dissent arises in tandem with a renewed, more internationalist, left-wing agenda inquiring the dominance of liberal democracies and the so called 'end of history'.[50] This was globally formulated via the anti-globalization movement, culminating in the anti-G8 protests in Seattle in 1999 and Genoa in 2001, the inauguration of the World Social Forum in 2001 in Porto Alegre, Brazil and a new wave of Marxist scholarship clustered around Antonio Negri's and Michael Hardt's book *Empire* (2000). Questions of representation, identity and struggles over meaning that preoccupied critical artists during the 1980s and 1990s were situated under this light within the greater narratives of globalization and neoliberalism (Dimitrakaki, 2013). Finally, as the published material of biennials and other large scale exhibitions of contemporary art are integral parts of the discursive exhibition model (O' Neill, 2012; O'Neill; Wilson, 2010), the Documenta publications express significant archival artefacts informing contemporary biennial and curatorial cultures.

Overall, this chapter helps to historicise and outline a theoretical format and attitude dominating biennials and its circuits today. This reading informs the subsequent chapter that investigates a crisis in this curatorial model, as well as the following ethnographic chapters that explore such aspects in light of the social microcosms and places of the biennials I analyse.

[50] The idea of the 'end of history' refers to how the victory of capitalism over socialism welcomes the advent of a final form of human government based on the principles of liberal democracy. It was proposed by the American political scientist Francis Fukuyama in his 1992 book *The End of History and the Last Man*.

3.2 Vision in an expanded field

Questions surrounding the autonomy of vision and the visual in art and art history became pertinent in the 1960s and 1970s, resulting in the opening and broadening of the disciplines to fields of knowledge other than aesthetics and the philosophy of art, such as sociology, anthropology, linguistics, feminism, psychoanalysis and critical theory. Especially during the 1980s, the idea of a disembodied eye guaranteeing the autonomy and purity of vision, has been the focus of severe criticism by prominent art critics such as Rosalind Krauss, Hal Foster and Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, for reproducing Western art cannons or privileging mystified, autonomous art objects. Institutional settings, such as the American journal *October*, the British art theory journal *Block*, and the *Whitney Museum* in New York, among others, were key in making popular among artists, curators, scholars and publics a kind of ideology critique targeting the predominance of a Western, bourgeois and male-centred institution of art. The "pure gaze" of the cultural elitist, as Bourdieu notes, implies a supposedly unmediated encounter with art objects, standing apart from time, transformation and social relations (Bourdieu, 1984: 3). Bourgeois refinement and enculturation is here perceived as complicit with masculine superiority (Berger, 1972) or Western colonialism and cultural imperialism (Mosquera, 1992). The site where such ideas of cultural superiority thrive, according to the well-rehearsed account of the artist and critic Brian O' Doherty (1999), is the 'white cube'. According to O' Doherty, an art object in white-walled galleries is decontextualised, mystified, separated from the outside world, and in turn detached from, "everything that would detract from its own evaluation of itself" (1999:14). This form of display is here regarded as navel gazing, demarcating lines separating the civilized from the non-civilized 'other'.

For theorists working in visual culture and visual studies,[51] visual experience, first and foremost, had to be understood in culturally specific and not universal terms (Jay,

[51] As the anthropologist and art historian Christopher Pinney comments "the turn from 'art' to 'visual culture' signalled a greater inclusivity of subject matter (from formal aesthetics to quotidian visual

2002). The universality of the alleged superior sensibilities of the educated elites was questioned as the effect of power relations between different class, gender and ethnic formations. As the cultural critic Martin Jay points out, visual experience, "was never innocent, even in the most exclusive precincts of high art" (2012: 135), but a practice to be read in relation to "a multi-layered context, involving modes of production, gender relations, and technological developments" (2012: 135). Moments of visual encounter are seen here as contingent upon the different systems of meaning, values and hierarchies in which spectators and objects are implicated (Foster, 1988; Bryson, 1983; Berger, 1972). Vision then, for visual culture theorists, is a socially constructed practice, subject to an expanded field of social relations that involved prior, culturally specific habits, predispositions and points of view (Krauss, 1979; Bryson, 1988). The "vision of the natural human eye", to recount Jay again, "is always filtered through discursive screens" (2002: 273) that mediate our understanding of what we see, the ways we see it and the emotional investments we build around it. As such, the artistic image, similarly to all other images, cannot communicate singular meanings to the viewer as there are no universal criteria against which to gauge the encounter with such an image. The interpretation of this encounter is never neutral, or the result of a good eye; it refers to a process filtered through linguistic conventions that decisively condition moments of reception. This epistemological proposition of visual experience as a "social fact", as Hal Foster put it in his influential edited volume *Vision and Visuality* (1988: ix), allows for a re-conceptualization of the art exhibition. Instead of being a neutral space of presentation of high art, it emerges as a space that produces and enables meanings and socialities.[52]

The exhibition format's turn to discourse also owes a debt to the widespread institutionalization of the conceptual art practices of the 1960s and 1970s (Wilson, 2009: 205). From the post-war period onwards and up until the 1970s, Conceptual Art

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representation) and a theoretical adjustment that emphasised cultural practice rather than artists' intentionalities and aesthetic virtue" (2006: 131).

[52] For Irit Rogoff, visual culture questions art history's conventional procedures, its connoisseurship and enthusiasm for 'a good eye', offering instead "an understanding of embodied knowledge, of disputed meanings, of the formation of scholastic discourses of material value, of viewing subject positions within culture, and of the role of vision in the formation of the structures of desire" (1996: 190).

grounded its raison d'être in what Buchloh calls an, "aesthetic of administration" (1990: 105), that is to say an aesthetic that replaced the painterly and sculptural insistence on the optical qualities residing in the objects themselves, with the conceptual insistence on the artwork as an, "analytic proposition", an arrangement of linguistic signs (Buchloh, 1990: 107). Such an aesthetic, according to Buchloh, was meant to assault and ultimately transform, not only the visual regime of artistic representation, but also the positioning of the artist in the social division of labour, the artwork's commodity status and generally its forms of production, consumption and distribution. As an effect, the expansion and proliferation of this type of artistic work brings forward a reliance on skills of an intellectual nature. Accordingly, as discussed in Chapter 1, the post-studio artistic labour process is often characterised as essentially immaterial, in the sense that the artist does not transform elements of material reality through traditional handcrafted skills (Gielen, 2009; Roberts, 2007). Rather, the actual labour that relates to the display of the work can be outsourced to specialised firms of fabricators, gallery assistants or, in participatory works, the audiences (Petry, 2011).

The decade of the 1990s is important for the broad spread and circulation of such epistemological concerns across academic art departments and artistic sites (Cherry, 2004). Apart from the vast differences in the two Documenta editions that we shall explore later on, this decade also saw the birth of a series of new biennials sharing similar points of departure. A prominent example is Manifesta, the roving European Biennial, that started operating in 1996 and is now one of the most prestigious sites of contemporary art display. In its first edition in Rotterdam, the catalogue assured the spectator that, "you will be amused and bewildered, you will not find paintings or monumental sculptures, you will not see a traditional presentation, it will not be a form of art involved only with itself, with art".[53] From the 'Info Lab', a separate platform of dialogue and exchange included in *Manifesta 2*, to the proposal to build an

[53] This is an excerpt from the announcement of the 1st Manifesta that took place June 9 to August 19, 1996 in Rotterdam. It can be found at the following address: http://www.manifesta.org/manifesta1/index.html

art school in Nicosia, Cyprus for the -eventually cancelled- *Manifesta 6*,[54] Manifesta proved foundational in Europe for opening-up biennials to public engagements. In a likewise rhetoric, Berlin Biennale's first edition that took place in 1998 (but was already inaugurated at *dX* in 1997 with the project *Hybrid WorkSpace*), wished to, "highlight the permanently changing character of the city and foster interdisciplinary collaborations between individual artists over the course of the biennale".[55] Under this light, the art exhibition is conceived as a site where dialogue and experimental educational formats circulate, a process described as the, ''educational turn'' in contemporary art (O'Neill; Wilson, 2010). Art display here becomes part of a broader knowledge production, with lectures, seminars, publications, tour guides, and discussion platforms becoming the "main event" and performing a central rather than supportive role to the show (O'Neill; Wilson, 2010: 12). The desire of 2012 Bucharest Biennale, a more recent event, to become, ''a form of agency within the city'' through connecting, "to other disciplines, longer-term involvement by artists through specific relationships with educational partner institutions and sites, and elements of surprise and playfulness in addition to critical debates"[56] is very eloquent in this regard.

One can draw another connection between this exhibition format and the rise of relational aesthetics at the end of the 1990s. Although criticised for ignoring antagonism (Bishop, 2004), side-lining questions of political economy (Martin, 2007) and uncritically praising the figure of the artist as nomad (Hatherley, 2009), discussions around relational aesthetics figured the artist and the art exhibition as enablers of potentially liberating social relations. Relational art, propagated by the French curator and art critic Nicolas Bourriaud (1998), one of the curators of the 3rd Athens Biennale, conceived the artist-as-administrator, or recycler, re-programmer,

[54] *Manifesta 6* was cancelled due to the tensions arising from its efforts to reconcile Greek and Turkish populations living in the island of Cyprus.
[55]This is an excerpt from the announcement of the 1st Berlin Biennale that took place from September 30 December 30, 1998 in Berlin. The whole announcement can be found at the following address: http://www.berlinbiennale.de/blog/en/1st-6th-biennale/1st-berlin-biennale
[56] This phrase is used in the announcement of the 5th Bucharest Biennale to describe the latter's role in Bucharest's urban setting. The whole text can be found at the following address: http://www.biennialfoundation.org/2011/06/the-5th-bucharest-international-biennial-for-contemporary-art-generated-by-pavilion-journal-for-politics-culture-set-for-25-may-22-july-2012-under-the-curatorship-of-anne-barlow-ukusa-re/

ideas-manager, bricoleur, and monteur who rearranges, reorders, reshuffles and ultimately glues together certain signs so as to produce new meanings that are contextual or can be contextualised by a curator at a later stage. Such an emphasis on discursive formations that cluster around the image or the happening instead of their figural qualities (Bryson, 1983) privileges the practices that take place around the object and not within it, practices that concern "the sort of social relations artistic practice can put in motion" (Cuenca, 2012: 6). These processes remind of what the artist and critic Alfredo Crammerotti calls "aesthetic journalism", where the rationale of artistic production is, "geared more towards the 'effect to be produced' rather than a 'fact to be understood'" (Crammerotti, 2009: 22). Using another definition to speak about this phenomenon, the cultural theorist Shannon Jackson invokes the concept of the, "performative turn" to describe recent artistic practice and its, "fundamental interest in the nature of sociality" (Jackson, 2011: 2). Here the principal question among art professionals becomes 'what can an object do?' Indeed, during the past fifteen years there is a huge expansion of exhibition practices that revolve around post-object forms of knowledge production, pedagogy and education. In our case the question could become 'what can an exhibition do?' In its attempts to reconcile art and grounded political action via versatile formats and varying methodologies, the discursive exhibition aims to provide, in Adajania's terms a, "sort of bridge…between the domain of symbolic action, institutionalized as culture, and the arena of practical, productive politics" (2012: 49).

Here, it is useful to note that this trend of reducing visual experience to discursive, social constructions invokes a persistent critical reaction within biennial cultures. Or, as Jay puts it, "however much they are [the images] connotatively deflected by the magnetic field of culture, they remain in excess of it" (2002: 275). This excessive behaviour of images, what W.J.T. Mitchell calls the "surplus value" of images (Mitchell: 2002: 1), or Janet Wolff the "power-of-images discourse" (Wolff, 2012: 10), transmitting "embodied experience and affect" (Wolff, 2012: 11), is fundamentally inscribed in the modes of looking at art, raising a barrier that

differentiates art exhibitions from other types of events.[57] Thus, while within the discursive exhibition model objects and events point to the production of discursive environments, the idea of an art space as a space that transcends rational deliberation is an ever-lasting and privileged interpretational device.[58] For instance, even a radically discursive exhibition like the 2008 Sao Paolo Biennial, which included almost no artworks and consisted of, "the exhibit of a void space at the pavilion's second floor", "a plaza or open space for meetings and events", "a large library*"* and *"*a series of publications"[59] was still read as a creative effort that points somewhere else, bearing the expectations of an art event and not, for instance, of a conference. The curatorial decision to eliminate art and produce a self-reflective and radically dialogical show has been conceived as a conceptual gesture in itself[60] and as Ferguson and Hoegsberg point out, was, "probably only really appreciated by the already devoted art audience" (2010:367). Thus, as we shall see in Chapter 5, it is no surprise that when the 7th Berlin Biennale hosts within the gallery space a social movement this is mainly perceived in aesthetic terms.

However, directing attention away from the exclusiveness of the art object to the field of social relations that regulate its experience, production and circulation is as a political gesture in itself. Indeed, the demystification of, "the hidden structures of the artworld" as the curator Seth Siegelaub (2006: 6) puts it in his work on the practice of conceptual artists of the 1960s, can be read in Marxian terms as shedding light on

[57] The idea of finding agency in the objects themselves, independently of their discursive contexts, is lately re-inserted to curatorial and artistic worlds through the so-called object-oriented ontology and the philosophical movement of speculative realism. Examples of large scale exhibitions influenced from such epistemological positions include dOCUMENTA 13 (2012) as well as the 55th Venice Biennale (2013).

[58] It is no coincidence that one of the most quoted theorists in this new paradigm of art-as-education is the French philosopher Jacque Ranciere and especially his work on pedagogy. In his 1991 work titled 'The Ignorant Schoolmaster' he advocates a teaching approach based on the teacher's ignorance that challenges predetermined top-down learning architectures. Phrases often used in post-optic art contexts, such as 'non-didactic pedagogies', 'process-based knowledge' and 'non-instrumental encounters', similarly point to a practice of learning that is not based on certain criteria, taking the form of open-ended confrontations with no expectations for tangible outcomes.

[59] These phrases come from the official announcement of the 28th Sao Paolo Biennial that took place from October 26 to December 6, 2008. The whole text can found at the following address:http://universes-in-universe.de/car/sao-paulo/eng/2008/index.htm

[60] The curator Jens Hofmann, for instance, in a text for Frieze speaks about the gesture of curators to stage a self-reflective show amidst budget cuts in the Biennial as producing "a sophisticated artistic and curatorial discourse" https://www.frieze.com/issue/review/28th_sao_paulo_biennial/

concealed social relations that condition the appearance of supposedly autonomous objects.[61] Marx described commodity fetishism in similar ways. When entering circulation in the exchange process, commodities appear as mystical things, "autonomous figures with a life of their own…apart and outside the producers" (1976: 165), concealing the social relations of their production i.e. relations of domination, alienation and exploitation. The mystical form of the commodity takes an, "objective form of a thing outside the eye" (Marx, 1976: 165), a form withdrawn from its place in production.[62] In this sense, the transition to this relational thinking is marked by a move from a preoccupation with objects, "that exist out of time and transformation" to an understanding of objects as facilitators of social relations themselves, "in constant flux and transformation" (Graeber, 2001: 50). Before exploring how such ideas were performed in practice in *dX*, I briefly turn to the re-adjustment of the role of the curators within these settings. Perhaps the single most important development for the above transformation of the exhibition space is the emergence of the curator as a figure of enhanced autonomy, who is now hailed as a type of content manager or mega-creator.

3.3 The Curator as Author

According to Foucault, "unlike a proper name …the name of the author remains at the contours of texts- separating one from the other, defining their form, and characterizing their mode of existence" (1984: 123). As such, it does not only impress an intellectual signature to certain texts, endowing them with distinct qualities, but is also an, "initiator of discursive practices", able to delimit areas of knowledge from which other ideas, practices and concepts can be introduced (Foucault, 1984: 131-

[61] For instance, John Berger, who is generally regarded as one of the "founding fathers" of the discipline of visual culture, especially with his *Ways of Seeing* (1972) book that was based on a BBC TV show, is a Marxist art historian.

[62] In his text 'The Sadness of Post-Workerism' (2008) the anthropologist David Graeber argues that Marx's most important and enduring contribution in social sciences is the idea that "the world does not really consist (as capitalists would encourage us to believe) of a collection of discrete objects, that can then be bought and sold, but of actions and processes." The text can be found online at the following address: http://libcom.org/library/sadness-post-workerism

132). The elevation of certain curators to authors, as understood here by Foucault, is a relatively recent phenomenon, gradually established since the mid-1990s. Superstar curators of today (we can mention here indicatively Charles Esche, Nicolas Bourriaud or Okwui Enwezor) not only possess the capacity to frame through their name expectations about exhibitions, but are also to enable areas of knowledge related to their past practice. In this regard, from a, "carer and behind-the-scenes arbiter", the curator, according to the critic Paul O'Neill, takes a, "more centralized position on a much broader stage, with a creative, political and active part to play in the production, mediation and dissemination of art itself" (2007: 12). Thematic shows played an important role towards this direction. As O' Neill again argues, large-scale thematic shows increasingly came to be understood as, "the sole work of the 'curator-as-auteur'" and the curatorial act as a, "total work of art" (2012: 5).[63] Similar such shows were crafted already from the 1960s by freelance curators who were independent of fixed posts in museums (O' Neil, 2012: 14). This unbinding of the curator from the bureaucracy of the institution of the museum and its collections was decisive for establishing curating as a practice that involved some degree of autonomous creative agency.

Indicatively, key for thinking through the exhibition as a medium in itself were shows like '557,087' curated by Lucy Lippard in 1969 in Seattle and 'Fluxus Concert, Happening and Fluxus', by Harald Szeemann, in 1970 in Cologne (O'Neill, 2012: 14-16). Harold Szeeman's *Documenta 5* of 1972, in particular, is widely regarded as a landmark moment in exhibition practice for introducing a kind of increased curatorial authority, typical of the one that is at play today, where the curator is seen as a highly-esteemed initiator of discourse (Richter, 2013; Skrebowski, 2010: 76). Historically speaking, *Documenta 5* took place in a period of upheavals related to the varied social struggles of the 1960s: feminism, the black revolutionary movement and gay rights, giving rise to experimental art forms. In the context of curating, the influence of the early avant-garde practices, and more importantly those of Marcel Duchamp, was

[63] Very useful reference points for this discussion include Paul O' Neil's *Curating Subjects* (2007) and *The Culture of Curating and the Curating of Culture (s)* (2012).

crucial for conceiving acts of administering, selecting and arranging as meriting artistic and thus authorial value. Since selection can be regarded as an artistic gesture in itself, a curator's choice of artworks, ideas and events can claim an equal standing for achieving authorial status.[64] The critic Dorothee Richter comments on how the widely reproduced picture of Szeemann taken on the last day of *Documenta 5*, in which he was surrounded by artists and audiences, brought to mind religious images of sacred figures, promoting the idea of a gifted individual who possesses higher creative capacities than the rest of the participants. As Richter puts it, "the pose adopted by Harald Szeemann on the last day of *Documenta 5* established the occupational image of the authorial curator as an autonomous and creative producer of culture, who organised exhibitions independently of institutions" (2013: 42). In the same exhibition, tensions between artist and curator were vocally expressed, perhaps for the first time within such an institutional setting, with a polemic launched against Szeemann by artists participating in the show, including Robert Smithson and Daniel Buren (Skrebowski, 2010: 76). As the latter put it, "the exhibition is tending increasingly towards the exhibition of the exhibition as a work of art and no longer as an exhibition of works of art" (Buren, 1972 [quoted in Richter, 2013: 46]).

This tendency to regard the curator as the grand auteur of a big artwork is today reflected in the art world's common sense, having been supported institutionally across various sites. For example, the noted curatorial theory journal *The Exhibitionist*, which began operating in 2010, has drawn analogies between the curator and the auteur-film director. In the first issue of the journal, the editors perceived their endeavour as the curatorial equivalent of *Cahiers du Cinéma*,[65] advocating a, "shared belief in the idea of the author, which applies to exhibition making just as much as it

[64] For instance, the art theorist Boris Groys suggests in his text 'Politics of Installation', published for the on-line magazine *e-flux*, that "today, there is no longer any "ontological" difference between making art and displaying art," and in this sense, "in the context of contemporary art, to make art is to show things as art" (2009). Later on in this text he sees an analytical distinction to be made between an "installation artist" and a "curator" based on the former's capacity to display an environment without having the need to justify or explain their decisions. His text can be found at the following address: http://www.e-flux.com/journal/politics-of-installation/

[65] *Cahiers du Cinéma* is a French film magazine, founded in 1951, which popularised the notion of the cinema director as an *auteur*, an author with an individualised filmic style, creative vision and signature.

does to filmmaking."[66] As they comment, "the application of the *auteur* theory to curating has been one of the most remarkable developments in our field in recent years, and it finds another level of urgency, intensity, and self-reflection in these pages."[67] Apart from *The Exhibitionist* a number of other curatorial theory journals and magazines circulating during the past few years, such as the *On Curating*, the *Manifesta Journal*, or the scholarly *Journal of Curatorial Studies*, as well as the proliferation of MA's and MFA's on curating across Western universities, expose the institutionally established idea of the curator as author.

Figure 3.1 Harald Szeemann at the last day of *Documenta 5*

The authorial role of the curator in the discursive paradigm is always accompanied by a display of self-reflexivity. The movement of New Institutionalism, as we saw in

[66] This phrase is taken by the first editorial of the magazine, titled 'Overture' and written by the curator Jens Hofmann, the founder of the magazine. The editorial can be found at the following address: http://the-exhibitionist.com/archive/exhibitionist-1/
[67] *Ibid.*

Chapter 1, expressing an imperative to critically re-engage with art institutions in order to hijack and transform them from within is key in this regard.[68] As the curator Claire Doherty notes, New Institutionalism is a, "self-reflexive process, by which the role and function of the art institution is brought into question", and similarly to the discursive biennial that concerns us here is, "characterised by the rhetoric of temporary / transient encounters, states of flux and open-endedness" (2004: 1). As we saw in Chapter 1 and Hlavajova's text, the opening of art to areas of social transformation seems to renounce the capacity of the curator to fully control all aspects of the exhibition process. The curator certainly becomes an author, but a partial one, an author who admits from the outset that what they will produce is not an outcome of an individual genius, but one tainted by the messiness of power relations, economic dependencies and institutional agendas. In other words, curators are authors that have to constantly strategise, negotiate and compromise in order to realise their larger vision.

3.4 Fragments of 1990s Documentas: Publications in Documenta 9 and X

As the British art theorist Claire Bishop points out, there, "lies an aesthetic and intellectual chasm" (194: 2012) between *Documenta 9* (hereof *D9*), curated by the curator Jan Hoet and *dX*, curated by the art historian Catherine David. By way of comparing and contrasting their respective exhibition's published material, in the remaining part of this chapter, I discuss how this 'chasm' ideally performs the modalities of the discursive exhibition and self-reflexive curating as described above.[69]

[68] Although there has not been a concrete study yet on New Institutionalism and curatorial self-reflexivity, the relations between the two can be traced in any text concerning the movement.
[69] In its online post 'Politics/Poetics: Documenta X' the research, publication and exhibition project *Former West* argues that the catalogue of Documenta X went "far beyond any traditional catalogue and fundamentally changes the way that contemporary art exhibitions make use of publications in years to

D9 that took place- as all other editions before it- in Kassel published a rather conventional for its time three-volume catalogue containing various texts and images referencing the artworks displayed in the exhibition. This catalogue was largely descriptive and in many ways, principally through the qualities of the texts and their strict separation from images, maintained the idea of Art with capital A- a privileged sphere separate from the rest of the social activities. The images of the catalogue largely represent the artworks displayed in the exhibition and, as such, the catalogue functioned as an illustration of the show. None of the three volumes was titled, furthering the impression that they were mostly conceived as illustrative devices. The first volume contained texts that accompanied the displayed artworks and the other two their pictures and alphabetical listings. All texts contained in the first volume were about the artworks themselves as art historical objects rather than about their politics, or what they do in the context in which they are presented. The question of 'what the exhibition can do' for enabling some kind of social and political intervention, prevalent in the exhibition model discussed above, was nowhere addressed in the texts.

What is also indicative is the professional background of the writers. The first volume contained essays by the art historian and art theorist Denys Zacharopoulos, the art historian and curator Bart De Baere and the art critic and curator Pier Luigi Tazzi, who were all part of the curatorial team. Moreover, it contained smaller texts or experimental writing pieces by the art journalist Claudia Herstatt, the American author Joyce Carol Oates and the poet Jacques Roubaud, as well as excerpts from a conversation taking place on April 1, 1992 between the renowned German theatre director Heiner Muller and Jan Hoet titled 'Insights into the Process of Production'. As this list indicates, all the participants were in one way or another professionally related to art, a gesture that makes the catalogue more bound up with the disciplines of art and art history. Discourses on social transformation or social equality were not present in the catalogue, or, whenever glimpses of such discourses appeared, they

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come." The full post can be found at the following address: http://www.formerwest.org/ResearchLibrary/PoliticsPoeticsDocumentaXthebook

were mostly looked at from the formalist, rather exclusionary, perspective of 'high art'.[70]

In contrast, five years later, the book of *dX*, a weighty volume of 830 pages titled **'**Politics and Poetics', transgressed from its usual role as an illustrative supplement to become a literary performance in itself.[71] Texts that referred to variations of Marxism and critical discourses other than art literally skyrocketed. The publication included a ground-breaking selection of politically engaged texts from authors of diverse social, scholarly and cultural backgrounds. For instance, there was a section devoted on Gramsci with texts by the Marxist theorist Nikos Poulantzas and Jean Thibaudeau, the post-colonial author Edward Said, and the Italian Communist Palviro Togliatti; texts on Hiroshima by the French writer and film director Margaret Duras and the Japanese film critic and historian Tadao Sato; essays on postcolonialism by the French writer Albert Camus and the anti-colonial psychiatrist Frantz Fanon; writings on the 1956 Budapest uprising by the political theorist Claude Lefort and the French philosopher Francois Lyotard; texts on Maurice Blanchot and Foucault; on world economy by the Marxist sociologist Immanuel Wallerstein; on the political potential of art; and on a critique on the institution of the state by the anarchist anthropologist Pierre Clastres. The form of the catalogue was rather unconventional, informed by practices of collage, juxtaposing content from a wide range of media such as photography, cinema and text. As the editors put it to justify their practice, such "effects of juxtaposition…upset the strict divisions between work, document, and commentary, creating a multifaceted, polyphonic structure" (1997: 13). While in *D9* the published material mostly functions as a reflection of the show, in *dX* the book functions as an object that performs a political statement.

[70] It needs to be noted, however, that it was one of the first times in the history of exhibitions of contemporary art where a catalogue included a text by a political philosopher. This was an essay by the philosopher Cornelius Castoriadis called 'The crisis of Marxism and the crisis of Politics' – a five-page essay on why politics that make claims to the notion of 'historical necessity' should be abandoned and why Marx's belief in 'progress' through the rational mastery over nature is a myth.

[71]One of the most discussed aspects of *documenta X* that mirrors the 'discursivity' and temporality of today's biennials was the programme *100 Days/ 100 Guests*. Each day a thinker, filmmaker, artist or philosopher offered a lecture or presentation in *documenta* premises. As the critic Monica Amor put it, *documenta X* "discursively constituted itself as a 'cultural event' imbued with the political aspirations that characterised postwar neo-avantgarde practices." (1997: 95).

Apart from the morphological terms, one can notice substantial differences in the language the curators employ to refer to their practice and rationalise their aims and objectives. Jan Hoet performed a conventional idea of authorship in which he seems to *possess* the art display. On the contrary, Catherine David, the curator of *dX*, with her focus on montage and intertextuality presented herself as an expanded discursive agent with a role to *facilitate* open-ended and socially engaged encounters. For instance, throughout the forward notice for *D9*'s catalogue, Jan Hoet refers to the exhibition as *his* own work, ignoring the contributions of the rest of the three co-curators (Denys Zacharopoulos, Bart De Baere and Pier Luigi Tazzi). Note for example the following passages written by Hoet in the first volume of the catalogue:

My exhibition is an offer and a challenge; it is an invitation and an argument that can be experienced through the individual encounter with art. If a text that accompanies an exhibition is to be anything beyond self-justification – *defending the work for which one has assumed such total and minute responsibility* – then the only statements that count are those that *direct the eye straight back to the exhibition itself.* (Hoet, 1992: 17)

My documenta takes the artist and artist's work as its sole point of departure. Organizing an exhibition is always a battle, a struggle for every work, an engagement to the point of physical exhaustion (1992: 19)

This exhibition is *my* text; every work that is contributed is a postulate; and the discourse unfolds as one walks through the spaces. It shows how one can think in and within reality, and it shows how one does not necessarily need a blank piece of paper in order to think; it shows art. (1992: 21)

I wonder, sometimes, whether I really want people to read what I think. I find talking more important. I want to see the power that dwells within art become a reality within our society. I am sure that society needs art more than ever (1992: 21, italics mine in all the above)

Hoet is self-represented as an all-encompassing authorial voice that permeates the exhibition and assumes for it absolute responsibility. Following the anthropologist James Leach, we can attribute to Hoet a form of "possessive individualism" (Leach, 2007:99), expressed in a neo-romantic, heroic fashion. In fact, the same spirit of

individualism runs throughout his text, reproduced in phrases as the 'individual encounter with art' and directing 'the eye straight back to the exhibition itself'. In these excerpts the visual experience seems to have a straightforward, unmediated and unproblematic relationship with the eye's retina without making allusions to 'discursive screens' standing between the eye and society. If we compare the above passages with those found in the introduction for the short guide in *dX* by the curator Catherine David, we see how five years later the curator's individuality is denounced:

> In full awareness of these limits, *we* have sought to provide a multiplicity of spaces and a broadened platform of discussion…To complement the exhibition in the city *we* have published a book …Finally, in the framework of the "100 Days - 100 Guests" program *we* have invited artists and cultural figures from the world over… (David, 1997: 4, italics mine)

The 'we' here, while obviously purporting to encompass the assistant curators, is also meant to question, at least rhetorically, the irrefutable authority of the curator as the sole author of the event.[72] Apart from bringing to task individual curatorial authority, there is also a further element in David's discourse that questions the impartial nature of the objects included in the exhibition (and we can assume objects in general). In the blurb in the catalogue cover we are informed that, "this book is necessarily incomplete, and necessarily biased by the subjectivity of those who contributed to it" and at the same time, "internally fissured by the attitudes of utopian or critical intransigence which characterize the relations of art to the real" (David, 1997). David here recognises the biases of the creators (including her own) as an important and unavoidable aspect of the exhibition, further acknowledging that the end result may also reflect attitudes characterising the institution of art. In a typical post-structuralist fashion, she shows, or at least she does not attempt to conceal, that what the viewer encounters is conditioned by forces and fields implicated in certain institutional arrangements. In this sense the curator cannot make claims for the absolute responsibility of the aesthetic result through her own unmediated effort.

[72] This rhetoric of course conflicts with how David is today considered *the* author of *dX* within artistic milieus, and thus, in a Foucauldian sense, as the initiator of a certain discursive practice.

Similarly, there are noticeable differences in the ways the two respected curators perceive what the aims of the exhibitions are. For Hoet, the strength of an exhibition "lies in revealing energies that are the motive forces of the world, energies that maintain life in motion, that manifest -for a single instant- beauty in its pure state" (1992: 19). There is a desire to *uncover* the hidden beauty lying beneath the surface of things. Comparing this passage with the excerpts from David's short guide to the *dx*, a leaflet that was distributed in the press, one once again notices important differences:

What can be the meaning and purpose of a documenta today, at the close of this century, when biennials and other large-scale exhibitions have been called into question and often for very good reasons? It may seem paradoxical or deliberately outrageous to envision a critical confrontation with the present in the framework of an institution that over the past twenty years has become a Mecca for tourism and cultural consumption. Yet the pressing issues of today make it equally presumptuous to abandon all ethical and political demands (1997).

The argument used in the passage above forecasts what will eventually become a formal curatorial attitude within 'New Institutionalism' and current modes of criticality. Hoet's idea of the curatorial gesture, as uncovering some hidden beauty, stands miles apart from today's curatorial statements.

What also seems to be radically different are the ways in which the idea of art and the artist are framed. Hoet's statement elevates the artist to the status of the shaman, where, the artist, similar to the curator, seems to have the capacity to *reveal* hidden beauty, ecstasies and world-energies:

Artists do not investigate the aesthetics of things; they reveal the hidden beauty, the essence, the ecstasy …The encounter with art begins at the point where the eyes reconstruct the artwork… (1992: 17-19).

The eye here is pure, as in Bourdieu's 'pure gaze', having the capacity to initiate and communicate directly with the artist's work. While the artist's gesture, according to this narrative, is redeeming, mediating between a motionless world and its forthcoming progress, this redemptive act seems to emerge out of an unmediated, inner need. The art objects are magical and mystified manifestations made by gifted

but unruly individuals. The curator, for Hoet, must play a disciplinary role and the exhibition an assembly-line delimiting the uncontrollable energies that can be released by the inner necessities of the artists:

> But for me there has only ever been one starting-point, and that is art, artists and their works: things created by inner necessity, which have sought and made a place for themselves […] Artists are the motors of the world; but they need the rest of the vehicle if their power is to become a propulsive force and not merely run for waste. This exhibition is intended to be a drive-belt (Hoet, 1992: 19)

In contrast to this conception of the artist as a Dionysian shaman and the curator as their Apollonian counterpart, David regards the artist as one who investigates, an interrogator expected to denaturalise the given state of things instead of revealing their hidden truth. In terms more familiar to critical theory where truth appears as construction rather than revelation, the artist in David's narrative problematises and poses questions about the given state of things:

> For most of these figures (some of the artists participated in the show), the critical dimension appears in a radical questioning of the categories of the "fine arts" and of the anthropological foundations of Western culture, through a subversion of the traditional hierarchies and divisions of knowledge (1997: 25).

Again here, there is a tremendous difference in how the aims of each exhibition are articulated: in Hoet's expressionist narrative the artist through a heroic gesture is expected to reveal true essences that inhere in the world, while in David's constructivist narrative the artist is expected to engage in political actions where no underlying essence seems to inhabit things.

Apart from the aims of the exhibitionary and artistic gesture, another difference lies in the ways that the general surrounding context is described by Hoet and David respectively. In Hoet's narrative, the actors of the world seem to equally participate in a process of endless circulation of bodies and information; hierarchies and power relations are unproblematically left outside of the picture; everyone seems to have

access to everything; the world is demystified and in the process of becoming a unified whole:

This world has grown smaller: the 'global village' that was outlined by McLuhan now forms the horizon of our everyday lives. *Almost everything is available; we have access in seconds to information, impressions and experiences of every kind.* The world is atomized; the holistic vision is increasingly disappearing from our lives. Everything has become an image mediatized. Our contacts with the world outside ourselves are concentrated in the eyes and in the immaterial experiences that they convey. No longer does the world seem alien: it has become a kind of object, a thing we think about we can be sure of….We feel secure because we have risk-free visual access to all phenomena, however distant (1992: 18, italics mine).

By invoking McLuhan's global village Hoet suggests a flat concept of humanity where all phenomena are accessible to everyone. For David on the other hand, the world is asymmetrical, determined by forces and power relations of political and economic nature. Globalization is not presented as a linear process; it includes as much as it excludes and exploits:

In the age of globalization and of the sometimes violent social, economic, and cultural transformations it entails, contemporary artistic practices, condemned for their supposed meaninglessness or "nullity" by the likes of Jean Baudrillard, are in fact a vital source of imaginary and symbolic representations whose diversity is irreducible to the near total economic domination of the real. The stakes here are no less political than aesthetic - at least if one can avoid reinforcing the mounting spectacularization and instrumentalization of "contemporary art" by the culture industry, where art is used for social regulation or indeed control, through the aestheticization of information or through forms of debate that paralyze any act of judgment in the immediacy of raw seduction or emotion (what might be called "the Benetton effect") (1997: 17).[73]

[73] In fact, David's language becomes even more polemic as she loathes how "the end of "real communism" in 1989, with German reunification and Soviet disintegration, is greeted by media triumphalism and a new celebration of the commodity aesthetic", while pointing out that these ideologies "cannot veil the extreme uncertainty of the present, dominated by the expansion of unbrindled capitalism, the reassertion of neocolonial relations between the economic centres and a fractured multitude of 'peripheries', the fading of the nation-state as an effective structure for the expression of popular sovereignty, and the emergence of identity groups as vectors of consensus and conflict across the world" (1997: 25).

The attempt to reverse the 'end of ideology' discourse of the post-1989 era is obvious as is the resemblance to the critical curating that appears in the years to follow. With its politically-charged and self-reflexive attitude, *dX* mirrored a climate of escalating dissent against economic globalization. In this sense, the event was warmly received by factions of the left and in fact signalled a leftist mode of engaging with biennials as sites of actualising Marxist and critical theory. In his 1998 article for the *New Left Review* titled 'Radical Art at documenta X' Masao Miyoshi asserted that *dX* "was an extraordinary event", mounting, "a fearless challenge to today's general premise and practice of art, and indeed to the entire art and culture industry", whose consequences "could turn out to be truly important historically" (1998: 151). Indeed, his expectations were fulfilled, for apart from making *dX*, "a kind of global standard for criticality",[74] this exhibition brought to the forefront a discussion of the potential of biennials to enact radical politics.

Interestingly, the fear of a spectacularisation and instrumentalisation of critical art practices is always already present. The significant question is, to go back to Chapter 1, *who* is to judge whether the show has managed to transgress its co-optation or not. And, in fact, *why* should one even accept such a standard of measurement for evaluating the politics of an art show in the first place? The discursive exhibition model that frames vision as a process constructed by social conventions, media representations and hegemonic effects poses the question of transgression emphatically and in a very particular way. As vision is not related to the authority of a pure gaze, but socially constructed, the role of the discursive exhibition is not to reveal beauty through special objects, as Hoet would suggest, but to enable counter-hegemonic environments that can construct a situation that will lead to a transformed consciousness.

The tensions formulated in *dX* between the socially interventionist tendencies of an art biennial and their possible appropriation from economic forces echo other critical

[74] This quote is taken from the text 'The Sublime Whiff of Criticality' by Radical Culture Research Collective posted in the website *post.thing.net* in 2007. The full text can be found at the following address: http://post.thing.net/node/1741

curatorial efforts of recent years. This problematic between the economic and the cultural-political, or the instrumental and the non-instrumental, holds forth among biennials cultures and their critical readings. The next chapter accounts for how during the period of the recent economic crisis a new vocabulary, ethnical framework and militancy are introduced, disturbing certain aspects of the discursive model and making the tensions inhabiting it more apparent.

Chapter 4

The biennial in crisis? Mapping fields of tension in the post-recession art world

4.1 Challenging the priority of the discursive

When the New York-based art critic Ben Davis began his *9.5 Theses on Art and Class* with the phrase, "class is an issue of fundamental importance for arts" (2013: 27), he expressed a belief widespread among critical visual art landscapes in the years following the 2007-8 recession in the U.S.A. and the Eurozone crisis.[75] Wishing to expand, modify and challenge the perception of the art exhibition as primarily a site of discourse, this belief resulted in an intensified questioning of the political role of art institutions and their correlation with social inequality and privilege. Decisively affecting the intellectual milieu of both biennials I explore, this questioning led to an increasingly expanded understanding of the art exhibition as a site of economy rather than one of discourse (Roberts, 2007; Sholette, 2010). The political exhibition is here related not only to the discourses it mobilises, but also to the ways it treats more conventional issues, such as class, labour and 'the common'. Similar debates on art and economy have flourished in socially engaged art since at least the 2002 *Documenta 11*.[76] This signalled the incorporation of Autonomist Marxist theory in art circuits,[77] expressing a more realist framework, for example, in its emphasis on class

[75] Eurozone crisis refers to the economic crisis starting in 2010 that affects the countries of Europe and especially the ones of the European South.

[76] The curator of *Documenta 11*, Okwui Enwezor, crucially conceived artistic resistance within the context of economic globalization, framing it within what Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt have called "Empire" in their book of the same title (2000).

[77] Autonomism refers to a school of Marxism that first emerged in the 1960s and 1970s in Italy. Autonomist Marxists stressed that working class resistance precedes capital control and disciplining. Thus labour has autonomy over capital, but also over the state, parties or unions. After the 1990s, and especially with the publication of Hardt's and Negri's *Empire* in 1999, Autonomist theory has seen a resurgence. A main claim, often incorporated in art debates, is that economic production is now increasingly becoming immaterial, affective or aesthetic and thus artists are spearheading capitalist work ethics. Terms often met in art theoretical debates and are associated with this approach include immaterial labour, precarity and artistic mode of production.

divisions or exploitation.[78] In the context of the rise of anti-austerity and Occupy movements appearing in European and international landscapes, these debates seemed to take, at least for a short period of time, centre stage within the discourse of political art. This chapter discusses how the vocabularies and frameworks of these interrogations, fundamentally informed by the social movements of the time, highlight the ways that the biennial's politicised rhetoric mingled with a hierarchically organisational structure and affinities to neoliberalism.

In his short article, 'Against Political Art' published in the May 2014 issue of *ArtMonthly*, the artist Daniel Miller points to what he diagnoses as the insincerity of political art and socially engaged institutions. Miller expounds that these present themselves, above all, as anti-neoliberal, "even though no sector better embodies the gated utopianism of global neoliberal society than the ultra-mobile and hyper-networked art world" (2014: 34). In effect, Miller admonishes the hypocritical function of these institutions, which claim to be something, in this case anti-neoliberal, but at the same time propagate the opposite of what they claim, which is to say, the structures of neoliberalism. His suggestion is that there is a lack of truthfulness in the statements of these institutions, a pretension emerging from the gap between what they say and what they do. Miller's polemic applies to socially engaged biennials, insofar

[78] Here, we should note that there is a recent widespread focus in the art world on a different kind of 'realism', a materiality that foregrounds the substantial and actual properties of a state of being as opposed to its relational forms, observed in a number of diverse contemporary art settings. For instance, this focus on materiality can be seen in speculative realist approaches, observed in exhibitions such as *documenta 13* (2013), the 55th Venice Biennale (2013) and the forthcoming 9th Taipei Biennial (2014), that stress the agency, efficacy and properties of objects. In terms of their practical implications, speculative realist and object-oriented approaches are less accustomed to motivate to action than the Marxian ones, that I discuss here, which, to the contrary, tend to advocate immediate and insurrectionary practice. Also, while the former is characterised by a rejection of privileging the 'human factor' over the rest of the actors within a 'network' or an 'assemblage', the latter emphatically highlights the 'human cost' of economic policies. Here, while acknowledging that speculative realist approaches already exert, and will exert some influence on future art and curatorial discourse, I prefer to look at how the Marxian 'realist' approach has been circulated within art and curatorial theory and practice. This is because the turn to Marxian categories are much closer to the biennials I examine and seem to coincide with the period in which my fieldwork took place, occupying a privileged terrain in relevant debates. While these approaches seem to be rather apart in terms of their stated aims and implied practices, they share a mutual conceptual insistence on what exists apart the mediation of language and representation via a renewed focus on the 'way things are' rather than on why they are the way they are.

as they, through their explicit forms - the discursive exhibition and criticality - employ a critical attitude as a pretext that masks their conceptual and organisational interweaving with structures of capitalism.

