



Charles Green, Anthony Gardner. *Biennials, Triennials, and Documenta: The Exhibitions That Created Contemporary Art.* Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2016. Illustrations. 304 pp. \$41.50, paper, ISBN 978-1-4443-3665-8.

Caroline A. Jones. *The Global Work of Art: World's Fairs, Biennials, and the Aesthetics of Experience.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017. Illustrations. 400 pp. \$65.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-226-29174-1.

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Responding to the booming culture of contemporary art biennials and scholarly interest in them, two recent monographs approach the subject from complementary perspectives. If aesthetics, artists, and works of art are the main point of inquiry in Caroline A. Jones's *The Global Work of Art: World's Fairs, Biennials, and the Aesthetics of Experience*, Charles Green and Anthony Gardner's *Biennials, Triennials, and Documenta: The Exhibitions That Created Contemporary Art* is an example of institutional art history. This review offers a comparative analysis of these two books, which came out almost simultaneously.

Jones begins her narrative by exploring the genetic connection between current biennials and nineteenth-century international exhibitions, or Exposition Universelles, or world's fairs (the official title varied depending on the host country). This historical provenance, along with its implications—contemporary biennials serve as urban tourist-driven attractions—is perhaps the most significant claim of Jones's book (chapter 2). To be sure, this is not a genuinely new claim even for the author, as she recently outlined this argument in her essay "The Historical Origins of the Bienni-

al." [1] But the present monograph unfolds and lines it up within the major twentieth-century biennial-type events.

One of the first major contributions to this field, Patricia Mainardi's *Art and Politics of the Second Empire* (1987), had already demonstrated that the nuclear idea of international competition of national art schools emerged within the framework of the 1855 Paris Exposition Universelle. Since then, contemporary fine arts displays have been an integral part of international exhibitions, aiming to represent the achievements in all branches of industry and culture of participating countries in a competitive manner. Of relevance, the fine arts sections of the world's fairs became crucial for shaping the concept of the international work of art. Jones's monograph could have done more in relating this novel exhibition-based concept to previous international artistic developments, for example, the baroque, classicism, romanticism, realism, and, most relevantly, the pan-European academic tradition, which absorbed all these international styles and dominated the official fine art exhibitions up to the early twentieth century. Instead, from the world's fairs Jones

jumps to La Biennale di Venezia, inaugurated in 1895, thus skipping the Munich International Art Exhibitions, which were launched in 1869, probably because they still remain understudied. In any case, with gradual introductions of national pavilions that began in 1907, La Biennale di Venezia secured its position of being the principal international competition in contemporary art (chapter 3). After the Paris Exposition of 1937, the international exhibitions (now referred to as expos) ceased to include any serious surveys of contemporary visual art. Hence, Jones reasonably considers La Biennale di Venezia as a paradigmatic show, in imitation of or in contrast to which all other subsequent biennale-type events emerged. The earliest of these was the São Paulo Bienal (chapter 4). Inaugurated in 1951, it “forever changed art-world geography,” marking the change from international to a new, global work of art (p. 113). The São Paulo Bienal became not only the first non-European biennale but also the first to be hosted by a non-Western country.

This institutional genealogy of the notion of a global work of art is, however, only part of Jones’s more ambitious undertaking, which aims to demonstrate the dramatic shift in the way the work of art evolved from an object to an experience-based medium. In her words, “art inserted into biennials in the postwar period came to incorporate the festal and ephemeral components inherited from the fairs. From art as object, we shift definitively to art as event” (p. 165). Jones counts various factors that influenced this shift. One of them was La Biennale di Venezia, when in response to the 1968 student revolts, works of art on display stopped being sold, and the exhibition ceased being an explicitly commercial event. This market role was apparently delegated to international art fairs, such as Art Basel, which emerged in 1970, as Jones notes. Supposedly free from commercial constraints, the biennale became open to a more experimental, time- and event-based art. Yet, according to Jones, the most important change turned out to be the innovative curatorial

practice of Gastarbeiter’s Harald Szeemann. This included foremost his influential fifth edition of *documenta* in 1972 with its “100-Day Event” that featured performances, lectures, and happenings (chapter 5). Jones’s analysis of the evolution of work of art from an object to an experience is based on the artistic practice of Lygia Clark, Hélio Oiticica, Joseph Beuys, Tino Sehgal, Olafur Eliasson, and Pipilotti Rist, among others. But this is accompanied with philosophical discourse, which traces the development of the aesthetics of the experience. The list of discussed theorists is even longer than that of artists and includes Immanuel Kant, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Karl Marx, Theodor Adorno, Martin Heidegger, Walter Benjamin, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Jean-François Lyotard, Noam Chomsky, Alain Badiou, and Jacques Rancière, to name a few. In this way, the vanishing point of the book is the two concluding theoretical chapters, which deal with concepts of “experience” (chapter 6) and “critical globalism” (chapter 7).

