Marks of Distinction, Vectors of Possibility

Questions for the Biennial

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In order to fathom the real meaning and opportunities of biennials as a global phenomenon, Scandinavian critic and curator Simon Sheikh introduces the term a *politics of translation*. Seen in this light, the biennial is a place where new meanings, stories, histories and connections are constantly produced. This condition of permanent flux may mean that biennials can do more than generate capital.

The collective symbolic capital which attaches to names and places like Paris, Athens, New York, Rio de Janeiro, Berlin and Rome is of great import and gives such places great economic advantages relative to, say, Baltimore, Liverpool, Essen, Lille and Glasgow. The problem for these latter places is to raise their quotient of symbolic capital and to increase their marks of distinction to better ground their claims to the uniqueness that yields monopoly rent. Given the general loss of other monopoly powers through easier transport and communications and the reduction of other barriers to trade, the struggle for collective symbolic capital becomes even more important as a basis for monopoly rents. [1]

If the spectrally human is to enter into the hegemonic reformulation of universality, a language between languages will have to be found. This will be no metalanguage, nor will it be the condition from which all languages hail. It will be the labour of transaction and translation which belongs to no single site, but is the movement between languages, and has its final destination in this movement itself. Indeed, the task will be not to assimilate the unspeakable into the domain of speakability in order to house it there, within the existing norms of dominance, but to shatter the confidence of dominance, to show how equivocal its claims to universality are, and, from that equivocation, track the break-up of its regime, an opening towards alternative versions of universality that are wrought from the work of translation itself. [2]

In a dialogue on the notion of *universality*, American Philosopher Judith Butler has suggested that we understand this concept in the plural and conflictual, and that the political task thus becomes to establish what she calls *practices of translation*. [3] This is not, however, a matter of translating the particular into the universal, in order to make it politically salient or effective, but rather that the universal is always a particular, competing universal. The universal is not anterior to the particular, and commonalities and overlaps can be found within such competing notions of universality, and thus also among various political movements and groups through acts of translation without transcendence. Movement here takes on a double significance, partly in the sense of concrete social movements with political aims, and partly, and more abstractly, as the movement between moments and sites of political contestation and articulation, which can be named *a politics of translation*. [4]

Now, the question I would like to raise is whether the contemporary forms of the biennial can be considered one such site, and what movements can be traced through and around them? In other words, what is to be translated, and through which method of translation? Obviously, the theory and history of translation in conjunction with culture is highly contested, and it is not my aim to reiterate these intellectual debates here, but only to point to one singular dichotomy in translation, that of the original and copy, and to suggest what it could mean in a geopolitical sense. The most widespread version of translation indicates a relation between an original text in an original language, and a copy that translates this text into a secondary language, leading to choices of fidelity, to either the original and the transfer of its meaning as accurately as possible, or to the new, secondary language and its specificity. In this theory, there is always something that is untranslatable, and which requires literary skills of equivalence on the part of the translator. It is also a theory, and practice, of translation that has colonialist implications in terms of site, privileging the originality of European culture in opposition to all the colonial copies.

The 'Originality' of the Biennial

In terms of biennials, the original to be copied and exported is the biennial in Venice, held 52 times since 1895, and based on the concept of national pavilions, that is, with national (self)representation, with each nation sending their best and brightest artist(s). The Venice Biennale exists as a sort of Olympic Games of the art world, complete with a first prize. However, it should be immediately noted that most of the biennials that have emerged all around the world since then have not followed this model, and indeed most of them do not make claims for world art, but rather for a regional, cultural particularism (with universalist elements), be it in Havana or the Whitney Museum in NYC, or the ever-shifting locale of the Manifesta in Europe. While this might be the predominant alteration of Venice, there is also the brief of bringing the world of art to a particular place, in effect translating the international to the local(s), be it in Berlin, Istanbul or São Paulo, or, specifically so, the poignantly named Peripheria biennial in Iasi. Finally, there are the biennials that make claims for a specific kind of art, for a certain medium as nation, one could say, such as the Liverpool biennial and the Berlin Transmediale, among a few others.

We are thus not exclusively dealing with a culture of the copy, but with deviation and hybridity as well as repetition and simulation, with different notions of fidelity. Biennials find themselves in an unregulated and informal system, that is, paradoxically, both rhizomatic and hierarchical. Although they are directed towards several vantage points and spheres of interests, their meaning and placement can only be seen from one place at a time. They may make up one place after another for an, again, loosely defined and organized group of art professionals, but for most regular visitors, their recurrence is time based, if not timely. In this case, they are more likely to be read in terms of the previous versions of the specific biennial and its scope, choice of artists, curators, venues and so on, rather than an international circuit and communication of exhibitions and articulations. While the exhibition format remains the main vehicle for the presentation of contemporary art, this does not mean that the exhibition is a singular format with a given public and circulation of discourse. Rather, the notion of an exhibition is to be understood in the plural, with different types of exhibitions speaking from different locations and positions, with different audiences and circulations indicated and implicated, from the self-organized student show in a small provincial town to the larger (inter)national biennials that are the topic of this essay. What they share, and this is especially true of biennials, is a double sense of public and publicity: the local, physically present (if only potentially) audience and the imaginary constituency and professional field of the art world (if only potentially). There is, in the landscapes of biennials, not only the original and the copy, the deviant and the hybrid, but also always a here and an elsewhere.