Indeed, similar polemics were recently launched against several biennials, putting their raison d'être under pressure. Among the most discussed, was the boycott against the 19th Sydney Biennial by various participating artists who protested against its main sponsor, the corporation Transfield, main stakeholder of an offshore detention camp in Papua New Guinea. The protest resulted in the withdrawal of the corporation from sponsoring the festival and the resignation of the Biennale's chairman (who was also chairman of Transfield) from the post he had held for 14 years. While the activist artists celebrated this withdrawal as a victory, Communications Minister of Australia, Malcolm Turnbull, found the incident, "disastrous", threatening to cancel government funding from the institution.[79] Similarly, for the 2014 Manifesta that opened in June 2014 in St. Petersburg, harsh debates on the blogosphere and social media denounced its unwillingness to be critical against the current political situation in Russia that includes the extreme violation of LGBT rights and the waging of war against Ukraine. Many artists protested against Manifesta, with the art collective Chto Delat withdrawing its participation from the event stating that they could not, "be held hostage by its corporate policies" since, "it is clearly art over politics".[80] The practice of withdrawal, followed by the engagement with different, less institutionalised, forms of action (Chto Delat mentioned that it intended to initiate a counter exhibition project with Russian and Ukrainian artists), are here advocated as an effective strategy of resistance.

[79] For a report on the issue see Bridie Jabour's article 'Malcolm Turnbull slams Biennale's 'vicious ingratitude' to Transfield' published on March 10, 2014 on *Guardian* at the following address: http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/mar/11/malcolm-turnbull-slams-biennales-vicious-ingratitude-to-transfield

[80] These excerpts are taken from the post 'Chto Delat withdraws from Manifesta' written by Chto Delat and published in their webpage on March 15, 2014. The full post can be found at the following address: 10http://chtodelat.org/b9-texts-2/vilensky/chto-delat-withdraws-from-manifesta-10/

Similar incidents abounded during the period of my fieldwork. In October 2011 a group of activists in Athens threw bags of human excrement and dead fish into several venues of ReMap, a recurring contemporary art event cooperating with the Biennale, in order to protest against gentrification.[81] In Documenta 13 in the summer of 2012, activists of the Occupy movement (labelled as *dOCCUPY*) occupied the garden area in front of Fridericianum, turning it into a space of action and protest for three months. In February 2012 members of the Occupy movement asked the Whitney Museum to stop its biennial as, "it upholds a system that benefits collectors, trustees, and corporations at the expense of art workers".[82] In June 2013, in light of the Gezi park protests in Istanbul, a group of 100 artists signed a statement condemning the 2013 Istanbul Biennial whose corporate sponsorship and hierarchical structure was, "highly in contradiction with its claims to 'activate social engagement and public fora to generate a possibility for rethinking the concept of 'publicness'".[83] The art critic and curator Jacquelyn Davis in her 2014 article with the revealing title, 'The Biennial: In Flux or Dead End Street?' eloquently summarises the dissatisfaction against such events, arguing that it is, "becoming more difficult to justify time and money going into these events during times of economic or political upheaval, recession or impasse".[84] Confirming the legitimacy crisis, in a talk for the inaugural, 2014 conference of the recently founded *International Biennial Association*, Hlavajova, warned the delegates that, "as we hear the agonistic voices of artists, activists, and intellectuals intensify these days, from Sydney to St. Petersburg, Istanbul to Bussan, Athens, New York and elsewhere, the biennial itself seems to have become (anew) a vital site of political contestations, though oft times it is its own politics that is questioned and

[81] For more information on the incident see my paper '*To See and be Seen': Ethnographic Notes on Cultural Work Contemporary Art* (2014).

[82] This excerpt is taken from the post 'End the Whitney Biennial 2014' uploaded on the website of the group 'OWS Arts & Labour' on February 24, 2012. The full post can be found at the following address: http://artsandlabor.org/end-the-whitney-biennial-2014/

[83] These excerpts are taken from the post 'Call to Rethink the 13th Istanbul Biennial and Response of the Biennale Curators' published in the webpage *ArtLeaks* on June 9, 2013. The full post can be found at the following address: 10http://chtodelat.org/b9-texts-2/vilensky/chto-delat-withdraws-from-manifesta-10/

[84] This article was written for the Baltic on-line daily art magazine *Echo Gone Wrong*. Its full version can be found at the following address: http://www.echogonewrong.com/review-from-latvia/the-biennial-in-flux-or-dead-end-street/#comments

questionable".[85] A year before, Esche expressed similar concerns, noting how the, "demonstrable gaps between word and deed" in curating politically-loaded shows, "would be unsustainable to many other professions" (2013b: 243).

How did this oppositional ethical framework that aims to interrogate the truthfulness of the discursive biennial as well as similar art institutions come about? This chapter aims to respond to this question by exploring theoretical writings, published material and actions, mainly from 2008 onwards, that foreground the fields of tension that occupy politically driven biennials. The conceptualisation of art as a space of production, labour and economy is not categorically opposed to the discursive exhibition. In fact, the political claims of the discursive biennial are a condition of possibility of its own questioning. The forms and modalities of this questioning can be better understood as an effect of the prior turn to discourse and its claims for social intervention. In this sense, the purpose here is not to refer to two incompatible approaches, but to foreground the tensions and changes in the biennial model as a result of larger social processes, in this case, the economic crisis and the resistance against it. Contemporary biennials as porous and interdisciplinary tournaments of value are in a constant dialogue with such considerations and are often expected, as legitimate and 'serious' institutions of civil society, to reflect on them.

The first two sections, 'The neoliberal biennial?' and, 'Social movements and ideas of humanism' describe how the conceptualisation of the crisis by social movements, activists and left-wing academics (as a crisis of neoliberalism and its epistemological logics) gave rise to oppositional strategies that structured their actions and voice through an explicit rejection of such logics. From within square movements and other forms of protests, especially from the years of 2010 to 2012, political-artistic actions foregrounding non-instrumental and non-economic values, self-organisation, direct democracy and social equality were emphatically articulated. Biennials, as sites tied to

[85] The conference took place form the 10th to the 13th of July 2014 in Berlin. The talk of Hlavajova ,'Why Biennial?' can be found at the following address: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XVO7T2_Bf3o

neoliberal rationalities, and in which the individual curator was the author-superstar, were seen as inadequate spaces for progressing radical claims. The following section, discusses some recent publications in the art world, from writers such as John Roberts and Gregory Sholette, who emphasise in different ways how contemporary art practices, discourses and networks should be read in terms of production and in relation to larger political and economic processes. In these publications, conditions of inequality and labour exploitation are more objective than relative, and social division is regularly presented as something unquestionable: the dominant against the dominated. In these terms, the biennial model is approached as a certain social arrangement that does not only depend on but also naturalises fixed hierarchical positions by unquestionably attributing leadership to a single author, the curator. In the same section, I briefly discuss how theoretical interventions by art collectives and more particularly the theory of communisation, with its emphasis on classic Marxian categories such as the proletariat, are characteristic instances of this trend, having recently been debated in popular art historical journals such as *October*, conference panels, readers and biennial catalogues. Under the lens of these recent calls for immediate and insurrectionary uprising, the biennial can be seen as hindering effective social change by absorbing political energies that could be diffused in other, more communising platforms. Finally, I discuss the activity of recently formed artist-activist groups, such as *ArtLeaks*, *OWS Arts and Labor* and *The Precarious Workers Brigade*, that engage with critiques against internships and unpaid work, making issues relating to class, social inequality and art unionising part of the global art agenda. Again here, the political role of the biennial is called to task on the basis of its dependence on unpaid or badly paid labour, and for promoting neoliberal vocabularies of self-realisation in the workplace. In short, the legitimisation-crisis in biennials that this chapter discusses happens in a period when the space between the cultural-political and the economic values that biennials are expected to enable becomes blurred, questioned, and in need of re-formulation.

4.2 The neoliberal biennial?

A question that often surfaced when introducing myself as a biennial researcher, especially within activist circles, was 'how are biennials funded?' or 'how do they relate to neoliberalism'? During the period of my research, social movements, activists and Marxist scholars alike portrayed the crisis as a result of the rise of market economy, and more precisely of the economic doctrine of neoliberalism. The term, "neoliberalism" became a dominant reference used to describe the state of economic relations following the collapse of socialist regimes in the 1990s (Harvey, 2010; Lapavitsas; Kouvelakis, 2012). It refers to a school of thought that has its roots in the work of economists Friedrich Hayek,[86] Milton Friedman[87] and the Chicago School of Economics,[88] as well as the Ordo-liberal school[89] in Germany in the 1930s (Foucault, 2010). According to David Harvey, the epistemological grounds of neoliberalism embrace, "a theory of political economic practices which proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by the maximisation of entrepreneurial freedoms" (2006: 45). Neoliberal thought advocates little state intervention, the liberation of entrepreneurial freedoms, the minimisation of social welfare, the maximum possible privatisation and market deregulation. Moreover, neoliberalism, according to a number of scholars, is not only a system based on certain economic theories and policies, but a rationality of governing purporting to construct models of calculative and competitive subjectivities (Foucault, 2010; Peck, 2010; Brown, 2003; Dean, 2008; Gershon, 2011).[90] In other words, it is argued that neoliberalism has a social

[86] Milton Friedman (1912-2006) was an American economist, who taught for many years at the Chicago School and was one of the most vocal advocates of neoliberal economics. His most important work is *Capitalism and Freedom* (1962).

[87] Friedrich Hayek (1899-1992) was an Austrian economist known for his defence of social liberalism and neoliberal economic policies. One his most well-known works is *The Constitution of Liberty* (1960).

[88] The Chicago School of Economics refers to a post-war school of thought associated with the University of Chicago that rejected Keynesianism in favour of neo-classical economics.

[89] Ordoliberalism is a post-1930's German movement in economic theory, clustered around the journal ORDO, supporting the idea that the state's role should be to ensure and create the conditions of free-market competition.

[90] The so called 'governmentality school' for instance sees that the exercise of power by political authorities in neoliberalism does not happen so much through the figure of the nation-state but through the employment of diverse techniques related to scientific and technocratic expertise that attempt to

constructionist character, focusing on fashioning subjectivities according to dogmas of competition and optimisation (Read, 2010). On these grounds, the sociologist Jamie Peck (2010) talks about neoliberalisation as a process, rather than neoliberalism as an accomplished state of things. Similarly Wendy Brown (2003) refers to the techniques and arts of government that the neoliberal apparatus mobilises so as to prescribe subject positions, behaviours, forms and norms of conduct in accordance to a neo-liberal political rationality. As a socially constructionist project then, neoliberalism, similarly to the discursive exhibition, attempts through its institutional agents to legitimise its vision of the world.

One can argue that biennials are deeply enmeshed with, and in effect legitimise such neoliberal processes by being typically funded by and thus providing symbolic support to neoliberal institutions, i.e. multi-national corporations or states that advance neoliberal policies. Among countless other examples, Istanbul Biennial's major sponsor was Koc, a multinational corporation; the main sponsor of Sydney Biennial until recently was Transfield, a corporation that as we saw owns a detention camp; Athens Biennale had Deutsche Bank as its sponsor; Documenta receives funding from a major arms manufacturer; Bucharest Biennale is funded by the UniCredit Tiriac Bank; and the Berlin Biennale is sponsored by the German state (which was nodal in pushing forward the neoliberal European restructuring), as well as by BMW and other multinationals. The question appears again, for the political biennial: How can participation in these events that claims to instigate anti-neoliberal values be justified, since these very events legitimise some of the most prominent neoliberal actors of today and in effect neoliberalism's social constructionist project?

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rationalise human conduct on an ethical basis. See for instance in bibliography Rose, *Powers of Freedom* (1999)

4.3 Social movements and ideas of humanism

This question can be posed even more emphatically in light of the emergence of anti-austerity movements where neoliberalism and its calculative frameworks often appear as the main ideology to be resisted. In what ways could a biennial be thought of as a political agent in light of the ideas and political values that emerged in this period? These ideas, including those of solidarity, community and co-operation, emerged globally through the so-called Arab Spring[91] and the 2010-12 squares movement.[92] To state a popular example, in its first public statement the 'Occupy Wall Street' movement[93] addressing all those who, "feel wronged by the corporate forces of the world", stressed that, "the future of the human race requires the cooperation of its members" and that, "no true democracy is attainable when the process is determined by economic power".[94] Similarly, the manifesto of the movement 'Plataforma ¡Democracia Real YA!' [95] in Spain stated with equal emphasis that, "instead of placing money above human beings, we shall put it back to our service," since, "we are people, not products".[96] This re-activation of the 'human factor' against an abstract economic logic, a financial abstraction, came to be the foundational idea of the oppositional discourses of the time. Here the question again becomes obvious: How could a biennial that typically presents highly abstract and cerebral forms of art respond to such pragmatic claims for solidarity?

[91] 'Arab Spring' refers to a wave of riots, protests and other insurrectionary activities that took place in the Arab world since 2010.
[92] The 2010-2012 squares movement refers to a series of occupations of various city squares as a form of protest mainly across Europe, the middle-East and the U.S.A.
[93] Occupy Wall Street was a protest movement that started with the occupation of the Zuccotti Park located in the Wall Street district, New York on September 17, 2011. The protesters were forced to abandon the park on November 15, 2011, but, in the meantime, the movement of occupying public spaces spread to many different countries and cities across the world.
[94] The full statement can be seen in the post 'First official statement from Occupy Wall Street' by the website *Daily Kos* published on October 1, 2011 t the following address http://www.dailykos.com/story/2011/10/01/1021956/-First-official-statement-from-Occupy-Wall-Street
[95] *Plataforma ¡Democracia Real YA!* (Spanish for *Platform for Real Democracy Now!*) started as a non-hierarchical protest movement in March 2011 in Spain advocating citizens' participation in decision-making, self-organising and community initiatives as well as control of the current economic system.
[96] The full statement published in the webpage of ¡Democracia real YA! In May 2011 can be found at the following address: http://www.democraciarealya.es/manifiesto-comun/manifesto-english/

Pressure against the biennial model came also from another factor that gained prominence at the time, which is to say a radical questioning of all forms of representation and authority. Central to these social movements was a growing suspicion against politicians and political parties who were seen as tied to economic wealth, corruption and hypocrisy. This idea often resulted in an opposition against any form of political representation,[97] the disdain of which often gave rise to a celebration of practices of direct democracy. According to such practices, every member that participates in a given constituency has equal opportunity to voice and be part of the decision-process themselves, instead of delegating responsibility to representatives through voting. Expressing this anti-representational feeling, Real Democracy Ya claim in their manifesto that, "democracy belongs to the people (demos = people, krátos = government) which means that government is made of every one of us".[98] This insistence on recovering a truer form of a democracy against the economic neoliberal rationality was prevalent in numerous Occupy assemblies across the world, where decisions were taken deliberatively by consensus. The rationale behind such processes was often based on an anarchist ethos that avoids putting its hopes for social transformation in the single moment of the future revolution, which could be constructed through the counter dissemination of oppositional discourses, but instead aims at prefiguring the future society in the present.[99] Resistance then emerged as a process of seeking to invent new forms of socialities, based on participatory, horizontally-oriented structures of decision-making that took the form of general assemblies, working groups, eco-communities, art collectives, online networks, zines and mailing lists. In this sense, what is most interesting about this type of activism is the denial, or at least the de-emphasising of hegemonic politics. Radical change, for

[97] For a fruitful debate on the Occupy's thesis against any form of political representation see Jodi Dean and Jason Jones, 'Occupy Wall Street and the Politics of Representation' (2012) that can be found at the following address: http://chtodelat.org/b8-newspapers/12-38/jodi-dean-and-jason-jones-occupy-wall-street-and-the-politics-of-representation/

[98] The full statement published in the webpage of ¡Democracia real YA! In May 2011 can be found at the following address: http://www.democraciarealya.es/manifiesto-comun/manifesto-english/

[99] One of the main advocates of the anarchist politics of Occupy has been the anthropologist David Graeber. In his text 'Occupy Wall Street's anarchist roots' published in the webpage of *AlJazeera* on November 30, 2011, as the title indicates he argues that the Occupy movement has an anarchist structure http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2011/11/2011112872835904508.html

these movements, would not come merely through infiltrating civil institutions, but by acting and constructing situations whose practices would be hopefully diffused in society. One could ask here, what sort of horizontal, prefigurative politics could be enacted through a biennial, which essentially depends on the authority of the curator-superstar? The curatorial self-reflexivity in this respect can be perceived as an empty gesture insofar as the curator, as active participant and author of such events, gains enormous material and symbolic capital.

Another central idea of this movement which challenges the practices of the discursive exhibition and the Foucault-Gramsci model is the notion that exploitation in society is something undeniable and objective and is manifested in the separation and unequal distribution of wealth between them, the 1%, and us, the 99%.[100] For example, the main slogan of the Occupy Wall Street, 'We are the 99%' claimed a division between the many and the less or the dominant and the dominated.[101] The 'them' versus 'us' binary was a crucial line of separation among the participants of the movement at least in its initial stages. As the authors of the manifesto of Real Democracy Ya point out, "citizens are the gears of a machine designed to enrich a minority which does not regard our needs", which, according to the authors, "without us none of this would exist, because we move the world".[102] Again, here the biennial's connections with neoliberal institutions and work models puts it an ambiguous position and probably on the wrong side of this division. While several curatorial statements in these events may announce that they to challenge neoliberalism, their intentions may well be seen as hypocritical insofar as biennials actively rely on the same neoliberal structures.

[100] As it was previously discussed (Chapter 1) mainly through Foucault and post-structuralism, many Marxists since the '80s have abandoned the idea of this clear separation.

[101] As Jodi Dean and Jason Jones suggest in their text 'Occupy Wall Street and the Politics of Representation' (2012) : "we are the 99%" highlights the gap between the wealth of the top one percent and the rest of us. It politicizes a statistic that expresses capitalism reliance on fundamental inequality- "we" can never all be counted as the top one percent. In so doing the slogan asserts a collectivity […]as the "we" of a divided people, the people divided between expropriators and expropriated. In the setting of an occupied Wall Street, this "we" is a class, one of two opposed and hostile classes, those who have and control wealth, and those who do not". The full text can be found iatthe following address: http://chtodelat.org/b8-newspapers/12-38/jodi-dean-and-jason-jones-occupy-wall-street-and-the-politics-of-representation/

[102] The full statement published in the webpage of ¡Democracia real YA! In May 2011 can be found at the following address: http://www.democraciarealya.es/manifiesto-comun/manifesto-english/

4.4 Art as a site of struggle and the biennial under pressure

4.4.1 Labour and class: naturalising inequality?

The vocabulary and interpretative framework of the social movements that we saw above also share similarities with published material and actions taking place *within* art circuits during the same period. Perhaps the most noticeable recent trend in such manifestations is the understanding of the art field as a complex field of relations subject to political-economic logics. Issues and subjects, such as labour, class and the commons were emphatically present in art theoretical vocabularies, especially during the period when the aforementioned social movements surfaced. For instance, the tendency to treat artistic activity as labour, in Marxian terms, as an activity that generates value, is often discussed in the framework of immaterial or intellectual labour (e.g. Smith, 2013; Berardi, 2013). Within this framework, artists can be conceptualised as privileged subjects of exploitative neoliberal policies. While this conceptualisation of art as a site of economic production does not refer to a kind of unified approach and is often posed through accounts differing in method and subject matter, it nevertheless shares a common underlying point of departure: contemporary art (as a field) ought not just to be read merely in terms of representation, but also (if not primarily) it should be read in relation to the economic relations between its actors and with the rest of the society. Many recently published texts bring explicitly to the fore these interrelations between art, activism and economy.[103] Below I chose to briefly look at two of them, John Roberts' *The Intangibilities of Form* (2007) and Gregory Sholette's *Dark Matter* (2011), as they best express the theoretical and activist conjectures that highlight the above argument.

[103] Other recent texts that bring the connections between art, activism and the economy to the foreground include Brian Holmes' *Unleashing the Collective Phantoms: Essays on Reverse in Imagineering* (2008), Nato Thompson's *Seeing Power: Art and Activism in the Age of Cultural Production* (2014), James Marc Leger's *The Brave New Avant-Garde* (2012) and *The Neoliberal Undead* (2013), Ben Davis' *9.5 Theses on Art and Class* (2013) as well as the edited volumes by Tatiana Bazzichelli and Geoff Cox *Disrupting Business: Art & Activism in Times of Financial Crisis* (2013) and Marco Scotini's *No Order Art in a Post-Fordist Society* (2012).

While *The Intangibilities of Form* was published in 2007, that is to say before the eruption of the Euro-crisis (and although cannot be considered as an activist book), it is important to explore its main claims, as it was perhaps one of the first widely recognised attempts to see art practice in non-representational terms and through categories borrowed from Marxian political economy. Roberts treats visual art as a form of social practice that, since Marcel Duchamp and his industrially produced readymades, has generated value by increasingly incorporating non-artistic hands in the production of the artwork. For Roberts, this incorporation signals an, "irrevocable displacement of the link between handcraft and skill" (2007: 2). Artistic skill now does not mean so much crafting artisanal objects destined for aesthetic appreciation in the salon or the academy, as it does the exercising of intellectual, managerial and executive skills. This condition comes about as a means to secure artistic autonomy during the encounter with Fordism and mass production. In this sense, and against voices that lament the loss of artistic skills in contemporary art, Roberts argues that rather than loss, there is a displacement of the nature of the artistic skill: artistic skills find their legitimisation not through the application of handcraft techniques but in the demonstration of some sort of conceptual sharpness (2007: 3). Thus, the abandonment of painterly skills by Duchamp, and later by minimalist and conceptual artists, is, for Roberts, "a productive process…which represents a technical and social readjustment on the part of the artist to the increasing socialization of labour" (2007: 23). This process of, "skill-deskilling-reskilling" is reflective of the effects of the changes in the productive forces and technological and economic innovations in modernity and the skills of the workers required for social reproduction (2007: 3). What is useful to stress here is the productive function that Roberts assigns to art practice by positioning it within the general transformations of capitalism and economy at a technical level. The representational or the strictly art historical are then for Roberts insufficient explanatory frameworks for assessing the political role and effect of conceptual shifts in art.

An important consequence of Roberts' assumption is that, as a result of this presumed deskilling of the creative practice and its displacement from traditional handcraft, any

object can now rightfully claim the status of the artwork. In other words, amateur cultural producers within an environment that the art philosopher Boris Groys terms, "aesthetic democracy" (2010) can equally claim that the objects they make, conceive or choose should be regarded as art. What results from this assumption is that since every object has the right to be called art, the objects that eventually become art, i.e. the ones visible and legitimised by biennials and similar institutions, are not selected on the basis of some sort of objective criteria having to do with the masterful application of artisanal skills. Instead, the objects that become art today rely on a basis of criteria set by curators, or other gatekeepers, who are in a position to define what has artistic value and can be displayed via the increasing role of communicational interactions.

In this context, the 2010 book, *Dark Matter*, by the artist and critic Gregory Sholette, is another important effort in framing art as a productive activity. Sholette makes a case for all the invisible workers within the art world, a position relevant to larger discussions internationally emerging concomitantly with global social upheavals. After this book, Sholette attained international visibility, co-curated the show *It's the Political Economy Stupid*, an exhibition about resistance against neoliberalism that travelled extensively around the world in places such as Pori, Thessaloniki and New York, as well as released a book by the same name. As a, "salient call-to-arms to all cultural laborers",[104] *Dark Matter* brings to light a series of artistic projects, taking place mainly in New York and some parts of Europe. The works described are related to tactical media and cultural jamming and share affinities with the scope of the early avant-gardes movements, such as Dada, Surrealism and Constructivism, as well as with the more recent Situationism, Minimalism and Conceptual Art, which is to say movements that attempted to use concepts as political tools. The groups that Sholette discusses, including the Temporary Services, the New York-based PAD/D and Critical Art Ensemble, are explicitly politicised and their militancy mirrors that of the art activism that emerged from within the crisis. The main idea that Sholette extols is that contemporary art is a field of immense inequality. One the one hand, for Sholette,

[104] This quote is taken from the back cover of *Dark Matter* and is written by Julia Bryan-Wilson.

there is a, “small cadre of successful artists” (the ones who become visible in official art institutions like museums, galleries and biennials) and on the other the, “creative dark matter” that consists of all of the shadowed, amateur, informal and self-organised practices that remain invisible (2011: 2-3). According to Sholette, it is the labour of this invisible mass of art workers, those excluded from the institutionalised scripts of the art world that sustain the system. These invisible art workers manage the careers of the art superstars, teach art, purchase books and journals, visit art shows and so on (2010: 3).

After setting up this binary between the visible and the invisible (or in other variations, between the dominant and the dominated), Sholette argues that if this invisible mass gave up its aspirations for professional careers, or set out to initiate alternative networks of art exchange, the art world as we know it today would cease to exist. Identifying himself as a cultural worker, Sholette argues that in the past few years, through the rise of the web technologies and a post-Fordist enterprise culture that increasingly demands creative inputs from its workers, this creative dark matter has only proliferated (2010: 5). It is therefore at this historical moment that the invisible cultural workers come to surface, demand visibility and thus re-arrange the rules of the institutionalised art world. The dark matter for Sholette is not intrinsically revolutionary, however, instead it, “possesses at best a *potential* for progressive resistance, as well as for reactionary anger” (2010: 44).

Sholette’s account, similarly to Roberts, explores artistic practice principally from the perspective of production and less than that of representation. In fact, Sholette stresses how the current crisis demands a different reading of culture than the dominant Gramsci-Foucauldian one with its insistence that, “the very narrative of class was in need of deconstruction” (2010:14). For Sholette, the updated, post-structuralist model of Gramscian hegemony that authors like Mouffe and Laclau advocate, where class is not the privileged signifier, was useful for bringing forward demands of excluded social agents, but in the face of the current crisis, it lacked the necessary political potential. Now, as the economic crisis exposes the ways in which global capital attacks mostly the working class and the poor, what is required for Sholette is a

reconceptualisation of the artistic field as a field of unequal relationships. Although not always wholeheartedly promoting class-based politics, Sholette's account is inspired by a Marxian desire to engage in a political gesture that brings to light those who actually produce through their labour the wealth for the few within the art world.

4.4.2 Common, collectives and communisation: hindering social change?

If the above accounts that frame art as a field of production owe a debt to the spread of the concept of artistic labour (or creative labour), then this latter concept proves to be equally important for the emergence of notions such as 'the commons' and 'the common' within the art field. These notions generally refer to ideas, objects, states and labouring conditions that elude the capture of the capitalist value-form, being able to enable communal and collective forms of life. The fascination with collectives in the art world as sites of non-alienating potential, emerges concomitantly with the academic popularisation of such terms, updating in many ways theories of relational aesthetics that occupied art theory at the beginning of the 2000s. Artistic labour is seen as a form of labour that does not exactly submit to the logic of the commodity process and value production, having the potential to generate de-alienating engagements with material reality (Bishop, 2012). In this sense, apart from being an activity seized by the capitalist mode of production, artistic labour is also understood as an inherently non-productive process whose valorisation does not follow the standard measure of value (Virno, 2009; Berardi, 2009). Especially through artist collectives resisting individualism, aesthetic workers are seen as having the capacity to insert new temporalities and new ways of being in the world through non-functional relations with the materials they use and the ways they relate to the world around them. Within this framework, a number of writers see that the political potential of artistic labour could be better and more effectively effected through co-operation with other artists or creative workers (Bishop, 2012; Roberts, 2007). In this light, the biennial then could

be seen as a site that potentially captures this radical potential of artistic labour by turning it into a big-budget spectacle.

An effort to politicise artistic labour and to conceptualise art as a field of potential anti-capitalist critique is the application of the movement of communisation to art theory and practice. Communisation theory, which was developed in the 1970s in France among extreme left-wing circles, and is associated with the writer Thierry Dauve and the group Theorie Communiste, has recently received some attention in Marxist scholarship, principally through the theoretical work of the collectives *Endnotes* and The *Invisible Committee*. In the context of art theory, communisation appears after the spread of the Occupy movement, among other sites, in the celebrated art historical journal *October*,[105] in conferences and panel discussions,[106] as well as in texts included in biennial publications.[107] The 2011 edited volume *Communization and its Discontents* includes a text on communisation and contemporary art.[108]

In brief, communisation theory holds that the overthrowing of capitalist relations cannot take place through a transition period via socialism, but instead through a, "continuous process of instituting communist relations", that is to say relations unmediated by the capitalist value-form, the state and wage labour (Mansoor; Marcus; Spaulding, 2012: 48). Communisation then is the name for the activity of, "making things available for communal use", which, among others, includes, "expropriating what a community needs without getting it from capital, and without the prior mediation of organised labour or the mass party" (Mansoor; Marcus; Spaulding, 2013: 48). This communising activity should have a global spread and be diffused through all social relations until capitalism and all its institutions, like money and the state, are removed and new forms of life are created. An important thesis of communisation

[105] See Mansoor, Jaleh, Daniel Marcus, and Daniel Spaulding (2012)
[106] The panel discussion 'Communization and the End(s) of Art A panel on 'Communization and the End(s) of Art' by Alberto Toscano and Benjamin Noys appeared in the 2013 Historical materialism conference.
[107] For example the interview of Daniel Spaulding by C.Derik Van titled 'Communization, Occupy and the Spectre of Aetshetics' appeared in the edited book that accompanied the 4th Athens Biennale titled 'AGORA'.
[108] See Anthony Iles and Marina Vishmidt (2012)

theory, which is particularly relevant for our discussion on art here, is that while this process of communist transformation ripples through society the current division of labour will be destroyed and thus all worker identities will be overthrown as the process of revolution cannot progress by clinging to a certain kind of worker or other identity. For writers associated with this approach, the latest struggles and social movements point in this direction, as within occupations there is no specific demand based on a worker identity.[109] Following this logic, if art aspires to some kind of communist transformation, it cannot afford to continue being some sort of autonomous field of action, but needs to be integrated within general social praxis.

This communisation thesis sparked debates among art theorists and critics regarding art's political role in social transformation. While it is not the purpose here to recount and reflect on these debates in detail, it suffices to say that, in broad terms, these debates are framed by the idea that artistic labour carries the potential of emancipation because of its non-productive and self-fulfilling character. This character needs, however, to somehow spread out into all social activities, and in the process the identity of the artist, as a social agent with special qualities, needs to be overthrown.

Benjamin Noys, the editor of *Communization and its Discontents*, notes that today to, "continue to be an artist is the problem, an unsustainable identity", and in this sense, "the rift would lie here with the 'de-essentialization' of art".[110] Likewise, the art historians Daniel Spaulding et al., in a text written in response to the journal October's questionnaire about art and Occupy, argue that, "in view of Occupy, it should be clear that a new account of autonomy is required, one that places the means of subsistence over and against the global reticulation of ideals and visibilities" (2012: 50). Similarly,

[109] For a good critique on this position see John Roberts, *The Two Names of Communism* (2013): 13-15. Roberts stresses that by rejecting the efficacy of struggles in the names of a workers identity, communisation overlooks and diminishes the value of all these wage struggles in Third World and developing countries in which people need to assume a workers identity in order to proceed ways their demands. In other words, for Roberts, communisation takes as a point of departure the ways capitalism has developed in the West.

[110] This quote is taken by a text written in the personal blog of Benjamin Noys titled 'The Aesthetics of Communization' based on a talk he gave at Xero, Kline & Coma Gallery on May 11, 2013. The full text can be found at the following address: http://leniency.blogspot.gr/2013/05/the-aesthetics-of-communization-xero.html

Anthony Iles and Marina Vishmidt, in their contribution to *Communization and its Discontents*, make the hypothesis that, "art's emancipatory qualities are founded upon the tensions between self-directed activity and productive labor", arguing that, "attempts to close the distance between them are of paramount importance" (2011: 133). One could similarly ask here in what ways is a biennial, as a site ontologically dependent on the category of the artist, able to support this process? How could art be 'de-essentialised' as a special form of human action within a site that addresses itself as an art event? In these terms, the hegemonic politics of the discursive biennial can be thought of as secondary to this struggle of superseding artistic identities.

4.4.3 Critique of internships: propagating unfairness?[111]

Art Monthly's September 2012 issue appeared with an unusual front cover. The highly-read and well-established contemporary art magazine in Britain, not particularly famous for its activist orientations, encouraged workers in the art world to, "bust" their bosses with questions such as the following: "When shall we agree the terms of the contract? What is the compensation fee if the work gets cancelled? What is the maternity/ paternity pension provision?" The cover was taken by a leaflet distributed by the collective *The Precarious Workers Brigade* at Tate Britain during a symposium on the subject of immaterial production. What *ArtMonthly* termed as "the Occupy effect" on contemporary art, citing Maja and Reuben Fowkes' article in the same issue, was itself the cause of this unusual urging.

[111] Some parts of this section are taken from my article 'Art Struggles: Confronting Internships and Unpaid Labour in Contemporary Art' (2014) (See bibliography).

Figure 4.1: ArtMonthly: Bust Your Boss

The 'Occupy effect' was also manifested in the formation of an array of different groups and artist-activist collectives emerging in relation and from within these social movements. U.S.-based groups such as *OWS Arts and Labour*, a working group founded in, "conjunction with the New York General Assembly for #occupywallstreet" and, "dedicated to exposing and rectifying economic inequalities and exploitative working conditions",[112] or *Occupy Museums*, wishing to free up "a space of dialogue and fearlessness for the 99%",[113] were key for popularising this structure of feeling across the art world. By assuming the position of the exploited, art workers participating in these initiatives argue that, "we are all art workers and members of the 99%", advocating, "in the spirit of Occupy…direct and immediate

[112] This passage is taken from the 'About' section of the group *OWS Arts & Labor* webpage. The full text can be found at the following address: http://artsandlabor.org/about-al/
[113] This passage is taken from the 'About' section of the group *Occupy Museums* webpage. The full text can be found at the following address: http://occupymuseums.org/index.php/about

action against the economic exploitation".[114] In the U.K., similar art collectives appeared and came to be linked with the student demonstrations against the rise of university fees in England in November and December of 2010. One of these groups, and possibly the most active one, is the *Carrotworkers Collective* (now called *The Precarious Workers Brigade*), which has been mainly producing knowledge and initiating actions against unpaid internships and voluntary labour. In their 2009 initial statement, the group employed a Marxian rhetoric attempting to frame art through its relation to capitalism, conceiving of, "free labour, internships, volunteer work not as a separate sphere of activity but as condition of late capitalist cultural economy".[115] Internships, for the collective, appear to be a structural part of the development of capitalism, a, "rehearsal for uncertain career paths, hyper-active networking, strategic lunching and infinite flexibility". The state of the internship becomes often permanent, thus an, "internship without end".

It is interesting to look at the methods and tactics of the Carrotworkers, which suggest a way of art unionising in the age of blogs and social media. Their *Surviving Internships: A Counter-Guide to Free Labour in the Arts*, released in 2011, is one of the most widely circulated manuals concerning internships, aiming to provide information about internships based on, "real life experiences of cultural workers in London" (:2). The document was released in PDF format and has been distributed through an array of different sources ranging from self-managed ventures to more institutional actors, such as the *EIPCP institute for progressive politics* and large-scale art projects such as *Truth is Concrete* taking place in Graz, Austria in September 2012. Faithful to the tradition of counter-information tactics, this 66-page leaflet seeks to, "explore and debunk some commonly held myths" concerning internships and creative careers (:2). This document does not only describe how unfair and unethical internships are, but also employs creative and playful ways to communicate the 'irresponsibility' of art institutions in affective terms by recounting internship stories

[114] This passage is taken from the 'About' section of the group *OWS Arts & Labor* webpage. The full text can be found at the following address: http://artsandlabor.org/about-al/
[115] This passage as well as the following one is taken from a text titled 'ON FREE LABOUR' that was published in the *Carrotworkers* webpage in 2011. The complete text can be found at the following address: http://carrotworkers.wordpress.com/on-free-labour/

in humorous comic strips. Apart from the dispersal of counter-information, the collective organises actions against galleries and museums for advertising unpaid positions. For instance, in December 13, 2013 the group issued a letter to the London-based Serpentine Gallery complaining about a non-paid volunteer placement and warning that, "over the coming months we will be engaging in a series of targeted actions at yours and other institutions to encourage the creation of such a policy".[116] This was eventually followed by a public action against the gallery organised by the group *Future Interns*, which attracted wide media visibility in which protesters dressed as Santa Claus entered the gallery holding a banner writing, 'All that we want for Christmas is pay'.[117] Such concerns, especially in the U.K., have recently reached more mainstream audiences[118] and have been manifested in other alternative forms, such as counter-exhibitions and display tactics.[119]

A similar group that came to be widely known in the past few years is the collective *ArtLeaks*, whose members include international curators, critics and artists. *ArtLeaks* was likewise formed, "in response to the abuse of their professional integrity and the open infraction of their labor rights",[120] wishing to act as an informal artists union using whistle blowing tactics against maltreatment in the workplace. The group

[116] This excerpt is taken from a post made by the *PRECARIOUS WORKERS BRIGADE* in their website on December 2013. The full text can be found at the following address: http://precariousworkersbrigade.tumblr.com/post/69877673667/dear-serpentine-management-we-have-recently-been-made

[117] The *Guardian* coverage of this protest can be found at the following address: http://www.theguardian.com/education/2013/dec/16/unpaid-internship-christmas-protest-serpentine-gallery

[118] For instance, among others, the newly founded organization *Intern Aware* attempts to reach such mainstream audiences as well as the 2012 publication of the document *Intern Culture* by the recently founded critical arts organization *Art Quest*. Information about the organizations above can be found at the following addresses: http://www.internaware.org/about/why-unpaid-internships-are-wrong/ and http://www.artquest.org.uk/articles/view/intern_culture

[119] Another recently formed grouped the *Ragpickers Collective* suggested the organization of a counter-show against free internships. The *Ragpickers* write in their statement: "RAGPICKERS invite current interns, volunteers and casual workers to join them in RAGPICKERS SHOW, a project which is dedicated to the problem of unpaid labour and exploitation in the contemporary art field. The project is intended to blur the difference between the artistic and forensic by exploring the format of a critical quasi-exhibition." RAGPICKERS SHOW will display 'artifacts' - material traces, residues or recorded testimonies - collected by participants that testify to the work undertaken within various art organisations." The full text can be found at the following address: http://ragpickers.tumblr.com/opencall

[120] This excerpt is taken from the 'About' section of the website of the groups *ArtLeaks*. The full 'About' section of *ArtLeaks* can be found at the following address: http://art-leaks.org/about/

maintains a webpage in which artists and cultural workers who have been 'abused' by institutions are invited to report their stories. For *ArtLeaks* this practice can become a means to, "underscore the precarious condition of cultural workers and the necessity for sustained protest against the appropriation of politically engaged art, culture and theory by institutions embedded in a tight mesh of capital and power".[121]

Employing the methods of *Wikileaks*, which involve leaking undisclosed information, as well as the rhetoric of the Occupy movement regarding the manifestation of social division in the art sector between the exploited and the exploiters, *ArtLeaks* wishes to serve as a tool in the hands of disempowered art workers. The social division suggested here, between on the one hand the politically engaged and underpaid artists, and on the other the art system that capitalises on and exploits critical practices, is characteristic of this new wave of class-based discourse. While the Gramsci-Foucault discourse (as applied to curatorial theory) finds the division between the dominant and the dominated simplistic, this class-based cultural politics and activism works to re-activate this division.

This division becomes a discursive trope for articulating inequality and acts as a means to critique the capitalist system as a whole. For example, the publication of 'ArtLeaks Gazette', currently in its second issue, attempts to officially, "break the silence" and aims to, "address the problematic of reinventing tools for the mobilization of resources and emancipatory models that help to articulate the movement of cultural workers".[122] The ArtLeaks Gazette, which is available online, is also focused on combating the perceived inequalities in the art world, as well as in conceiving glimpses of a post-capitalist future. With their multivalent action and tactics, such as boycott, physical protests and actions, publications of counter-information guides and the organisation of counter-shows, these groups are both operating in the shadows of the art world and within more mainstream channels.

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[121] *Ibid.*

[122] These phrases are taken from the editorial of first issue of *ArtLeaks* Gazette titled 'Breaking the Silence- Towards Justice, Solidarity and Mobilization' published in May 2013. The full issue can be found at the following address: https://archive.org/details/ALGazetteIntroduction

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The above polemics hail the biennial as a problematic site of production, a site bound up with logics that annul its socially engaged declarations. Organisationally, biennials employ hierarchical structures and specific lines of command. Despite their otherwise experimental and politically-charged vocabulary, they maintain a customary division of labour, where the relationships between the various participants, from sponsors to curators and invigilators to cleaners, are sharply defined. A tension between the biennial's aim to produce radical politics and its actual organization, exposes the inability of this conventional hierarchical model to challenge current dominant institutional formats or experiment with the new anti-hierarchical organizational forms cultivated within protest cultures. Moreover, to return to the discussion on communisation, biennials are already implicated with practices of city branding, public and private funding, and advertising. Being already tainted by the value-form to such a degree, one can argue that biennials, for all their radical discourse, capture rather than release activist energies. The biennial then can also be seen as hindering the possibilities of any substantial change, as it drains political energies and resources that could be used elsewhere in potentially more radical ways.

In turn, the activities of the labour activist groups conflict with the biennials' reliance on flexible and very often unpaid work. A common language found in contemporary biennials is derived from a vocabulary that closely mirrors neoliberal vocabularies, with volunteering positions being often advertised as a, "unique opportunity of interacting with established artists, professionals, local and international visitors",[123] or a, "fantastic opportunity to be part of a major international art event".[124] Biennials

[123] This quote is taken from an advert of the 2011 Singapore Biennial. The full text can be found at the following address:
http://www.biennialfoundation.org/2010/11/600-volunteers-and-interns-needed-for-singapore-biennale-2011/

[124] This quote is taken from an advert of the 2011 Dublin Contemporary. The full text can be found at the following address:
http://www.biennialfoundation.org/2011/06/dublin-contemporary-is-looking-for-volunteers/

can be then seen not only as sites that employ a conventional organizational model, but also as ones that propagate forms of inequality through a language attempting to lure creative professionals into usually badly paid and poor quality work. In all these ways, the analytical and practical frameworks that have emerged in the art world through these recent upheavals intensify the questioning of the biennial model in at least three ways: the biennial naturalises hierarchical relationships, hinders substantial change and propagates neoliberal work ethics.

Both the 7th Berlin and 3rd Athens Biennale occurred when these questions were already prevalent across critical contemporary art landscapes, and were both conceived as events willing to negotiate aspects of them. They did so by conceiving themselves as sites of activist action. Precisely because these biennials are not just art events, but also have institutional and organisational agendas that rely on structured and structuring relations with diverse partners, their initial desires resulted in a number of tensions and conflicts that point to the limits of the political biennial in a situation where its model is challenged. The two chapters that follow, then, will look at these biennials as sites of situated tension between the politics and places they occupy, and their respective responses to translocal debates surrounding global art circuits and social movements.

Part III

Curating Resistances

Chapter 5

7th Berlin Biennale: Enacting Dissent, *Forget Fear* and Occupy

5.1 Dramaturgies of Resistance

While approaching the contemporary art centre Kunst Werke (KW) on April, 26, 2012, the opening day of the 7th Berlin Biennale's (hereof BB7), I encountered an unusual spectacle. For two or three blocks the street was heavily guarded by armed policemen and police vehicles. As it was later confirmed by participants of the Biennale, a politician had visited the Gerhard Richter exhibition held in a gallery next door. The conversion of the street into a police zone during the inauguration of BB7, an art exhibition already controversial for its proclaimed political radicality and its unorthodox on-site hosting of activist social movements, acted as an inadvertent reminder of the larger tensions between artistic freedom and institutional power.