It is indeed legitimate to ask: what sort of aesthetics did the long-term global biennialization produce and what were its unique qualities? Unfortunately, the concurrent examination of artistic practice and theory does not offer enlightening synergy in Jones’s narrative. As numerous art history books have demonstrated, the artistic medium went through a remarkable evolution in the course of the twentieth century: from painting and sculpture to installation, conceptual and video art, environment art, happenings, performances, and all sorts of time- and experience-based art. The extent to which the biennials shaped, intervened, and enriched rather than merely represented or amplified this evolution on a global scale remains largely obscure in Jones’s book.

It is possible that incomplete arguments in Jones’s monograph stem from the way the narrative is delivered. While this informative book is filled with significant names, dates, details, theo-

ries, erudition, and illustrations, the narrative is just too kaleidoscopic to be a coherent and easy to follow story. Much of the polemics are framed through questions and claims rather than answers. Even if the author is inclined to (over)use questions and claims as a rhetorical device, it would have been helpful to have a clear hierarchy within that network of questions, claims, and assertions. Moreover, the text gives an impression of a collection of what used to be separate articles, exhibition reviews, and columns written on various occasions. As a result, one encounters a few semantic repetitions from chapter to chapter.

Jones's monograph came out around the same time as another impressive work, Green and Gardner's *Biennials, Triennials and Documenta*, which likewise traverses much of the same chronological territory as Jones's book but is more ambitious in terms of the geography. The authors make no secret that *Biennials, Triennials and Documenta* is a collection of previously published texts. This effort, however, resulted in an updated, edited, and coherent narrative, and therefore, the book would be useful for university students as much as for the general reader interested in the subject.

Biennials, Triennials and Documenta is an excellent introduction to the history of the globalization of biennials or biennialization. Green and Gardner cover all major biennial-type events and their constellations that emerged on the five continents: Documenta, Manifesta, Tirana, and Venice Biennales, among others, in Europe; in South America, the São Paulo Bienal and Bienal de La Habana; the Johannesburg Biennale in Africa; the Biennale of Sydney and Asia-Pacific Triennial, among others, in Australia; and Gwangju, Shanghai, and Istanbul Biennials in Asia. Significantly, in each case, Green and Gardner provide initial historical, political, and cultural details, which help the reader grasp what was unique about this or that initiative in a particular region. As the book consistently promotes an exhibition-based

approach to the subject, the major protagonists here become the curators: Harald Szeemann, Jean-Hubert Martin, Okwui Enwezor, Hans-Ulrich Obrist, Massimiliano Gioni, and Francesco Bonami, among others, while an illustrative line solely consists of exhibition catalogues and posters. Szeemann's documenta 5 once again becomes a principal turning point, since it marked the emergence of a curatorial-type show that resonated with the social and political fabric of the period. The authors equally trace the disintegration of the "authoritarian curatorial model," associated with Szeemann, over time and the role of such figures as Enwezor in this development.

Given its enormous chronological and geographic scope, it is perhaps not surprising that *Biennials, Triennials and Documenta* has some undelivered promises. The most regretful of them is that the concept of "biennial art" is not fully discussed and developed. Green and Gardner introduce the idea that some art projects could only be "made with the encouragement and infrastructure offered by biennial directors" and later explain that this meant that "biennial art" became "large-scale, spectacular installations and moving image projections" but do not go into depth about the history, aesthetics, or economics of that concept (pp. 40, 253). Certainly, this is where Jones's monograph complements the story. And as with Jones's book, here too, the closer authors of *Biennials, Triennials and Documenta* are to the present-day, the more fragmentary the narratives become, clearly signalling that the lack of necessary historical distance to the described developments is difficult for making viable analytical observations.

Note

[1]. Caroline Jones, "The Historical Origins of the Biennial," in *The Biennial Reader*, ed. Elena Filipovic, Marieke van Hal, and Solveig Øvstebø (Bergen: Bergen Kunsthall; Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2010), 66-87.

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