In this chapter I focus precisely on how such controversies relate to BB7 and its very unusual institutional experiment: hosting in its main showroom, and for all its duration, activists from the Occupy movement. These activists were invited to camp inside the building and organise protests, anti-capitalist actions and network internationally with fellow activists. Through lengthy descriptions of the ways activist and other projects were implemented (or not) throughout the course of BB7, this chapter asks how such activist logics, wishing to turn the institution into a generalised site of dissent, clash with, transform and adjust according to their encounters with settings of established power.

The programmatic declarations of BB7, the polemic works of the artists, the militant spirit of the participants, the almost obsessive prioritising of action over reflection, the activist pamphlets, slogans and dramaturgies present in the show, weaved together a stage upon which activist politics were performed. The rhetoric of this setting revolved around a set of key issues that traditionally occupy left-wing politics, such as the critique of economic exploitation, nationalism, racism and ideology of the market,

the invention and promotion of strategies of resistance, the belief in and planning of revolutionary politics hoping to abolish the existing state of things, the dissemination of ecological states of mind as well as the insistence on collective instead of individual processes of doing and being. Although these themes have been touched upon in many contemporary art biennials during the past fifteen years (Chapter 3), in BB7 they were evoked to an extreme, colouring every aspect of the show, even constituting its raison d'être. BB7's activist attitude was clearly influenced and boosted by the worldwide events discussed in the previous chapter, such as the emergence of the global square movements and their quest for new modes of political representation. In essence, the Biennale wished to tackle most of the aspects raised by the activist art of the period, namely the exploitation of artistic labour, gentrification, revolution, nurturing an anti-neoliberal structure of feeling through a turn to notions such as commons, collectives, resistance and artistic labour. One could even argue that by insisting on insurrectionary action and the abolition of the category of the artist in favour of that of the activist, BB7 rhetorically employed some aspects of the communisation framework.

Figure 5.1: Police Blockade: Augustusstrasse in BB7's opening

Of particular interest to this chapter is the institutional work of the curator of BB7, Artur Żmijewski, who openly used the power and legitimacy of Berlin Biennale so as to support causes and individuals related to his larger vision about art and politics; a vision not in full agreement with the institutional agenda of the organising committee of the Biennale itself. Despite the organizational autonomy that is regularly granted to the curator within biennial cultures, the implementation of this vision often took such radical and unexpected forms as certain projects had to be negotiated, modified or even abandoned. To understand the dynamics through which such processes unfolded, I begin this chapter by describing the general context in which the Berlin Biennale takes place, as an organization and institution. More specifically I discuss its history, background, hierarchical structure and situatedness within local and global settings. This brief account aims to outline the institution's entanglement in a web of conjunctions that set certain limits and define the parameters in the way it operates (Born, 1995), i.e. its obligation to account to taxpayers as it uses state funding.

In turn, I look at the actual event of BB7. The curatorial strategy employed by Żmijewski and his co-curator Johanna Warsza, is exemplary for its effort to break with the discursive exhibition model. Żmijewski programmatically denounces this model for its hypocrisy as well as most of its recurrent aspects, such as the reliance on grand theoretical concepts, the extended educational events and the rhetoric on open-endedness. From this aspect, I discuss how this break took flesh and bones through Żmijewski's projects and strategic decisions. The invitation to Occupy activists was one of these projects, and the one that drew the highest visibility. Through the activists BB7 attempted to associate itself with the global mobilizations against austerity taking place at the time. Under this light, I discuss the conflicting and deemed problematic appearance of an Occupy group within a prestigious venue of high art, as well as the ways that this movement struggled to perform its political values through self-organised educational endeavours, a garden project, daily assemblies and a generalised enactment of dissent.

The provocative artworks and projects that I choose to look at in the next section are also reflective of the difficulties that BB7 encountered in its attempts to instigate

social change. In fact, as a result of its teaming with active practices of resistance, BB7 was hugely controversial, alienating the majority of the art world scene and triggering a great amount of negative as response to the show. To account for the ways that the show has hitherto passed into art history, the next section outlines what were the most significant reactions against BB7 by the press and the art critics. This discussion is based on a collection of secondary material, mainly Anglophone texts published both in international art journals as well as in Germany, such as *Frieze*, *Afterall*, *Art Journal*, *Art Agenda* and *Texte Vor Kunst*. Despite some differences in the views expressed, they altogether convey the idea that the Biennale was in several respects a failed event. BB7's shrinking of the division between art and popular culture was largely perceived as a simplistic move, as this division, "could only truthfully end with the end of social antagonism" (Jarvis, 1998: 73), to repeat an Adornian slogan that is inscribed, as we shall see, in the rhetoric of these texts.

Interestingly for this discussion, Żmijewski found several formal aspects of the discursive biennial too elitist, most significantly the idea of discourse as a privileged form of cultural-political intervention as well as the incontestable authority of the curator. However, it is more precise to say that the model of the discursive biennial, as described by New Institutionalism and David's curatorial language, was not really abandoned but radicalised. This radicalization consisted in an *effort*, rather than success, to close the gap between what a biennial says and what it does, an effort that appeared as a straightforward mobilization against neoliberalism and its apparatuses. This effort, by attempting to be truthful and authentic, rendered the event and the institution rather inoperative in the long-run, as projects were caught up in spiralling webs of controversies, conflicts, cancellations and claims of censorship. The last section of this chapter is devoted to this latter category of projects, involving polemics between participants, tensions between activism and the institution of art as well as the realisation of a controversial conference with representatives and spokespersons of 'terrorist' organisations.[125] Representing an extreme moment in biennial practice and

[125] It is very telling that the 8th Berlin Biennale that followed totally renounced BB7's model in order for the institution to continue operating smoothly and receiving funding.

repeatedly claiming that it was not really a biennial but an action space, BB7, a blockbuster art event tied to an institution considered one of the beacons of German culture and an organization with a conventional hierarchical structure, displayed through its extremity, as this chapter argues, the limits of the political turn in biennial-making.

5.2 Accounting to Taxpayers

As with all the previous editions of the Biennale, the central venue of the exhibition, or of the 'action' in our case, was the building and the exterior space of 'Kunst Werke' (KW), a contemporary art institution responsible for organising the Berlin Biennale roughly every two years. While the KW, during the rest of the year, regularly holds art shows, the Biennale is its largest project and officially belongs to it since its first edition in 1998. The front part of KW is the oldest part of the building, built in the late 18th century and last used as a factory of margarine. After 1990, during the process of German reunification, the factory was given to artists by the city council. At that time, the curator Klaus Biesenbach, currently one of the directors of the MoMA, along with other artists and theorists founded KW there. Located in the area of Mitte, in former East Berlin, KW lies in an area that gained important social and economic capital during the 1990s after the fall of the Berlin wall as many artists and other creatives flocked there by virtue of its central location and cheap rents. Currently, the district is one of the most gentrified areas in Berlin, with a big change in demographics. In the past fifteen years, as a recent newspaper article puts it, a "yuppie invasion" occurred there pushing out both old residents and most of the artists who moved there right after the unification.[126]

[126] The journalist Peter Beaumont wrote about "yuppie invaders" in Berlin in his article "East Berlin fights back against the yuppy invaders" published online in *Guardian* on January 16, 2011. The article can be found at the following address: http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/jan/16/berlin-gentrification-yuppification-squat

Since December 2003 and from its 4th edition onwards, the Biennale receives regular funding from the German Federal Cultural Foundation (GFCF), the official body of the German state responsible for the funding and support of cultural activities. The funding the Biennale receives is around 2, 5 million euro per edition. This provision has been described to me as the single most crucial development for the sustenance of the Biennale. Denhart von Harling, the person responsible for the press and communication at KW at the time, whom I met on April 21, 2011 in Berlin, asserted that as a result of this sum, the Biennale has now, "a more stable situation than in the past and can better plan everything in advance". Before the 4th edition, Harling noted that, "it was as it is with KW now; we had to apply for everything again and again", and as a result the Biennale often found it hard to keep its two year intervals (the required funds had to be sought through applications to different state and private sponsors). Harling stressed the significance of the GFCF funding, portraying it as the solution to many of the Biennale's problems and as an important factor for its evolution to a worldwide recognisable institution. The GFCF, according to Harling, gives contracts for five years, which is to say two and a half editions. This contract had been renewed for the 7th Berlin Biennale:

> It is fixed and safe now but it is going to be decided this year whether they will do it again. We are very positive about that and hopefully they will do. If not, it is really a problem because it is really hard to get the funding which we are missing now, so if we have to acquire everything [from external sponsors] it will be really really hard.

The funding from the GFCF is then indispensible for the realization of the Biennale in its current form and crucial for its development over time. The Biennale, apart from GFCF, received some support in cash or kind through other bodies, for instance national councils, such as the Goethe Foundation and the British Council, or private sponsors like BMW. Harling, in fact, calculated the whole budget to around 3, 5 million euro. There was however a clear dependency on GCFC, as the maintenance of these funds is of paramount importance for institutional preservation. Tensions around this dependency became apparent when certain projects during BB7 were often discussed, as we shall see, as being inappropriate for receiving 'taxpayers' money'.

The Biennale then was largely accountable to this particular funding body and in effect to the respective agendas of the government. In this sense, although Harling assured me that "content-wise they [the GFCF] are not interfering", in my fieldwork I encountered much more complex procedures. The actual realisation of certain artworks and projects had to go through processes of negotiation between different institutional bodies, artists and other participants representing certain historical conventions, juridical rules, mediatised communication and inscribed social values in Berlin and Germany at large. The possibilities and limitations of the Biennale seemed liable to this substratum of historically and socially specific conditions. In any case, after the third edition, the organizational platform of the Biennale was redefined and as a result of secured funding long-term planning was more possible.

The Berlin Biennale is, in this sense, a private institution claiming to enable cultural and economic values within the public sphere so as to secure funding from the state or other sources. The private association that manages it comes, in Harling's words, "really from within the art world", rather than from a municipal or regional authority. In this respect, similarly to the Athens Biennale (Chapter 6), the Berlin Biennale is an organization built and run by a team of individuals who wish to intervene in the artistic scene of the city by adopting the brand name 'Biennale' (Chapter 1). This team then pursues different forms of funding and collaborations. The symbolic status of the name 'Biennale' among people in the art world and beyond, proves crucial for negotiating a number of issues with diverse partners, ranging from economic support and the provision of infrastructure to making the show attractive to critics or even cultural workers (who may often work for free or very low pay just to fill their CVs). GCFC offers funding to the Biennale both on the basis of its ability to stand as a, 'cultural beacon' for Germany and its capacity to add prestigious artistic vibrancy to a city that largely grounds its economy on the capitalization of art and culture. In this sense, despite the fact that it is a Biennale directly, "coming from within the art world", as Harling asserted, it is both expected to invoke some sort of national pride, as an exemplary exhibition of German culture, and contribute to the economic development of the city.

Here it is useful to note, that apart from its enhanced capacity for long-term planning, what also changed after the 3rd edition was the process of selecting the curators. Before the GFCF's funding, the curators were appointed by the 'Berlin Biennale association', a group of collectors, critics and patrons. After the 3rd edition, the Biennale developed a model that is still at work today, according to which the choice of curator is decided by a selection committee. A different committee is appointed for each biennale edition, comprised by international museum directors, curators and art critics. Harling describes this process in detail:

> We have a board of directors for the Biennale; two members of this board are from the German Federal Cultural Foundation, the director of KW and the Berlin Biennale, Gabriele Horn, and then there are Klaus Biesenbah, founding director of both KW and the Berlin Biennale, and three more persons from the former Berlin Biennale association. They select or appoint the selection committee and invite them to do it. They are well connected to the art world and know what an interesting theme will be. And then these persons from the selection committee, who are around six, propose one curator or curatorial team each and all the former curators of the Berlin Biennale also hand in one name or a team. So we are getting more and more proposals for each Biennale and then the selection committee is totally free to choose around three or four curators or teams to hand in a concept and then based on this concept they start to talk with them.

The public funding from the GFCF enables in this way a more transparent selection of curators, themes and artists. Other participants in the Biennale include a few people working in the office of the KW, who hold permanent or semi-permanent positions, and a number of temporary workers hired specifically for the show, such as invigilators, production assistants and tour guides.

From its very first edition the Berlin Biennale functioned as a socially engaged platform, performing the most significant aspects of the discursive exhibition, including an interdisciplinary nature, a durational character, an increased self-awareness regarding its positioning within capitalism and a desire to explore politics within the city. It also attempted to rhetorically distance itself from mega-shows, such as the Venice Biennale, and their touristic agendas. This was obvious in the curatorial

statement of the first Berlin Biennale. In 1998 the curators Klaus Biesenbach, Hans Ulrich Obrist and Nancy Spector write:

For us as curators, the task of inventing a biennale for Berlin has not been uncomplicated. From the start we have acknowledged the fact that such exhibitions are, in general, commercial ventures and venues for barely disguised nationalistic gestures. Beyond this, however, the city poses its own very unique challenges… Our initial response to this paradoxical situation was to propose a biennale that would take place in time, an exhibition that would occur over a two-year period rather than happen every two years. This was to reflect the emphatically temporal nature of a city that looks forward by eliminating its past and looks backward to decorate its future. Our impulse to create a non-static exhibition also represents a certain resistance to the traditional, neatly packaged biennale (that usually takes place during peak tourist season) as well as an attempt to mirror the ephemeral nature of much of the contemporary art being produced today.[127]

Despite initial declarations to be a counter-biennial, the Berlin Biennale is now a rather conventional big-budget show and from its 4th edition onwards regularly takes place in spring and summer i.e. during peak tourist season. Over the next years, the shows that followed shared similar curatorial aspirations to intervene within the city of Berlin, interweaving art with social commentary and a desire to open up social questions and fields of investigation. Indicatively, the 2nd edition of the Biennale explored notions of, "connectedness, contribution and commitment", aiming to launch a, "critique of the commercial and profit-oriented art world by moving away from artistic narcissism and elitist approaches opting instead for a dialogue with the public".[128] From the 3rd edition onwards, while the critique against the commercial art world or gentrification seemed to be rhetorically de-emphasised, the discursive elements that uniformly characterised biennials at the time remained and were expanded on. The 3rd edition curated by Uta Meta Bauer aimed to create, "a temporal

[127] This excerpt is taken from a post titled 'Klaus Biesenbach, Hans Ulrich Obrist and Nancy Spector in the catalogue of the 1st Berlin Biennale' found in the website of the Berlin Biennale. The full curatorial statement can be found at the following address: http://www.berlinbiennale.de/blog/en/allgemein-en/klaus-biesenbach-hans-ulrich-obrist-and-nancy-spector-in-the-catalogue-of-the-1st-berlin-biennale-12496

[128] This phrase is taken from the post '2nd Berlin Biennale for Contemporary Art' found in the Berlin Biennale website. The full post can be seen at the following address http://www.berlinbiennale.de/blog/en/1st-6th-biennale/2nd-berlin-biennale

space of discourse by fostering connections between local players of art and knowledge production",[129] while the 4th edition, the first to receive the GFCF funding and the first to come up with a title, *Of Mice and Men*, although stressing the, "obscurity" and the, "almost magical power" of art objects, similarly engaged in a discursive exercise through what the curators Maurizio Cattelan, Massimiliano Gioni and Ali Subotnivk called an, "archaeology of the quotidian".[130] The 5th edition evoked the show's temporal dimension, emphasising how the event was conceived as, "an accumulation of transient experiences", with its venues spreading across the city and "along the duration of the biennial, night after night".[131] The sixth edition,[132] curated by Kathrin Rhomberg declared in stark opposition to the 7th that followed that, "the aim of the show is not to provide answers, but to pose questions" and that it will reach, "this goal when it succeeds in calling attention to the questions".[133] In short, all previous biennial editions drew heavily from the interdisciplinary model of the discursive show, with a desire to be socially interventionist and enable effects within the city of Berlin. Although it shared the form of these shows, the 7th Berlin Biennale, in its attempt to be in tune with the new activist demands, was, to a large extent, in its stated aims, content and background, a break from the previous endeavours.

[129] This phrase is taken from the post '3rd Berlin Biennale for Contemporary Art' found in the Berlin Biennale website. The full post can be seen at the following address: http://www.berlinbiennale.de/blog/en/1st-6th-biennale/3rd-berlin-biennale

[130] These quotes are taken from the catalogue of the 4th Berlin Biennale 'Of Mice and Men' from a text by the same title composed by the three curators Maurizio Catelan, Massimiliamo Gioni and Ali Subotnick (page 24-25).

[131] This excerpt is taken from a post titled 'Adam Szymczyk and Elena Filipovic in the catalogue of the 5th Berlin Biennale' found in the website of the Berlin Biennale. The full curatorial statement can be found at the following address: http://www.berlinbiennale.de/blog/en/allgemein-en/adam-szymczyk-and-elena-filipovic-in-the-catalogue-of-the-5th-berlin-biennale-12533

[132] *This last show was the target of anti-gentrification protests* who accused BB6 *for employing a venue in the gentrifying area of Kreuzberg,* contributing in this way *to the immense rise in rents of the past years* in the area.

[133] These quotes are taken from the catalogue of the 6th Berlin Biennale 'What is Waiting Out There?' from a text by the same title composed by the curator Kathrin Rhomberg (page 12).

5.3 *Forget Fear*

5.3.1 Venues, Context and Curatorial Approach

BB7 took place from the 27th of April until the 1st of July 2012. The show was visited by 120.000 visitors, 40.000 more than the previous show. This number of tickets, partly fuelled by the newly introduced free admission to all events, stands as a record high in the history of the Berlin Biennale. Apart from the KW, the Biennale spanned several other venues including the 'Akademie Der Kunst', one of the most respected art academies in Germany and the building of 'Deutschlandhaus', a "container of repressed or excluded German history",[134] as BB7's newspaper puts it. This building was used by Nazis and currently by the German state to host permanent exhibits related to the dislocation of German populations from neighbouring countries during and in the aftermath of WWII. 'St. Elisabeth-Kirche', an old church used both for religious and cultural occasions, also hosted one art project. Apart from these sites, other indoors or outdoors spaces usually loaded with social or historical significance were used to hold different events and projects. The Biennale, in this way, and also through the polymorphous actions of its participants, embraced many different parts of the city of Berlin, touching themes related to its history, its current physical and conceptual space as well as the potential for rewriting the social space.

The head curator of the Biennale was the Polish artist Artur Żmijewski, considered one of the most renowned post-Soviet critical artists. During the 1990s he drafted his idea about 'applied social arts'.[135] This idea, reflected in his approach to the Biennale, views the artist as a functionary of emancipation, whose skills should be put in the service of social change. This stance is mirrored in the exhibition's title *Forget Fear* meant to highlight the courage and bravery one has to summon against all forms of oppression. Żmijewski, with an established reputation in the art world for producing

[134]This phrase is taken from a post titled 'Deutschlandhaus As Venue' found in the website of the 7th Berlin Biennale. The full curatorial statement can be found at the following address: http://www.berlinbiennale.de/blog/en/projects/deutschlandhaus-as-venue-22127

[135] His full manifesto of the 'applied social arts' can be found at the following address: http://www.krytykapolityczna.pl/English/Applied-Social-Arts/menu-id-113.html

works that purport to challenge established institutions often via the exercise of psychological violence or the tackling of repressed historical memories, was accepted by the Biennale's selection committee on the basis of a curatorial proposal that he submitted in 2010. This proposal, described by many, including the co-curator Joanna Warsza in a personal interview, as, "prophetic" concerned the investigation of the relationship between art and activism. With the Arab Spring, the Indignados and the OWS bursting onto the scene in 2011 Żmijewski's idea could not seem timelier.

Warsza, a scholar and curator working in the theatre, joined the curatorial team in late 2011 after randomly meeting with Żmijewski a couple of times, where they both showed interest to each other's work. She did not have a big name in the art world, and as she put it in a personal talk on May 29, 2012, she, "was not well-known enough to be listed as a curator of such a thing". In the Biennale she would mainly compensate for Żmijewski's inability to handle sensitive issues related to the press, and media, and who, according to a tour guide I met, was "terrible at communication".[136] Also, with her experience in administration and organising, she expected to act as mediator between the curatorial team and the different parties involved in the production of the show.

On December 2011, in addition to Warsza, the Biennale also announced the Russian group Voina as associate curators. It is worthwhile taking some time to describe Voina's case because it is in many ways exemplary of the discourses and practices taking place in and around *Forget Fear*. In the past few years, the group has achieved notoriety in Russia and the global art world for their scandalous performances, involving violence and sabotaging of state institutions, such as burning police cars and drawing a gigantic penis on a bridge opposite the building of the Russian secret services. Voina consider themselves anarchist revolutionaries and the statements they produce have strong romantic origins, often portraying the normative role of the artist as that of an agent acting exclusively for social emancipation and against established social norms. Also, in some of their interviews, Voina members invoke notions which

[136] This phrase was communicated to me by a tour guide of BB7 on May 3, 2012.

can be considered dated in the context of postmodern art discourse, such as that of real art and the true artist.[137] Because of their violent performances and political opposition, Voina are regularly accused of criminal behaviour and hooliganism, and are a constant target of Russian authorities. According to their interviews, some of the group's members are currently held in police custody while others live in secret locations to avoid imprisonment. Notably, due to their underground position, they also claim that they reject the use of money and live from scavenging and supermarket lifting.[138]

At a first glance, Voina's radical anti-institutionalism, garnished with statements such as, "all exhibitions are utterly pointless"[139] and, "holding exhibitions can only harm real art",[140] appears contradictory to their participation as co-curators of the Berlin Biennale, an institution funded by the German state, BMW and other private sponsors. This tension was supposedly reconciled through the revelation that their participation was due to their personal relationship with Żmijewski, whom they regard as a true radical. Both Voina and Żmijewski publicly stated that he visited them in December 2011 in St. Petersburg asking them to help him, "transform art into politics".[141] There, Voina decided to check Żmijewski's radicalism, the way they "check out everyone who comes to Voina". They made him pretend that he was a drunk tourist during a supermarket lifting in St. Petersburg so as to distract the cashier. After Żmijewski "passed the test" and his radicality was confirmed, they started building a relationship

[137] See for instance the interviews in the following footnote.
[138] Such things are admitted for example in their interview titled 'Russian art collective Voina: 'Zhlobs are in power in today's Russia'' given to Annie Rutherford on December 5, 2011 for the webzine 'Café Babel' as well as in an interview of one of the Voina's members gave to an unnamed person that was published on April 26, 2012 in the website 'Free Voina' titled 'Vor: To fuck them in a way the people can grasp, but with all the brilliance that is our wont'. The full interviews can be found at the following addresses: following addresses: http://www.cafebabel.co.uk/culture/article/russian-art-collective-voina-zhlobs-are-in-power-in-todays-russia.html and http://en.free-voina.org/post/21855280663
[139] The quote is taken from the interview 'Free Voina' titled 'Vor: To fuck them in a way the people can grasp, but with all the brilliance that is our wont'.
[140] *Ibid.*
[141] This phrase is mentioned in the post titled '7TH BERLIN BIENNALE. STATEMENT BY VOINA' found in their website 'Free Voina'. The full text can be found at the following address: http://en.free-voina.org/post/22267051835

of “total trust”, “with absolutely no boundaries”, where “limits do not apply”, “laws don’t exist” and the only thing that mattered was to “do politics.”[142]

In practical terms, Voina made clear that they were not, “going to occupy themselves with exhibition management”, which they find, “rather useless”. Instead, in an interview right after their participation was announced, they triumphantly declared in an emphatically militaristic tone: “We have taken Berlin. The next thing is the Russian revolution” (‘voina’ in Russian means ‘war’).[143] Indeed, Voina did not have any curatorial responsibilities expect their informal communication with Żmijewski on matters that no one apart from the two parties was aware of. In reality, Żmijewski simply offered Voina the opportunity to connect their name with the prestigious title of the associate curator of Berlin Biennale so as to give them the international visibility necessary to put them in a better position in their negotiations with Russian authorities. As Warsza put it in the *Forget Fear*’s newspaper that served as a guide for the exhibition, “our curatorial alliance with Voina creates a situation in which the institutional tools of the Berlin Biennale—access to press coverage, legal representation, or funding— can serve Voina’s cause; through it they are legitimised as artists and their actions are deemed art”.[144] Voina would receive different kinds of benefits from this position without really having to contribute or commit to any of the show’s responsibilities in a substantial way.

The case of Voina is exemplary of the ways that Żmijewski saw his involvement in the Biennale and his general curatorial strategy. Żmijewski’s strategy of enacting dissent involved the conscious and explicit exploitation of the symbolic capital of Berlin Biennale as an institution so as to defend, support or give visibility to persons or discourses that the curator saw as resistant to dominant structures and ideas. In this sense, Żmijewski’s ‘institutional work’, to use the phrase of Lawrence and Suddaby

[142] The quote is taken from the interview ‘Free Voina’ titled ‘Vor: To fuck them in a way the people can grasp, but with all the brilliance that is our wont’.
[143] All the above quotes are taken from the post titled ‘7TH BERLIN BIENNALE. STATEMENT BY VOINA’.
[144] This excerpt is taken from the text ‘Doing Things with Art’ by Joanna Warsza which was also published in the Berlin Biennale website in 2012. The text can be found at the following address: http://www.berlinbiennale.de/blog/en/allgemein-en/doing-things-with-art-by-joanna-warsza-27688

once more (2006), consisted of repurposing and taking advantage of the symbolic power of the institution by disrupting, or better dislocating, its institutional agenda. Interestingly enough, the language that Żmijewski used in public occasions and private talks significantly resembled that of Voina in its polemical tone.

Before the show started, Żmijewski made his intentions clear. In these serious times for the world, there was no time for play or passive contemplation. In contrast to the decisively political, but more reflective and deliberative approaches that characterised the discursive exhibition paradigm, according to him, art should act and act now. In a statement that the Biennale released some months before the show started, Żmijewski declared that, "art now is no longer just an intellectual safari for philosophers but also a political safari for politicians and the local administration" and that, "art today mostly represents the ambitions of individual artists, being the interests of the members of neo-liberal elites"[145]. Żmijewski invited around 50 well-known cultural producers based in Berlin to write statements responding to his call for, "drafting and signing a new social contract between artists…, curators, directors, and representatives of commercial and non-commercial cultural institutions in Berlin, and also politicians".[146] This new pact for art was perceived as a motivation to empower the artists in reclaiming the fruits of their creative, intellectual and manual labour that contributed to the redevelopment of Berlin's cultural capital.[147] In this sense, the rhetoric on art as site of production, instead of merely a representational one, was profoundly reflected in Żmijewski's statements.

Some months before the publication of this newspaper, Żmijewski announced an open call for artists willing to participate in the Biennale. In this rather unusual gesture from a renowned Biennale exhibition, artists were invited not only to submit their artworks,

[145] The quote is taken by a statement of Żmijewski published in 2011 in the Berlin Biennale website titled 'Artur Żmijewski artist and curator, 7th Berlin Biennale, Berlin and Warsaw'. The full statement can be found here: http://www.berlinbiennale.de/blog/en/comments/artur-zmijewski-2-15158
[146] *Ibid.*
[147] Żmijewski's tone in the New Pact' brings in mind a widespread demand of the past fifteen years, that of the 'basic wage', which is to say a guaranteed basic salary for everyone for life regardless of whether they work or not. This is usually justified through the idea that post-Fordist economies heavily depend on sociality, something that turns all people to 'workers', i.e. through their lifestyle choices, creativity, desire to network and share.

proposals and projects in hard copy formats, but, more crucially, to identify their political positions. Around 5,000 artists from all over the world responded to the call, sending their work and describing where they belong politically in a few words. Yet, in a move that caused controversy, these proposals were not taken into consideration by the curators. In fact, the art works presented in the Biennale had nothing to do with these applications; they were instead a result of research that the curators made themselves. The only artist who replied to the open call and eventually took part in the exhibition was Marina Naprushkina (who was invited by Żmijewski after they met in a demonstration without him knowing that she replied to the open call). The visitors, however, could see during the Biennale a number of the files that contained the applications of the artists who submitted to the open call placed in piles in a room close to the entrance of KW. This room also displayed on one of its walls a large-scale graph representing the political views of the artists as described in their submissions, creating a network of links between their various political orientations. For the record, the vast majority of the artists who submitted work to the Biennale were self-described as left-wing. The Berlin-based media activist and writer Pit Schultz was invited to develop a so-called 'ArtWiki', an on-going digital art library based on the model of Wikipedia, which was linked to Biennale's official website and included all artist's names, their political orientations and information about the work. This ArtWiki was expected to continue being active even after the conclusion of the Biennale so as to facilitate links between artists and institutions.

The main curatorial strategy the curators used was described to me by Joanna Warsza as, "following the news". According to this strategy, rather than doing studio visits, the curators operate like journalists, selecting artworks and projects in response to current political and social events. As Warsza put it in a text circulated through the process of the Biennale,

…this form of curatorial research does not involve deadlines, hunting for interesting portfolios, or studio visits. We searched for art in civil disobedience, in politics, in

representative state art, in the politics of memory, in capitalist appropriation, or in educational activities seen as "bad art."[148]

The main idea that guided this approach was the desire to discover the art in politics and, inversely, the politics in art. This was related to art's performativity, that is to say on art's capacity to *do* things that can have certain effects in the world (Jackson, 2011: 2; Chapter 3 Section 2). In other words, the art shown in the exhibition was chosen on the basis of its capacity to act. On top of that, the curators, echoing Mouffe's agonistic approach (Chapter 2 Section 2.2), called their approach, "agonistic curating", perceiving the role of the curator not only as someone who is, "taking care" of art, but as a position that is "inviting disagreement, confrontation, losing control over meaning, or of giving away space and means."[149] The reference to Mouffe eloquently indicates some affiliation of the exhibition's strategies with the epistemological framework of social constructionism, a rhetoric often used in the discursive exhibition format.

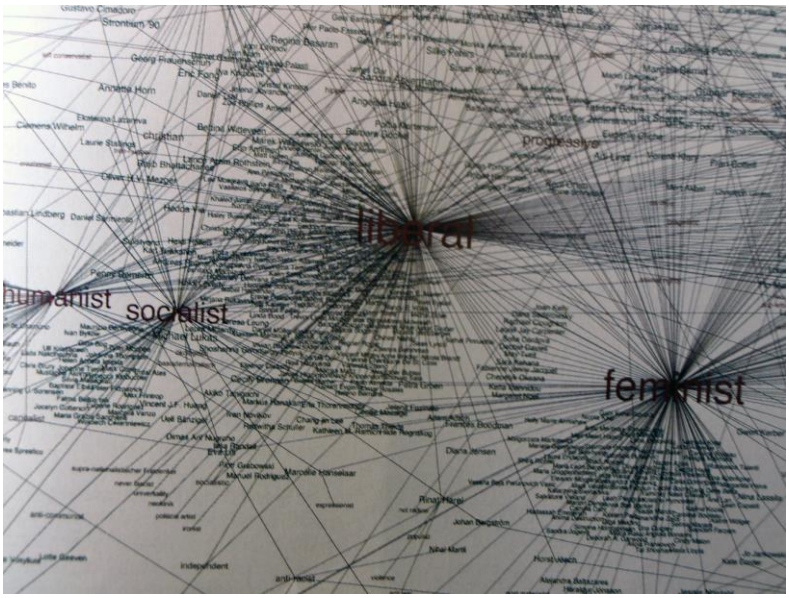

Figure 5.2: *ArtWiki*: A Network of Artists' Political Orientations

[148] This excerpt is taken from the text 'Doing Things with Art' by Joanna Warsza published in the Berlin Biennale website in 2012. The text was also included in a newspaper that BB7 released that served as a guide for the exhibition. The text can be found at the following address: http://www.berlinbiennale.de/blog/en/allgemein-en/doing-things-with-art-by-joanna-warsza-27688
[149] *Ibid.*

Contrary to their joined statements, Żmijewski's own curatorial statements seem to perfectly fit and embody the shift from the discursive to the activist vocabularies of the recent years. In fact, Żmijewski not only reflected this shift, but actively propagated it by openly dismissing the hitherto model of the political exhibition. In the foreword of the publication of *Forget Fear*, an edited volume with texts and interviews related broadly to the themes of the Biennale, released during the days of the opening, he explicitly embraces an activist vocabulary by attempting to reunite art with society for the cause of social change. His main objection is that the art of our times does not have any concrete effects: "people otherwise extraordinarily well-equipped—artists—produce paradoxical or utopian visions and a social critique which neither they nor their viewers are willing to translate into a political (or any other) practice of any tangible social value" (2012: 10). However, since, "we are witnessing an attack on the fiscal foundations of culture" and since, "the majority of artists are in fact part of an artistic proletariat", art cannot afford simply being, "a décor for a neo-liberal system" (2012: 12). For Żmijewski, it is not only art and art objects that are a décor but also, "the intellectual discourse that frames them" (2012: 12), that is to say the theoretical frameworks that claim to propagate art's social engagement. Instead of being subversive, for Żmijewski, this system only serves to drain, "into its centre each and every radical proposition, transforming it into speculation and theoretical reflection—but not into action" (:12). In this sense, "artists, as well as the theorists and philosophers" of the past decades, "have become 'practitioners of impotence'" (:12-13). By launching a full-front attack against the political statements of the discursive biennial, Żmijewski states, echoing the tone of Voina, that, "the curator" has in fact, "become a traveling producer of exhibitions", who, "speaks of social issues in the soft language of pretended engagement" (:13). Instead, his conception of political art refuses, "to ride the postmodernist merry-go-round of cultural pluralism, slow reform, and gradual development of new languages that satisfy everyone", declares, "disobedience to a falsity of aesthetics, existence, and humanity of art" and abandons, "the ship named 'the free market of ideas' or 'the post-political feast of differences',

beginning to form a movement on its own" (:16). In other words, Żmijewski proclaimed that BB7 attempts to initiate a radical break from a model relying on discursivity, mediation and theoretical reflection in favour of an insurrectionary artistic activism.

Notwithstanding his desire to escape from previous models, Żmijewski's break with the past was not as holistic as claimed. This biennial shared many aspects of the discursive show: an edited volume that expanded on the curatorial approach was published, several theorists, philosophers and social scientists were invited into its premises to give talks, there were regular and daily guided tours, it contained works of interdisciplinary nature, and it had a strong temporal dimension as various events were occurring every day. In this sense, Żmijewski's embrace of questions of insurrection, labour and action adapted itself to the previously existing system of showcasing and its vocabularies.

5.3.2 The Occupy Berlin Biennale

Despite similarities with previous models, however, the eccentric nature of Berlin Biennale was made evident from the beginning, and as a result, many critics went as far as to question its status as an exhibition. The unconventionality of the show was evident in several of its manifestations, ranging from the ways it engaged with the press to the actual exhibits themselves. For instance, some weeks after the Biennale's opening, a black and red flag appeared hanging from KW's façade. The flag, fluttering on a balcony not accessible to the audience, was put up by members of the Occupy movement in order to declare affiliations with the movement of anarchism. The encounter with the anarchist flag gave the somehow paradoxical impression that this well-established and prestigious institution with its top-notch art world connections in a gentrified street of Berlin was somehow propagating anarchist causes. Similarly, for most of the two-and-a-half month period that the show was running, invited and uninvited activists and members of the Occupy Berlin movement placed in its yard

several banners that directly called the visitors to action. For instance, slogans such as ‘This is a Class War Fight Back’ and ‘Don’t Play with the Dictator’ (referring to the possible boycott of the hockey games organised in Belarus in 2014 by the president Alexander Lukashenko) were on daily public display for the largest period of the show. The straightforwardness and unambiguous nature of such performances with which one was confronted, seriously downplayed the expectations of a traditional art exhibition where political issues are usually discussed from a remove.

Figure 5.3: KW’s façade during BB7

Figure 5.4: KW's yard during BB7

The eccentric character of *Forget Fear* came largely as an effect of Occupy Berlin, the Berlin section of the Occupy movement, invited by Żmijewski, some months before the opening, to take part in the show. The participation of the Occupy movement in the Berlin Biennale epitomises, not only the translocal nature of the interactions taking place in and around the show (Greiner; Sakdapolrak, 2013), but also the radicalisation of ideas of criticality, as here an activist social movement, formless and improvisational as it was, took over the direction of the biennial's main space.

The Occupiers were essentially carriers of a globalising language and set of tactics which had to be placed within the territory of Berlin Biennale, resulting in situations that revealed the internal dynamics of the group as well as the limits of the biennial as a potential activist site. The group, a local manifestation of the global Occupy

movement, eventually agreed to participate on the basis that its members would have total freedom to exercise politics and organise actions. Occupy Berlin accepted the invitation because it wished to strengthen its position in Berlin (it had recently been evicted from the park it was located at), to offer visibility to the cause of Occupy in general, and to connect and network with global activists. Some Occupy members did not agree with this participation, as the Berlin Biennale receives state and corporate funding, and decided to leave the movement. However, as a participating activist informed me, most of them were more or less forced to return as most of the activist action in Berlin at the time was taking place there.

Around four months before the beginning of *Forget Fear*, Occupy Berlin announced an open call to which potential participants were invited to propose the organization of actions, events or working groups. No specific formal restrictions were applied for accepting proposals, although they had to be sympathetic to the idea of direct democracy and propagate values related with anti-capitalism, environmentalism, anti-colonialism and the like. Also, the initial Occupy group invited several activists and activist movements from around the world, most notably from Spain and the U.S.A., to co-create actions during the show. Eventually several activists from outside Berlin and Germany showed up, taking up different tasks and responsibilities. All decisions for these tasks were taken through a general assembly, which they called *assamblea* (after the Spanish word for assembly), in which anyone could participate. The assamblea was held regularly in the main space of KW. In the first assambleas, the Occupiers were divided into different working groups which met independently and were responsible for separate issues. Such groups included the 'Occupy Communication Group', the 'Creative Actions Group', the 'Autonomous University', the 'Garden Group' and the 'IT Working Group', which all together made the larger group of 'Occupy Biennale'. As such, according to one participant, Nelly, Occupy Berlin was not a homogenous movement, but

there are various assemblies, various affinity groups…we came together with these preparatory brainstorming meetings and it became immediately clear that some people were very interested in content, like what kind of content we were going to provide at this space

which is going to be offered to us at KW, and other people were interested in art and performances or visuals…I don't want to call it arts and culture because we were from the very beginning very adamant about not producing art and keep it very controversial and political…eh, I think it was called the 'actions groups', having things like street theatre, direct action, you know more lively things that will bring the spirit of Occupy from the streets and demolish this barrier between the public and the gallery.[150]

The working groups mostly co-operated with each other and formally discussed matters together in the assamblea, although communication was mainly established informally through day to day conversations and interactions. A very important part of social life for the members of Occupy Biennale was the 'Kitchen', which was a room above the main space and in which the participants spent a great amount of their time, chatting, sharing ideas, eating and drinking. The duties for cooking and keeping the kitchen tidy and clean were generally split through rotation among the activists. While the Kitchen room was similarly open to all participants, and even the visitors, it was somehow more reserved for the Occupy insiders. The Kitchen also functioned as a symbolic space because ideas related to 'organic food' and 'eating healthy' were an important part of the Occupy culture.

In the course of the show, a backyard which was accessible from the back door of the main space in KW, was turned by occupy activists and volunteers into a garden where they grew spices and herbs. The garden, gradually, as the weather became warmer, ended up being one of the most vibrant areas of *Forget Fear*, functioning as a meeting space for different events where ideas related to social change and gardening were discussed.[151] One of these ideas was that of 'guerrilla gardening' that involved turning

[150] This excerpt, as well the ones that follow, are taken from a recorded interview I had with Nelly, an activist and member of the Autonomous University on June 26, 2012 in Berlin (the name is not her real name).

[151] The participants in the garden project propagated through flyers and other material the idea of gardening and self-sustenance as a deeply political act and strategy of resistance. For example in a catalogue publication of the Occupy Biennale, which was released after the first month of the show and cost 5 euros, we read: "People no longer know how to grow their own food, which has resulted in an increasing disconnect with nature and seasonal produce. We are now mostly dependent on the corporate system of agricultural production, consuming industrialized goods from supermarket shelves and without any real idea of where our food actually comes from or what it really contains. Food is essential for survival, so the economic elite use this necessity to their advantage by creating communities that are largely not self-sustainable. Today we largely rely on food produced through industrialized agricultural

abandoned sites into gardens and green spaces. One of the weapons of guerrilla gardening that the group made was the so- called 'guerrilla gardening bombs' or 'seed bombs'; compressed bundles of soil containing seeds that participants were encouraged to drop into abandoned lots so as to flower gardens.

However, Occupy Biennale's political views were far from unified. In many of the assambleas that I participated there were several occasions where people would fight over ideological or other differences. Decision-making, in this sense, was not an easy task, as even the Occupiers themselves could not easily locate their role within an art institution, and indeed a rather well-established one, for two and-a-half-months. As an Occupy member, called Tessa, commented to me during a chat:

We have not made it clear among ourselves whether the space in Biennial was an exhibitionary space or our working space. It took a long time to make it clear…the first month of meetings was fully dedicated to that issue.[152]

Furthermore, although the movement wished to challenge the expectations of a normal gallery show, and not 'show art', it was often forced to succumb to several of the plots of an art institution. For instance, before the opening of the show, there was widespread concern about what the Occupy members will show to the visitors. Here the institutional logic of an art exhibition seems to inexorably shape and inform the actions and attitudes of its participants. As Tessa put it regarding this concern:

For all of the Occupy team the issue was what we were going to show. I think it would be much more critical and challenge the so-called institutionalization of the movement [if we were not thinking about that]…myself as well as all the others in the preparation team for Occupy were in a kind of stress, we were saying "what are we going to show?"

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practices, enslaving us to a system that is wasteful, over regulated and environmentally destructive. Gardening is independence and is a form of civil disobedience~ it is one of the most subversive activities in our society today." This quote is taken from a section in the catalogue titled 'Guerilla Gardening' (page 36).

[152] This excerpt, and the ones that follow, are taken from a recorded interview I had with Tessa, an activist of Occupy Berlin on June 17, 2012 in Berlin (the name is not her real name).

The tensions and contradictions among the group were also obvious in other ways. After the first weeks of the Biennale activists of the so called 'Global Square' movement, who were invited by other Occupy members and were there since the opening, abandoned the Biennale as they felt oppressed by the rest of the Occupy activists. Tensions grew higher as the days passed and various uninvited activists started appearing, changing the dynamics of the group. As Tessa remarked, "to a very large degree the team of Occupy Berlin felt that the activists coming from elsewhere were destroying what they had already built". Such tensions culminated when towards the end of May, some newcomers from Spain vandalised an artwork that was put on display in the main yard of KW by the curatorial team because they mistook it for a corporate advertisement. They covered the artwork and some parts of the exterior wall of KW with the painted slogan 'RISE UP!'. This artwork was in fact an appropriation of an original banner of *Mobinil*, a major mobile phone company, which was exalting the courage of the Egyptian people after the Egyptian revolution has taken place. However, during the same revolution the company cut-off their network service on government orders. By putting the banner up the curators wished to expose the hypocrisy and the unethical tactics of the corporation that attempted to capitalise on the revolution. When the vandalism took place, KW felt disturbed and sought to charge the activists for defacing both the artwork and the wall of the building. The global language of contemporary art here, by not being understood, activated a situated clash between two different participants, the organisers and the activists.

Many debates among activists, members of the public and participants followed concerning how free the space that the Biennale offered actually was. Here is how Nelly described the event in relation to the general constraints imposed by the institution, taking eventually the side of KW and not of her co-activists:

I mean there are constraints, in the sense of legal constraints. There are constraints that you will encounter when you are a guest in someone's home. For instance, somebody from our group, I don't know who, spray-painted the walls of the interior courtyard and this is going to cost the KW a considerable sum of money. So obviously that is a constraint… But the limitations on where you can spray the walls it is nothing comparable to other limitations that

we could have encountered, just because they have been incredibly welcoming and yeah….encouraging, I don't want to say tolerant, but yeah encouraging .

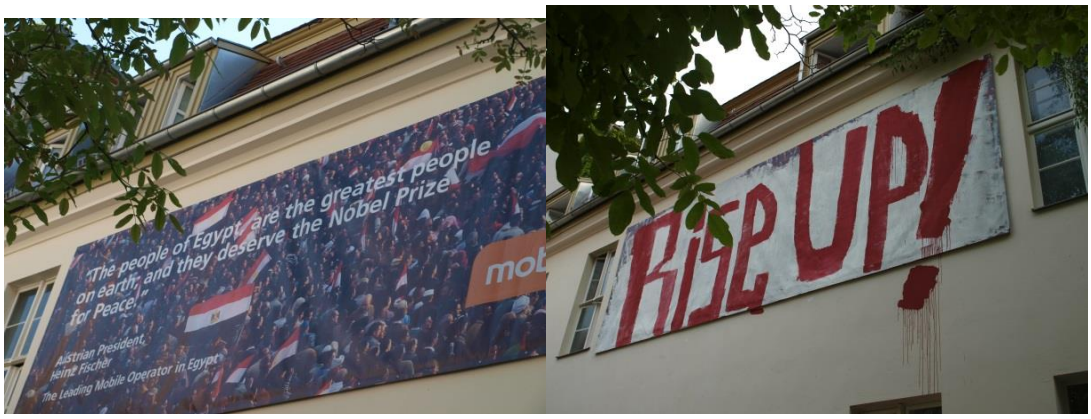

Figure 5.5: Replacing Mobinil with RISE UP!

The diversity of agendas between participants in the Occupy movement was something strongly noticeable during my ethnographic fieldwork. Whereas many activists employed a class-based rhetoric, mainly holding big corporations and banks accountable, other participants perceived the movement in more spiritual terms. For instance, one of the participants I interviewed, Joshua, who joined the Occupy Biennale from its early days, thought of the Occupy as a, "cosmic thing" in terms of, "the whole history of evolution."[153] Joshua believed that, "a very special field of energy will come in the summer" and the change will eventually, "happen in three or four years". For him, the Occupy was the spark of a forthcoming planetary movement. Joshua's beliefs, who along with others constructed and hung from the ceiling of the foyer a metallic sculpture of the 'sacred' New Age symbol, the 'Flower of Life', stood in complete disparity from these of other participants who perceived social change in much more mundane and materialistic terms.

Despite such differences, the presence of the Occupy was emphatic from early on, acting as the main point of attraction for media and critics. The much discussed press

[153] This excerpt, and the ones that follow, are taken from a recorded interview I had with Joshua, an activist of Occupy Berlin on May 25, 2012 in Berlin (the name is not his real name).

preview resembled an assamblea, with the chairs of journalists, visitors and organisers put around in a circle. There, the participants in the Biennale, and especially the Occupiers, questioned the journalists, rather than the other way round, about how objectively they represent the news. In a similar fashion, on the night of the opening, a large assamblea with around 100 participants took place in the main space where the activists were camping. Despite the increased numbers, however, many of the participants moved in and out of the assamblea, making decisions for action nearly impossible to reach and some of the Occupy Berlin members unhappy. As Tessa confirmed, "in the opening we started the assamblea and some members of the Occupy Berlin were very frustrated because loads of people were coming in". The chaos was further amplified by the decision of the activists to avoid using a real microphone and instead employ the technique of the 'human microphone'. According to this technique, when a participant speaks, the rest of the group repeats like a chorus her or his statement so as to make it audible to everyone. This technique was developed by the OWS in Zucotti Park, by necessity, as a way to amplify the words of each speaker, as the police forbid the protesters to use conventional loudspeakers. However, given that not even half of those present in the space participated in the assamblea, the surrounding noise was extreme and the whole process ended up being more like an exercise in cacophony.

Regardless, the activists stuck with the Occupy movement's global protocols and vocabularies. In an effort to reduce this chaos, 'senior' members began transferring functional skills required for taking part in the assamblea to the 'newbies'. The Spanish activists had developed a specific hand language in the square movements during the previous months for making the assambleas operational and limit noise in the process of deliberation. This language involved specific hand signs which one would use whenever they wished to communicate something to the group, especially to the person speaking, such as 'I agree', 'I disagree' or 'move faster'. Those aspiring to participate in the assambleas had to learn the basic gestures of this language. Otherwise, the whole process could easily become dysfunctional. In fact, if a newcomer was not aware of some basic hand signs it was impossible to attend the

meeting. For this reason, many people wishing to join were often turned off and left. Those who already had the experience and expertise in this language had to transfer this skill to the others, and through this system a hierarchy of seniority was allowed to develop.

Furthermore, while the assamblea proceeded during the opening there was a constant tension between the participants, especially the more experienced ones, and the art crowd. This tension was an outcome of the different expectations that activists and visitors had about what the gallery space stands for. Many activists, for instance, during the opening, felt extremely uneasy as the Biennale was proving to be a space overloaded with expectations of spectatorship. Although, they started calling members of the public to participate in the assamblea, most of the visitors, being there to see art and make public relations, did not bother to join. In the following day's assamblea this was translated as a failure of the movement (they 'scared-off' the potential activists), as some members believed that yelling at the visitors was disrespectful. This pressure put on the Occupy Biennale by the expectations of spectatorship resulted in a daily, almost ritualistic, reiteration by its members that they were not mere instruments in the hands of the Biennale and its sponsors. Performing thus a daily form of dissensus against the authority that invited them, the Occupy Biennale seemed to perceive the art institution not only as an ally but an adversary. Here, the values of the art field, including beliefs of the art exhibition as a space of reflection and thought, clashed with activist mentalities of action, unquestionable political engagement and determinate decision-making.

Figure 5.6: The Occupy on the night of the opening

In most assambleas I participated, from the very first day of *Forget Fear* until the last one, the tone, aims and content of the conversations revolved around certain issues that were approached through specific vocabularies. The most prominent idea among them was that the increasing implementation of neoliberal policies in Europe and the world has given rise to a financial dictatorship- indeed a rather common idea among social movements (Chapter 4). This idea was often framed within more catastrophic scenarios according to which, as a participant put it in the opening, "humanity as a whole will have rough times" and "the environment will collapse".[154] For Occupy Biennale, the solution against this situation was immediate action against neoliberalism at every possible level and, as such, a multitude of diverse actions were organised by the group during the exhibition. One of the most notable of these actions was the co-organization of the so-called 'Blockupy' protest in Frankfurt, a protest against the bankers and the banks, to which the great majority of the participants travelled to demonstrate. During the days of the protest, the main space was almost completely empty and disorganised and as a result several dysfunctional situations

[154] These phrases were heard by a participant of the assamblea in the opening of BB7.

occurred. For instance, when an invited international speaker arrived on May, 12, there were merely two persons attending his speech, among them late-sleepers who were just emerging from their tents.

While the discursive model of extended educational events was denounced by Żmijewski, it found its place in the exhibition by one of the most active Occupy groups, the so-called Autonomous University, a self-organised educational endeavour set up by the Occupy Biennale. This smaller, transient institutional endeavour was conceived a few months before the opening and designed specifically for *Forget Fear*. Its co-ordinators managed to obtain some room inside the main space, and their primary aim was to create a live space, filling most days of the schedule with events in the form of lectures, seminars and panels. At least in the beginning, apart from a general anti-capitalist orientation, there were no hard-lined principles regarding the issues they wished to cover or the political statements to promote.[155] However a certain political direction, according to Nelly, was clear: "The 'Autonomous University' was mostly meant to communicate knowledge; to tap into the local activist scene and bring together activists, community members, academics and exchange knowledge". The process of scheduling talks and other activities was mostly based on individual initiative. If a member had an idea, this would be presented to the rest of the group, which, as Nelly informed me, never, "vetoed something or refused an invitation". After accepting the person's proposal, it was their, "responsibility to make this happen". For instance, if they, "proposed to bring someone to talk about ethical consumption, it's up to them to schedule it and they have the microphone, the beam and the projector, advertise it and so on". In this sense, it was a very democratic and loose organization, based on individual commitment and voluntary participation rather than some programmatic principles that had to be strictly followed.

The Autonomous University was described by Nelly as, "one of the most successful working groups in the Biennale" and while "the urban garden project, the public kitchen all of these things were also successful…the 'Autonomous University' had

[155] As Nelly described to me, "these things are just impossible to do, to begin with, because there is not one correct analysis of capital".

probably the biggest exposure". This was generally true as large numbers of people attended the lectures given by some high profile speakers and 'star' intellectuals such as David Graeber, Peter Marcuse and Brian Holmes. The talks were also uploaded on YouTube and promoted through the Biennale channels and accounts. As Nelly explains, organising such an enterprise was much easier through the support of a well-known institution such as Berlin Biennale:

> You know what, as 'Occupy Berlin Biennale' it was very easy for us to organise all these things because when you call yourself the 'Autonomous University' and you explain to people that on the one hand you are involved in the Occupy and on the other you have a space in the Biennial, which are both very attractive things for various reasons. It turns out that everybody is willing to come and talk to you….Well in most cases the people that came were already here for other reasons. Because it is summertime and all these star-academics were already on the speaking circuit, or they went to Documenta and so on, and they were in the neighbourhood and it was easy for them to come.

Although this endeavour was set up with, "zero financial support" on the behalf of the Biennale, the, "space", and also the space, "being in an attractive location", were the most significant factors that gave visibility to the Autonomous University and the rhetoric it wished to make public. The issue of visibility, in other words, was the precondition for its success.

To sum up this section on Occupy, the most important tensions in the Occupy Berlin, which were present from the beginning and were constant, had to do with two interrelated things: the first was the question as to whether the movement had been institutionalised by a state and corporate-funded institution, and secondly, if that was the case, how to counter this appropriation. For the most part, most of the activists agreed that the situation could be reversed only if spectatorship, or the practice of looking at art objects, with which everyone more or less associates art galleries, was turned into active participation. The biggest challenge then for the Occupiers was to turn the visitors entering the exhibition into activists for social change, which is to say to participate in assambleas, organise actions and spread the word of revolution to others. In this sense, (similarly to what was discussed in Chapter 4) the art space

would turn from a site of representation to one of action, keeping in mind, as a participant from the 'Radio for the 99%' put it, that, "everyone entering the space stops being audience and they become potential activists". Efforts to address this condition involved the attempt to organise the workers of KW for demanding a pay rise, as well as the gradual and rather symbolic development of a horizontal working model in the course of the Biennale, in which hierarchies between the Occupiers, KW staff, the curators and other participants were supposed to be eliminated. The curators, for instance, during the last month of the Biennale were referred as, "former curators."[156] This was a practical manifestation of the ways that the horizontalised ideas of social movements were nodal in actualising a less hierarchical (although merely symbolic) curatorial paradigm than the one of the discursive biennial of the past.

Interestingly, the questions posed in the microcosm of the Occupy Biennale resemble the ones posed within critical curatorial discourse. Given that participation in the Biennale was meant to empower the cause of social change, the main question was *how* to participate: how to use the symbolic power of the institution so as to balance out the guilt of participating in an organization that receives corporate and state funding? To divert this power for their own ends, the conspiracies of Occupiers against neoliberalism, had to be organised, channelled within art institutional scripts, involving public expectations about art, spectatorship and aesthetisation. In other words, and as we shall see more emphatically in the critiques of BB7, the activist impulses of the Occupy were caught and performed within the logics of the art institution. In another sense, a main difference between the impulses of the Occupy Biennale and these of critical art professionals, was that for the latter participation also meant professional opportunities and thus compromises are easier to make. Looked at through the lens of curatorial theory, the decision to bring in the activist scene then, a

[156] In an announcement titled '7TH BERLIN BIENNALE IS MOVING TOWARDS HORIZONTALITY' the Berlin Biennale website writes: "More than halfway into the 7th Berlin Biennale for Contemporary Art, the invited global movements challenged the hierarchical structure of the Biennale, initiating a move toward horizontality. Horizontality means de-centering power away from leadership hierarchies and making decisions through group consensus." The full post can be found at the following address: http://www.berlinbiennale.de/blog/en/comments/7th-berlin-biennale-is-moving-towards-horizontality-30631

crowd that does not have any real stakes in the art world, thwarts the discursive model by enabling an agency of pure activist desire.

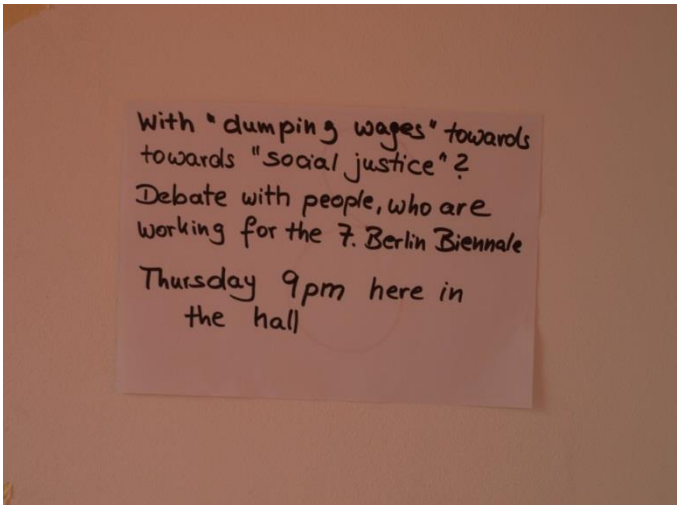

Figure 5.7: With Dumping Wages Towards “Social Justice”?

5.3.3 ‘Doing Resistance’: Artworks, Projects and Events

5.3.3.1 Artworks

Not surprisingly, the very few art projects by artists, much less than any other past edition, were mostly fuelled by a similar activist desire. Most- if not all- of the works included, either produced by artists directly for the Biennale or re-contextualised by the curators, communicated political messages in a direct and straightforward fashion. In this sense, most of the works displayed a clear-cut immediacy, narrowing the limits of subjective interpretation and contemplation as much as possible. As the curators emphasise in a section titled ‘Eliminating the Audience’ in the P/ACT FOR ART they

aimed to create a, "situation where audience members lose sight of their position as observers, turning spectatorship into citizenship".[157]

Several projects attained widespread publicity, engaging social actors far beyond the traditional art world, with themes ranging from diplomatic relations and ethnic diaspora to German history and politics. In the courtyard of KW, after entering the main gate, the curators placed the so-called 'Key of Return', possibly, "the biggest key in the world",[158] according to Berlin Biennale, which was brought over from Palestine. The Key, made by steel, weighing almost one ton and nine meters long, was manufactured collaboratively by the residents of the Aida Refugee Camp in Bethlehem. When dislocated from their houses in 1948 and 1967, many Palestinians kept their keys, passing them from generation to generation. As such, the Key was meant to stand for remembrance as well as symbolise a possible Palestinian return. This collaborative project was spotted by Żmijewski on one of his visits to Palestine. There, he asked the representatives of the community whether he could ship over the Key to Berlin. As expected, the Key attracted visibility in the media catching the attention of the public. While visiting the exhibition, the head of the Palestinian diplomatic mission in Berlin stated in *AlArabiya News* that, "to bring it to Berlin is to show to the German people […] the Palestinian refugees and tell them the story of the Palestinian narrative."[159] During the show, many Palestinians living in Berlin visited the exhibition and were photographed in front of the Key as a way to connect with their roots. In addition to this work, the Palestinian artist Khaled Jarrar presented his project 'The State of Palestine' in which he asked visitors to stamp into their passports the logo of the Palestinian state. This gesture was expected to give visibility to the Palestinian cause through the participants' agreement to officially recognise a Palestinian state and risk harassment at possible future passport checkpoints. Through

[157] This particular phrase is found in the newspaper 'P/ACT FOR ART' (p.7). While in the newspaper the phrase is attributed to Żmijewski, a phrase which is almost the same is attributed to Warsza in her text 'Doing Things with Art' posted in the Berlin Biennale website.
[158] This phrase can be found at the Berlin Biennale website in a post called 'Key of Return probably the biggest key in the world' at the following address: http://www.berlinbiennale.de/blog/en/projects/key-of-return-probably-the-biggest-key-in-the-world-19705
[159] The full interview in *AlArabiya News* can be found at the following address: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OE9JD1e8c0w#t=51

the above (unambiguous) works, *Forget Fear* intended to explicitly confirm its solidarity with Palestinian struggles and, in this sense, create new audiences for contemporary art.

BB7 was the subject of many other such general public debates. Yet, a great deal of these debates portrayed the exhibition in explicitly negative terms. A main reason of these debates was the piece 'Germany Gets Rid of It' by the Czech artist Martin Zet. A few months before the opening, Zet set up several collection points around Germany and publicly asked from those who own Thilo Sarazin's 2010 book *Germany Gets Rid of Itself* to dispose their copy at one of these points. Sarazin, a German Social Democrat politician, makes in his book racist remarks, supporting that the intelligence of the German nation was threatened by immigrants who did not wish to integrate (*sic*), pointing his finger specifically to the Turkish population. The book sold a very high number of copies in Germany, around 1, 5 million, and attracted widespread publicity. Its influence on middle-class and working class Germans is noted by critical commentators. The book is also invoked as an indication of the alleged existing hyper-nationalism in Germany- even in the centre-left of the political spectrum. Zet planned to collect all the disposed books and produce an installation out of them to display in the Biennale. However, the call for disposing books at collection points was badly communicated in the German public sphere, provoking associations with the Nazi past. The media were quick to refer to the banning of books and book-burning during Nazism. According to a tour guide, the German Federal Cultural Foundation, due to the seriousness of this incident, saw the forthcoming Biennale as a political disaster and threatened to stop funding it. The Biennale had to negotiate the situation with the public, and as a result on February 20, 2012, two months before the beginning of the show, it organised a public event called 'Debate on the Occasion of Martin Zet's Campaign' so as to defend the project and reverse the negative public opinion. As Żmijewski commented:

Immediately the media jumped on this idea and created this absolutely fantastic work of flames, Nazi associations. Instead of following his proposal people started to fantasise about something that was not mentioned by the people who are in the team of the biennial.[160]

Initially, the artist wanted to construct a lengthy carpet with the disposed copies of the book that would represent, as form of protest, a big Turkish flag in the ground-floor of KW. He calculated that he needed 60,000 copies for that cause. The Biennale published the press release, advertising the collection points and hoping that at least 60,000 owners of book would realise its racist undertones and eventually dispose of it. However, only five disposed copies were collected, and thus the initial idea had to be abandoned. As Warsza explained in a guided tour in the final day of the show, the project's effects rippled through society in many different ways:

We have been accused for starting a book-burning process, that we want to destroy these books and that we actually are fascists…The right-wing portals organised a protest at BebelPlatz, which is the place where the Nazis used to burn books in 1933 against this project…We also had letters of support by Turkish organizations and a group of antifascists blocking Augustrasse to prevent the possible protest of the right-wingers. Eventually, the project stopped being about the effect of collecting but rather what it has triggered in the society with this reaction.[161]

Although the project was finally allowed to be implemented, it cost BB7 a very negative publicity even among liberals and leftists.

Meanwhile, the entire main ground floor space of KW was given over, as we saw, to the Occupy Biennale group for general assemblies and for placing their tents, posters, works and other material. Between the floors, on the staircase's interior walls Marina Naprushkina's displayed her project 'Self Governing'. Naprushkina, an artist from Belarus, sketched onto large strips of carton representations of different social and political situations and imagined how a socialised economy could function in Belarus if its president and dictator Alexander Lukashenko was disposed. Also, with the help

[160] This phrase is taken from the video '7th Berlin Biennale: Krytyka Polityczna in Berlin' posted in YouTube at the following address: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=owiopz2IDoQ
[161] This excerpt is heard in a guided tour by Warsza that I recorded on June 30, 2012.

of the Biennale, Naprushkina published a newspaper, again with the title 'Self-Governing', which was freely distributed throughout the show. The newspaper informed readers on the current political situation in Belarus, calling into question both its oppressive character and its neoliberal policies. In the first introductory page of the newspaper we read:

> The year 2011 was a significant year for democracy movements around the world. In Belarus, the movement started to become active right after the faked elections in December, 2010. Because of the brutal reaction to the opposition, it has become especially dangerous to work towards a free Belarus. But people have been democratized; now all they need is the power to elect an adequate government. Democracy and human rights can be secured permanently wherever people live in modest wealth, but the prevailing model of 'predatory capitalism' destroys this foundation. It is time to reconsider. 'Occupy' is one beginning in the western democracies; a corrupt administration in Russia is also coming under pressure, but new forms of economy have to be found an tested everywhere. It's the beginning of a new time all over the world, and soon in Belarus.[162]

Naprushkina in this newspaper seemed to share the ambitions of the Occupy movement to transform and overthrow the predatory capitalism. Apart then from the voices within the Occupy Biennale group, her work launched the most explicit polemic against neoliberalism. A project sharing a similar desire to protest was the so-called section of *Breaking the News* which was presented in the third floor of KW, for which Żmijewski assembled together and screened various film footage from demonstrations and protests around the world taken by different artists, journalists and video-makers (more on this work in the next section).

While it is beyond the scope of the chapter to look in detail at all the projects included in the Biennale, let us have a brief look at some of the most relevant ones for this discussion. Two of the most recognised pieces in the show, which were placed opposite each other on the second floor of the exhibition, were 'PM 2010' by the Mexican artist Teresa Margolles and 'Blood Ties' by Antanas Mockus, the former

[162] This excerpt is taken from the front cover of the newspaper 'Self-Governing' that was given the audience during BB7.

mayor of the city of Bogotá. Margolles' piece is an installation consisting of tens of covers of a daily Mexican tabloid, called PM, hung on a wall. Each of these covers displayed photographs of those killed during recent drug wars in Mexico alongside erotic and sensualised advertisements. Margolles draws attention to the ordinariness of drug-trafficking killings in Mexico and how scenes of murdered gang members are part of a daily routine. In turn, Mockus was asked by the curators to make a piece and place it anywhere he wished within the exhibition space. He chose to make an installation opposite Margolles' piece so as to create a dialogue on the subject. Mockus asked from the visitors of the Berlin Biennale to sign a statement in which they personally commit to stop using, or at least reduce the consumption, of drugs for the duration of BB7. The visitors were asked to supplement their statement by donating a drop of blood. Every day that passed, a Mexican flag hanging from the ceiling dropped lower towards a bucket of acid. If a visitor signed the statement to reduce drugs, the flag would move some millimeters up. In this way, Mockus wished to make the visitors aware that their personal drug consumption was complicit with the Mexican drug-wars and its deadly business.

Figure 5.8: Teresa Margolles' installation 'PM 2010'

Perhaps the only artwork presented in the show that did not share the belief in the positive role of art in combating some sort of oppression and economic exploitation was the installation and documentary film 'A Gentrification Program' by the artist Renzo Martens. Martnes' work was split in two parts. The first part was presented in the form of some photographs in the first floor of the Biennale, showing a supposed gentrification project that he initiated in Congo. The photographs depicted the Berlin Biennale flag placed within some African forest, accompanied by a written statement on the wall that read: "If we feel art should fully embrace the terms and conditions of its own existence, it may be good to inquire where art has a bigger impact on social reality". By that Martens meant that the most visible effect of art was the gentrification of the certain areas in which it appears. The second part of his work was a documentary screened on the last day of the show, in which Martens described his alleged gentrification project in Congo. In this documentary he presented the process of setting up a seminar to inform local plantation-workers about themes like institutional critique and immaterial labour. In this seminar, art theorists and curators related to political engagement, such as T.J. Demos and Nina Möntmann, were invited to speak. By assuming the role of a modern creative colonialist who attempts to teach to the locals what critical art is Martens purports to disclose the interrelations between art, critique and economic development. Due to the use of a version of the tactics of, "over-identification"[163] however, the work caused again confusion and spite. An on-line blog, devoted to shadowing the exhibition wrote that, "any thinking and feeling person would be insulted by such imagery", while in the night of the screening there were many objections against the, "insulting", as several visitors put it, imagery of Martens.[164]

Another theme of *Forget Fear* related to national history, and especially the history concerning WWII. For the work 'Berlin-Birkenau', which could be found in the fourth

[163] Over-identification refers to an artistic practice that, broadly speaking, identifies with the object it aims to critique instead of approaching it from a critical distance. For an overview of the approach see BAVO (2007) *Cultural Activism Today: The Art of Over-Identification*.

[164] These quotes are taken from a post titled 'Another Aggressively Stupid Berlin Biennale 7 Provocation' posted in the website 'The Season for Treason' which was conceived as critical project against BB7. The full text can be found at the following address: http://2012istheseasonfortreason.wordpress.com/tag/gentrifizierung/

floor of KW, the Polish artist Lukas Surowiec brought 320 birches from the surrounding area of Auschwitz and planted them all around the city of Berlin. This was meant to be a symbolic gesture intended to keep the memory of Auschwitz alive. The dialogue between Poland and Germany, and their respective World War II national histories, was another very important recurring motive of the show. However, such discussions would sometimes lean toward a kind of patriotic or even nationalistic rhetoric, often promoted by Żmijewski himself. For example, in the publication of Forget Fear, in an interview with the Polish historian Dorota Sajewska, Żmijewski starts the discussion with the awkward phrase, "let's talk about Germans", and carries on with similar essentialising questions, such as, "is it really the case that the Germans feel guilty about the war, or they are secretly proud of it?"[165]

Another work that caused major controversy and heated debates was the installation 'Peace Wall' by the Macedonian artist Nada Prlja. Prlja erected a wall of twelve meters wide and five meters high in the middle of a busy street in the area of Friedrichstrasse. The wall, built by blocks of cement, symbolised the new economic and social segregations that exist in the district, particularly between the touristic business district and working class housing projects. Some weeks after the installation of the piece several people from the neighbourhood started complaining, especially traders and business owners, for its disrupting effect on the movement of tourists and residents. Eventually, the artist and the Biennale representatives agreed to knock the wall down on the 15th of June after daily pressures by citizens living in the area and even verbal abuse against them.[166]

[165] This quote is taken by the interview 'A Topography of Identity, Dorota Sajewska in conversation with Artur Żmijewski' that was included in the book 'Forget Fear' (page 287).
[166] In the clip '7th Berlin Biennale: The Story of the Peace Wall' published in the official YouTube channel such incidents can be clearly seen . This video can be found at the following address: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XZxi806Cnhk#t=295

5.3.3.2 Project and Events

Likewise to the discursive exhibition model, BB7 (also owing to the Autonomous University) staged daily events and projects, most of which articulated direct and provocative statements on social and political affairs. Several of these, often varying in method and scope, caused new controversies and tensions by employing (similarly to what we saw before with the Polish-German affairs) the theoretically problematic category of the 'people', either in ethnic, religious or national terms. One of such projects was the organization of the 'First International Congress of the Jewish Renaissance Movement from Poland' by the artist Yael Bartana. The project was centred on a video-installation made by the artist propagating the return of 3,300,000 Jews to Poland whose families were expelled during World War II. In addition, a three-day conference that called for debate on the same issue took place in Berlin from the 11th to the 13th of May. Equally controversial was the project 'Rebranding European Muslims', a project initiated by a group called 'Public Movement' and which the Biennale decided to advertise through its website. Inspired by the method of nation-branding, the project's leader Dana Yahalomi wished to initiate a campaign for rebranding the European Muslim population so as to make it more attractive to Europeans. These two projects were discussed in particularly negative terms during the Biennale by visitors or members of Occupy for clinging too much on national or religious identities.

Even though it is not possible to mention all of the contentious projects and events that took place during BB7, I will briefly describe those that achieved notoriety and are relevant for the issues that this thesis explores. The first of these events took place in the St. Elisabeth-Church, one of Biennale's venues. There, the artist Paul Althamer invited, for the duration of the Biennale, members of the public to engage in a collaborative art work. He encouraged everyone to sketch or paint on the carton strips covering the walls of the church their ideas, engaging in a visual dialogue with each other. In the same venue, on June, 9 2012, in an event titled 'Politics of the Poor' the curators invited some members of the Brazilian group *Pixadores*. Pixadores is part of

the *Pixação* graffiti movement in São Paulo. Pixação mainly consists of young people living in favelas from poor and working class backgrounds. The main practice of the movement is the tagging of high buildings as a form of making them visible across the cityscape of Sao Paulo. In other words, Pixação is a means through which the language of the excluded and the poor is heard, or as Joanna Warsza put it in Forget Fear publication, "an expression of the antagonism of the suburbs toward the centre…a protest of the lower class against a city ruled as corporation" (2012: 206).

The movement of Pixadores achieved notoriety across the institutional art world after a number of 'art attacks', where they intervened by spraying and tagging institutionalised spaces. The most notorious of them took place in the 2008 Sao Paulo Biennial. The curators of this particular Biennial announced that the second floor of Niemeyer, the venue in which it is taking place, will be completely empty and freely available to the audience to express their own reflections. At the night of the opening a group of 50 members of the Pixadores invaded the show, spraying on the walls of the venue different tags. Immediately after the event, the Pixadores were chased by the police and arrested. As Sergio Franco, a Pixadores member describes to Warsza:

> The *pixacao* action was provoked by the curatorial statement, which invited artists to intervene in the empty space, to occupy it and propose works. However, the curators acted against their own concepts, and made a threat during a press conference, saying that the *pixadores* didn't realize what the consequences of such an attack were. Nevertheless, on the opening day, the *pixadores* went up to the second floor of the building and tagged it all over it, which led to a serious struggle with the guards and the police. The *pixadora* Caroline Piveta da Mota was held in detention for nearly three months… This time art was used as a vehicle to shift the position of the *pixadores*, and make visible the anger of the periphery. *Pixadores* don't wreck the streets; they visualize the class struggle (2012: 214).

For the BB7 event, Warsza invited members of the Pixadores to St. Elisabeth-Church, asking them to give a presentation and painting workshop within a predetermined framed space inside the church. However, while the workshop was taking place, a member of the group climbed up one of the church's wall and sprayed in an unauthorised area a black logo of the group. Żmijewski, who was present in the

workshop, saw this action as an abuse of hospitality and reacted by pouring a bucket of water over the head of a Pixadore. As soon as this happened, another Pixadore, as a response, poured a bucket of yellow paint over Żmijewski, while the others took their spray cans and started spraying all over the church's walls. As a result, Żmijewski called the police to restore order. In contrast to Żmijewski, Warsza, the associate curator, asked Pixadores to engage in a discussion so as to resolve the conflict. Żmijewski denied entering in any possible dialogue with Pixadores. A few weeks later, the Pixadores received a letter that summed the cost of cleaning St. Elizabeth's walls to 18.000 euros, asking them to appear at a hearing at the Brazilian Ministry of Culture. In the end, however, all charges against them were dropped.

Figure 5.9: Police Forces Arresting the Pixadores

The perspectives of the curators, Żmijewski and Warsza, on the issue differed and after the incident their relations became strained. When I met Żmijewski toward the end of the exhibition, he was still furious with the Brazilian group, mentioning that while they wanted to be transgressive, they abused his, and the Biennale's, hospitality. Justifying his action to call the police, he said it was a, "stupidity" on their side because the church was a community-run space and all they achieved was to harm the community, for which he felt responsible. Calling the police, for him, was a justified move that brought justice to the name of the community of the people who structure their daily lives around St. Elizabeth. Warsza, on the contrary, was rather disapproving of Żmijewski's decision, perceiving the role of the curator to be more mediating than suppressive. On the occasion of this incident, Warsza doubted Żmijewski's tactics as a curator of the Biennale in general.

At times Żmijewski also appeared publicly at odds with KW and the Berlin Biennale institution. One such occasion was triggered when Żmijewski invited the group 'BRIMBORIA institute' to KW in order to present an event titled 'An Evening without Christian Worch'. Christian Worch is a high profile figure of the neo-Nazi group in Germany, *Freie Kameradschaftsszene* (The Free Comradeship Scene). According to the initial statement that BRIMBORIA released, Worch was not invited to the event. In their press release, BRIMBORIA stated that they wished to make the public aware about contemporary extreme right-wing ideology without giving much information about what the event involved. However, it turned out that Worch made clear to BRIMBORIA that he wished to participate. Eventually the group decided to give him the stage, announcing his presence in KW a few days in advance of the event. In light of this development, the event, scheduled to take place on June 26, 2012, was eventually cancelled by KW a day before. Three different statements were written in response to the cancellation of the event, distributed through the BB7's webpage, one by KW, one by the BRIMBORIA Institute and one by Żmijewski. KW stated that they cancelled the event, "after the well-known neo-Nazi Christian Worch had been invited to participate in the panel against previous agreements and information". The statement emphasised that the director of KW, Gabriele Horn,

"clearly opposes an equal dialogue with neo-Nazis in terms of a mutual acknowledgment" and the KW, "refuses to function as a stage for any type of neo-Nazis, legitimizing participating people through a public discussion in a recognised art institution".[167] On the contrary, BRIMBORIA and Żmijewski essentially accused KW of censorship. BRIMBORIA stated that, "for quite a long period of time it was uncertain whether Mr Worch was ultimately going to be present at all or not", arguing though that they made it clear to KW that having a real Nazi at the event would be a, "desirable situation."[168] For them, the institution was afraid to support the project because under no condition could 'taxpayers' money' be given to an event that hosts a Nazi. After they expressed their discontent with KW's decision, they thanked, "Artur for trusting in us" and, "Mr Christian Worch for his willingness to confront critical questions."[169] On the side of BRIMBORIA, and against KW, was also Żmijewski. In his statement, he wrote that it is Mr. Worch's, "right in a democratic system, which Germany still is" to publicly express his opinions, and that the decision taken by Gabriele Horn to cancel the event, "shows the limits of curatorial and artistic freedom".[170] Controversies of this kind expose how the conflicting agendas between participants within a biennial setting are subject to general social conditions and antagonism, where curatorial or artistic autonomy can be contested and even repressed in direct or indirect ways.

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[167] These quotes are taken by the text 'CANCELLATION OF THE EVENT BY BRIMBORIA INSTITUTE: A statement of KW Institute for Contemporary Art' that appeared in the Berlin Biennale website after the cancelation of the event. The full statement can be found at the following address: http://www.berlinbiennale.de/blog/en/allgemein-en/cancellation-of-the-event-by-brimboria-institute-2-31512

[168] These quotes are taken by the text 'Statement on the cancellation of the event "An evening without Christian Worch"' by Brimboria Institutet' that appeared in the Berlin Biennale website after the cancelation of the event. The full statement can be found at the following address:http://www.berlinbiennale.de/blog/en/allgemein-en/cancellation-of-the-event-by-brimboria-institute-2-31512

[169] *Ibid.*

[170] These quotes are taken by the text 'STATEMENT REGARDING THE CANCELLATION OF THE BRIMBORIA INSTITUTE'S EVENT' by Artur Żmijewski that appeared in the Berlin Biennale website after the cancelation of the event. The full statement can be found at the following address: http://www.berlinbiennale.de/blog/en/allgemein-en/statement-regarding-the-cancellation-of-the-brimboria-institutes-event-31489

5.3.4 Criticism from the press

BB7 was severely attacked by the art press, receiving unprecedented negative criticism by critics, especially on issues related to curatorial strategy, effectiveness and aesthetic quality. These criticisms gave rise to a rather strained climate within the show, where curators, organisers and participants on different occasions were compelled to be apologetic about their decisions. Indicatively, the first question that Żmijewski asked me when I met him for an interview was: "Are you also one of those that found the show terrible?"[171] The criticisms that drew most attention and were discussed in different conversations that I was involved in can be summarised in the following: First, Żmijewski, according to critics, utilised the participants in order to produce his own meta work, which indexed much of his past work. Second, the show produced an easy and ineffective radicalism that exoticised resistance, and, third, it overemphasised a theoretically weak and largely unsubstantiated opposition between reflection and action (or art and reality). The texts that I draw from appear in some of the most established art journals and periodicals, and as a result of their explicitly polemic nature, we can safely assume that BB7 was perceived in largely negative terms within the context of international art networks. Below I look at these critiques in detail, attempting to draw associations between them and the ways that contemporary art discourse evolves amidst a situation of crisis.

5.3.4.1 Żmijewski's 'meta work'

One of the most significant reproaches, directed personally against Żmijewski, was his alleged manipulation and utilization of the participants in order to fabricate his own meta-work of art. This critique was initially launched publicly immediately after the press preview in a text simply titled '7th Berlin Biennale', written by Ana Teixeira

[171] Interestingly, however, most of the viewers who were not initiated in the rituals of the artworld I had chatted with, apart from finding the show bizarre and even paradoxical, were for the most part positively inclined to it, perceiving it as an unusual experiment in activist politics.

Pinto for *Art Agenda*. In this widely circulated text, Pinto instigates a polemic against the alleged megalomania of Żmijewski, arguing that, "through the hand of the curator the many become one, and that one is Żmijewski himself", as the "show's closing statement is: Żmijewski. Żmijewski? Żmijewski!"[172] Pinto, in a discourse that has been repeated in different variations throughout the show, rebukes Żmijewski for staging a show that, "stands for left-wing positions through the enactment of right-wing methods and 'vigilance' rhetorics".[173] A similar position was shared by other critics, such as Monika Szewczyk, who in her text 'Courage, Comrades: The 7th Berlin Biennial' published for the established contemporary art journal *Afterall*, a little more than a month after the opening of the show, points out how Żmijewski set up an exhibition that revolves around his personal practice as an artist and as a Polish national subject. As she writes:

> There was also frustration at the sense that there were too few artworks, though too many Polish ones; and finally utter indignation at Żmijewski's allegedly having moulded the work of participating artists to reflect his own practice – shaping this biennial, the criticism held, into his own Gesamtkunstwerk.[174]

The allegation that Żmijewski moulded the work of participants to fit his own mega-artwork, was mainly enabled through the inclusion in the exhibition of a number of works and projects that resemble and draw on Żmijewski's own past work as an artist. For instance, one of these works was the section *Breaking the News* (that I referred to previously), displayed on the third floor of KW. This project contained multiple film projections within a room, showing footage from riots around the world from Egypt and Ukraine to Greece and Germany. These films displayed demonstrations and clashes between protesters and the police, without however providing any contextual information about the exact place or the reason why these events were taking place. This project is very similar to Żmijewski's own 2009 installation project *Democracies*,

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[172] The full text '7th Berlin Biennale' by Ana Teixeira Pinto for *Art Agenda* can be found at the following address: http://art-agenda.com/reviews/7th-berlin-biennale/

[173] *Ibid.*

[174] The full text 'Courage, Comrades: The 7th Berlin Biennial' by Monika Szewczyk for *Afterall* can be found at the following address:http://www.afterall.org/online/courage-comrades-the-7th-berlin-biennial/#.U1ulY1eeiAo

which again involved different films showing people protesting in public spaces in different parts of Europe and the world without providing any other contextual information.

On top of that, Żmijewski included in the exhibition a work of his own, which, according to Szewczyk, is something of a, "taboo in the province of artist curated exhibitions".[175] The work was a short video titled 'Berek (The Game of Tag)', in which naked people are running around inside chambers of former concentration camps, playing a children's game of tag. In 2011 the work was removed by the curator Gereon Sievernich from the exhibition 'Side by Side. Poland-Germany: 100 Years of Art and History', which took place in Berlin, with the excuse that it was disrespectful to the victims of the Holocaust. Żmijewski perceived the removal of his work as an unacceptable act of censorship and for this reason decided to exhibit *Berek* in the Biennale, to react, as he puts it, "against this impulse to censor, self-censor and close off discussion."[176]

Apart from these two cases, there was also the art project *Draftsman's Congress*, organised by a personal friend of Żmijewski's, the artist Paul Althamer. This time, the project resembled a past video of Żmijewski titled 'Them'. In this video, first shown in Documenta 12 in 2007, Żmijewski invited antagonistic social groups into a room, including elderly Catholic women, members of a Jewish Youth Group and left-wingers, who would express their different ideologies to each other, voicing disagreement and dissensus and thus 'performing democracy'. Similarly, Althamer, in an open invitation to the public, invited people to freely paint on to cardboard covering walls of the church. The participants in this way would engage with one another in a dialogue using visual language. Once more here, the dialogical engagement among different identities, such as religion fundamentalists, left wing activists or Nazis, becomes the vehicle through which democracy will be performed. All these similarities in the above art projects plus the more general exhibition's resemblance

[175] *Ibid.*
[176] This quote is taken from the text 'Berek' by Żmijewski published at the website of the Berlin Biennale in the following address: http://www.berlinbiennale.de/blog/en/projects/berek-by-artur-zmijewski-22243

with the general style of Żmijewski were foregrounded by critics as a means to degrade the show's legitimacy through the accusation of narcissism and manipulation.

5.3.4.2 Fake radicalism, Occupiers as savages and the exoticization of resistance

Another important point of critique against BB7 refers to the issue of appropriation and exoticisation of the Occupy movement and of the concept of resistance in general. Here, the curator is attacked for aestheticising resistance and, thus, rendering it inoperative. In an article for the *Art Newspaper*, Christian Viveros-Fauné echoes this dissatisfaction, noting that, "activists became an exhibit at the biennial" and that the curator tended to, "anthropologise and humiliate global movements." [177]

Figure 5.10: "We also do Weddings and Company Parties" (a comic strip that was circulated around social media during BB7).

[177] The full text 'Biting the hand that feeds them: Activists turn "human zoo" into Occupy-style working group' by Christian Viveros-Fauné published for the *Art Newspaper* can found at the following address: http://www.theartnewspaper.com/articles/Biting-the-hand-that-feeds-them/26755

This criticism, combined with allusions about the political ineffectiveness as a result of Occupy's 'neutralization', was expressed by the majority of the exhibition's critics. Furthermore, the Biennale Occupiers, according to these critics, betrayed the name of the movement. The participation in a Biennale had nothing to do with a political occupation that stands as a radical critique against established power- what the Occupy movement was originally supposed to represent. Instead, the movement's participation was based on an invitation from an institution funded by the German state, which contained the movement's potential within its institutional agenda and gallery walls. This, as we saw, was something that the activists participating in the Biennale had realised before the show has started and tried to address it in various ways. For instance, in a particularly polemic text against BB7 titled 'Propaganda of the Deed' written for the important German art journal *Texte vor Kunst*, Sven Lütticken *et al* wonder, "what does it mean to "occupy" by invitation?"[178] Later in the text they associate the participation of the Occupy in the Biennale with colonial exhibitions of the past:

> The similarity of the 'Occupy Biennale' camp in the KW Institute for Contemporary Art to 'living history museums' was hard to suppress – as was, going back further in time, that to nineteenth century colonial exhibitions with their exhibitions of "savages."[179]

Most often this criticism against the participation of the Occupy resulted in a questioning of the political effectiveness of BB7's political aims in general. This argument was usually justified through the invocation of certain determinates, upon which the Biennale was dependent, and that it could not exceed however radical it may appear programmatically. For example, in Christi Lange's article for *Frieze*, the argument for the ineffectiveness of Occupy's participation is framed by a quasi-deterministic affirmation that art exhibitions are destined to be sites bound to representational logics. As she puts it:

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[178] The full text 'Propaganda of the Deed' by Sven Lütticken, Johannes Paul Raether and Kerstin Stakemeier, Margarita Tupitsyn, and Victor Tupitsyn for *Texte vor Kunst* can found at the following address: http://www.textezurkunst.de/86/propaganda-der-tat/
[179] *Ibid.*

Titled 'Forget Fear', it presented a staging of conflict under controlled conditions, drained of spontaneity or urgency – a performance of politics rather than politics itself […] The attempt to frame political movements within an art exhibition, as in the oxymoronic 'invitation' extended to members of Occupy and the Indignados to inhabit the ground floor of KW, neutralizes their activism by filtering it through the lens of representation, rendering their action less urgent and their presence more harmless.[180]

In this narrative, representation, or, better, the expectation of entering a space where representation occurs, overshadows and, in a way, overdetermines the Occupy's actions. A variation of this opinion is shared by the group *Rosa Perutz*:

But what else should happen in an exhibition hall, if a scattered group of "activists" are to perform democracy in front of an international audience? [181]

This question, similar to the dismissive approach, sets up an opposition between reality, where social struggles occur out in the streets, and art, where these struggles can only be represented. In other words, this is a binary between reality as a space where objects and actions have the potential of being effective, and art as a non-functional, useless and already neutralised form. This, "quasi-ontological uselessness" through which our society sees art, as the art theorist Boris Groys writes, "inflects art activism and dooms it to failure" (2014: 3). We clearly find this view in an equally critical text for the *Art Journal*, 'Administered Occupation: Art and Politics at the 7th Berlin Biennale' by Olga Kopenkina:

….the curators' idea to install "the open process of collective negotiations, debates, and decision making," free from administration by official political institutions, seemed to commit the usual mistake, namely, replacing the experience of a social struggle with its representation.[182]

[180] The full text '7th Berlin Biennale' by Christi Lange for can be found at the following address: http://www.frieze.com/issue/print_back/7th-berlin-biennale/
[181] The full text 'TRUST YOUR ANGST' by Rosa Perutz for the website by the same title can be found at the following address: http://www.frieze.com/issue/print_back/7th-berlin-biennale/
[182] The full text 'Administered Occupation: Art and Politics at the 7th Berlin Biennale' by Olga Kopenkina for *Art Journal* can be found at the following address: http://artjournal.collegeart.org/?p=3457

Again, the author here emphasises how as soon an object enters the art gallery, it is meant to be perceived as representation, rather than, say, in terms of its own materiality and efficacy. In close relation to this view, another variation of the dismissive approach and critique of BB7 evokes economy and economic power as tainting radical art. This critique is explicitly articulated in the aforementioned text by Sven Lütticken *et al*, who regard that the institutional partners and affiliations of Berlin Biennale are suspicious:

What to think of a project based on a call for radical, real-world action that still takes the form of a biennial that prides itself on its connections to Berlin Biennale founder Klaus Biesenbach, and exists in symbiosis with Gallery Weekend Berlin?[183]

In a similar variation of this type of infectiveness argument, Christine Lange puts emphasis on the economic relations of Biennale, where its sponsors prevent the project from being radical enough:

But I'm not sure if the Berlin Biennale – an exhibition funded by the German Federal Cultural Foundation and BMW, in a city to which artists still flock for cheap studio space – is a context that can produce enough friction.[184]

The group *Rosa Perutz* expresses this argument in a more condensed way in a particularly critical text titled *Trust Your Angst*, bringing to mind the incident with the road blocking, described in the beginning of this chapter:

The programmatic fusion of art and politics disconnects art from their specific social context and instead, places art in a decisionist act as a symbol of unconditional radicalism. It requires the authorities that it denounces to express such a radicality.[185]

[183] The full text 'Propaganda of the Deed' by Sven Lütticken, Johannes Paul Raether and Kerstin Stakemeier, Margarita Tupitsyn, and Victor Tupitsyn for *Texte vor Kunst* can found at the following address: http://www.textezurkunst.de/86/propaganda-der-tat/
[184] The full text '7th Berlin Biennale' by Christi Lange for can be found at the following address: http://www.frieze.com/issue/print_back/7th-berlin-biennale/
[185] The full text 'TRUST YOUR ANGST' by Rosa Perutz for the website by the same title can be found at the following address: http://www.frieze.com/issue/print_back/7th-berlin-biennale/

Relying on a kind of economic reductionism where the cultural reflects the economic, and can hardly exceed it, these argumentations are linked to a marginalised position in contemporary art, and cultural theory in general.[186] This neglected position refers to the practical impossibility of producing radical critique against the system when working within the institutions of power due to the inextricable link between cultural institutions and economic parameters. Irrespective of whether the argument of determination is here rehearsed intentionally or not (or has been triggered by Żmijewski's own insistence to 'become real') it occupies public space in times of crisis in a paradoxical way. It displays that even though in a time when art activism was on the rise and institutions were called upon to perform a more explicitly political role, BB7's hyper-activist model caused unease and perplexity within the biggest part of the art world. Zmijewski's model, thus, by performing the practical impotency of art objects as activist gestures in their own terms, necessitates and pushes to a critical renegotiation the boundaries between art and politics. We could argue that, in this case, the limits of activism and art are determined by the intellectual milieu of art criticism.

5.3.4.3 Crude opposition between art and action

Another point of criticism against BB7 regarded its theoretical and, in effect, its epistemological position. Żmijewski's public statements were to blame for promoting a crude opposition between action and reflection that leaves little or no space in

[186] This argument is expressed in several of these texts discussed, but Kopeknika is the most indicative example. As she further put it: "In fact, a contemporary art of resistance is formed inside the system of the neoliberal state. This is why the opinion that it becomes more and more difficult to draw the line between official art and a position of resistance is by no means baseless. Artists, however, continue to be attracted by aesthetics and the practice of resistance…. The phenomenon of "revolutionary practices" of the 1960s still appears to be an unfailing source of inspiration for new generations of artist-activists. But one has to keep in mind that cultural projects such as Emory Douglas's with the Black Panthers, or the street art of the Madame Binh Graphics Collective, emerged not only outside the art world, but also *in direct opposition to the liberal welfare state* of the 1960s. Such is not the case for contemporary art, a brainchild of the late-capitalist, neoliberal world." The full text 'Administered Occupation: Art and Politics at the 7th Berlin Biennale' by Olga Kopenkina for *Art Journal* can be found at the following address: http://artjournal.collegeart.org/?p=3457

between. Żmijewski's foreword in the book publication of BB7 is a very characteristic example of rhetoric totally opposed to the postmodern Marxist theory that informs the field since the 1990s (Chapter 1 & 3). Phrases such as 'open-ended encounters' and 'dialogical processes' are here systematically avoided (when not accused as ideological), being replaced by phrases such as 'real action', 'concrete activity', 'tangible social value' and 'problem-solving art'. The insistence in this kind of phraseology turns art from a supposedly non-functional activity to a means employed to achieve certain ends. The following excerpt from the Żmijewski's foreword in the publication of BB7 is exemplary in this regard:

> What interested us were *concrete activities* leading to visible effects. We were interested in *finding answers, not asking questions*….artists produce paradoxical or utopian visions and a social critique which neither they nor their viewers are willing to translate into a political (or any other) practice of any *tangible social value*…What we need is more an art that offers its tools, time, and resources to *solve the economic problems* of the impoverished majority. For the actual limit to the possibilities of left-leaning art is effective engagement with material issues: unemployment, impoverishment, poverty (2012: 10, italics mine).

I discuss several complications of this curatorial strategy as it develops within the institutional framework of BB7 in the next section. For now, let us note that this rhetoric in the context of an art biennial is historically unprecedented, as it directly aims to, "solve the problems of the impoverished majority", rather than engage in social critique or critique of the art world i.e. institutional critique. Żmijewski's activist approach then aims at converting the institution itself into a radical social agent (or one could say a type of a temporal NGO), modifying the gallery space, the context within which art is expected to be presented. For Groys, even comparisons with the Russian avant-gardes, and their desires to mobilise art in the service of revolution, are in this case misleading (2010: 3). This is because, while the latter were officially supported by the Soviet authorities, such attempts have, in essence, "no reason to believe in external support" (2010: 3). But, also, in these current times, the re-purposing of an art exhibition into a space providing social aid and support to activists, conflicts with regular ideas of what the 'ontological' purpose of an art space

ought to be. Thus, Żmijewski's will to convert the art institution by renouncing aesthetics (in other words the raison d'être of art) is further accused of theoretical arbitrariness, lack of reflexivity and non-dialectical thought. For instance, Sven Lütticken *et al* see that:

> *Forget Fear* (the title of the Biennale) is predicated on what must be a willfully crude opposition between art and action… The undialectical crudeness appears to be a cipher for radicality. Art must be rejected, and our actions must be voided of aesthetic niceties that in the end only serve to bind us to a corrupt system….illustrating an abstract and rigid opposition between aesthetics and ethics, between -contemplation and action.

In a similar fashion, Szewsczyk in *Courage Comrades* regards this rhetoric, not only arbitrary, but also deterministic in its insistence on action as the one and only solution. As he mentions, "a sense of inevitability is actively bolstered by… Żmijewski's writing" that not only, "contradicts reality" but, "faithfully performs a form of determinism that seems undemocratic or at least impatient with reflexivity". Here, Żmijewski's announcement that resistance against capitalism and the economic crisis is now an absolute imperative is regarded as a random point of curatorial departure that serves Żmijewski's own ends. Christy Lange, in *Frieze*, finds the dichotomy between effective art and less effective art as equally arbitrary:

> It presumes a false dichotomy between art that 'works' and art that doesn't, between art 'objects' and art 'actions' – a binary that ignores large swathes of contemporary artistic practice. Furthermore, Żmijewski's notion of politics being 'performed' is ambiguous: the definition of 'performance' could imply efficiency and efficacy; or, on the other hand, a rehearsal or staging.

Again, the question of how far art activism can go in the context of an art institution becomes pertinent. These critiques against the exhibition and the curatorial choices, published in some of the most prestigious art forums, reflect how BB7 has been communicated across the official art world. Through their rejection of the exhibition, they constitute a discursive device (Foucault, 1978), circumscribing an ethical framework through which the political biennial loses is value when assuming

immediate and instrumental forms. It would be unfair, however, not to mention that among the countless talks I was involved, there were many voices (especially from members of the public) that were very sympathetic to the exhibition. As these voices were hardly heard in official accounts, BB7 is now ensconced in art history as a rather problematic and unsuccessful experiment. To sum up this section, the criticism around BB7 brought to the fore how the dismissal of the exhibition is based on specific presuppositions about art, namely that as a form of social practice it must preserve some distance from 'reality', by displaying reflexivity and non-functional modes of being.

5.4 Rehearsing the 'Codes': Conflicts and Tensions over Meaning

5.4.1 For and Against

As a tournament of value that encompasses multiple and contradictory forces, BB7 was variously conceptualised by social actors holding diverse positions, such as activists, artists, members of the curatorial team and other participants. Through these conflicting conceptualisations, participation in this institutional structure was performed through idiosyncratic and non-uniform ways. The predetermined roles of the curator, the activist or the artist, were, in this sense, played out in the context of certain value regimes, systems of meaning and material constraints. As we saw above with Pixadores, the BRIMBORIA Institute and the incident with the Egyptian poster, controversies did not only emerge externally, from the critics or the public, but also internally, from the ways the exhibition developed through time. Conflicts, alliances and the practice of choosing sides proved to be integral for maintaining affiliations, supporting one's practice, vision and work and surviving the pressure from critics and the public. In the case of the BRIMBORIA Institute, for example, in the letter written as a response to the cancellation of their event by KW, they explicitly disregard the political potential of the Occupy Berlin, dismissingly referring to it as a, "courtyard to

the children's birthday party of the poor Occupy-people."[187] Similarly, for many of the Occupy participants I met, the exhibition was boring, or in some cases even 'awful'. In response to the questions, 'how do you feel about the politics of the exhibition?' and 'did you enjoy the exhibition?' Nelly gave the following answer:

Oh no, I think it is garbage. I think it is conceptually weak and politically very superficial, it is promoting a very liberal notion of politics of creating this space of inclusivity where everyone's voice can be heard, where everyone has equal rights, it is this insipid view of liberal colourised equality without any larger social vision of a good life...It has not been really reflexive or really ambitious. I understand that the art world is notoriously apolitical, but this is not really the kind of politics that I would like to see disseminated, that's already the politics of UN and UNESCO and so many other institutions that function under the umbrella of international organizations. There was not anything politically very radical.

This was not an isolated incident. In fact, most of the Occupiers that I talked with did not visit the rest of the exhibition. This was in complete contrast with most participating artists that I met, who seemed to share to a lesser or larger degree the political vision of Żmijewski. For instance, Marina Naprushkina, spoke to me about his serious effort to produce art with particular social and political effects in the context of the mainstream art world.[188] For Naprushkina, the fact that Żmijewski was an artist curating a biennial, and not a professional curator, was particularly important for maintaining their professional collaboration, as he was able to understand better the perspective of the artist. In this regard, in light of all the negative criticism, her emotional attachment to the exhibition motivated her to write a letter of support of Żmijewski, a letter posted in the BB7 website. As she writes, defending Żmijewski's practice against the storm of negative criticism:

The idea of the exhibition is clear and simple; one does not need to have an art history background to understand the idea of art that can influence the reality with measurable effects.

[187] These quotes are taken by the text 'CANCELLATION OF THE EVENT BY BRIMBORIA INSTITUTE: A statement of KW Institute for Contemporary Art' that appeared in the Berlin Biennale website after the cancelation of the event. The full statement can be found at the following address: http://www.berlinbiennale.de/blog/en/allgemein-en/cancellation-of-the-event-by-brimboria-institute-2-31512

[188] I conducted a recorded interview with Marina Naprushkina on June 12, 2012 in Berlin.

It is a paradox that exactly this idea got so many enemies in the art scene. Why? Do not we believe in our work anymore? Is it naïve and, what comes with it, unprofessional, to believe in the effectiveness of art? ...Is it possible, that the rejection of the Biennale for many is a result of their own disorientation? How else to explain the fact, that despite the calls for artists to take radical positions, the Biennale was dismissed as a provocation. Or another, not so rare statement, that artists that would like to do politics, should become politicians. Why cannot we stay here?[189]

Furthermore, for Naprushkina, who as she described to me could barely sustain herself from art, one priority for looking at whether the exhibition was fulfilling or not, had to do with whether the artist's labour was compensated. As most exhibitions do not pay the artists, it was particularly important for her that in this case BB7 covered production fees and included an artist fee of 1000 euros. The same issue of labour was similarly debated by the Occupy Berlin although in different terms. To the question, "were there any second thoughts in the movement about participating in the Biennial?" Nelly replied:

Yes, there was a constant apprehension or fear that we might get co-opted and that we are just doing work for the curators Artur Żmijewski and Joanna Warsza and we are basically helping them promote their careers while doing free labour.

Here, it is the different social framings of the issue of 'labour' that determines the degree and perception of exploitation. In other words, while both activist and artistic labour are socially recognised as being self-fulfilling, artistic labour as a professional field is (still) expected to be paid. On the contrary, the activists neither established a professional relationship with BB7 nor expected to have work opportunities through their participation. Their presence, however, was crucial for BB7's publicity across broader social circles. Thus, while producing symbolic capital and value for the exhibition, the institution and curators, paying Occupy Berlin's participants was out of the question. In this sense, a generally accepted social norm that evaluates artistic and

[189] This excerpt is taken from the text 'The Taboo-breaking 7th Berlin Biennale When art does not ask questions anymore, is it still art?' by Marina Naprushkina published in the website of the Berlin Biennale. The full text can be found at the following address: http://www.berlinbiennale.de/blog/en/date/2012/06/26

the activist labour in different terms becomes formative for the social scripts circulated around the exhibition.

Occupy Berlin was reflective of its possible institutionalization, displaying what Ong and Collier, following the sociologist David Stark, call "reflexive practices" (2005: 7-9), which is to say practices enacted by subjects that actively question their participation in institutionalised settings and act in relation to this questioning. In this sense, the process of institutionalization here cannot be simply perceived as the incorporation and programming of a practice in order to reflect a larger institutional logic. Since the practicing subjects are self-conscious about their possible 'programming', the larger institutional logic can be equally disrupted or acted upon. The institution can only try to manage these tensions as they occur. In this sense, participants had already realised that the art institution and the social expectations around it, may hinder the generation of more radical effects (Chapter 4 Section 4.2). As Nelly from the Autonomous University aptly puts it:

….there was also the structural fear or scepticism that whatever we were, or whatever hopes we had for the movement, to broaden it to help it grow, or to bring it in the public eye, that this could not be realised from within the gallery space. But we thought that simply by being aware of these issues we could keep them managed, like by structuring our relation with the curators and the stuff of the KW in an egalitarian, open, transparent way, that this would prevent any power dynamics and would prevent us from being co—opted. We also thought that if we keep the space free from artistic installations, like we would still have installations but they all should be overtly political, that we would avoid the problems that come with being institutionalised in an art space. Obviously these turned out to be illusory thoughts or simplistic. Our relationship with the curators and the KW stuff has always being very good, they were very supporting, they have been very encouraging of all of our work, they never demanded or imposed their own agenda on us. But as far as the in –built problems of the gallery space are concerned we had very little control there… Yes of course, putting ourselves at display and create this 'human zoo' effect, there was very little that we could do about that. One, because people who come in the biennial they expect to see a show, so they already enter the space as the spectator…. and…they are not that ready to join and participate, while our hope was that if we showed them how our assemblies work, how our signs work, what a

wonderful feeling of solidarity and hope and transparency and the transformational capacity the assemblies create, something we have all felt, which is also a big reason why we are in the movement, we thought that also other people may feel infected with the same bug and join us.

As the Occupy Berlin did not manage to mobilise the activist energies that it hoped, it was largely perceived as a failure, or, better, as an incomplete effort, by most participants. This condition gave rise to an intense speculation that the Occupiers will eventually really occupy KW after the end of the exhibition on July 1, 2012, in order to continue the struggle and prove that they have not been really co-opted. However, the thought of really occupying the institution was perceived as unethical by some members, whose ethical code propelled them to respect the hospitality they received. For instance, to the question: "is there any chance that the Occupy will stay in KW?" Nelly replies:

I don't know. I couldn't tell you. I 'm sure that some people would like to but again it is… It would make me feel so uncomfortable…After we had such a nice relation they would have to kick us out, yeah…and also because that's not the place for Occupy to be. If it really wants to have a place under a roof, I am sure there are other better places than the KW. But some people would probably encourage a forceful occupation not even for strategic reasons that we need a space to exist in not just outside but also indoors. But maybe some people would do it because of a juvenile, a childish sense of proving something...because we have often been accused that this is not an occupation, because we have been invited, so then the point at which you can revert this situation is by overstaying their welcome.

What however happened eventually with the Occupy movement in Berlin? Immediately after the Biennale, the movement ceased to exist as a collective and continued to be a loose network of individuals. Eventually, Occupy Berlin followed the fate of the rest of the Occupy movement and gradually sunk into invisibility. Was then the Occupy Biennale empowering for the movement? Did it produce some sort of communizing social effects? Did it improve art workers' conditions? While some international networking was made possible, and some actions produced and certain

radical ideas debated, the answer to all these questions is probably, as expected, 'no', or at least 'not in any visible way'.

5.4.2 Complicating the Curatorial Strategy

The possible discordances between the art institution and the invitation to an activist collective, was an issue heavily reflected upon among the members of the curatorial team. In a revealing interview I had with one of the members of BB7 organising team, Igor Stokfiszewski described to me in detail the background processes involved in implementing the curatorial strategy. Stokfiszewski is a Polish activist and personal collaborator of Żmijewski and both are members of the Polish left-wing organization 'Political Critique'. Political Critique was active in BB7, organising a number of events including talks, music performances and workshops. Stokfiszewski acknowledged that his relationship with Artur was, "more personal than professional" and that therefore, his participation in the show came as a result of Żmijewski's will to include in his team somebody he could trust, or in his words, "somebody who could be a kind of a mirror for him in the process of the show."[190] Indeed, Stokfiszewski seemed to be an outsider to the art world circuit. His general manners, affect and way of speaking did not really reflect contemporary art's institutionalised scripts. When I attended the first meetings of the Occupy in the ground floor of KW, I saw him very often speaking and being involved in the organization of different actions. Thus, I was under the impression that he was an Occupy activist and not someone hired by Żmijewski to help him set up the show. Tessa for instance similarly confirmed when commenting on curatorial politics that, "Igor considered himself part of the Occupy".

Stokfiszewski's main focus was on two different but interrelated projects in the show, the practices of 'Political Critique' and the organising of the Occupy movement in Berlin. Żmijewski and Stokfiszewski invited 'Political Critique', their own

[190] This excerpt, as well the ones that follow, are taken from a recorded interview I had with Igor Stokfiszewski, an activist and organiser of the Berlin Biennale on May 22, 2012 in Berlin.

organisation, to BB7 so as to mobilise political discussions within the Biennale. Apart from this inclusion, when the Arab Spring took hold, they also thought it important to support the square movements. The most appropriate method to do this was to establish face to face contacts with activists. Thus, Żmijewski asked Stokfiszewski to visit Spain so as to meet and interact with activist groups. There, he was expected to ask what the Berlin Biennale can do to support the movements. Stokfiszewski describes their curatorial practice as following:

> We were travelling, we went to Spain, then to Paris, there were marches to Brussels, Joanna Warsza, the associate curator, went to the United States and the Arab countries and we were simply talking to the people. We went to Spain, I went to Plaza Del Sol and I simply started interacting with people. That's how finally we got to the point of personal, direct relationships, we got to the point where we could formulate an invitation, we asked from people with whom we met before to spread the invitation among their people in a way and this is how it started.

Part of his job then was to convince the activists that their participation in the Biennale could really help the causes of the movement. As it was not clear-cut what an activist movement could do within an art institution for two and a half months, he had to convince the activists:

> From the very beginning it was not clear for them what we want. It was a long process but we were trying to convince them and we were trying to be very clear that we want to support the movement, really to support the movement. So we said we have a few things. We have space in the centre of Berlin, we have quite a big visibility in the city in mass media and son on, we have some means, also financial means, and we have the two months period where around 60.000 people come about 1.000 people each day. We asked them how we can support the movement with these means…

However, the process of negotiating and balancing between activist and art institutional rationales was far from smooth. It was not easy, in turn, to convince the institution (that carried certain artistic agendas), to assume a more directly political role. This difficulty had also to do with the fact that the Biennale was not merely an event but an institution, involving certain stakeholders and dependencies, which was expected to continue and maintain its status after the end of the show:

Yes, there was an element of risk. As Artur wrote in his forward, it was a very difficult process. In the very beginning of course the institution was very open but the furthest we were going more problems would appear. And ….yes it is another aspect: how to force the institution to become a political subject. And here we were not capable of proceeding. We were somehow encouraging or pushing the team somehow to openly fight and also to give their own voice about what they think about these initiatives…but I don't think it really worked… In the sense that the gallery, the people from the office they wanted to avoid any kind of open political conflict and they were rather putting themselves in a position of simply professionals who were either able or unable to organise something. In the framework of the legal issues, in the framework of what is acceptable of German society. A very typical situation also is that it should be very clear that there is something excessive in such a thing like a Biennale. Because you become a curator, you come here for two years and the institution afterwards stays. Anyway, I think that we did a lot of work here and also in terms of personal relationships, which is banal but still institutions is people, and I think we opened some possibilities and also it is somehow very important to show to the institution that the institution itself should somehow 'forget fear' (laughs), meaning that we very often project to things very bad feelings and suddenly they appear to be not that bad and often appear to be very good.

In this regard, KW thought that the invitation to the Occupy movement was an extremely risky affair for the Biennale. On the other hand, this invitation could not be cancelled, as blocking a curatorial decision is taboo across biennial cultures. Stokfiszewski states how the institution responded when the participation of the Occupy Biennale was announced to them:

…the institution was totally terrified regarding the Occupy project. People from KW were expecting some sort of aggressive activists and it was very difficult to convince them that the Occupy movement and Indignados are of a different quality, they have to do with horizontality, participation, democracy and so on. For example, for long time it was difficult to convince people from the office to contact Occupy activists directly, personally, and not to exchange tons of email but simply to go and talk. We were also trying to convince people from the office that when a question, a problem or anything else appears, it is good to take part in the assembly, propose and somehow decide and agree on the fact that decisions need to be taken collectively, including all the subjects taking part in the situation.

However, as the exhibition developed, the relations between the Occupy Berlin and the institution gradually became more collaborative:

> You know that we started making assemblies with the KW team? We started one or two weeks ago. Because this is something very beautiful that people from Spain invented in a way or somehow thought that we should start form the place that we are. So if we want to intervene with activists from Berlin for example we should first start from KW, and then slowly go out and develop. So, on the one hand, it was not under control, but on the other if you know how the movement acts you know that it is related with a good democratic quality.

Similarly to Stokfiszewski, Żmijewski thought, as he told me towards the end of the show, that probably the institution will return to "business as usual". As the Biennale was approaching an end, Żmijewski and his collaborators felt unable to influence decisions conceding that there was not going to be any lasting effect on the institution through BB7. For Żmijewski this process of losing power was exemplified in the cancellation of the BRIMBORIA institute's event that happened towards the end of *Forget Fear* and that was decided by the office without taking into account his opinion. In this respect, the biennial, as a recurring event, fails to radically transform the functioning of the biennial as an institution or as an organization in a lasting way. Indeed, after the show, the organization of Berlin Biennale carried on in the same hierarchical way. Its institutional status as a public art institution had to be re-affirmed through more purely, artistic-oriented exhibitions in order to maintain the government funding and its art world connections.

5.4.3 Inviting 'Terrorist' Organizations

Perhaps the most controversial moment in the entire Biennale was the 'New World Summit' one of its most interesting and debated projects. Apart from an installation in KW, the project also consisted of a 'summit' that took place in Sophiensaele, a venue nearby KW. During this summit representatives of terrorist listed organizations and three lawyers were invited to speak and give details on their cases. These

organizations, which vary from communist, anarchist to nationalist were internationally considered by national and supranational entities such as EU and the USA to be a ‘threat’ for world peace. The project, in this sense, intended to explore the following paradox: How is it possible that in the context of democracy, where debate is supposed to be open to everyone, certain groups and populations are systematically excluded and repressed under the label of terrorism. Which legislative, discursive and ethical apparatuses are used to disqualify these people as equal citizens, and what can a more inclusive democracy look like? Jonas Staal, the initiator of this project, suggested in this regard a democratic form that he called ‘fundamental democracy’, democracy as a ‘movement’ that should constantly reflect on how successfully it implements its democratic promise rather than as an accomplished state of things. In this model the voices of all citizens should be included in the public dialogue.

The two-day summit took place on May 4-5, 2012, and was well-attended and generally regarded as one of the most effective projects of the Biennale. Seven speakers where invited to speak representing or affiliated with outlawed organizations, such as National Movement of the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA), the National Democratic Front of Philippines (NDFP), the Tamil Tigers, Basque Peace Process and the Kurdish Women's Movement. As the original voices of these organizations are totally excluded from contemporary political and media outlets, Staal, by putting forward the idea of art as a space of ‘freedom’ and ‘autonomy’, offered to these organizations a stage. The project, in this sense, was conceived as a step in the process of deepening democracy and showing what art can do in this direction. As it was planned, the speakers in the event had the opportunity to publicly express their opinions without interruptions and a lively debate with members of the audience followed.

The process of implementing this project, however, was far from smooth. A researcher and collaborator of the project, Younes Bouadi, described to me the various complications and negotiations they went through in the process of its materialization. Among other things, the team asserted that their communication with these groups was part of an artistic project that was not trying to justify or celebrate violence. In effect,

they developed the project in part with Żmijewski and Warsza, who supported the project from its conceptual stage. However, as Bouadi asserted: "We decided from the very beginning that we are going to realise it…[but] we were never sure until the day that it took place actually". This uncertainty came as a result of a series of impediments that resulted from the 'sensitive' nature of the project. Bouadi further describes how the project had to be realised in a world where such a project could be interpreted as "material support to terrorist organisations" and where sponsors of the biennale might not want to be affiliated with it.

Given the sensitivity of the project, as well as the media 'scandal' that Martin Zet's work had already caused, the organising team had to enter into difficult and cautious negotiations. As Bouadi further explains in detail:

> Then we were still determined to make this go on. We put some pressure, saying that it would be a bit strange for the city of Berlin where the only marketing point is art and culture to be censoring one of its art events […] it was a bit more subtle and at least we wanted to have a conversation with the people who took this decision […] We had to balance how we were going to deal with this in the media, and what kind statements we were making and at what time we should be publishing it in the website of the Biennial, this was not about the scandal for us. This is part of a larger project and if we had created a scandal no other big institutions would want to work with us. So we wanted to realise it, but not as children or adolescents who create a big scandal, and the general media is not what we were interested in.

The 'taxpayers', in other words, in whose name, as the sponsors of the event, the Biennale occurs, was a key discursive terrain upon which arguments and counter-arguments were performed. The implementation of the project had to persuade the director that such a project was for the benefit of democracy, and thus for the taxpayers themselves. It is important however to note that this persuasion was made possible by labelling the project as 'art' rather than 'politics'. And even more importantly, that the project was negotiated with the guarantees of a major contemporary art institution, which was publicly legitimised to frame and determine art. Staal's project then consciously transgressed the conceptual and material limits of the word 'art', by way of an engagement with clear political ideological commitments.

As it is taboo to censor an art project in the context of Western liberal societies, and since such an intervention could potentially harm the reputation of the German state and the Biennale, the project was allowed to materialise. Strategically positioning itself within the context of art's autonomous realm, Staal's project displayed the possible strategic advantage of art in the context of Western liberal democracies to 'enact dissent'.

Yet, the limits of this advantage are always contingent, negotiable and not always clear-cut for all participants. For instance, Żmijewski asserted to me that if the project was going to be banned by GFCF, the curators were planning to release, as a form of protest, a statement that would clearly explain the reasons for doing so. Taking place within the larger discursive arenas that effect conceptualizations of the role of public art, such negotiations manifest how the supposed 'de facto' autonomy of art-making becomes a contested terrain upon which restructurings and compromises are performed.

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In all its complicatedness and unconventionality, BB7 aligned itself with the rhetoric of contemporary social movements that spread across contemporary art landscapes and put the conventional biennial model in crisis. This effort to reach out to an international condition, such as the Occupy movement, was performed locally, through a particular institution, urban setting and infrastructure with their particular histories, practices and reputation; a curatorial team and the selected artists; as well by the participating audiences, media and funding bodies. The main criticism raised against the Biennale, as we saw, was marked by a rejection of the potential of projects working under the banner of art to escape both economic determination and art's representational realm. This often resulted in a veiled defence of art's autonomy as a separate field of action, that is to say of art's duty to reject functionality. While this boundary between aesthetics and functionality has historically been negotiated in different ways from the avant-gardes of the 19th and 20th century onwards, and

retrospectively integrated in art cannons, here, Żmijewski's gesture was perceived as pushing the boundary too far, stripping art of its raison d'être and collapsing it in the realm of day-to-day activities through the rhetoric of 'problem-solving' and 'practical effects'. In this sense, a curious paradox was at play: while art denounced its 'unreal' or 'magic' qualities and announced its attachment to reality, in practice it was seen unreal-*as*-art, as a lapse to fakeness. If art is not real enough when it escapes its role as representation, it stops being art and has no place in an art institution. BB7 in this sense was, for art professionals, a failed experiment and exposed the limits of an activist turn in contemporary art biennials.

Although Żmijewski used the institution so as to produce radical results, his approach was very different from that of criticality and New Institutionalism. In fact, if criticality occupies the institution, Zmijewski attempted (through the Occupy Berlin), not only to occupy, but to convert the institution itself, its institutional and organisational agendas, into a radical agent. Despite its uneasy setting within an art biennial, Occupy Berlin did not wish to establish some long-term alliance with the institution so as to achieve social hegemony, but to convert it into a radical agent in the here and now. In this regard, Zmijewski's activist approach, doomed to fail as it was, brought to the surface the tenuous relationship between art and activism. The unique historical case of BB7 demonstrates how the condition of curatorial autonomy, running through the scripts of contemporary art, can bring about results that may prove unconventional or disruptive in relation to the usual functioning of the art institution. It is important however to emphasise that within a biennial these results are only allowed to take place within the boundaries of durational and predetermined event that do not affect or radicalise the structure of the institution in any substantial way. In the next chapter we shall similarly see how certain practices were performed in a particularly strained place, in Athens in the context of the 3rd edition of the Athens Biennale.

Chapter 6

3rd Athens Biennale: Reflective Indeterminacy, *MONODROME* and the Failure of the 'Nation'

6.1 Squalid Encounters

In contrast to BB7, the district around which the 3rd Athens Biennale (hereof AB3) was held is considered by Athenians a no-go zone. Since the mid-2000s, this district, 'Plateia Theatrou' (Theatre Square), located in the centre of Athens, came to achieve notoriety in mainstream discussions on the rise of criminality in Athens, especially the one related to drug trade, trafficking, robberies and prostitution. The land value around the area, mainly populated by undocumented migrants, has lowered dramatically during the past few years. For these reasons, it is often invoked in public discourse, especially by extreme right commentators, as a spectacular indication of the effects of the 'uncontrolled' migration from countries of the global South. Given the squalid conditions of the area, in the press conference of AB3, the mayor of Athens praised the curators' decision to locate it there. Such initiatives, according to the mayor Yorgos Kaminis, help revitalise what is usually referred to in mainstream debates as the 'debased historical centre of Athens'. In this sense, while the physical surroundings of the Athens and Berlin Biennale were very different, in both cases, expectations for generating economic value were apparent and, in many cases, predominant.

The immediate social conditions around the venue were not the only challenges this edition of the Athens Biennale had to reconcile with. Since the beginning of 2010 Greece has experienced an unprecedented economic crisis that was increasingly escalating by the time AB3 opened its gates. At the time of my research, the public disapproval against government policies and especially against the forthcoming austerity measures was enormous and as a result massive demonstrations often materialised in Athens and other Greek cities. On October 22, the day of the opening,

more than 500.000 people demonstrated in the Athens city centre against the austerity measures, where one person lost his life and serious clashes between protestors and the police occurred. This demonstration was the culmination of countless similar ones that have taken place in Greece since 2010. In other words, for AB3, the crisis, and in effect the resistances against it, not only reflected of a global discourse, but an everyday agitation manifesting in urgent ways within its local materiality.

Happening within the context of such extreme conditions, the Biennale could not avoid commenting on political and social concerns. In its first official statement, released in May, 3 2011, AB3 accepted the idea that the biennial model is in crisis, questioning its legitimacy in ethical and affective terms, as it is, "no longer poignant – or even moral – to simply keep making exhibitions in the way that had become the norm in previous years".[191] Wishing to differentiate from the dominant model of biennial-making, AB3, similarly to BB7, polemically declared that it wished to, "transform the biennale into a sit-in and a gathering of collectives, political organizations and citizens involved in the transformation of society, an invitation to create a political moment rather than stage a political spectacle".[192] This statement, which was rather unique for a biennial at the time, was a reaction and anticipation of the crisis in the biennial model (Chapter 4), suggesting that, rather than discursively attempting to construct reality art has to become a site of immediate political counter-mobilization.

However, despite this ambitious announcement, AB3 proved to be a rather traditional thematic show that resembled the discursive model in its most important elements. Centred around the idea that Greece has failed in social, economic and national terms, AB3 hoped to enable a stage for questioning and expanding on the nature and failures of Greek national identity. Its critical stance against the crisis, articulated through a soft anti-neoliberal rhetoric, purported to enable social energies of varying individuals, media outlets and strands opposed to austerity policies (Section 3.3). By employing

[191] This statement comes from the first press release of the 3rd Athens Biennale on May 3, 2011 and can be found at the following address: http://www.athensbiennial.org/cgi-bin/biennial-list/mail.cgi/archive/athensbiennial/20110503220018/
[192] *Ibid.*

the format of the discursive exhibition, AB3 strategically articulated a sort of reflective indeterminacy, that is to say a desire to reflect upon the official narrative of Greek history and its mainstream effects on the perception of Greek identity, without, however, being explicit neither on how this perception relates to the current crisis nor how AB3's framework intervenes in relation to this perception. This rhetorical device that involved the mobilisation of ideas related to melancholy, failure, nostalgia and self-reflection, helped the Biennale to critically position itself within the current polarised climate and mainstream debates about the crisis without taking a clear side.

Figure 6.1: The surrounding area of the 3rd Athens Biennale

Representing in many ways the limits of the biennial model due to the critical urgency of the general environment in which it took place, AB3 was caught up in the web of conflicting value regimes that it set out to reconcile. Following the framework developed earlier in this thesis (Chapter 2.3), this chapter wishes to highlight the implications of the biennial's need to bring institutional and organizational sustainability to terms with social and artistic expectations of making an

interventionist event. Again here, the tensions of such conflicting attitudes are performed within localised settings of established and negotiable regimes of truth that exert pressure on the development of curatorial and artistic tactics, approaches and strategies.

The first part of this chapter, similarly to the previous one, provides some general information about the Athens Biennale's structure, history and identity that helps to position it as an institution and organisation within Greek and art international landscapes. I present AB3's curatorial strategies and the ways they came to be articulated mainly through excerpts from the press preview and personal interviews. As there is no catalogue or edited book to accompany AB3, an initial construction and elaboration of the curatorial narrative is necessary. As noted above, the attempted interventions of AB3 changed through time and, in this sense, it became clear that its modes of display were often dictated by serious material constraints. The strained social condition in Greece, in this regard, sensed as the breakdown of an era's horizon, became visible not only in the public language of AB3 and the debates around it, but also in the ways the exhibition space was arranged. The artworks, the events, the archival material of AB3 as well as the venue, an old crafts school abandoned for years, were univocally and altogether expected to reflect upon and respond to this troublesome situation.

One of the most notable differences in relation to BB7 is the amount of publicity that AB3 acquired. Contrary to BB7, AB3 was hardly commented on by international art journals and the press, and, in this respect, it cast its shadow mostly on local debates and discourses. The next section then looks how apart from some rare exceptions, most, if not all, of the articles looking at the show in the international press, were restrained to a strictly descriptive lining up of artworks, events and curatorial tactics, without in any way delving into the particularities of the biennial's curatorial or artistic language. The well-rehearsed motive of the 'country in crisis' literally framed every account of AB3, making it extremely difficult to see the show, similarly to BB7, as a usual art exhibition. In this sense, apart from informing the curatorial language,

the social conditions around AB3 cultivated conceptual frameworks for interpreting the show.

The final section engages with the controversies and conflicts that arose during AB3, including the withdrawal of one of its three basic organisers for political reasons, the contentious issue of volunteerism and the lack of meaningful interaction between the Biennale and the surrounding area. Again here, the ways that certain elements of the Biennale were produced and performed within translocal frameworks, demonstrate how the values that it enables become subject to situated encounters and acquire diversified meaning for groups, individuals or authorities.

6.2 Centralised Structure

The Athens Biennale was established in 2004 by three young Greek art professionals, the curator and artist Xenia Kalpaktsoglou, the artist Poka-Yio and the curator and art critic Augustine Zenakos (altogether also known as XYZ). This Biennale was perceived as an intervention in the context of the local as well as the international art scene, attempting to bring the two in dialogue through foregrounding the city's vocabularies and artistic vibrancies. Most of the information for the Athens Biennale's past life, comes from two interviews I conducted with the organisers, one in August 2011, a few months before the opening of AB3, with Poka-Yio and Kalpaktsoglou (who were also the co-curators of AB3) and one with Zenakos in November 2011, who decided some months in advance to retire from the show for reasons that will be discussed later (Section 6.1). The three of them, according to Poka-Yio, set up the Athens Biennale as a farce, announcing its inauguration, as he said, through "a wrinkled flyer".[193] As a matter of fact, according to him, the Athens Biennale commenced as an extremely fluid and precarious endeavour as, "from the beginning it was a thing where no one knew until it happened, whether it is a hoax or it was

[193] All quotes rendered to Poka-Yio and Xenia Kalpaktsoglou, unless stated otherwise, come from an interview I had with them on August 9, 2011 in the office of the Athens Biennale located in central in Athens. The interview was in Greek and the translation is mine.

actually going to become a Biennale". The improvisational character of the Biennale was an outcome of their attempt to approach, as both Poka-Yio and Kalpaktsoglou claim, the biennial phenomenon with a, "rebellious spirit" wishing to, "hijack something that appeared to be crafted by precious materials by doing the exact opposite". The first edition of the Biennale, however, resembled, as we shall discuss, in many ways the dominant biennial format; it was a big-budget event, attracted some international publicity and had as its main sponsor one of the biggest banks in Europe, Deutsche Bank. In any case, Kalpaktsoglou and Poka-Yio claimed that one of the reasons for setting up the Biennale was to undermine the biennial phenomenon from within, by simply adopting its title and working against its assumed prestige.

Similarly to the Berlin Biennale, as the private initiative of three individuals, Athens Biennale was perceived as an independent organization, in the sense of not being directly organised by the state or some other authority. However, in contrast to Berlin Biennale, to this day the Athens Biennale has not managed to secure stable funding, and for each edition the organising team had (and still has) to look for different kinds of sponsorship. This process makes the whole enterprise rather unstable and improvisatory. In the first two editions, however, the organization managed to obtain some generous funds. As was claimed by Zenakos in our interview, the difference in budget between them and the Berlin Biennale, in these first two editions, was not so significant. After Deutsche Bank helped fund the first, the next edition continued with having as its major sponsor Cosmote, a major Greek mobile phone provider.

Overall, the Biennale's funding includes different kinds of corporate sponsorships, paid in cash and in kind, grants from charitable, cultural and educational organizations and institutions, embassies, private donations (Group of Friends of the Athens Biennale), limited funding from Greek Ministry of Culture, for which they apply each year and some revenue income that comes from the entrance fee, the catalogue sales and souvenirs. As I was told, the Athens Biennale usually covers part or all of the production of new works, logistics, transport, hospitality and per diem, but does not offer any other financial compensation for the participation in the exhibition. Also, as

there are no full-time employees in the Biennale, they have to principally rely on volunteers, who are trained to contribute to the production of each edition. The volunteers, as well as general debates on volunteering, proved to be a fertile field of tension and disagreement in AB3 (Section 6.4.2).

Another crucial difference between the two biennials is in the ways the theme and the curator of each edition are selected. Whereas, as we saw, in Berlin Biennale there is an official international committee of trustees and previous curators who screen curatorial proposals, in the Athens Biennale the curator and the theme is hitherto chosen by the founders of the organization. As a result the whole enterprise is much more centralised. Not only are the three organisers (currently two) responsible for selecting the curators of each edition, but are most often themselves part of the curatorial team, selecting artworks and setting up events. In AB3, for instance, although in newsletters and across the international press the name of Nicolas Bourriaud appeared most prominently, the main curatorial work was carried by Kalpktsoglou and Poka-Yio (Section 6.3).

This mixing up of roles is partly an effect of the original organisers' desire to be involved in creative and not only administrative work.[194] As Kalpaktsoglou conceded in our interview, "no one of us was dreaming to be behind an organisation that produces cultural work…we were all demanding to produce ourselves the cultural work and not to support its production". This more centralised condition, which necessarily brings about a situation in which the roles of the organiser, the participant, the curator and the artist merge and interweave, however, is partly an outcome of the Biennale's non-stable financial condition. Particularly for AB3, in which there was no definite budget to count upon, the production of the exhibition had to remain relatively flexible and adaptive to new circumstances. As a result not so many openings to outsiders could be pursued.

[194] In a recorded panel discussion on Greek biennials that took place after AB3 on January 23, 2012 in Athens Poka-Yio stated: "Many people ask why the organisers also curate the exhibition. I will tell you a practical thing, a very practical reason, when you do not have budget and you do not have anything sure, you cannot bring anyone to collaborate with."

It is also interesting to note that in all past editions of the Athens Biennale, including the 4th that took place in 2013, there was at least one Greek member in the curatorial team.[195] This made the Athens Biennale a much more locally conditioned event than its Berlin counterpart. This peripheral status of Greece in relation to the big contemporary art centres was from the start a central aspect in the decision to set up a biennial, even with few resources. Overcoming Greece's cultural and artistic remoteness in the contemporary art circuit, however, as Poka-Yio put it, demanded the invention of a particular narrative that could be used in order to address translocal partners, capital and visitors from the art world and beyond:

There were several myths with which we were working that we had to take as axioms. One of them was that there is no international interest about what happens in the art scene of Athens for the reason that Athens is neither a Third-World country, nor a metropolitan centre. It is something like saying Cincinnati or Minnesota. Someone who lives in the U.S.A is not interested about what is happening say in Wisconsin. This was a myth though. This thing is not valid. When we tried to decode our time so as to build the first narrative about Athens and we made the 'Destroy Athens' [i.e. the 1st Athens Biennale] - which was also prophetic as was proven with what happened even a few months later- for the first time we went out and said something that displayed an image of Greece outwards, internationally that was completely different than the usual beatified rhetoric. We saw that this was tremendously interesting.

However, always according to Poka-Yio, to set up a biennial and become visible across contemporary art networks, a certain differentiation should be pursued from what already exists in such networks. The term, "differentiation", according to him,

is a term derived from the business world…In the world of biennials, regardless of the fact that one may use business terms that come from marketing or anything, one has to have a different tone... Paying attention on differentiation is a condition for survival. And this is a term with which we wanted to bestow the Biennale…

[195] In fact, in the first Biennale all three curators were Greek, in the second one two out of five, in the third one two out of three and in the fourth one the overwhelming majority of the around 40 curators were Greeks.

Marketing-wise then, given also the city's marginalised status across contemporary art landscapes, the Athens Biennale had to establish something like a niche, a field of practices, discourses and vocabularies capable of arousing the interest of translocal audiences and stakeholders. The specificities of this new field of interest were principally framed as a re-interpretation of Greek official historical narratives, circumventing the usual and unproblematic identification of Athens seen through the lens of antiquity. In the first decade of 2000s, when the Athens Biennale was born, there was a generalised sense of success and euphoria prevailing in the mainstreams of Greek society. Greek identity was modernised, and in a way empowered, by becoming more European. The 2004 Olympic games and the building of big infrastructural projects such as the Athens Metro, Attica Road and Rio-Antirrio bridge, as well as various national victories, such as the Euro cup in 2004 and Eurovision in 2005, contributed to the construction of the narrative of the strong European nation with a booming economy. This new Greek national identity was based on a modernised, de-balkanised nation that even though small, could revive the 'deeds of its ancestors' in the body and soul of celebrated modern Greek athletes, pop singers and yuppie entrepreneurs. According to Poka-Yio, the Biennale, founded in 2004, had to take into consideration this general atmosphere:

[We had] to create an institution that can stand alongside a rhetoric of a cultural agenda, which says 'Live your Myth in Greece',[196] the post - Olympic era in which there is a certain euphoria or to put it differently a 'rebranding of antiquity'. In reality, we have the antiquity, which we sold for decades now, this is the only thing that we distribute as an exportable product and in these recent years there was a trend of refreshing this image of antiquity. But all this stopped there. A kind of solemnity with no mood for self-criticism, or any criticism in general I would say, self-sarcasm, any kind of mood to see who we really are. So this thing was out there when we began. We began at the same time with campaigns like 'Live your Myth'. And although foreigners may not be consumers, direct consumers, of Greek reality, they experience it through representation - it's like an advertisement for a product you are not buying, however, this does not mean that you do not know that it exists over there; it is a product that you

[196] 'Live Your Myth in Greece' was a 2005 branding campaign set up by the *Greek* National Tourism Organization, presenting, as the name indicates, Greece in 'mythical' terms in terms of its food, ancestry, sea, food and parties.

perceive. The perception of the outside world of Greece relates to our mood for freshening up at best, as well as with a sense of pomposity and antiquity-worshiping. There was no space for criticism. But criticism cannot not exist in a country facing all these issues; issues that later came emphatically to the surface.

The translocal branding of the Athens Biennale, as embraced by the organisers, was activated through the above conceptual lines. The Athens Biennale was perceived, in this sense, from the start as a localised manifestation, originating from and, at the same time, intervening within an international circuit of display and biennial forms. As Poka-Yio, himself also a brand strategist, comments, this image of the Biennale,

somehow derives from the qualities of the people who assembled it and somehow tries to leave its different stain in a puzzle, in a global network of relevant exhibitions. However, it is not that if our character is such, the Biennale will be such. No. It is the whole condition, the state of things here in Greece as well as the oversight of what is happening outside, plus the mood for differentiation.

Or, as Kalpakstoglou notes, while there is a certain similarity with the biennial model in terms of the event's periodicity and flexibility, the model stops being copied insofar, "as our critique in an organization or an institution is very different than the critique that a person from central Europe does, as here the structures are rather more liquid and with a different style". Similarly to other emerging biennials of the mid-1990s, and similarly to the Berlin Biennale, Athens Biennale adopted for its format the discursive model. In contrast, however, to the Berlin Biennale, as well as to most of the other biennials that mushroomed in the past few years, Athens Biennale is truly nomadic, in the sense that it lacks a stable space, having to find different venues for each edition. As a result, the choice of the venue's physical space, history and symbolisms, in all editions so far, plays an integral and particularly significant component of the exhibition's concept and display.

The first two biennials in Athens can be described as exhibition-blockbusters, with relatively big-budgets, many commissioned works and a strong desire to have international appeal. The first one, titled 'Destroy Athens', took place in Technopolis,

a spacious events space housed in an old gas factory in the area of Gazi, an emerging entertainment district of Athens at the time, with an abundance of newly opened bars, cafes and restaurants. Informed by debates on identity and cultural studies, the general theme of the exhibition dealt with the ways personal identity is fashioned through the perspective of others. The artistic director of the first Athens Biennale was Marieke Van Hal, later Founding Director of the Biennial Foundation and Vice-President of the International Biennial Association. Van Hal and XYZ, the curators-organisers of the event, called for the symbolic destruction of the stereotypes that have hitherto structured the identity of the city of Athens. In fact, Destroy Athens presented the city as a symbolic space, associated with stereotypical images of democracy and ancient civilization, that, "belongs to everybody", as a site of demolition.[197]

Faithful to the discursive model, the exhibition displayed a multi-layered nature involving the release of a booklet, titled *Suggestions for the Destruction of Athens*, a conference some months prior to the opening, the publication of an edited book based on that conference and multiple projects and events that took place during the course of the show. Despite its counter-establishment rhetoric, the Biennale was not perceived warmly by activists and social movements. Some months before its opening, the Biennale was a regular target of criticism in on-line forums, accused of attempting to capitalise on the activist energies of Athens for producing a highly spectacular event funded by Deutsche Bank. The main bulk of this criticism concentrated on the ways that the Biennale was complicit with the gentrification of parts of Athens, for its special connection with specific galleries and institutions, and for the alleged neutralization of radical political theory. In this sense, similarly to what has been discussed so far, the biennial model was questioned for enabling more economic than cultural values.

As a response to this criticism, the curators drafted a reply that they circulated on the Greek cyber-sphere, insisting that the Biennale is an independent, non-profit organization that did not maintain any relationships with particular investors, real

[197] This was stated by Poka-Yio in an interview he gave in 2007 to the journalist Giannis Gigas that can be found in full at the following address: http://www.ardin.gr/?q=node/2378 (translation mine).

estate, collectors or otherwise, and only wished to support art.[198] In an elaborate article circulated on-line after the completion of the Biennale (and probably the only one employing Marxist political economic and critical theory), the author and ex-Biennale collaborator Michalis Paparounis, ideally performing the 'dismissive approach', portrayed *Destroy Athens* as an ideological mechanism in which contemporary art blatantly and unashamedly embraces the market, and espouses branding and city promotion techniques with a self-referential subversive rhetoric.[199] Through similar discussions, Athens Biennale achieved negative publicity among activist circles, a phenomenon that would only start to be relatively reversed from its third edition onwards, which, as we shall see, was far less spectacular than the first two.

The second version of Athens Biennale, titled *Heaven*, took place in a remote and inhabitable area of Athens, called 'Faliro Delta', in several disused facilities of the 2004 Olympic Games. Partly as a result of its remote location, *Heaven* was not publicly debated in the above forums. In fact, *Heaven*'s effects came to be mainly circumscribed within the boundaries of the official art world. The exhibition was similarly planned as a discursive and multi-layered contemporary art event rather than simply a show, involving, apart from the showcasing of art, actions, film screenings, performances, lectures and the publication of a catalogue. This time the curatorial trio XYZ operated as artistic directors, bringing together an eclectic mix of two Greek, Nadja Argyropoulou and Christopher Marinos, and three internationally-based curators, Diana Baldon, Chus Martínez, and Cay Sophie Rabinowitz. While there was a loosely defined theme around the idea of heaven, seen mostly as a kind of ideal and utopian condition, the five curators were invited to simultaneously curate their own shows in relation to that theme. Unlike the previous edition, *Heaven* did not generate serious debates beyond the artistic scene, while it has been reviewed by a couple of art

[198] The response that was written as a comment under blog posts related to the issue can be found, among other places, at the following link http://futura-blog.blogspot.de/2007/09/remap-km.html (translation mine).
[199] The text is called 'The Multiple Signifying Dead-End' (Το Πολλαπλά Σημαίνον «Αδιέξοδο») and can be found at the following address (in Greek): https://athens.indymedia.org/front.php3?lang=en&article_id=869496

international magazines including *Frieze* and *ArtForum*.[200] In any case, it is useful to note here that the first three biennial editions in the series were conceived by the organisers XYZ as parts of a trilogy. The circle of this trilogy starts with the first that had to do with impasses related to the city and identity, continues with the second that attempts to locate utopia and hope and closes with the third, which according to the curators looks at collective dead-ends.

6.3 MONODROME

6.3.1 Venues, Context and Curatorial Approach

The 3rd Athens Biennale opened its doors to the public on the October, 22, 2011, the day that, as referred above, more than 500.000 people demonstrated in the centre of Athens against the austerity measures, and closed its gates on December 11, after one government had already collapsed in Greece.[201] Diplareios School, the main venue of the Biennale, is one of the few examples of 1930s Greek modernist architecture still standing, and having changed many uses, has functioned as a school for manufacturers and craft makers, city-planning offices and a nursery school. The building was chosen to symbolise historiographical elements of the Greek economy, mainly representing the obsolescence of its manufacturing sector.[202] Already out of use for a couple of

[200] A very central theme in reviews about *Heaven* was the choice of the venue, which seems always to be a significant issue for the Athens Biennale due to its unstable condition. For instance, Adam Jasper in his text '2nd Athens Biennial' for *Frieze* describes the venue as follows: "The central exhibition space – a multi-storey structure built into the undercarriage of a bridge that ends before it reaches the water – was particularly disconcerting. The structure appears to be – to borrow Robert Smithson's term – a 'ruin in reverse', desolate before it ever achieved completion, as if it envied the crumbling marble of the Acropolis that dominates every visitor's impression of Athens." The full text can be found at the following address: http://www.frieze.com/issue/review/2nd_athens_biennial/

[201] On 11 November, 2011 the economist and technocrat Lucas Papademos was appointed as the Prime Minister of Greece taking the place of the leader of the PASOK party George Papandreou whose decision to announce a referendum has been seen by European officials as scandalous.

[202] As Poka-Yio stated in the press conference in relation to the selection of the building: "It started as a design school, after it became a hospital and finally it was taken over by a public authority for the city planning. What you have here is a monster. Athens is perceived sometimes as monstrous. In these very walls you see many transactions that took place. Many transactions that were what they should be (legal) that led to what you see outside (the monstrous, unruly city planning). We will see traces, even

years before the opening of the Biennale, the Diplareios School was in a state of disrepair. For AB3, graffiti on the walls, broken windows, old abandoned classrooms, dead birds and droppings in the windowsills were left unmodified. The aesthetisation of ruins and desolation was a practice in tune with AB3's serious budget restrictions, the extremely limited funding it received, and the general economic climate.

Apart from one computer company, the banners of which one could see when entering the Biennale's space, the project was financially supported by the so-called 'Friends of the Biennale', a group of wealthy collectors who have vested interests in the promotion of the Greek art scene. As I was informed by the organising team, AB3 did not receive any state funding.[203] In other words, AB3 had an extremely tight budget, something that was reflected in almost every aspect of the show, from the free and voluntary participation of all participants, including the curators, to the abandonment of several pre-announced projects, including a film and a catalogue publication as well as the change of its initially announced location.[204] Most people I met during the opening of the show commented on how appropriately the building expressed such issues, and why such a 'gem' had not yet been exploited by the Greek state. This gave rise to a narrative (further enhanced with other incidents as we shall see), according to which the Biennale, as a private initiative, does the work that the state should have already done. The almost total contempt towards the state and its institutions, dominant in Greek public life at the time, expressed, albeit for different reasons, by most sides of the political spectrum, helped the Biennale to appear as an alternative private initiative.

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phone numbers and account numbers on the walls. People that lived here, worked here, exchanged…it is a huge notebook and people wrote account numbers…I don't know what kind of transactions with the public sector was taking place. There are unthinkable findings that we wanted to thank Diplareios school for being so brave to open that and letting us to use these elements of the history of the school."

[203] When I asked AB3's Head of Communication whether AB3 has received any financial support she emphatically replied: "Nothing. Naught. Zero". Regarding the possibility of receiving state-funding she stressed the messiness of the situation: The 2st and 3nd Biennaleshave received an amount from the Ministry of Culture which was, let's say, the 1/8 or the 1/10 of the budget. ..The funding applications for events that are happening in the second half of 2011, like us, were open until the September, 30. For events that take place now…We obviously applied, but the way things are in the country there is no chance. " Our interview took place on November, 15 2011 in Athens.

[204] In this first announcement AB3 stated that it was going to take place in the Athens School of Fine Arts, something that eventually did not happen due to tensions and disagreements.

Figure 6.2:.Diplareios, the main venue

Apart from Diplareios, which hosted the main bulk of AB3's artworks and projects, the organisers used a complex of venues in the so-called Eleftherias Park (Park of Liberty), upon which the headquarters of the Special Interrogation Section of the Military Police (EAT-ESA) was located during the Greek dictatorship years from 1967 to 1974. The venues that AB3 used there included a space called 'Arts Centre' that was the closest to a traditional museum room compared to the other venues, and the Eleftherios Venizelos Museum, a museum dedicated to the Greek mid-war politician by the same name. In this sense, all venues carried certain historical connotations for a Greek context, wishing to articulate historical events of modern Greek history in relation to the present condition.

The theme of AB3, articulated in rather vague and less developed ways than the one of BB7- partly as a result of the limited resources AB3 had at its disposal- engaged in a direct dialogue with the general economic and social situation of Greece. The curators presented the localised tensions of the general atmosphere of the crisis (a structure of feeling having to do with anti-state, anti-austerity discourses and an injured national identity) through a conceptual display of art objects, archival material and physical

spaces. While some months before the beginning of the show, on May, 30, 2011, the biennial's statement emphasised the need for action instead of representation, the final version of AB3 appeared to be more of a commentary on the crisis that called for a fragmentary renegotiation of Greek identity. Its title *MONODROME* (One-way Street) is the Greek translation of Walter Benjamin's collection of texts and aphorisms *Einbahnstraße*, written in 1928 in the context of mid-war Germany. The curators in this way tried to draw a parallel between the Berlin of 1920s and the Athens of today, and more precisely between the rise of Nazism and the often fearsome and unsettling social conditions that the current crisis entails.

In this sense, the more hopeful tone, sparked in art and social movements by the emergence of the Occupy movement, was largely absent from *MONODROME*. Despite its initial actionist statement, the invocation of a general ambiance of resignation and despair was a main difference with *Forget Fear*, which was essentially an exhibition about the celebration, faith and transformative effects of the capacity of art to act rather than reflect. *MONODROME*'s almost exclusive focus on Greece and its leading role in the development of the European debt crisis, through the showcasing of an extremely large number of Greek artists, was posed almost as a necessity to the curators. As the curators admitted on several occasions, the choice to speak specifically about Greece, rather than engage with more internationalist agendas, was a choice forcefully dictated by these recent events. The local, in this sense, was a concept expressed in every manifestation of the event, whether this referred to the choice of the venue, the theme or the budget restrictions.

Let us, however, briefly look at the larger political and social spectrum in which AB3 found itself in. In November 2009, two years before the opening of the Biennale and almost a month after the election of the socialist democrat party of PASOK, Eurostat revised the Greek public deficit forecast and its total debt to GDP ratio resulting in panic in the bond markets.[205] On December 2009 the Greek government in an attempt to 'calm the markets', to use a commonly used phrase of the time, announced radical

[205] More details can be found at the following address: http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-11755320

reforms, including the reduction of public spending, consumption costs and the trimming of the public sector. According to the socialist Prime Minister George Papandreou, Greece's lending problems was a major opportunity, "to address and resolve, once and for all, deep-rooted problems that are holding the nation back".[206] However, despite the efforts of the Greek government to adhere to a neoliberal paradigm, state borrowing problems only worsened in the following months, and gradually it started becoming clear that a default on its debts was a very probable outcome. On May 2nd 2010, the Eurozone members and the IMF eventually agreed in Brussels on a 110bn-euro three-year bail-out package in order to, "help Greece meet its financing needs" [207] and, "safeguard financial stability in the euro area as a whole"[208]. Greece in exchange agreed to implement draconian reforms, under the supervision of the group of lenders called 'Troika': the IMF, the European Commission and European Central Bank. The so-called 'austerity package' that was agreed to by the government and its lenders followed a classic neoliberal recipe, including the cutting of pensions and state expenditure, firing public sector workers, fast track investments and abolition of collective bargaining. Nevertheless, this didn't manage to bring the economy back on track and the Greek government, amidst intense public disapproval, agreed on June 2011 to a second bailout package and the implementation of new and harder austerity measures. From May to June 2011 the movement of *Aganaktismenoi* (The Indignant Ones) occupied central squares of many Greek cities demanding an end to austerity. The emergence of this movement and its impact on Greek politics was key for the establishment of a committed radicalism against Troika and the memorandum agreements that are still implemented today. On

[206] This phrase of Papandreou is taken from the article 'Papandreou unveils radical reforms to salvage Greece's public finances' written by Helena Smith on December 14, 2009 for *Guardian*. The full article can be found at the following address: http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/dec/14/greece-unveils-reforms-to-public-finances

[207] This phrases are taken by a blog post titled 'The Greek Bailout: the Details' written on May 3, 2010 in a blog called 'European Union Law'. The full post can be found at the following address: http://eulaw.wordpress.com/2010/05/03/the-greek-bailout-the-details/

[208] This phrase is taken by a paper titled 'The European Stability Mechanism' and posted on July 2011 on the European Central Bank official website. The full paper can be found at the following address: https://www.ecb.europa.eu/pub/pdf/other/art2_mb201107en_pp71-84en.pdf?949be656fa5e93425de7b4bffded7c75

November 2011, after the failed announcement of a referendum from the then PM George Papandreou, and while the Biennale was on-going, in a heated atmosphere, the socialist government resigned and a new coalition government was formed with a non-elected, appointed technocrat, Lucas Papademos, as the new prime minister. Succinctly put, shortly before, as well as during the course of AB3, a generalised climate of intense uncertainty, insecurity, anger, but also an emerging radicalism in both left and right wing politics dominated the face-to-face discussions and public debates in Athens. Within this framework of extreme events, AB3 decided to directly contextualise the curatorial scope within the local situation.

The show significantly differed from its predecessors, being much less spectacular, with fewer resources and with a more explicitly political orientation. The main presupposition behind the curatorial idea was that Greece was a failed country, and, as such, certain axiomatic ideas that structured its national narrative had to be questioned and reflected upon. The curators suggested that such a questioning should take place amidst the ruins of Greece. Among these ruins, the philosopher Walter Benjamin, who was labelled by AB3 as a defeated intellectual because he committed suicide in 1940 right after the beginning of WWII, engaged in imaginary conversations with the Little Prince, the main character of Antoine de Saint-Exupery's popular book of the same title. This imaginary dialogue materialised on several of the walls of Diplareios in the form of sketches. These sketches portrayed the Little Prince asking naive questions, equipped with the "child's innocence", as it was put by Poka-Yio in the press conference, to the philosopher, whose abstract replies were taken from quotations found in his work.

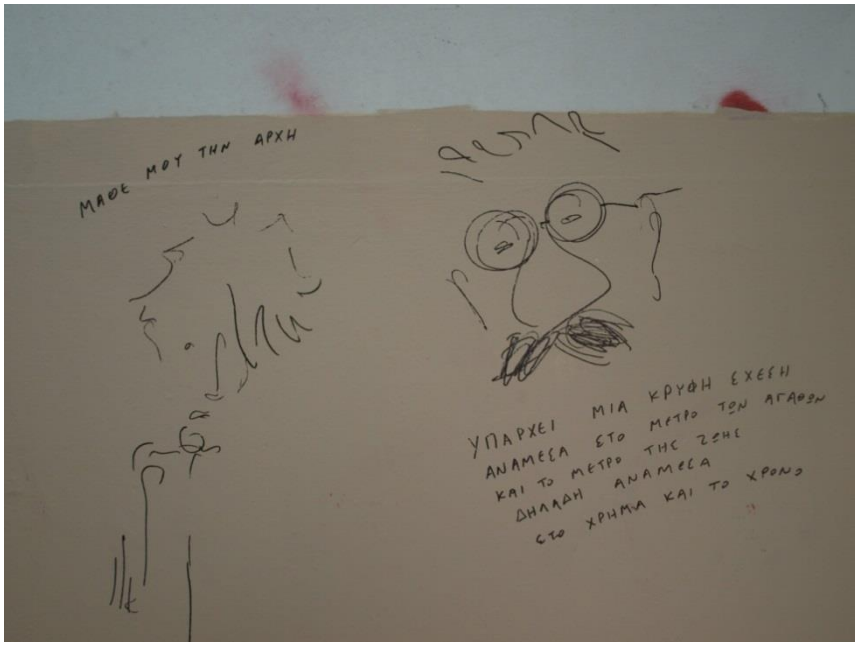

Figure 6.3: Walter Benjamin and Little Prince. The dialogue reads: Little Prince: “Teach me the start”- Walter Benjamin: “a secret connection exists between the measure of goods and the measure of life — which is to say, between money and time”.

Before looking in more depth at the ways that the curatorial narrative unfolded, let us briefly examine the case of Nicola Bourriaud, who (along with Poka-Yio and Kalpaktsoglou) was one of the co-curators of *MONODROME*. Nicola Bourriaud is commonly regarded as one of the key figures of the post-modern curatorial theory of the late 1990s and early 2000s, and is particularly well-known for the notion of relational aesthetics (Chapter 3 Section 3). His book *Relational Aesthetics*, published in 1998 in French and in 2002 in English, was ground-breaking for the development of a curatorial as well as artistic language, focusing less on autonomous objects and more on the relations enabled between objects, environments and spectators. Bourriaud, already an active curator in France at the time he wrote his book, framed his approach within a typical post-Marxist framework, according to which, art in the context of a post-Soviet and globalised world could no longer focus on the grand-narratives of class, communism and the like, but on the construction of micro-situations, encounters and exchanges that could challenge the economic rationality of capitalism. The

artwork, according to this approach, would be a kind of, "social interstice" (2002: 16) that opens up spaces of new sociabilities and, "momentary groupings" (:17) within urban frameworks of mobility, nomadism and translation. Garnished with theoretical references to the situationists, Felix Guattari and Karl Marx, and celebrations of the recycling practices of collage, DJing and remixing, Bourriaud's account proved extremely influential for 2000s contemporary art curating, theory and practice worldwide.

Aware of budget restrictions and of the fact that all participants were working for free, I asked the organisers how they managed to convince this superstar-curator to accept the position. They answered that, as with many other people with whom they collaborated in the past, they already had a personal relationship with him. As a person who, "started on his own", according to them, he was sympathetic to their cause, knowing what it meant to be involved in independent initiatives with precarious support. In any case, the announcement of Bourriaud on October 30, 2010 as the co-curator of the Biennale soon caught some attention across the international art circuit. Many art sites announced him as *the* curator of the forthcoming AB3, something that gave publicity to the event and allowed its effective promotion across art circuits. Because of his increased international visibility, Bourriaud was often presented as the mastermind behind the exhibition. It is telling, for instance, that even today the *Wikipedia* entry on Nicola Bourriaud states him as the sole curator of the exhibition.

The show involved some of the classic relational aesthetics artists, mentioned by Bourriaud in his *Relational Aesthetics*, such as the Jens Hennings and Liam Gillick. The inclusion of these artists strongly referenced Bourriaud's past curatorial practice. Since, however, most of the art shown in the Biennale had explicitly to do with aspects of modern Greek history, aspects impossible for Bourriaud to know well enough so as to reflect upon, it was clear that the curatorship was disproportionally led by Kalpaktsoglou and Poka-Yio (XY). Also, it was clear that the overwhelming majority of the events, co-ordinated in Greek or concerning Greek issues could not be conceived by Bourriaud himself. Bourriaud's most principal contribution was expected to be the direction of a feature film, planned to be shot during the days of the

opening. In this film the main character, according to Bourriaud, would be, "a reincarnated Walter Benjamin, who will have to deal with the current Greek crisis and deal with ghosts from History".[209] This film was meant to be one of the nodal points of the exhibition and was advertised in the original AB3's newsletter. Bourriaud's high expectations of the film were revealed in an interview he gave some months before the opening of AB3, where he declared that through the film he was, "trying to propose an alternative to the 'big exhibition': more collective, and also more articulated", developing, "a scenario within the city", in which, "the whole biennial will be cut into pieces all over Athens".[210] This ambitious plan was somehow forgotten in the course of the show, and up to date there has been no official announcement about its fate neither by the Biennale nor by Bourriaud. Different participants during the exhibition suggested that the film was to be cancelled for financial reasons. The cancellation of the film due to the lack of funding as a result of the "situation in Greece" was also confirmed to me in a personal communication I had with the French production company *Kino* on April 11, 2014, which was initially advertised as the production company.

Thus, Bourriaud's contribution to the exhibition was in reality much less important than officially stated, and his place in the curatorial team principally functioned as a magnet for audiences, sponsors and stakeholders. Also, apart from his presence on the day of the press conference and the opening, Bourriaud, to my knowledge, remained largely absent through the course of the Biennale.

During the press conference, Bourriaud made a curatorial statement that explained how the initial ideas were developed by all three of them. Given that eventually there was no accompanying catalogue, this statement was the only comprehensive one that Bourriaud made publicly about the exhibition. As it has not been recorded anywhere else it is worth quoting in full here:

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[209] The excerpts are from the interview '8 questions for Nicolas Bourriaud' that was released at the independent magazine SALZINSEL. The full text can be found at the following address: http://salzinselmagazine.blogspot.de/2011/03/8-questions-for-nicolas-bourriaud.html
[210] *Ibid.*

The most striking aspect of this show is that it is a biennial which is totally independent in its situation, in its context. Even the building, the venue. We tried to follow this situation, it was our guide in a way. The economic crisis, the political situation was the guide that led us to the exhibition that you will see. And that's really important, not to ignore the situation, but to take it into account and even more to include it in the process. That's why the character of Walter Benjamin came up in our first or second discussion that we had. In a way it is also an interesting guideline to see what is in the rooms here. The political thought of Walter Benjamin was based on the notion of 'rescue'. Of the possibility to revisit the past in order to rescue visions of the world. Visions of History which were actually condemned, defeated in a way. For Walter Benjamin, history and the work of the historian means to rescue such visions which were defeated. How do we examine this past? How do we see this situation? Through fragments. Ruins. The ruins are the primal material for the historian and also for the artist today. For Benjamin each period of time is producing what he calls a *phantasmagoria*, which is a kind of dream, a collective dream, that can be a nightmare or a wonderful dream. And this dream we can find it within the fragments, within the ruins themselves. We can constitute the dream of the 19th century Paris for example, to take an example of what Benjamin was interested about, only by examining small details, little areas. And if you consider these three things, the idea of history as rescue, fragments and phantasmagoria, it corresponds to the three different classes of elements that are in the exhibition: artworks, documents like historical objects or printed matter and films. We can see many different samples of films. It was really important for us to have these three elements presented in the same way. It is not only artworks, it is also objects and signs which are entering to a dialogue with the artworks. There is an interesting line that you can see in the exhibition is the huge importance of the black and white. There are many things that are black and white in this exhibition. And it also corresponds to the fact that this exhibition is about, as Poka-Yio said, the Little Prince meeting Walter Benjamin. What does the Little Prince say? He says: "Draw me a sheep." Which is the most simple thing that one can think about. And what is the sheep here? The sheep is Capital, the sheep is the political situation. How can we express that? How can we put names and faces in this situation? That's the "Draw me a sheep" in this situation, which I think is the main gesture that you can see in this exhibition. It means sometimes representing something very simple. Doing a sketch to build up the house or whatever. It is these very radical simple gestures that are the core of the exhibition. It is a starting-over biennial. Something else that was really important which was also part of the process is the fact that there is a very

important proportion of Greek artists in this exhibition, which I think it is very relevant in the context. I got used to biennials which were really derogatory international or global. I think the gesture of this Biennial is to relocate, and of course this is something that comes up from the political and social situation. Another aspect that I want to stress on, is the fact that this exhibition will be prolonged by a project that is a more complex one, which is the idea of producing a feature film based on this exhibition, with footage with what is going on here, documents on the Greek situation today, which will be included in a feature film which is on its way. It is a difficult process, but we already have the French production company Kino, we agreed also to be a mix of fiction and documentary […could not transcribe]. It will be the first exhibition that will be a feature film and the first feature film as an exhibition, and it will be the last part of this process, the Athens Biennale.

This statement seems to be very close to Bourriaud's past curatorial strategy, where he regularly counterpoises ideas related to abstractions like 'capitalism' or 'History' with the efficacy of small and simple gestures. These gestures are meant to stimulate fresh conceptual arrangements that can somehow reverse dominant relations. Furthermore, Bourriaud's curatorial narrative seemed to foreground a variation of the agonistic approach having to do with the unquestionable appointment of himself in the position of a progressive critical agent, whose role is to intervene and enable counter-dominant discourses. Indeed, Bourriaud identified himself a few months before the opening of the show as a, "partisan of 'radical democracy'" in the way, "Chantal Mouffe puts it" (Chapter 2 Section 2).[211] Putting this theory into practice, Bourriaud, via Walter Benjamin, announced himself as taking up the historian's militant task to rescue fragments of the past that remain obscured in official historical narratives. Bourriaud however avoided referencing and commenting on how nodal ideas in Benjamin's conception of history, such as notions of class struggle and oppressed history, converse with his narrative. One was led to wonder who are defined as the oppressed

[211] *Ibid.*

in Bourriaud's account and how do these oppressed relate to the exhibition in any possible way?[212]

As the curatorial narrative of *MONODROME* received little public discussion and has not been recorded in any official document up to this day, it is useful to look at how it was expressed by rest of the curators. Poka-Yio, who spoke before Nicola Bourriaud in the press preview, attempted to historicise AB3 in the context of the periodicity of Athens Biennale. Poka-Yio, similarly to Bourriaud if not even more dramatically, assigned a rather privileged position to the curators, and creators in general, whom he compared to "prophets":

For us when we started this quasi trilogy, we had Destroy Athens and the dead-end that was a diminution of what was about to happen in Athens. In a sense, we sensed this high tension that was growing in the city and therefore we created 'Destroy Athens', something which was unfortunately prophetic of what was about to happen (he means the December 2008 riots)….you know that every creator has this strange psyche, maybe capacity to understand what is about to happen, that's why we say or we used to say that art is avant-garde, it is before its time in a way, of what is about to come.

Subsequently, Poka-Yio explained how the idea of art that comes 'before its time' could not be applied to the context of the dramatic events taking place in Athens. In a way, this prophetic function of the 'creators', stressed above, seemed to be annihilated by the intensity of the crisis:

Now history is accelerating to a point that all of us are behind of what is happening: the economic crisis, the sociopolitical crisis are both ahead of us. So, all the artists are striving. All these days they have been asking us in various interviews whether the artists or art can address what is happening today. Our idea, unfortunately, is that art struggles to understand what's going on. Maybe in the future, we will be ready to retaliate and give our own narration of what's happening today. But now, we don't know exactly where we stand. So in that way we have failed. Failure is everywhere. And failure is within this Biennial. *This is not exactly a biennial*. What we have done is something that goes along with our times. So, when we are

[212] In fact, if one social group could be identified as the "oppressed" in the context of MONODROME, it is the undocumented migrants living in large numbers in the area, who, as we will see later, seemed to be an absolutely foreign body to the social scripts of the show.

saying about collective dead-ends, this is a collective dead-end….This country is under such a stress, that trying to create a Biennial under this stress is an enormous task. We could say: OK, we can postpone it in a way. But for us to give an answer, this poor maybe answer, of what's going on in Greece now, it was mandatory. It meant that we were struggling to give a battle without any hope. That it was a hopeless battle. And this kind of feeling you can trace in this building that we have picked up….This exhibition is an allegory of the whole modern history of Greece. In a way this building, from its foundation upwards, is built in a tradition that turns it to craft and then turns it industrial. This is the 'Greek Bauhaus' that you see here. Our host here is an architect and he carries this legacy of the school that used to be something very important for this country, a country that never cared to be an industrial country…Probably you have read in our releases, about this narrational device that we came up, the dialogue between Little Prince and Walter Benjamin. We came up with this idea, because in order to understand the crisis we have to go back to history, to history where the economic crisis led to a political crisis (italics mine).

The idea of failure was contextualised within the current socio-political climate in Athens and that of mid-war Berlin. On the one hand, Poka-Yio compares- through Benjamin- contemporary Greece to the pre-Nazi Germany as both societies were suffering from a serious economic crisis. On the other hand, he identifies Benjamin as an iconic figure of the failed intellectual. This narrative is again framed by a slight fatalism, according to which, art has nothing, or very little, to offer:

The mid-war era was when the financial crisis led to totalitarian ideas, and converted democracy to totalitarianism. Therefore this era was our tone of voice. You will see this everywhere in this building. It is like a monument of that era… So, Walter is the intellectual who was defeated, because he was a left-wing Jew that got prosecuted, one of the greatest intellectuals of the twentieth century, was prosecuted and defeated and committed suicide in the borders of Spain. For us these times as intellectuals- and I perceive the artist as an intellectual- we are all defeated in a way. We cannot know what is happening, therefore we are moving to the limits, so to say, defeated and that's it. So, Walter has an inner dialogue with what we say in psychoanalysis the 'inner child', the innocent, the child who wants to know the very basic questions: Why are we here? What's happening here? It is this situation that I want to understand. Of course this is totally fictional, but these innocent cry for basic answers is what led us to create this narrational structure of the third Athens Biennale.

In effect, the curatorial strategy was concerned with an intervention in History, and Greek History for that matter, involving the enabling of elements that have been excluded or even actively repressed within official historiography. In this sense, despite the growing anti-neoliberal and anti-austerity climate prevailing in the streets of Athens, *MONODROME* compared to *Forget Fear* was less activist and less open to social movements, although it borrowed some of their language and iconography. While *MONODROME*'s eventual conventionality may appear somewhat trivial, as the social conditions in Athens were much more radicalised than in Berlin at the time, it also shows the complex relationship between a biennial and its outside. This relationship is subject to multi-layered contexts, involving organizational dynamics, institutional visibility, funding sources and infrastructural abilities.

6.3.2 Artworks: Reflective Indeterminacy

Over 100 participating artists took part in *MONODROME*. The Diplareios main venue hosted the majority of these works that were exhibited inside the building, from the basement to the ground floor and its three upper floors. At times, the navigation in the space purposefully recalled a maze, with arrows pointing to hidden spots and semi-ruined rooms and spaces. Many of the works displayed were not artworks in the strict sense, which is to say works crafted by named, professional artists with the purpose to appear in an art exhibition, but archival material that had been collected and repurposed so as to fit the theme of the show, as well as 'environments' found in the interior of the Diplareios building. Again, in this respect, *MONODROME* did not align itself so much with the objectives of the social movements, activism and social change, creating rather a space of representation, interpretation, and reflection on the crisis, its causes and effects.

Many parts of the building, for instance, in a state of ruin due to a socio-natural process of abandonment and decay, were framed in the context of the curatorial statement and approached so as to point to the larger ideas of abandonment and decay

prevalent in Greek society. Within the long-time sealed-off building, these environments exist with little or no 'creative' human intervention. The several dead pigeons, for instance, that were purposefully left lying on the floor during the exhibition, capped by special glass bowls, were found when the long sealed-off venue was opened by the curators. On the one hand, these dead pigeons acted as a reminder that the Greek state left such an impressive building to decay, certifying, therefore, that 'Athens is in crisis'. On the other hand, by evoking the state of death as an index of the negative social condition, *MONODROME* called for a reflection upon the crisis. Similar feelings were induced on other occasions, such as the various graffitied slogans that existed on the walls and other parts of Diplareios. These were again left untouched both as a historical 'trace', something that has taken place in past, and as a reminder of the present desertion that could possibly bring about some future renewal. It is worth remembering here that the decision to leave such traces, pointing to a state of ruination, was largely an effect of the budget constraints.

The idea of performing the archive, the practice of re-contextualising historical documents in the present in order to facilitate the enabling of differentiated meanings, was predominant in *MONODROME*. An array of heterogeneous found objects was made to be expressive of the general situation of the crisis, which was a determining signifier of all the artefacts that appeared within AB3. The amount and diversity of the artefacts put on display by the curators shows their enhanced desire for artistic intervention, who rather than merely selecting works, displayed their own. Among such documents one could find casted busts representing ancient Greek figures placed alongside TV screens showing recent Greek victories in sports competitions, as well as scattered debris of broken cast sculptures representing figures from ancient Greek history that were found in a cast workshop and moved to one of the exhibition rooms. These curatorial placements, referencing the ways that Greek antiquity has contributed to the constitution of modern Greek identity, wished to draw connections between the nationalistic rhetoric of the Greek state and the current economic crisis.

Figure 6.4: A “squalid environment” inside Diplareios

The desire to highlight this connection (between the economic crisis and a national identity based on antiquity), often veered toward the rhetoric of nation-branding (Poka-Yio as we said is also a brand strategist), according to which Greece has failed because it has not communicated the right image. This was represented, for example, in Greek touristic posters of the 1960s and 1970s that mixed antique forms with images of Greek island landscapes that were framed by the curators as kitsch.[213] Other found objects, included furniture samples constructed in Diplareios when the building used to be a craft school, expressed a sense of appreciation and nostalgia for the long-gone Greek manufacturing sector. In this sense, and despite the curatorial emphasis on understanding the crisis as related to global economy, one of the main statements of *MONODROME* was that there is a strong linkage between Greek national identity and economic failure.

[213] Other characteristic examples included the costumes of Olympic Airlines, designed by Yves-Saint Laurent, displayed on the third floor of Diplareios on mannequins.

Figure 6.5: Ruins (Top Left: Slogans on the walls and on a blackboard/ Top Right: Dead pigeons (Courtesy Spyros Staveris)/ Bottom Left: Busts representing ancient Greek figures placed alongside TV screens / Bottom Left: scattered debris of broken cast sculptures representing ancient figures)

The tendency to foreground elements of Greek culture, popular and otherwise, and arrange them among physical and symbolic ruins, e.g. the ruins of Diplareios, the manufacturing sector, ancient ruins or the ruined economy, was also reflected in the selection of other works, initially not created to appear within the gallery circuit. For instance, on the top floor of the exhibition, the curators included the documents of a project made by the architect Christos Papoulias twenty years ago as a response to the architectural competition organised by the Greek state for the materialization of the New Acropolis Museum. In this unrealised project, Papoulias argued against the

creation of a tourist-driven museum that would intervene in the area and make claims to 'stolen' antiquities, suggesting instead the development of a cryptic, difficult-to-access and invisible cave within the bowels of the rock of Acropolis. This will to highlight how claims to antiquity became organising principles of modern Greek identity and its value systems, was also evident in works, such as the 1982 film, 'The Bleeding Statues' by the Greek director Tony Lyckouresis. This film starts with the depiction of celebrations associated with the opening of an Archaeological Museum in a small Greek town. Three juvenile delinquents who escape from a nearby reform school find refuge inside this museum after being chased by the police. When they realise that the archaeological artefacts displayed in the museum are enormously valuable they decide to take the statues hostage. In this regard, the film purports to expose the hierarchical structures in the official value system of Greek culture that treats antique forms as sacred.

AB3's references to Greek social and political life, however, did not only engage with official discourses concerning classical antiquity, but also with a set of different periods and histories. Among them, for instance, we find a series of comic strips from the late 19th century satirical Greek magazine called *New Acropolis* that sarcastically account for a similar period of bankruptcy in the history of the Greek nation-state. In another example, a Vlachian shepherd's hut, part of the durational project 'Carnival Pause' by the artist Nikos Charalambidis, was placed on the ground floor of AB3, intended to serve as a material index of a past era related to Greek minority cultures. There were other, more recent and direct references to Greek history, including the documentary film 'Songs of Fire' by the filmmaker Nikos Koundouros, which was filmed immediately after the fall of the Greek military junta (1967-1974). This iconic film mainly focuses on two concerts held by Greek left-wing composers, whose songs were illegal during the junta period, documenting the celebrations of the students and the youth during the restoration of democracy. The post-junta period in Greece, known as *metapolitefsi* (a word translated as 'regime change'), is associated with the

ascension of the social democratic government of PASOK to power[214] and the incorporation and diffusion of left-wing elements in the state apparatus that had remained violently supressed during the previous decades. In the light of the economic crisis, however, the *metapolitefsi* era was often seen by protestors and populist resistant movements, as a corrupted regime that through its excessive borrowing led the country to bankruptcy. *MONODROME* in this sense re-purposed the film, re-contextualising a 'heroic' moment of the Greek democratic and left-wing tradition and its cultural forms within a strained climate of historical questioning and restructuring.[215]

Right beside this film, on the first floor of Diplareios, the curators hung on the wall a placard they randomly found somewhere in Athens, that read: "Wake Up Banana Republic!" This piece was one of the few directly indexing the anti-austerity protests and the *Aganaktismenoi* movement. However, this piece again, functioned more as a document of a certain era, a material trace that pointed to an emergent structure of feeling in Greek society, rather than a call to action, pro or against the movement. Similarly, the inclusion of the work of the Greek photographer Spyros Staveris, who in a slideshow chronicled the culture developed around *Aganaktismenoi* in Syntagma square, served as a photo-journalistic document of visualising resistant cultures.[216] Perhaps the only work in the exhibition that took a clear position (in fact a critical one) in relation to the protest culture expressed by the *Aganaktismenoi* movement was the short film 'Threnodies: Reflections on the Merchant, the Geographer and the Snake in Antoine de Saint Exupery´s "Little Prince' by the artistic duo *Kavecs*. In this film, *Kavecs* developed a multi-layered symbolic language of references to Josef Beuys,

[214] PASOK (Panhellenic Socialist Movement) is a socialist democratic party that was in power in Greece from 1981 to 1989, from 1993 to 2004 and from 2009 to 2012 that is to say almost throughout the whole *metapolitefsi* period.

[215] Another work that interrogated the PASOK and Greece's social democratic period was the *Elounda Summit* in which the artist Vaggelis Vlahos simply displayed photographs that showed the ex-PASOK leader Andreas Papandreou in the '70s and '80s together with figures such as the Libyan leader Mouamar Kaddafi and the Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat in a period when Papandreou was seeking alternatives allies for Greece beyond European partners.

[216] This work was placed opposite a 1823 painting by the folk Greek painter Theofilos that represented Greek war of independence from the Ottomans. Again, it was not clear whether the associations between the Syntagma protests and the Greek war of Independence were meant to be ironical or real.

Walter Benjamin and anti-Semitic Greek popular songs to warn against the messianic and ethno-populist elements of the resistant movement of *Aganaktismenoi*.

Figure 6.6: "Wake-Up Banana Republic"

The Diplareios School also provided the backdrop for some few site-specific works. An exemplary work of AB'3 approach, attracting some relative visibility, was an installation called 'Photocopies' by the Greek artist Rena Papaspyrou. Papaspyrou copied and photocopied onto small paper slips, some telephone numbers of unidentified people that she randomly found on the venue's wall. The numbers were put there years before the opening of the show probably by office workers who used to work there. This installation was thus meant to foreground the building's former use as an office (prior to its conversion to an art venue), questioning the boundaries between the private and the public through the bureaucracy of the public sector. Something similar was attempted by the artistic group 'Under Construction' that

placed old, wobbly office desks in one of the Diplareios' rooms, invoking images of state bureaucracy in relation to a symbolic or forthcoming collapse.

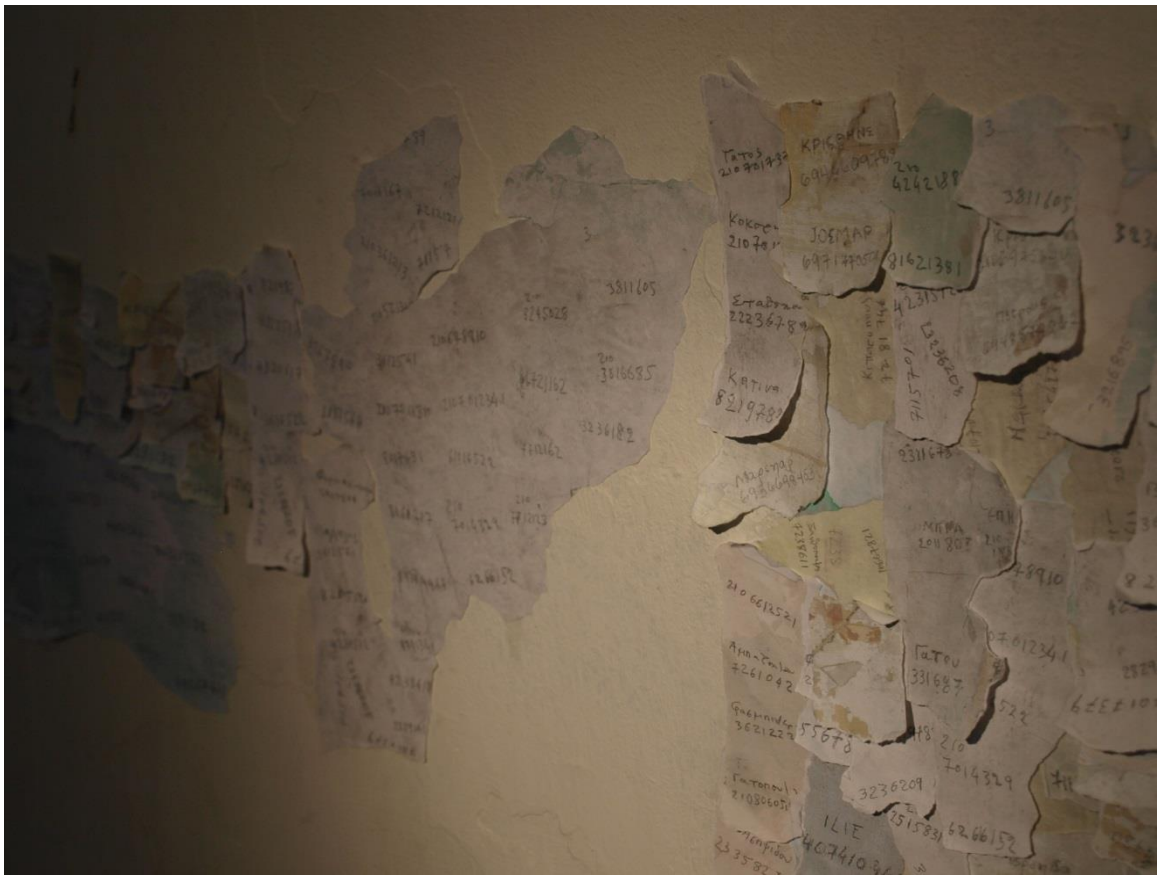

Figure 6.7: 'Photocopies' by Papaspyrou

It is worth noting that relatively few of the displayed artefacts were commissioned or created by artists in response to the curatorial concepts. Several displays were just ordinary objects, elevated to documents or archives of artistic merit by the curators themselves.[217] This kind of, "aesthetic journalism", as Cramerotti would put it (2009),

[217] I use the term art objects here in a descriptive sense. For example, the dead pigeons "became" art objects, that is to say special objects separated from the rest of the environment, insofar as the tour guides stood above them and explained the reasons for including them in the exhibition.

was an effect of the tight budget that empowered the curatorial authority to select and nominate an unusually large amount of objects as worthy of aesthetic appreciation. Furthermore, the selection of these works, which along with similar others made up more than half of the displays in AB3, was chosen solely by the Greek curators (XY). Not only would it have been impossible for Bourriaud to have such an advanced knowledge of Greek politics and history, but nowhere in the exhibition was his name mentioned in connection to these works. In addition, the rather limited desire to communicate *MONODROME* to an international audience was enhanced by the absence of any sort of interpretative material that could possibly facilitate their decoding for non-Greek visitors. In this sense, the budget restrictions came to affect the cosmopolitanism of the biennial event and its circulation across contemporary art circuits.[218]

To be fair, there were quite a few international artists participating in the exhibition. The great majority of these works, however, had little to do with the Greek crisis and its relation to national identity. In fact, most of them seemed to have little to do with *MONODROME*'s curatorial statement in the first place, seeming to be mainly included for raising the cosmopolitan profile of the show. One of the international participations was titled 'Inside Now, we Walked into a Room with Coca-Cola Coloured Walls' by Liam Gillick, a canonical relational aesthetics work from a celebrated relational aesthetics artist.[219] For the work, which was first conceived in 1998, Gillick instructed the assistants and volunteers of *MONODROME* to draw stripes with paint on one of the exhibition's walls. The rules instructed that the stripes be in the hue of Coca-Cola colours and that the executors should not have consumed

[218] For instance, when I asked the Head of Communication of the Biennale halfway the show whether a catalogue will eventually accompany the exhibition, as it was initially announced, which could communicate the exhibition to a more international audience, she replied: "I do not think so. We will only publish a catalogue if we win the lottery! It is a shame because we gathered a very good material…but it is not possible… There is no spare time, but more crucially there is no money. If we could upload in a website all the videos and the interviews as we planned and all this come together it could become like an online catalogue. We tried to open up the exhibition as much as we could. But there are limitations." Eventually there was a website that included several videos documenting some interviews with participants, lectures, presentations and performances, but all these were not translated to English something that immediately significantly shrunk the range of the gesture.

[219] More than a decade earlier, Bourriaud in his book *Post-production* (2001) praised Liam Gillick for fabricating "tools of exploration that target the intelligibility of our era" (:28).

the beverage for the past 48 hours. The work was performed by exhibition volunteers thirteen years after its original conception in a different context than that originally produced. Potentially it can be reproduced in a similar manner in almost any time and space coordinate provided that there is a wall, paint and a loosely defined social group to perform it. The above process of production makes the piece interesting in relation to debates having to do with labour, value, authenticity and copyright in the realm of contemporary art but, can hardly justify its inclusion in an exhibition that is framed in the context of the Greek economic crisis and the revisiting of History.[220]

Figure 6.8 Inside Now, we Walked into a Room with Coca-Cola Coloured Walls' by Gillick

Another internationally acclaimed artist taking part in the exhibition was the Australian artist Tracey Moffat, well-known for her socially engaged practice. In *MONODROME* the curators chose to show some excerpts from Moffat's 2001 photographic series 'Fourth', which focus on the depiction of athletes participating in

[220] In any case, the curators did not communicate some connecting idea between this exhibition and its themes to the public. While for instance it could be seen as a rescue of past fragments, in a couple of guided tours that I followed the work was merely described as a "fascinating work of conceptual art."

the Olympic Games that took the fourth position and thus did not manage to win a medal. This series seemed to relate to the exhibition's theme through the idea of failure, since both the athletes and country of Greece have failed to achieve their aims, a medal in the first case and economic prosperity in the second. However, this interpretation can be invoked only if one accepts the naïve, if not entirely problematic, identification of an individual athlete competing in the Olympics with a nation-state running in the context of geopolitics and world economy.[221] The selection of this work again, seemed to have less to do with its associations to the subject matter than with raising the biennial's international profile. A similar dissonance was invoked with the inclusion of the 1994 work 'Turkish Jokes' by the artist Jens Haaning. For this work Haaning, who is another widely acclaimed relational artist, recorded jokes told in Turkish language and then played them back through a loudspeaker in an Oslo central square. Haaning wished to comment on the fractured character of national space in the rise of multi-national societies, as well as to create a temporal community consisted of those who understand the Turkish language in Oslo. Similarly to the cases above, this work could be understood as relevant in an extremely loosely way in relation to the stated aims of *MONODROME*. The above cases manifest how within *MONODROME* two different exhibitions co-existed, a national and an international one, with little relation to each other.

6.3.3. Projects and Events

Apart from the several lectures, conferences and performances organised by the curators, *MONODROME* also included two permanent projects in its premises with an almost daily presence in the space. These projects retained some relative autonomy from the curatorial team and were crucial for turning the Biennale to a more inclusive space, in the sense that their participants were not all affiliated with the art world.[222]

[221] This explanation was surprisingly given by some of the tour guides that I followed.
[222] Here, we should mention however that MONODROME never reached the degree of inclusivity of 'Forget Fear' that, although similarly predominantly white, managed to draw in its premises a

The first of these projects was called 'We Never Closed', set up by the collective by the same name and located in a room of the first floor of Diplareios. The title 'We Never Closed' referred to the motto of the Windmill Theatre in London, which during the WWII remained open despite the war. In this sense, the project, by drawing a connection between two 'states of emergency', the economic crisis in Greece and London of the WWII, wished to foreground the need to keep the theatrical stage open under such conditions. The stage of 'We Never Closed' hosted tens of works in the course of *MONODROME*, in their overwhelming majority by Greek artists, varying from stand-up comedies and theatrical pieces to lecture-performances. Operating by loose criteria of selection We Never Closed attempted to create an inclusive space, where scholars, artists and performers would have the opportunity to share their work and attract some visibility.

The other permanent project was titled 'World of Mouth' and was organised by the curatorial and artistic trio of KERNEL. World of Mouth was essentially a show within a show, as KERNEL curated a mini-exhibition of five different projects in which they invited artists and art collectives to take part. The project, consisting of a combination of installations, live performances, presentations and actions, explored the ways in which a new oral culture, born through the network age, could enable modes of cultural and social action.

The members of KERNEL, Pegy Zali, Petros Moris and Theodoros Giannakis, mentioned in a personal talk how from the beginning they tried to be cautious and reflective on their participation in AB3. While they did not identify with the curatorial tactic, they participated in *MONODROME* to make their work known to wider audiences and possible transform the discourse of AB3 from within.[223] From the five projects presented in the World of Mouth, the project that mostly performed this idea

heterogeneous mix of social groups ranging, as we saw, from local ethnic minorities to representatives of outlawed political organizations.

[223] This idea of occupying the institution, rather than opting-out, related to a performed criticality and the smuggling of radical ideas, was constantly evoked during my research so as to justify participation. Among others, the Athens Biennale organisers claimed that they participated in the biennial circuit so to undermine it from within, whereas Żmijewski participated in BB7 so as to shift institutional power balance.

of internal subversion was the ‘Public School of Athens’. This project operated for the whole duration of the exhibition and shared some of the ethos of the Autonomous University as described in the previous chapter. The project was part of the ‘Public School’, a self-organised school founded in 2007 in Los Angeles by a group of artists and architects, whose function is to materialise series of classes on philosophical, critical and socially transformative issues. There are no financial transactions related with the school, no curriculum and no degrees awarded, while the main idea behind it is the open distribution of knowledge and experimentation with co-operative methods of learning beyond official channels. The Public School essentially operates through a web–forum, where anyone can propose a course which, if there is a demand, can be actualised by those who run the school. KERNEL contacted the founders of the Public School and suggested to include a local variation as part of the World of Mouth. The idea was that during AB3 possible tutors would suggest different classes to KERNEL that would be hosted in the ground floor of Diplareios.

Despite some formal similarities with the Autonomous University, the Public School, an essentially translocal phenomenon, was much more centralised (as presented in AB3), in the sense that it was set-up by a closed group of (three) people who were in charge of selecting the classes. In this sense, it also mainly addressed individuals already familiar with the rituals of the art system, as the organisers were named artists and not an activist anonymous collective. Another difference was that in the Autonomous University, the organising team was mainly responsible for inviting speakers, whereas in the Public School of Athens it was the participants who proposed classes. In any case, the Public School managed to enable certain discussions that were not necessarily bound to the art world and its publics, as the subjects of the thematic classes varied from alternative exchange systems to open source architectures and currencies.

Figure 6.9 ‘The café of Monodrome’. This was also the place where the Public School held its classes

Among several others, an interesting class for the Public School was one organised by the economist and philosopher Georgios Papadopoulos. The course, delivered in Greek language, was called ‘Alternative Exchange Systems and Initiatives of Social Economy’, aiming to introduce and possibly actualise models of social economy based on alternative currencies (Local Exchange Trading Systems – LETS). Examples of such models were reflected upon both as viable local alternatives for distributing goods and services as well as political initiatives standing against the logic of market. The circle of four seminars was well-attended, and, by being framed within the mobilising of action in the context of the current economic model, raised interesting discussions regarding the feasibility of such attempts. In a private talk, Papadopoulos, who at the time was reading for a PhD in economics and psychoanalysis, explained

how for him the art circuit, and in extension the biennial, provided a shelter for hosting both his work and political aspirations:

> In the academic context I usually find it hard to present, just to get some feedback. For me it is a little difficult in traditional academic institutions, because the subject that I work in, the issues I use and the techniques or methodologies, if you want, that I employ are not so "scientific," in the strict sense, especially since I left economics and started being more into cultural studies. And I never liked being in a very specific community, anyway, with which to share the same research paradigm, trying to wrestle with the same questions, and having a little portion of this field. This I did not like from the beginning and now I found this resort to art…And anyway the use of theory cannot touch the affective and desiring aspects of the subject. Many people who would earlier be preoccupied with politics in the context of social movements, now find resort to artistic spaces, and not only as art producers but also as theory producers.[224]

The above account shows how the art biennial becomes a desirable alternative outlet for the circulation of both scholarly and activist production, as a space that allows, on the one hand, freer circulation of forms of knowledge other than the academia, and on the other, aesthetic forms of engagement not regularly met in traditional activist politics. The seminar of Papadopoulos displayed, in this sense, a conscious desire to escape from more traditional systems of knowledge and action. AB3, in this regard, through its experimental format became a more inclusive space, enabling the discourse of social movements and resistant cultures. In this regard, the 'extitution' (Spicer, 2010; Chapter 2 Section 3), which is to say the formless outside that institutions try to domesticate so as to expand their activity, may consist in fact of an already formed desire that comes to organically assume a place within the institutional structure.

Other seminars in the Public School shared a similar interdisciplinary character, as the art platform was becoming the means, or often the excuse, for the circulation of different types of knowledge with a socially interventionist character. Such examples include the seminar given by Ben Vickers, member of the London-based collective

[224] This is an excerpt from a recorded discussion I had with Georgios Papadopoulos on November 15, 2011.

Luck PDF, on October 27 titled ‘A Very Brief Introduction to State Management Failure’ which dealt with the question of alternative management systems, as well as that of a member of the collective Phrixos, ‘Poster Engineering: A Brief Introduction to the Propaganda Valves’ that examined the visualscape of Athens in relation to the iconography of street posters.

While the above lectures in the Public School touched on issues related to the commons and the means of production (Chapter 4), in most of the projects and events organised by the curatorial team such references were largely absent. This omission was in stark contrast to the fourth edition of the Athens Biennale, titled *AGORA* that took place from October to December 2013. In *AGORA*, which was organised collectively by group of more than 40 curators, theorists and artists, an attempt that already touched upon questions of authorship and forms of production, such references were central to the development of the exhibition. Indicatively, apart from the gesture of selecting the former stock market building as a venue, a direct reference to a form of production now in crisis, the catalogue of *AGORA* included an interview by Daniel Spaulding on art and communisation, plus texts by typical Marxist and activist writers on contemporary art such as, among others, Brian Holmes, John Roberts, Dave Beech and Nato Thompson. While *AGORA* did not reach the actionism and immediacy of *Forget Fear*, it was clearly influenced by the vocabularies of the Occupy movement in a way that *MONODROME* was not. *MONODROME* started in a rather depressive political climate in Greece but when it ended new hopes for a broad left-wing movement were ascending. As we shall see, when the Occupy movement gained wide publicity in the U.S.A., globally as well as in Greece, the limitations of *MONODROME* to involve such activist voices became obvious.

Perhaps the closest bond created between *MONODROME* and the language and actions of the social movements of the time came rather inadvertently through an incident that gained widespread publicity shortly after the opening of the Biennale. While *MONODROME*’s TV spot, directed by the filmmaker Giorgos Zois, was scheduled to be screened on Greek State television (ERT) it was eventually turned-

down. The spot was a 25 seconds clip that staged short stereotypical scenes from the everyday reality in Athens that ranged from a soup kitchen to an attack against a special force policeman with red paint. The official explanation of ERT for its decision not to screen the spot was not officially announced but explained verbally to the organisers of the Biennale. The reason was that the spot made calls to violence, especially through a short scene in which a young man throws a Molotov bomb in front of a neo-classical building. Images of protestors throwing Molotov bombs against the police or government buildings was a very common one at the time in Greece, being often the main image of Greece communicated internationally. The state television, however, considered this image inappropriate. Later ERT announced that the, "legal framework does not permit, among others, the transmission of messages that include elements of violence or encourage behaviours that can harm health and safety or insult human dignity."[225] This was widely perceived as an act of censorship and as a reaction, numerous blogs, mainly with a liberal and left-wing orientation, embedded the video on their pages. The spot gained hundreds of thousands of views, reaching an audience that the Biennale could have never imagined. In turn, the Biennale made an official statement, saying that Zois' images, "born out of everyday iconography, are not provocative, and certainly do not insult human dignity, freedom or even public order any more than the countless news reports and the majority of TV shows that are screened daily by all TV stations".[226] By being regularly referred to in the press as the Biennale's censored or prohibited spot, it offered *MONODROME*, and as an extension the Athens Biennale as an institution, the symbolic capital of an anti-establishment endeavour whose actions are repressed by a repressive and corrupt state.

For instance, among other liberal and left-wing newspapers, the official newspaper of the Radical Left Party of Syriza, currently the main opposition party in Greece, published on October 26 a short article in its webpage titled 'ERT censors a film for

[225] The excerpt from ERT's response is takes from an article from the Greek newspaper *Eleftheropytia* titled 'What ERT responds for Biennale's spot'. The full text can be found at the following address: http://www.enet.gr/?i=news.el.article&id=321067 (translation mine).
[226] The excerpt from Biennale's response to ERT is taken from the article 'The Biennale supports Zois' "censored" film' published in the newspaper *Avgi*. The full text can be found at the following address: http://www.enet.gr/?i=news.el.article&id=321067

Athens Biennale!'. In this article the newspaper ironically comments that the Greek public broadcasting channel, addressing it as the "big sponsor" of the Biennale, "decided to censor…[the spot] so as to 'protect' the viewers." Furthermore, the incident gained such widespread publicity that a Syriza MP, Dimitris Papadimoulis, brought it to the parliament, where he questioned the Minister of State, "for what reason is an advertising spot designed for an artistic event censored, through vulnerable legal pretexts?" and why was, "the government annoyed by the visualization of the current situation."[227] In this sense, Athens Biennale partially repaired its broken image among left-wing and activist circles. Later in this chapter we shall see how the ambivalences and tensions between art and politics in the context of the crisis, led to the withdrawal from the Biennale of one of its three organisers, Augustine Zenakos, and how this also helped the Biennale to gain some symbolic currency as a potentially resistant endeavour.

6.3.4 Reception from the Press

Apart from the above incident that hit the news, the Biennale did not spark any other significant debates in the press, or at least it did not do so for its content. In contrast to *Forget Fear*, which sparked controversy and awkwardness in the art world and beyond, *MONODROME* was received in rather positive terms both from the Greek as well as the international press. Despite Bourriaud's participation in the curatorial team, however, the publicity that the show received in the international press was not anywhere close to that of BB7. Short reviews written about the exhibition appeared in the international press, and in particular in the *ArtForum*, *Frieze* and *Art Monthly*, explicitly framing the exhibition within the context of the harsh economic conditions in Greece. In fact, it is not an exaggeration to claim that every single one of these

[227] These questions are taken from the official page of Synaspimos, the then most populous tendency of Syriza party, titled 'The censorship of the 3rd Athens Biennale's advertising spot by ERT'. The whole text can be found at the following address: http://www.syn.gr/gr/keimeno.php?id=25140

reviews of the exhibition, plus most of the others,[228] with very few diversions, brought forth the following schema of interpretation: While Greece is in a huge economic crisis, and as a result the funds for art are scarce, surprisingly the curators of AB3 managed to organise a very special show despite the budget constraints and general turbulence. Furthermore, all reviews shared an admiration for the building, hailing its significance for displaying the harsh economic reality. This shows how the crisis was not only an overdeterming factor for materialising the exhibition, in the sense of dictating some curatorial choices, but also for its reception, with all reviewers describing it through its perspective. The interpretation of the show through the lens of the crisis came about partly as a result of the insistence of the curators to frame the show in these terms. In any case, it also demonstrates how the general financial conditions, or their scarcity in this case, are capable of influencing the ways that an exhibition will be aesthetically debated or the ways that the codes of the biennial will be performed.

Let us look, however, a little closer at how this exhibition was internationally debated. In her short article, called 'Crisis Management' the *ARTFORUM* reporter Cathryn Drake asserts that the events leading up to *MONODROME,* such as the riots in Greece and the Arab Spring, brought forth "biblical allusions",[229] in which the exhibition should respond. Primarily stressing the shoestring conditions of the event, the demonstrations and strikes, including that her, "flight from London was delayed by a day" and Bourriaud's by three, Drake saw that that is it was, "something of a miracle that the exhibition even happened". The curatorial approach or the works themselves in her account were secondary, and, when discussed, they were largely subordinated to the context set by the economic conditions. For instance, Drake notes in her review that, "neither the artists nor the curators are being paid for their work" and that, "day-to-day running of the biennale is managed by volunteers". Quoting Bourriaud, she added that the budget for the whole exhibition was, "basically equivalent to the salary of a curator from Montmartre". This insistence on the stark economic climate, and its

[228] The only exception as we will see was the review that appeared in the website of the Biennialist.
[229]The full text of the article 'Crisis Management' by Cathryn Drake can be found at the *ArtForum*'s website at following address: http://artforum.com/diary/id=29269

elevation to an axiomatic standard against which the exhibition is comprehended was shared by most other reviews. For example, in her article simply titled 3rd 'Athens Biennale' in *Frieze*, Despina Zefkili begins by noting how *MONODROME*, "was produced in a state of emergency: with no private sponsors or state support", only through the contribution of, "a large group of volunteers, including the biennial's curators".[230] Zefkili continues by stating that the show took place in the, "dodgy downtown area of Plateia Theatrou, a hang-out for prostitutes and drug dealers". The description of the surrounding area as one of destitution matches with that of most other reviews. In another review, simply titled 'Athens Biennale, the Crisis as Art' Karin Olsson points out for the website 'PressEurop', how "Monodrome is contiguous with urban destitution to the point where the exhibition is perhaps, of all the shows I have visited, the one that is most in tune with its era, and the one that most reflects a sense of urgency".[231] Here she describes the borderline situation:

> Hundreds of Athenians huddling together against the autumnal cold while waiting for their turn in the soup kitchen. I stand there observing this poverty probably a bit longer than someone who is well brought-up, until a man hurling abuse indicates that I should get lost. The Biennale has been set up in a symbolic location: an abandoned school in one of the city's must rundown neighbourhoods. It is an imposing 1930s building that has been left to go to seed. Paint is peeling off the walls, which are still covered with graffiti scrawled by students.

The art historian Anna Deuzeuze similarly refers extensively on *MONODROME*'s crisis-driven situation. While Deuzeuze comments on some aspects of the works exhibited, such as that, "everywhere we turn ancient history seems inescapable" (Deuzeze, 2011: 29), she also performs a reading determined by the idea that the Biennale takes place in a state of emergency. Deuzeuze also adds some of her personal experience as a speaker in the organization:

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[230] The full text of '3rd Athens Biennale' by Despina Zefkili can be found at the *Frieze*'s website following address: http://www.frieze.com/issue/review/3rd-athens-biennale/

[231] The full text of 'Athens Biennale, the crisis as art' by Karin Olsson can be found at the website 'PressEurop' at the following address: http://www.presseurop.eu/en/content/article/1224511-athens-biennale-crisis-art

The privately funded Athens exhibition, for its part the last instalment in a trilogy started in 2007, offers a lesson in how to put on a biennale on a shoestring: choose very few venues, use found objects and archival documents creatively, do not publish a catalogue, rely almost entirely on volunteers and gifts in kind, and focus on a programme of performances and talks, to be arranged as you go along (I was invited to give a lecture at less than four weeks' notice when the team found out I was going to be visiting the Biennale) (2011: 28).

The reviews in the Greek press were very similar to the ones above, and again there were very few accounts on the actual art show in the exhibition or some sort of theoretical elaboration or international contextualization of the curatorial tactics.[232] In fact, there is only one review of the exhibition that differentiates itself from the rest, discussing *MONODROME* critically and looking at the larger spatial and cultural politics of the area it inhabited. This is the text 'The Biennalist in Athens – Emergencies in the Midst of Unfulfilled Promises' written by the author Vassilios Oikonomopoulos in November 2011 and published in the webpage of 'Emergency Rooms', the project of the fictional character 'Biennalist' performed by the artist Thierry Geoffroy, the artist with the safari hat mentioned in the beginning of this thesis. The Biennalist came to Athens for *MONODROME*, where he conducted an array of impromptu short interviews with different individuals, mainly highlighting how the biennial's original stated aims to create an activist place relate with the immigrants living around the area as well as the protests against austerity. The Biennialist claimed that he found that the biennial was a vehicle of gentrification and a kind of "vacuum cleaner", in his words, for the undocumented migrants of the area.[233]

Similarly to all other reviews Oikonomopoulos, a collaborator of the Biennialist, stressed upon the strained economic climate of Greece, the derelict building of Diplareios, the destitution around it as well as the initial will of the organisers to construct an anti-biennial model. Contrary to all other reviews, however, Oikonomopoulos foregrounded the two unreconciled realities existing in the area,

[232] The most interesting of them was a text titled 'In the Prefix of the Crisis' by Kostas Christopoulos published in the newspaper *Avgi* on November 2011, which again however enabled the 'crisis'as the over-determining framework of gauging the show.
[233] "Are artists used as vacuum cleaners?" https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bxJMBJOXOZ4

between, on the one hand, the codes and the value system that the Biennale operates and, on the other, the undocumented migrants that populated the district. As he notes:

At the site of the Biennale, a literal 10-minute walk from the spectacle of destruction, time moves in a different pace. It is less than two days before the opening night and the Biennalist is intrigued to find out about the area in the immediate proximity of the Biennale. People mention that this is a dangerous territory, especially at night. As soon as the sun sets, the area around the former school becomes frequented with African prostitutes, junkies and drug dealers. An underground population emerges in the streets of the forgotten quarter. Pedestrians rather than vehicles occupy the roads. There is the occasional trading from small shops that sell Chinese and Asian products, and where other commercial exchange takes place over transitory stalls and makeshift shop windows […] Its background would not satisfy the new consumers. This is a rough territory, part wasteland, part slum, a compound constructed by immigration, rejects, overcrowding and inadequate sanitation.[234]

What Oikonomopoulos, similarly to the Biennalist, claims in his text is that *MONODROME* was responsible for the police terrorization of the inhabitants of the area. Oikonomopoulos claims that, "miraculously though, on the run-up to the Biennale, images of degeneration have disappeared" and, "prostitutes and junkies have been removed, possible by a police operation" as, "policemen are 'sweeping' the streets of the area clean of the unwanted, the marginalised, the 'dangerous' elements that frequent it". There is no real evidence however presented by Oikonomopoulos for these serious charges, because, as he claims, "people are reluctant to talk about it". Despite this lack of evidence, he suggests, somehow provocatively, that the presence of the Biennale effected the regulation of the social and physical space around it:

This is another forceful construction, to satisfy the insatiable thirst of the art crowd, fuelled by the persistent drive to rationalise, homogenise and regulate with the controllable power of police, what used to be a diverse, fluid space. As the official institutionalised qualities of art are progressing to taking up this space, the evacuation of a local population is deemed

[234] This excerpt, as well as the excerpts that follow, are taken from the text 'The Biennalist in Athens – Emergencies in the midst of unfulfilled by Vassilios Oikonomopoulos for 'Emergency Rooms', the webpage of the Biennialist. The full text can be found at the following address: http://www.emergencyrooms.org/ATHENS_BIENNALE.html

necessary. Another spectacle is progressing here, the new social and aesthetic structure that competes for the site, with the promises for offering the possibility for a new society, a new form of experience and a new power construction where the old will be eliminated.

Another aspect that is interesting in Oikonomopoulos' long piece on *MONODROME*, in fact by far the longest that has been written for the exhibition, is the way that he treats the original statement released by the biennial, claiming that the site will function for the gathering of collectives interested in social change, at face value. Calling AB3 to task, Oikonomopoulos shows how such politicised and radical statements produce binding relations for the curators and organisers as they create expectations about what is to be seen. In this sense, the reality of gentrification or of police raids against is gauged against the proclaimed desire of the curators to transform AB3 into a political space:

It is a big surprise that no collectives or sit-ins are to be seen. Political groups and activists are nowhere to be found either. The experience is a collection of two-dimensional and three-dimensional works, from international or Greek artists and a collection of historical material that represents the 'good, old days' when Greece was great. Although some material is interesting, the disappointment is clear. There are no intentions for exploring the current political and social situation. The show, although sympathetic, cannot be considered a breakthrough. It has certainly failed in grasping the situation, and it has failed in showing and expressing the current and contemporary moment which Athens experiences. This is another art show. Its agenda for new forms of collectivities and new conceptual frameworks from those that are involved in transforming the society, are non-existent […] And what about the local communities? The people that live and work in the area, mostly from different backgrounds and not related to art, they are however people that live and breathe a few streets from the Biennale. Is the exhibition addressed to them? Poka-Yio objected, that the Biennale does not have any intention of being politically correct. However, does it have an intention of being socially exclusive? How much of that is in their program? Where does change they hope for come from?

The questions that Oikonomopoulos poses in the text, are significant to highlight as they manifest the questioning of the truthful intentions of the biennial (Chapter 4

Section 1). Interestingly, both the Athens and the Berlin Biennale were questioned for their incapacity to be sincere in relation to their surrounding area, though for opposite reasons. BB7, as we saw, was questioned for its incapacity to see that its actions did not reflect the reality around the gentrified area of Mitte, while AB3 was deemed hypocritical as it purported to involve collectives interested in the transformation of society or re-write the history of the oppressed, while in reality it failed to engage in any convincing way with the inhabitants of the area. Here, as in most biennials, the political role of the exhibition is invoked and measured against a context, or a place, whether this refers to the physical materiality of the country, the city or the district in which it takes place, or the symbolic tensions taking place around them.

6.4 Disturbing Contexts: Anti-participation, Volunteerism and an Art Ghetto

6.4.1 The Withdrawal

One of the most debated topics among members of the local art scene during the course of *MONODROME*, was the withdrawal from the curatorial team and eventually the Athens Biennale as an institution, of one its initial three organisers, the art critic and journalist Augustine Zenakos. Zenakos, Poka-Yio and Kalpaktsoglou initially set up the Biennale, as the curatorial trio XYZ, curating the 1st edition and responsible for selecting curators for the second. Zenakos' decision to leave the team so as to devote to activist journalism was explained in a talk he gave within the framework of AB3. In this talk, he argued that it was not possible for art biennials under the situation of crisis to produce political interventions that could shake in any way the foundations of the current political and economic establishment. In other words, there was not any possibility to produce a 'critical surplus'. Zenakos' performance of his decision to withdraw is, as we shall see, expressive of tensions arising within the context of Greece, the contemporary art circuit and European society in general, with the advent of the economic crisis and the social resistance against it.

I met Zenakos in November 2011, while *MONODROME* was still running, asking him about his will to leave the institution. It is useful to present long excerpts from the interview with him as he narrates in detail the ideological reasons for withdrawing from a biennial, emphasising its inability to intervene within the context of the crisis. His explanation for doing so advocated as an activist, immediate and insurrectionary move also functions as an interesting comparison to the approach of Żmijewski who advocated his political engagement through participation. The difference between the two approaches however also has to do with the different dynamic of the two biennials. Berlin Biennale in contrast to its Athens counterpart is much better funded, has a broad international appeal and occurs in a city that strongly supports contemporary art. Therefore, from an activist perspective, by participating in Berlin Biennale one has better potential of making certain resistances visible than doing so in the Athens one. After comparing the Berlin and Athens Biennale in terms of their organizational structure and their funding sources, Zenakos complicates the situation further:

The biennials are a result of a very specific ideology in the Marxist sense of the word: the cluster of beliefs that legitimises a series of functional operations. What is this ideology? It is the ideology of the end of history, the ideology of the fall of ideologies, the ideology that we have reached a state that may not be perfect, but it is the best possible one and we now only have to solve technical problems. The Western world proceeded through this ideology from 1990 onwards, with the sense that okay, we are now done with the major battles, we may have problems, but we can grow, move etc. Germany was, and still is to a degree, quite within this ideology. Greece when we started, in November 2005, was too. We had the Olympics, we had passed 8 years of modernization with the Simitis government,[235] where we got into the Euro, we saw streets, airports, development, raising living standards for the people and so on. You know there was a sense that okay, we have an inefficient state, a bad bureaucracy, but we go well, you know problems of a technical nature. Therefore you take steps to go to fix it. Your problem is e.g. there is interesting art in Greece but it does not communicate with the art happening abroad. What could I do so as to fix it so that it can be displayed alongside foreign artists? Such is the nature of your problem. What was concealed in that kind of institutional

[235] Kostas Simitis was the president of PASOK and the prime minister of Greece from the period 1996-2004.

behaviour was that this ideology was not solid enough. That was then revealed by the crisis. It will be revealed for everyone else too, but for us it came quickly. So when you arrive at this point, you realise that such structures are found within a prosperous society, or in any case within the narrative of a prosperous society with a sense of progress, development etc. When this thing bursts it ceases to be an issue of subject-matter. Let us turn to the political now. My belief and part of the reason for which I am not involved in curating this year, is because I think that when you get to this point in which it becomes increasingly clear that there is a fault in this ideology, the issue of what you put in your exhibition is irrelevant. Yes, you can make some kind of interesting narrative, no doubt, you can, and I think that *MONODROME* is a very interesting narrative, but from the point of view of the 'political impact' it means absolutely nothing.[236]

Musing on the question of whether art can have an actual effect in the current state of emergency, Zenakos' narrative positions the 'crisis' as turning point in realising that biennials are, in this respect, impotent institutions. Striving to improve liberal democracy and its institutions, according to him, is a valid 'activist' strategy insofar as the prospect of a more progressive future is alive. The crisis then, as a symbolic moment of a breakdown of this horizon, manifesting through the austerity measures and an increasing police suppression, reveal, always according to Zenakos, the cracks behind this seemingly seamless ideology. Zenakos' narrative then is not, strictly speaking, 'anti-establishment', as being so would mean recognising, even retrospectively, the falsehood of seeking technical solutions, as he puts it, in the context of the neoliberal post-1990s consensus. The biennial is here seen as a valid political strategy within relatively stable social conditions, in which pacts between the state, the private sector and the art institution can be justified, while it becomes ineffective when this condition breaks down, or is in the process of doing so. One could claim that, for Zenakos, as far as there are some available resources, like in the first and second editions, the Biennale can be an effective activist means.

[236] This excerpt, as well as the excerpts that follow, are taken from a recorded an interview I had with Augustine Zenakos on November 10, 2011 in Athens (the translation is mine).

In any case, the rejection of cooperating with the institutions and agents that are in power in extreme contexts becomes, for Zenakos, a principle that leads to non-participation, an opting-out that could lead to an engagement with different modalities and formations. When I asked Zenakos from what aspect is the political understood in the context of the crisis the above framework of interpretation became clearer:

From the aspect that when there is crack in the ruling ideology, politics is not anymore a narrative, a story, it can only be perceived through terms of conflict, and an exhibition never creates conditions of conflict as far as the model is given, as far as the outline is given. I can give examples. You are in an area like the one around Diplareios. This area is overrun by a great amount of social problems. The Biennale is co-operating with the City of Athens, because as an institution you have to do so. The City of Athens is an embarrassment as regards to its social policy. You co-operate with them at an institutional level, you are under its aegis, the mayor of Athens comes to the press preview etc. What the City of Athens does is that it sends the Municipal Police to beat the snot out of the vendors around the area, to jug them and often steal their merchandise, for which in turn they have to bribe so as to take back. This is the policy of the City of Athens. The Biennale essentially gives an alibi to the City of Athens- I do not mean personally to the current mayor. It comes and decorates the facade and from inside its all rotten. Athens' public does not need a Biennale. There is a wonderful comic strip by Olaf Westphalen, where in the back it shows some ashes, in the front a villager, of whom the village has been just burned down and as there is an international TV crew interviewing him he says: "what our village needs now is a biennial." It is like this. And we readily played this game because coming from the ideology that I describe this was our rhetoric. What we always used to say in order to ask for funding was that we activate some sort of development, a secondary service economy; when an event happens you are going to sell for example sandwiches, taxis and so on, this was our argument for culture. Always. So necessarily, we are mobilised by the authorities, exactly through this rhetoric. And we are willingly playing this game. And for me the question is reasonable: What kind of political impact to have in conditions which are war-like. You have to choose a side when you have a political power that will leave three hundred immigrants for fifty days almost to die, discussing every second day to send the Police Special Forces in the building so as to remove starving people, it takes them out of the Law School with an unprecedented mission in which they block the whole centre of Athens with police vans, it mobilises 5.000 policemen, you try to pass with your journalist ID,

I am a journalist too, and you hear that there is an order from Central Police Department that prohibits to pass.[237] My journalist identity writes that every authority is obliged to help me in the accomplishment of my work, that is what a journalist is supposed to do, and the police does not only not help but has a special order to prohibit me reaching the Law School so as to see what they do to the immigrants. So, you are faced with this situation. And you make an exhibition that writes on the top 'under the Aegis of the Ministry of Culture' or 'the City of Athens'. Could you please let me know what kind of politics do you perform?

Claiming that the totalitarian face of the Greek state has only become visible after the crisis, Zenakos draws a dividing line between functioning liberal democracies and non-functioning ones. In the non-functioning ones, Zenakos suggests that art, as a privileged and separate sphere of reality, cannot have a role. The only effective role for activist cultural producers in such contexts, for Zenakos, is to abandon art and engage themselves with social struggles in other areas of social life.[238] Here, we see how the tension between the different values that a biennial enables is pushed to its limits. In the current political situation, the cultural-political values it enables, for Zenakos, are not enough to wipe-off the guilt for collaborating with the state and similar established institutions (and thus providing them with an alibi). As the biennial necessarily becomes a façade, endowing the city and its institutions with a sense of normality, the participation in this 'façade' serves to legitimise a pseudo-image of a country that flourishes by supporting art and culture. For someone speaking from an activist perspective, this legitimisation is enough to hinder any effective political content that the biennial may include. Interestingly, toward the end of our talk, Zenakos suggested that the next edition of Athens Biennale should be financed through crowdfunding techniques so as to be accountable only to the people and not to any official institutions.

Here, the international discourse of the 1990s that sees contemporary art and curating as political acts in and of themselves (Chapter 3), is performed within a local setting

[237] Zenakos here refers to the hunger strike of 300 migrants that started in January 2011 and ended in March 2011, demanding the improvement of migrant working conditions living in Greece. Initially camped inside the Law School of Athens, they were later moved to a private building known as 'Megaro Ypatia'.
[238] Zenakos in fact did so as editor of the monthly critical journalistic magazine UNFOLLOW.

and becomes subject to place-bound frictions. It is hard to imagine that Zenakos would enable this type of narrative (also in public) if he was the director of other kinds of art institutions i.e. a film festival or an opera house for instance. Yet, the biennial, through its politically engaged modalities, allows for the conceptualisation of the curator's role as a deeply political one, bound up with issues related to power, social intervention and activism.

6.4.2. Playing the Volunteer

During the show, such issues resulted in tensions arising from the ubiquity of volunteerism and free labour. Most, if not all, of the participants in *MONODROME* took part in the exhibition voluntarily, meaning without any financial compensation. It was repeatedly stated by the curators, but also by most participants I had the chance to speak to, that AB3 could not have been made possible without the contribution of the numerous volunteers. As the Head of Communication of AB3 asserted in our interview, "the concept of volunteerism exists horizontally, vertically, everywhere". In the context of a politically-engaged exhibition, however, wishing to instigate counter-hegemonic structures, the omnipresence of unpaid labour is a rather problematic condition. As we saw, discussions on labour exploitation structured critical debates around contemporary art since the early 2000s and strongly re-surfaced with the emergence of Occupy cultures (Chapters 1 & 4). In a Facebook conversation that took place on October 3, 2011, shortly before the opening of *MONODROME*, in a comment under a post from the Athens Biennale's official Facebook account that made a call for volunteers, a user named 'Irene Electra Theodorakos' addressed this problematic condition:

> No more free labour guys, resist to slavery that uses as a pretext volunteering and training. Do not believe in stories, nobody will remember you after your work... Respect to your knowledge and self-determination! […] Unfortunately here in our country volunteering (volunteers are still paying their transportation, lunches etc.) means short-term free labour for

long hours, under difficult conditions, intolerable pressure and tension. Out of the 50 volunteers who are "used" only one or two will have a career.[239]

In its response, the Biennale took a very clear, and somewhat patronising, position, suggesting seeing volunteerism in personal terms, as a consensual agreement between free individuals, without tackling larger systemic questions of social inequality:

Dear Irene, volunteering is a decision of adults who cheerfully participate in something they consider as fulfilling and professionally rewarding [...] Volunteering, as the name itself indicates, is a voluntary contribution to a common project which obviously concerns the people involved. The description 'short-term free labour' is therefore not only an (incomplete) tautology, but one in which what is lacking is the will and the great interest of all those people whom you unsolicitedly 'defend'. Each organization, depending on its features, proposes a framework for cooperation to people who wish to participate in its activities and thus a consensual agreement comes about.[240]

Notions such as 'framework of cooperation', 'participation in its activities' and 'consensual agreement' purport to give another name to working for free. By not tackling greater systemic issues related to this phenomenon, unpaid labour is here presented as a pragmatic, natural state of things. From this response we can assume that the organisers of Athens Biennale were either not aware of the emerging discourses on artistic labour and exploitation, that increasingly came to occupy a prominent place in discussions on art and politics at the time, or preferred to distance themselves from them. However, it is not possible to completely escape from the tensions between a highly politicised statement wishing to invite activist collectives and a practice that undermines the meaning of this statement by maintaining free labour and hierarchical work relations. In this effort to reconcile the condition of unpaid labour with an exhibition that mobilises Benjamin and the history of the oppressed, there is a remainder threatening the sincerity of this discourse.

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[239] This excerpt is taken from a Facebook post in the official account of Athens Biennale on October 3, 2011 titled 'Athens Biennale needs qualified and willing volunteers and interns to contribute to its 3rd edition MONODROME' (the translation is mine).
[240] *Ibid.*

The recognition of the problematic condition of working without being paid was shared by all the volunteers that I spoke with in the Biennale. In this sense, to quote Ong and Collier again, these actors were "reflexive" about their participation (2005: 7-9), questioning their possible exploitation and coming up with justifications in relation to this questioning. One of the most popular justifications was that the biennial lacked resources and it therefore was unable to pay them. In this regard, most volunteers were ready to accept that since the curators themselves were working for free, it was not possible that they will receive a salary. This rationalisation, however, can be easily countered by the enormous difference in social capital gained by a curator and a volunteer. Another, more stable, justification was framed by a discourse of necessity (in the sense that doing free labour was something obligatory so as to advance one's career), and thus the 'payment' took the form of contacts and work experience.[241] For instance, one of the most active volunteers in the Biennale, Maro, 22, told me that, "of course I would prefer to be paid" but, "I feel that I gain so many things professionally with the tour guides, and now I write some texts for the artworks which may end up in an electronic catalogue" and, "it is certain that I am going to take a reference letter afterwards, these people are going to speak for me."[242] More interestingly, volunteering was also justified through a parallel discourse of contribution to a 'good cause', which is to say AB3's critical stance towards the economic crisis. This was apparent in the following excerpts from a conversation I had with Niki, 23, a volunteer with a background in architecture:

Can you see a social role in contemporary art and Biennale in particular? I say that because this year's Biennale is politicised and tries to intervene…

Yes we send messages… There is a revolution going on (laughs), we try to get people on our side.

Do you identify yourself with this?

[241] Here, it should be noted that all the volunteers I talked to and the overwhelming majority of the volunteers overall, were women usually in their early 20's, which also manifests the gendered aspect of precarious work.

[242] This excerpt, as well as all other excerpts attributed to the same person, are taken from a recorded interview I had with Maro on November 23, 2011 in Athens (the translation is mine).

I like it… Especially with this situation, everything can help. Even contemporary art can motivate people…From the censored TV spot to discussions, everything can be something…

So, was the fact that the exhibition is 'political' a motivation for you to participate?

Yes, my generation has the biggest problem, so we can contribute wherever we can.[243]

Niki's case was not isolated, as overall it was quite common among volunteers to justify their participation in terms of the exhibition's usefulness in the context of a 'broken Greece'. In this sense, the politicised nature of the exhibition, even the censored spot, gave to many volunteers the feeling of participating in something bigger than simply an art exhibition, something that could potentially be socially transformative and vocalise resistance.

Of course, this type of rationalisation was not shared by all. Certain volunteers blamed the organisers for their lack of support and assistance, often regretting their participation. For instance, another volunteer, Myrto, 21, stated that:

The Biennale did not help me in what I wanted to pursue. I do not feel an involvement on the side of the organisers. I was expecting to participate in a more active way. I was expecting to meet more people, but it does not matter. The whole situation here is a bit rough, there is no infrastructure.[244]

Other volunteers felt the need to vocalise the unfairness of volunteerism, but were too afraid to make it a big issue.[245] For instance, Nicole, 25 years old, one of the first volunteers that joined *MONODROME,* stressed how the antagonistic work climate and individualism led to an absence of a collective workplace identity:

I have been to discussions with other volunteers, telling them that if you show your availability anytime they are going to exploit it [the organisers] and because we are all in this, please do not take off your underwear. But you cannot get on with them, because this is what

[243] This excerpt, as well as all other excerpts attributed to the same person, are taken from a recorded interview I had with Niki on October 28, 2011 in Athens (the translation is mine).
[244] This excerpt, as well as all other excerpts attributed to the same person, are taken from a recorded interview I had with Mirto on November 19, 2011 in Athens (the translation is mine).
[245] The issue of systemic fault was mentioned in passing by the Biennale's Head of Communication: There is enormous interest and too many people coming and telling example "I do not have a job or I was fired" and instead of sitting around I prefer to come here...this is very sad.

they are used to, they look only at themselves. There isn't anything collective in this. You cannot speak freely. There is a big fear basically. When I speak to the other volunteers about these matters I am afraid.[246]

Labour in a biennial, or better volunteering (a way of making oneself visible through working for an institution with a certain brand name), was seen as primarily a means to advance one's career. Within this framework, the strong contradiction between the proclaimed activist position of AB3 and its exploitation of free labour was something that did not go unnoticed. In this sense, the pronounced political role of the show, rather than a contribution to a good cause, is here seen as hypocritical:

For me art is something that should be paid…. you do a Biennale, called *MONODROME,* it takes a critical stance on the crisis and on the other hand you have so many workers that you do not pay. And you are based on the fact that they come as volunteers. But as we all know volunteerism is fake. Everyone came here for the same reason [making contacts]. So? What kind of political act is that?

Here, it is useful to note that it is not volunteerism per se that it is conceptualised as negative by the participants, but volunteerism within a structure that is organised hierarchically, so that those on the top (artistic directors and curators) receive disproportionally larger cultural and symbolic capital than a mere volunteer. Apart from other justifications, such as the necessity to advance one's career, the politicised direction of AB3, as we saw with the examples of Niki and Nicole, plays an ambivalent role. On the one hand, it hails the volunteers as practitioners of socially useful labour (and thus beautifies their unpaid participation), and on the other it creates expectations for more equal treatment in the workplace. One could argue that in a way the volunteers in AB3 played the role of the Occupiers in BB7. Both groups were key for the development of the shows and both were hailed by the respective biennials as participants whose activity has a larger social utility. Also in members of both groups, there was an intense questioning of whether their free labour was exploited by the institution. This questioning led to practices and conceptualisations

[246] This excerpt, as well as all other excerpts attributed to the same person, are taken from a recorded interview I had with Nicole on November 7, 2011 in Athens (the translation is mine).

that are ‘reflexive’, in the sense of expressing a sense of discomfort with the institution that they are part of. In another sense, the volunteers of AB3 and the Occupiers of BB7 provided an unremunerated support mechanism, a kind of ‘extitution’ that these biennials came to colonise and upon which they build their activist narratives.

6.4.3 Out of Context

Apart from the issue of volunteering, another recurring matter of contestation (which we saw in relation to Oikonomopoulos’ text) was how AB3 did not make efforts to interact with its extremely sensitive surrounding area. This was something noted by most of the visitors I spoke with, putting in possible jeopardy the pronounced political role of AB3. As the exhibition evolved, it became clear that the local populations living in the district, mostly migrants, drug users, sex workers and *sans-papiers*, did not interact with the exhibition in any possible way. In some cases, in its attempt to explore the identity of ruins and decadence, AB3 used the scenes around the area as its ‘raw material’, the decorative backdrop against which crisis could be contextualised. It was rather obvious that the biennial stood as a foreign body and seemed to represent something hostile for this population. This was also related to the extremity of the surrounding environment, which, as the scene with which this thesis begins reveals, mainly consists of people radically indifferent and irrelevant to the social scripts of contemporary art.

As expected, however, this condition became an issue in more than one ways. Several volunteers stated that they were afraid to walk alone in the evening in the area, and one of them stated that her car was robbed. When I asked Niki whether there was any interaction with the local residents she started giggling, saying that, “no, never, this could not be possible in any way”. Another volunteer said that the only interaction she had with the locals was when one of them asked her whether the venue of the exhibition was the town hall. Another stated that there was not any effort on the Biennale’s part for co-operation and communication of the artists with their

surroundings. The latter also mentioned how some journalists from Sweden coming to see the Biennale were so shocked with the location that they eventually avoided visiting the exhibition, being too afraid to walk around the district.

AB3 wished to keep this issue intentionally invisible, as it was neither publicly addressed by the curators themselves nor mentioned in any of the public events organised by the Biennale. Despite attempts to conceal it, or at least not mention in public, it was clear that most of the participants or visitors were clearly concerned about it. For instance, a volunteer mentioned, somewhat naively, that she was initially planning to organise a guided tour only for the local residents. In the end, as she saw that this was far too paradoxical and could not be made possible under the given conditions, she abandoned the plan. A personal friend from Berlin, visiting Athens at the time, similarly could not understand how it was possible that a biennial takes place in such a location without anyone noticing the contradiction in public.

However, as the Head of Communication of AB3 noted in our interview, discussions on how to engage with the surrounding community actually did happen within the curatorial team, but were quickly dropped due to the limitations in budget and resources. To the question of whether there were any thoughts about engaging with the citizens of the area she replied:

Engaging with the area was something that interested us a lot, but this needs a special group of people to deal with it properly....I think these are terribly sensitive and complicated things and I think that one needs to have a group of people that will deal very seriously with this and see exactly what should be done and how... We were discussing in the past when we thought that things would be rosier to hold some outdoor activities, but eventually the Biennale was made with essentially no budget, and the whole team had to exceed themselves. But to do something sloppy just to say that we engaged with the region? We were not able to do it seriously...The area is too difficult....[247]

[247] This excerpt, as well as all other excerpts attributed to the same person, are taken from a recorded interview I had with the Head of Communication of AB3 on November 21, 2011 in Athens (the translation is mine).

The Head of the Communication carried on by explaining how the biennial failed to change the vibe of the area despite her expectations for the opposite, blaming mostly the state for not taking the appropriate initiatives:

I was very curious to see how our presence was going to change the chemistry of the region...but I do not see any change. But you see how even in these areas that we thought as unreachable, people come, things can happen if we show some interest. And in this building many things could happen but there is no money and maybe not the intention...that is if this building was becoming an academy or something similar, I think it would help the area. Not gentrification and all that, but I believe that things can be done ... perhaps an art school for migrants.

In this sense, while the issue of engagement with the surrounding area was part of the curatorial agenda, it was swept under the carpet as AB3 lacked the adequate resources and was afraid to open up such a sensitive debate. The fact that AB3 found resources for the exhibition and other daily events shows that in reality it is more a matter of priorities than resources. Due to the need to maintain its status as a brand (an art exhibition with a certain international appeal) the engagement with such sensitive and risky matters can be sidestepped. Again here, we can ask, for whom is the biennial political?

All these contested issues, namely the antinomy between cultural and economic values, expressed by Zenakos' withdrawal, the issue of volunteerism and unpaid labour and the lack of substantial engagement with the migrants of the area, were treated much more effectively in another festival taking place close to AB3's venue. On November 11, and while the Biennale was still running, an occupation occurred in an abandoned theatre, called *Empros,* located a five minute walk from the building of the Biennale. The occupation was instigated by a group of artists that call themselves the 'Mavili Collective'. On the day the occupation started, Mavili Collective announced the initiation of a 10-day festival in this theatre. This self-organised festival attracted a wide range of visitors, participants, artists and collectives from different social strata and became a vibrant space that activated residents of the surrounding and other areas. It was non-ticketed, it included performances by migrants and in general,

without making any grand statements, effectively managed to be as inclusive as possible. After the festival ended, the occupation of the theatre remained and it is still active as these lines are written. A very high number of people volunteered to help keep the space open, deal with practicalities and generally participate in the community-run endeavour.

The comparison of this event with the Biennale was inevitable, as they were both art events in the same area and context, aspiring to be socially relevant and politically active. In a way, some of the tensions and contradictions that haunted the Biennale, as described above, were addressed with greater sensitivity in *Empros*. Regarding the volunteers, while in *Empros* there were much less possibilities of professional advancement compared to the Biennale, the participants who volunteered were mostly doing so on their own terms. As there was no predetermined hierarchy, between the curator, the organiser, the artist and the volunteer, the decisions could be taken in a more open and collective way. This issue pointed to how the biennial as an organisation is not effectively accustomed to resolve these tensions in the context of crisis and lack of funding. Furthermore, the festival included migrant performances that were organically incorporated in its programme and were attended by numerous visitors. Instead, the institutional character of the biennial that needs to maintain its social recognition and capital is weak when confronted with real issues 'dangerous' for its reputation (note how many times artists and art institutions have been accused of romanticising communities).

In this sense, it is interesting to see how the 10-day self-organised festival in an occupied space, without any budget and under more harsh conditions, managed to accomplish what AB3 could not. The more effective handling of these tensions that occupied AB3 in the context of a self-run theatre, exhibits how the treatment of these issues is principally a matter of priorities and politics rather than a matter of resources. This inability of AB3 comes precisely because a biennial is not only an event, but an event knit to a particular organization with its structures and hierarchies, as well as an institution that has to cultivate its image as a brand and be attractive to sponsors, artists, critics, magazines and so on. This condition of the biennial necessarily shrinks

the possibilities of either paying the contributors or engaging with more sensitive social issues.

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Similarly to the previous one, this chapter discusses how the development of AB3 was conditioned by a series of tensions and controversies activated through its relations with the place it unfolded and its operation as a global form. While the protests and social movements in Athens were more emphatically pro-activist and anti-neoliberal than in Berlin, AB3 ended up being less activist-oriented despite its initial declarations. AB3 did not manage to keep most of its stated aims. As it developed, it consciously presented itself as a failed experiment, mobilising (what they claimed to be) a failed philosopher and taking place in a failed country. While it was perceived mostly positively by the press, all debates about it framed it within the context of the crisis and its ruins. Seemingly emerging as an alternative, courageous initiative from these ruins, AB3's most important political intervention, for the international press, was that it *did* manage to take place. As the expectations for transforming its space into an activist one eventually proved illusionary, the rhetorical device of ruins and failure served as a way to frame this impossibility. Here, we see another interesting paradox in development: the biennial is expected to mobilise some sort of action against the crisis, but as gradually it becomes clear that such a thing is impossible to achieve, the event is eventually debated and framed in terms of this impossibility. In other words, the failure of AB3 to keep its original statements becomes the backdrop, the general context, against which its intervention is (mostly positively) evaluated.

Again here, the first reaction of AB3 to the strained situation of the crisis (and the possible crisis of de-legitimation of the biennial model), was to denounce in moral terms the way that biennials were hitherto organised. The lack of adequate funding and infrastructure, however, as well as the insurrectionary, rather extreme, situation in Greece, made it very difficult to materialise these challenges. Despite its more classic form than its Berlin counterpart, or perhaps precisely because of it, AB3 managed to

pass as a critical show across international biennial landscapes. Through a string of incidences and performances (some of which were unplanned), such as the censored spot, the Public School of Athens, Zenakos' abandonment of and public framing of biennial-making in explicitly political terms, and the questioning of dominant, nationalist ideas about Greek identity, the biennial managed to perform the image of the critical social agent. AB3, however, wished to distance itself from that of the discursive model, in that it deemed it as an inefficient mode of institutional engagement in the current times. Interestingly, one of the main proponents of criticality and architects of criticality and the discursive model, Charles Esche, in a talk he gave in AB3 on November 11 19, 2011 noted that critical curators must combine criticality with action, as otherwise the imbalances between the economic values and cultural values that a biennial mobilises will remain intact. The crisis, then, seems to function as a general turning point of disassociating with the discursive model (even if this often remained solely at the level of rhetoric). Finally, and significantly, apart from being a result of the differences in each respective biennial's institutional power, Żmijewski's extremity and Bourriaud's and XY's conventionality were also a reflection of the different positions these curators held in the hierarchal division of labour in contemporary art. Żmijewski is not a curator and in this sense he carried a different and more experimental mentality than that of professional curators, while he seemed absolutely indifferent to maintaining a curatorial profile that could help him later on with his career. As a matter of fact, after the catastrophic BB7, Żmijewski's visibility in the contemporary art field has significantly dropped. On the contrary, Bourriaud and XY maintain professional stakes in the field of curating and organising, and were thus prepared to undertake lesser risks. In all the above senses, by seeing AB3 in its development, we can conclude that as its radical activist ambitions gradually retracted, the exhibition came to adopt a more safe and stable format that could at least maintain its institutional status without risking its social legitimacy. The priority here (partly an effect of its centralised structure that controls more than enables curatorial autonomy) was the preservation of institutional legitimacy rather than initiating an activist space of dissent and radical socialities.

Conclusion

This thesis provides an ethnographic account on the subject of contemporary art biennials and political engagement. As we saw, the main body of the existing literature approaches these shows as vehicles of civil society through which progressive social demands and non-didactic pedagogies can potentially enter the public agenda. In other words, they are generally conceived as a *means* in the service of general social transformation. In turn, as indicated early on in this thesis, biennials are either dismissed for their alliances with capital, or praised for their experimental and potentially counter-cultural virtues. By focusing on *how* a biennial should be run (e.g. Hlavajova, 2010; Sheikh, 2010), however, this existing literature largely circumscribes systematic examinations on the very mechanisms of the biennial apparatus and the social worlds it interacts with. The usual impulse of these texts- to make the biennial work *for* something- often masks a latent affirmation of the field from which the vast majority of the authors derive or depend upon professionally: the contemporary art world and its value systems.

The primary motivation for undertaking an ethnographic, contemporaneous and comparative study on biennials arises from the desire to address this gap in relevant literature. Rather than attempting to come up with suggestions on how to run these events more effectively in order to pursue social change, my main intention with this thesis was to shift the ground upon which the problem of biennials and social intervention has been hitherto posed. Put differently, rather than examining how the biennials, as 'tournaments' or 'enablers' of values (Tang, 2011; Appadurai, 1988), can be employed by curators and artists for emancipatory purposes, this thesis takes these values and the social relations they instigate as the *object* of the ethnographic analysis. Instead of asking how can biennials be mobilised as sites of dissent, it asks why is this demand posed so intensely within a landscape of social and economic crisis, by whom and who does it address?

As this thesis shows, the pressing demand to turn biennials into political agents during the latest crisis is an outcome of a larger struggle for maintaining institutional legitimacy and social relevancy. If, to cite Adorno's famous phrase, nothing about art "is self-evident anymore" (1997:1), then the evidence of art's social usefulness needs to be constantly re-framed not only in dialogue with its (supposedly) constitutive disinterestedness and non-usefulness but also according to the moving substratum of social values that can offer validity to art's critical function. The emergence of anti-capitalist activism as a critical force within globalisation comes to be incorporated, as a progressive social value, into the critical post-conceptual art of the 1990s and the biennial circuit. During the same period, Virno's "virtuoso" (2004), the communicative and socialized worker, poses as the dominant figure and role model of artistic subjectivity. Within a neoliberal framework, where art is mainly judged on the basis of its commodity status, the prestige and the economic and symbolic capital it adds to respective locales, this attempt to radicalize or merge art with activism to the point that they interweave or drop their distinct qualities, becomes, as we saw, troublesome. Not so much because it aesthetisizes activism or, inversely, manipulates art, but because this interweaving plays out upon a ground which is already perceived as hostile to both these areas: it projects the deeply economized institutional and organizational frameworks of spectacle on the fields of art and activism whose critical function essentially flourishes on the anti-spectacular. This is not to say that Mouffe's 'hegemonic strategy' or Guattari's 'transversalism' are necessarily flawed or ineffective proposals as modes of engagement with such institutions. Rather, it is to remember that while the move of art toward 'real action' in a biennial can empower social causes and deterritorialize constituted identities, it may simultaneously act as an amputation of both art's and activism's critical impetus. In the context of the neoliberal dismantling of social welfare and the establishment of new barbaric regimes and debt colonies, the desire of art to enhance or replace political action conceals the danger of transforming itself into what the collective BAVO readily called 'NGO art' (2007), an art that substitutes state aid claiming an alternative and more humane governmental role. Again, this is not problematic in itself; it becomes problematic when the administrative and neoliberal codes regulating the biennial re-territorialize

radical desires within mandates of optimization and calculability, reproducing (if not initiating to social life) practices of unpaid labour, gentrification and urban-colonization.

This move from the *how* to the *why* may at first glance appear as politically ineffective, in the sense that it avoids outlining an appropriate framework for engaging with these institutions. Nevertheless, it entails strong political implications. Similarly to Bourdieu's conceptualization of high art as another form of cultural production (1997), this thesis draws attention away from art historical lineages in order to explore the relations that uphold and maintain the art biennial and its social valorization. The shift from the aesthetic and the 'cultured eye' to the ordinary routines through which these shows come to being, puts the figure of the 'connoisseur' in dialogue with that of the 'philistine'. Contrary to Bourdieu's paradigm however, this thesis does not propose looking at art as a solely bourgeois ideology or perceiving its aesthetic qualities as secondary in relation to the larger politics and positionalities within the biennial field. It rather places the 'aesthetic', the affective modalities of experience, on an equal footing with the categories it brings together and interpellates, e.g. activism, branding, unpaid labour, precarity, crisis and gentrification. In other words, it examines the "articulated combination" (Althusser, 1997: 51) of an aesthetic-political logic distinct within biennial cultures and the spatial and temporal framework in which it appears.

With this framework in mind I employed the method of ethnography attempting to both access contemporary art subcultures as well as keep a certain distance from them (in the sense of avoiding having professional affiliations with the art world or intimate relationships with the participants that could decisively influence my viewpoint). Taking a step back before asking how the biennial can be deployed for social change, and wishing to question the hitherto dominant approaches on the subject (mainly coming from curatorial, art historical, critical theory or Marxist perspectives) with their tendency to pay inadequate attention to the multiple and conflicting logics that crisscross a biennial, this thesis provides an ethnographic take on the phenomenon: it examines the relational dynamics at play between its threefold nature, as an institution,

organisation and event. It further explores the ways they unfold in the context of local and global value systems, power relations, economic and cultural logics and the materiality of surrounding structures. Based on this idea and the understanding of the biennial as a platform of enabling and realising values (Appadurai, 1988; Tang, 2011; Bourdieu, 1997), this thesis frames the communicative interactions in and around these exhibitions as constitutive of the ways they develop their discourse and are publicly perceived (Helgeura, 2013). Here, ethnography helps to problematize the easy binary between interactions happening 'inside' the biennial and those happening 'outside' of it- as for example expressed in the common belief among art historians that exhibitions need to be primarily read in respect to the discipline and history of aesthetics. Instead, this thesis stresses the necessary interrelation, or even total collapse, of the boundaries between the inside and outside. It puts emphasis on their articulated combination and grounded performance within dispersed translocal assemblages.

This ethnography took place during a turbulent period of crisis in Europe and the Western world. The rise of protest movements and the anti-neoliberal discourse they emphatically brought to public debate resulted in a loss of faith in the legitimacy of biennials to instigate effective social interventions. Thus, the very nature of the values that these events had to defend and promote as agents of civil society shifted. The spatial and temporal arrangement in which this research took place offered the unique opportunity to observe how the intense questioning of biennials brought about an unprecedented biennial radicalism. The study of this radicalism in respect to the contexts it was performed helped to problematize both the dominant optimistic discourses of criticality (Hlavajova, 2010; Rogoff, 2006), the idea to occupy the institution so as to change it from within, as well as the more fatalistic discourses according to which participation always already equals co-optation (Vishmidt, 2008). On the one had this research poses the question: for whom is this occupation of biennials critical? And on the other, it argues that there can never be a straightforward incorporation of critical practices that univocally results in the perpetuation of the (art)

system. Let me discuss these issues below in greater detail by recapitulating the main points of this thesis.

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Informed by Gramscian and Foucauldian ideas, the main question of criticality, New Institutionalism and the political turn in art is: *how* should art professionals participate in biennials? (Chapter 1) In this light, the biennial could be conceived as an experimental space; a space where politics, aesthetics and larger questions about social transformation intersect, potentially enabling cosmopolitan values, diasporic public spheres and counter-cultural modes of action. Catherine David's *documenta X*, a mega-exhibition that provided legitimacy and institutional recognition to this approach, emerged at a time when fresh anti-capitalist articulations were emerging worldwide through the anti-globalisation movement. During the 2000s, the discursive exhibition, with its educational focus, socially interventionist character and interdisciplinary format, grew into a dominant exhibition paradigm across biennial and art institutional landscapes. Several curators within the biennial milieu attained through this model the reputations of superstars, attributed with creative autonomy and elevated to the status of highbrow, critical authors.

The period in which I conducted this study coincided with the eruption of a distressing economic crisis, mainly hitting Europe and the USA, as well as the Arab Spring, both of which gave birth to a global mobilisation of oppositional movements that were the biggest since the 1970s. These movements involved widespread square occupations, an anti-corporate ethos and the invention of new modes of organisation. Such modalities of thinking and doing, strongly reflected in the art world through engagements with ideas such as labour, the commons, the collective and art activism, brought about an intensified questioning of the role of biennials. This mainly occurred with regard to their socially transformative capacity in ethical, political and social

terms, by pointing to their inextricable intertwining with established economic and political power. Extrapolating from the conceptual implications of such emerging frameworks, this thesis argues that the biennial model came under pressure in three different respects: for naturalising unequal relationships between its participants, for hindering effective political action and for propagating exploitative work relations and exclusive vocabularies. The questioning of the biennial on these accounts brought about fields of tension putting pressure on the model itself. The discursive effects that these shows claimed to produce in exchange for allying with state or corporate powers seemed to lack validity and evidential force. Within this context, the fresh activist modes of curatorial and political engagement partly attempted to re-legitimise and re-assert the biennial as a politically relevant space of action.

The two biennials that this thesis examines stand for an extreme moment in biennial making in Europe. In their effort to respond to the new challenges, they performed excessive and extraordinary statements and practices, staging eventually, as this thesis contends, through a series of unresolved tensions the distinctly marked borders of the biennial as form of activist practice. The 7th Berlin Biennale announced a break with past models, activating a hyper-activist space that emphatically focused on the generation of practical social effects. This space could only precariously be labelled as an art space. It assumed the modalities of art, exploited its institutional status but at the same time blurred the boundary between art and protest to such a degree that it provoked polemic reactions. The question as to whether this event enabled cultural capital for the institution of Berlin Biennale or undermined its status, can be a question for future biennial historians. What BB7 certainly achieved, however, (through its controversies and failures) was to display how the dominant ways of looking at an art institution are bound up with expectations and ordinary conceptualisations of art as an autonomous, non-instrumental practice. The unashamed conversion of the biennial into a tool for social change, and in turn the conversion of art as a means to an end, exceeded (even within the urgent context of the crisis and resistance) the conventional grasping of art by sponsors, critics and fellow curators.

Since BB7, KW, the art institution of Berlin Biennale, has returned to organising strictly art-oriented shows. In May 2014 it opened its gates to the 8th Berlin Biennale, a show curated by Juan A. Gaitán that engaged with 'museumified' modes of display. Interestingly, in a recent panel when asked about BB7, Gaitán stated the following: "I am thankful to Artur for having made it because otherwise I would have had to make the same Biennale…it is a Biennale that saved the Biennale, [taking place] in a total state of crisis…it proved to the world that we have total curatorial autonomy".[248] The excesses of BB7, according to Gaitán, not only did not threaten the functioning of the institution, but instead affirmed its relevance by re-asserting its capacity to enable current social and cultural values, to re-legitimise its supposed autonomy from corporate mandates and re-elevate the curator as an author. At the same time, an institutional denunciation, rather than an expansion, of Zmilewski's previous model was released. In the opening text of BB8's publication, Professor Monika Grütters, German Minister of State for Culture and the Media, indirectly alludes to and condemns BB7 when she writes that contemporary art is, "under no circumstances responsible for providing easy answers" (2014: 10). As an informant working for BB8 commented in a private talk, the aesthetic and non-political orientation of Gaitán's curatorial mission was an indispensable strategy for institutional survival: washing-off the stigma of the last edition's disaster so as to continue securing state funding and significant art world connections. In this regard, Żmijewski's extreme curatorial tactics act as a reminder and remainder upon which conflicting rationalisations are played out.

The 3rd Athens Biennale announced a similar break with previous biennial models, questioning their morality and poignancy by attempting to transform itself into a space of action. Eventually, it was not only ineffective in reaching this objective, but also failed to succeed in many of its other stated objectives, such as the production of an experimental film and the publication of a catalogue. Caught amidst the tensions brought about by the selection of a 'deprived' area, the lack of financial means, the

[248] This excerpt is taken by a talk that Gaitán gave in the 2013 Art-Athina. His full talk can be found at the following address: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xZJcM1rSpWM

withdrawal of one of the organisers and the strained social conditions, AB3 was unable to see through most of its programmatic statements. This failure displayed and circumscribed similar boundaries in relation to the biennial as a space for actualising AB3's stated aim of utilising Walter Benjamin's conception of history of the oppressed as curatorial reference point. Having to abide by a set of rules involving the maintenance of its brand status and profile across local and international circuits, its organisational hierarchies based on curatorial and artistic expertise, as well as its vital connections with sponsors, collectors and surrounding institutions, the biennial amidst periods of financial constraint was less able to practically actualise issues pertaining to social inclusion or remunerated labour.

The 4th Athens Biennale that followed created more successfully what the previous one had set out to do, which is to say, a relatively open space that involved different collectives and groups interested in social transformation (although again it mainly involved a local middle-class public and was based on the voluntary labour of participants). Paradoxically, the better funding that *AGORA* secured, including that from the Hellenic Ministry of Culture and European funding programmes, resulted in more effective activist explorations than those of its predecessor. In this sense, AB4, rather than denouncing its previous edition, as BB8 directly or indirectly did, conceived itself as its continuation, one that occurred within a more stable financial condition for the institution, as well as in the already established counter-cultural and collective experiments in Athens upon which AB4 could model its practice. An example is the *Empros* theatre discussed earlier, from which AB4 heavily drew its mode of collective organisation. Even the pertinent question that it set, 'Now What?', was borrowed from the title of a ten-day festival, 'Where are we Now?', that took place in *Empros* some months before AB4's opening. In this light, the boundaries of AB3's *MONODROME* performed in relation to its social activist role lie in the tensions generated between the desire to be socially relevant within a strained financial climate, and the imperative of the biennial to preserve its institutional legitimacy and organisational model.

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Building on the above, we can map the biennial as an assemblage of multiple and conflicting desires, interests and modes of expression of temporary yet lasting, often oppositional and antagonistic relations instigated by the ways its globalised form plays out in certain places. Crucially, it is an assemblage that performs resilience over time; one whose flexibility and adaptability allow it to re-structure its audiences, hierarchies and modes of being without destroying its existence. This moment of crisis seemed to signal a re-organisation of mega-show-making, whether this re-organisation means new audiences, curatorial devices or modes of display. The post-crisis rise of ideas regarding affect, object-oriented-ontologies and accelerationism, and their subsequent incorporation in biennial cultures shows how the dominant socially constructionist ethos that organised its practice since the mid-1990s gives way to different epistemological lines of departure.

As an assemblage that inextricably and recurrently absorbs and re-mediates its externality (whether this refers to sponsors, social events or artistic discourses), the biennial also bears parasitic elements: a mode of being that essentially seeks to survive by draining its hosts and by re-purposing their energies. The biennial in certain cases empowers what it enables, but as this thesis discusses, the institutional and organisational dynamics of the biennial have the tendency to absorb contradiction and conflict by continuously remediating it in aesthetic forms: as ruins, as crisis, as a call to action, as upheavals, as their epistemological backdrop and so on. As Żmijewski's action (among others) showed, if these tensions cannot be remediated there is always the police to call upon.

Rather than reaching a definite conclusion about how the biennial should be run, this thesis wishes to raise a number of questions in relation to its politics and social engagement that can inform future research on the subject. First of all, the practices of criticality in the 1990s, under the influence of ideas of hegemony, gave rise to a new

class of travelling curators-superstars who found professional legitimisation and self-affirmation in their claims of occupying the institution for the purpose of social transformation. This assumption has to do with the problems around the proclaimed performance of Gramscian hegemonic politics through the occupation of institutions of the liberal state and civil society. Russell Jacoby has discussed how the 'long march' through academic institutions in the 1960s and 1970s by New Left proponents (mainly in the USA) ended up transforming the New Left's modes of expression rather than the politics of these institutions. As Jacoby puts it, "in the end it was not the New Left intellectuals who invaded the universities but the reverse: the academic idiom, concepts, and concerns occupied, and finally preoccupied, young left intellectuals" (2000: 141). A similar story can be found in the critical engagements with institutions of the state and parliamentary politics during the 1970s (expressed for instance by the Italian Eurocommunism or the German Green Party) that hoped to achieve change by diffusing revolutionary energies into official politics. Here, the pessimistic argument that participation equals co-optation seems to hold water: the incorporation of critique renews and revitalises structures of power (Vishmidt, 2008).

On the other hand, as we have seen, this process is always marked by disturbances as the institution itself is not immovable. It does not stand still during this process of 'occupation' and as such there can never be a straightforward incorporation or neutralisation of resistant practices, insofar as institutions and critical actors are bridged through relations. In this sense, both poles are open to transformation, rather than processes of direct appropriation and incorporation. As a case in point, one result of incorporating the lessons of New Institutionalism and *documenta X* was that the art biennial (and the mega-art exhibition in general) came to be transformed from a site of visual display to an interdisciplinary site of knowledge production, education and social engagement. The question that remains open here, is whether this transformation generates institutional encounters that are more inclusive, anti-establishment and even revolutionary (as Gramsci himself had hoped). Or, again, for whom can these encounters be all of the above things? In what ways do the self-proclaimed socially-engaged scripts of a biennial hail publics that do not conform to

the standards of the educated middle-class, such as working class subjects, the poor, undocumented migrants, or, to cite Benjamin, the 'oppressed'? And, in this sense, to what degree is there always already an implicit crypto-colonialism in this hailing, in the interpellation of an 'other' within the circumscribed, refined and 'higher' codes, languages and practices that infuse such events? In both cases examined in this thesis, this crypto-colonial attitude reared its head, either by the barring of undocumented migrants living around AB3 or the calling on state and police intervention to protect BB7 from the 'wild' working class Brazilian kids of Pixadores and Spanish anarchists.

Secondly, this thesis argues that the political turn in art institutions, like any other discursive device, is inexorably caught up in a swirl of tensions, contradictions and site-specific conflicts that inform and adjust its rationale. As expressed by the discursive exhibition and its proponents, this political turn can seem insincere within the specific socio-temporal context of new activist demands set by the oppositional movements. Within the climate of the crisis, new travelling critical actors emerge across the art world, acquiring symbolic power as art radicals. A good case in point was the recent event organised by the institution 'Public Art Agency Sweden' that took place May 27, 2014 in Berlin, the day of the opening of BB8. In this event, a new generation of travelling radical actors within the art world, emerging in the context of the crisis, such as Ahmet Ögüt, Jonas Staal, Joanna Warsza and Nato Thompson, employed the same phraseology and arguments to these of criticality so as to essentially argue for the occupation of the institutions and their transformation from within. In this event, but also in many similar others, the impasse of this discourse becomes apparent not only through circular, self-referential and self-congratulating arguments, but often creates false expectations regarding radical, anti-establishment practices. Without doubting the good-will or the possible positive effects of this type of institutional engagement, this thesis wishes to raise an issue concerning the invocation of this logic of occupation: who is it that occupies, what do they occupy, and for whom is this occupation so significant other than their own professional practice? The interesting thing to note here is that, through the crisis and the crisis in the biennial model, the modes of critical institutional engagement brought new actors

with certain symbolic and thus institutional power to the surface, whose claims and articulations share similar vocabularies with those of the past generation. The questions that remain open are positioned around the ways this new radical wave of travelling artists and curators perform new 'modalities of power' (Vishmidt, 2008) through art institutional landscapes, and how this performance is different to the largely self-affirmative modalities of power found in criticality and New Institutionalism. And in light of this, how then can the practice of curating be thought of in different ways? To refer to a recent proposal by the cultural theorists Stefano Harney and Valentina Desideri, curating can perhaps be a, "conspiracy without a plot" (2013). A conspiracy that is an improvisational, caretaking and experimental exercise, exposed to risk and uncertainty, which, rather than striving to achieve goals and ask for credit, invents practices of being together without settling on structured identities, collective or otherwise, constantly thwarting the binaries between the art world and the world at large. (2013: 134).

The binary between the inside and the outside (as well as its collapse), have informed the development of this thesis in a number of different ways. The codes, or 'social scripts', of the biennial prove to have an expansive tendency in attempting to explore, colonise and domesticate external forms of social life. In the two biennials discussed, the 'extitution' (Spicer, 2010) - the formless outside - takes the form of the economic crisis and resistant movements whose imagery, rationale and perspective were brought inside the biennial, and where through the process of domesticating such extituent codes, the biennial cultures were durationally transformed. The activist ideas incorporated within the exhibitions played a role in affecting the circulation of ideas around biennial cultures. Indicatively, as I argue, the reactions raged against Żmijewski for stripping art of its essential qualities by blurring it with formless popular culture and activism performed the limits of the political turn in contemporary art landscapes. The inability of AB3 to adhere to its initial statement that pronounced the creation of an inclusive activist space performs a similar border.

In addition, and at a more general level, the ethnographic focus of these two events disturbs the straightforward attribution of biennials as a 'field-configuring events' (Chapter 2, Section 3), that is to say events having the capacity to determine and forecast an area of social action- in this case contemporary art (Delacour; Leca, 2011; Delgado; Cruz. 2014). For, as we saw, these events depend on and address complex translocal assemblages, and, as such, there can never be a stable field of art against which a biennial's value is measured or its influence assessed. Indicatively, AB3 undoubtedly maintained a global orientation and a desire to be heard internationally, but it also responded to a condition of crisis informing and informed by local audiences, sponsors, public authorities, art circuits and networks. In this sense, by delimiting the operation of an event within a univocal field of action, we risk overlooking the distributed relations that, intentionally or not, this event configures with a myriad other 'fields'. Rather than seeing the biennial as a nodal agent of art's globalisation then, this thesis suggests how the performance of a global form occurs in the context of mundane and ordinary tensions that need to be apprehended in the context of translocal debates and articulations. Thus, extrapolating on the tenuous and ever-evolving relation between the biennial's expansive tendencies and the externality of multiple and differing practices that interfere with the functioning of its code, a further question that can be raised is: what kinds of fields does each biennial configure each time and how is this configuration related to issues of power, institutional legitimacy and general social and economic conditions? In response to Bourdieu's idea of the field of cultural production, where the different participants strategically position themselves in order to raise their symbolic value, we can see how the 'field' in such events exists only in the plural. Rather than *a* field there exists a multiplicity of fields founded in the conjuncture of 'global' and 'local' tensions. To go back to the incident with the *Biennialist* where this thesis started, each biennial, according to its resources and intentions, engages as much as it excludes different fields. This engagement is a political choice but also a choice usually expressive of already existing power relations.

Furthermore, the conflicting ways through which the concept of 'institutional work' (Lawrence; Suddaby, 2006) comes to be performed in these events was expressed by the inclusion of two absent co-curators in both of them: Voina and Nicolas Bourriaud. Organisationally, the position of the curator attributes to a person or a group the authority to decide what will be displayed during the event. In other words, in terms of the biennials' hierarchical structure the position of the curator is for a predetermined period of time the highest position in the line of command. In the cases of both Nicolas Bourriaud and Voina, it was, however, not so much their organisational contributions but the institutional one that mattered. Bourriaud was expected to give visibility to AB3 and thus elevate the Athens Biennale's prestige and institutional power, while BB7 was supposed to lend institutional legitimacy to Voina by including them as co-curators. Again, the issue of the biennial's institutional power calls for a relational exploration, as a condition upon which practices of granting and lending values are played out. In this regard, (to raise a question more related to the sociology of institutions) were Bourriaud and Voina really performing some kind of institutional work in the above cases? If yes, in what ways can two absent curators disrupt, repurpose or reaffirm the codes of institution, and what does this absent performance mean for the approach of institutional work, a work that is meant to involve purposive institutional action (Lawrence; Suddaby, 2006: 215)? What this research shows modifies Lawrence's and Suddaby's conceptualization of 'institutional work' in that it questions the 'purposive' aspect of the intervention. In the above cases, but also in other cases throughout this research, institutional agents were not really 'working'; often it was only because of the particular positions that they occupied that confrontation, ruptures and controversy were enabled- even in their radical absence.

By attempting to decentralise knowledge produced around the biennial by accounting for its complexity and contradictory unfolding *Curating Resistances* foregrounds the translocal elements that disrupt, move along, circulate and co-operate with the functioning of the biennial's codes. The relationship between a place, as a set of structured and emerging configurations, and the biennial, as a global form with a distinct language and tactics, is always a dynamic one. Processes of biennialising a

place are marked by situated encounters with other conflicting flows and institutional arrangements ranging from political, migrational, financial, activist and legal ones. The tensions that arise from these encounters are never resolved; as the paradigm is transformed through and in opposition to them, they give birth to new configurations that bring about new lines of contestation. As this thesis hopes to show the relationship between critical practices and the institution unfolds amidst such lines of contestation, social forces and contradictions that transverse aspirations to be critical. The unique condition propelled by the extraordinary mobilisation of activist rhetoric and practice in the two biennials I explore calls for a re-evaluation of modes of critical institutional engagement. These events did not only wish to be critical, or to engage in some form of institutional critique, but to transform the institution into a space of activist insurrection against political power. In both these unprecedented cases, the limits in enabling, "critical surpluses" (Esche, 2013b: 243) took the form of mandates to preserve institutional legitimacies. It is imperative then to rethink institutional engagement not only in terms of self-reflexivity, personal involvement and through a sense of 'guilt' associated with being complicit with structures of power, but in terms of wider tendencies that have the capacity to exceed the art institution while at the same time condition its modes of being.[249] To curate resistances then (seemingly a paradox in terms), is to intervene upon such ambiguities and multiplicities by asking *if* and *what* (to curate), while not losing sight of the *how*. In other words, instead of retreating to an either/or dichotomy that reinforces an inside/outside boundary, this thesis ends with the question of what it may mean to think through practices of participation and withdrawal, of affirming and negating, not as ends in themselves, but as performances always intertwined and bound up with larger questions and broader movements toward more equal and experimental futurites.

[249] Such tendencies may include social and legal norms, economic dependencies, ordinary beliefs, processes of mediatisation and spectacularisation, exploitative hierarchical relations, proximate materialities and general ethical frameworks.

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