Biennials are placed within an ecosystem as well as an economic system of exhibitions (and exhibition venues) in geopolitical terms. They do not command the same immediate attention internationally, despite the number of (local) visitors. More people visit the biennial in Mercosul in Porto Alegre than do the Documenta in Kassel, for example, but historical importance in the art world, geographical placement and media attention all play a role in the significance of a biennial's standing and influence as well. In short, a biennial builds up a brand, as well as an audience and a constituency, both locally and internationally. And with the recent growth of new biennials, especially in Southeast Asia, it is becoming an increasingly competitive environment in which to vie for international attention, which affects designated centres and peripheries as well.

Take the aforementioned Documenta, although not a biennial in the proper sense of the word, it has, since its inception in 1957, taken a different route than the Venice Biennale, rather than the Olympic model of national competition, Documenta tried to make a statement about the state of art. That is, a transnational survey of the most dominant trends within contemporary art at the given moment. Movement was understood as artistic movement, and was originally dedicated to twentieth-century avant-garde art in a re-education of the German people after the Second World War, and as part of an assessment of Western-German democratic ideals in opposition to its Eastern, communist Other. Its brief has naturally then changed since the fall of communism in Europe, and indeed the last three versions, Documenta 10 through 12, have attempted to redefine the idea of a world exhibition of art and address the idea of a globalized world by showing art from all corners of the world as opposed to focussing on Western Europe and theUSA. However, Documenta's centrality and discursiveness have simultaneously been challenged by the many new biennials, both in its vicinity and around the world, and it remains to be seen if it can maintain its importance and place at the top of the hierarchy in the future, both in terms of discourse, attention and economy.

Biennials and Monopoly Rent

More and more, a biennial has to create a niche market, a specific identity, reputation and prestige that can place it on the map of the world and the art world alike. And this placement may be vastly different, and might even require speaking different languages and in two tongues. On the one hand there is the circulation of discourse of the international art world, with its system of competing universalities, as well as a competition for symbolic capital, market shares and monopolies, and on the other the local political and economic demands for cultural significance and supremacy: the uniqueness of this culture, this country, this place. The uniqueness of a particular place and culture is not only a question of nationalism and of nation building, though, but is also a means of establishing a niche market and attracting an international audience, to generate cultural capital as well as increased revenues through (art) tourism. Biennials are, in this way, part of the experience economy, with the whole experience of the city and the exhibition being the commodity rather than the singular works of art, as is, presumably, the case with art fairs.

In his book *Spaces of Capital*, social geographer David Harvey has analysed the relationship between globalization, city marketing and the commodification of culture through the Marxian category of 'monopoly rent'. Monopoly rent occurs when a producer can generate a steady increase of surplus and thus income over time through exclusivity. This is achieved either by being the only producer of a certain commodity in a regional economy, or through the uniqueness of the brand in a more global economy. The example given is the wine trade, where an exclusive vineyard can both sell its wines as commodities, but also itself; the land, resource and location. Historically, a producer of wine or beer could gain monopoly rents in its region or area by simply being the only brand available, but in a global and globalized market, the product has to have some sort of local uniqueness in order to be tradable outside its region and in order to compete over market shares with

other brands being imported into its region. It has to achieve a symbolic quality besides its actual taste in order to generate revenues, therefore the wine merchants in the Bourdeaux region have copyrighted the use of the name 'Chateau' and only the producers of sparkling wine in the Champagne region can now legally call its products 'champagne'. Here we are dealing with a culturalization of commodities as much as the commodification of culture. However, there are also other factors involved in the wine market, specialist publications and international competitions give value judgments based merely on taste rather than origin, suddenly bringing wine from, say, South Africa, Chile or Australia to the fore, and then there is, naturally, a competition in terms of price, which compared to the specialist judgments of taste creates a consciousness of value for money among potential consumers in a global market.

Hopefully, the parallels to the art world, and market, are obvious. Here, we also have historical centres, in a biennial context places such as Venice and Kassel, but also new, emergent players around the world, most lately and massively in Southeast Asia. Also, we have the judges of taste in the form of critics and magazines, as well as a competition on price and uniqueness in terms of locality. Venice obviously has the history, not only of its biennial, but also of its city, giving it an incredibly strong brand and attraction. Secondly, it has a centrality in terms of location, certainly within the art world, but also, from a European perspective, in terms of geography. All these factors clearly outweigh the fact that the city is very expensive for travellers. Other cities, like, say, São Paulo, are obviously cheaper to be in for the art tourist, but more expensive to travel to from most places, both in Europe and the USA, not to mention Asia. Indeed, the São Paulo biennial was originally based on the same principles of national pavilions as Venice, which also made each nation participating financially responsible, but has recently abandoned this model, presumably due to its decreasing symbolic value and credibility in the art world as such. Perhaps this format is a bit too crude within the global (art) economy?

Instead, biennials have to brand themselves differently and specifically in order to achieve not only cultural hegemony, but also to extract monopoly rent, in terms of both symbolic and real capital. They must be, on the one hand, recognizable as a certain format, a festival of art, and, on the other hand be specific, *this biennial*, not *that one*. With *these* specific properties and attributions, in *this* specific place, city, region and country. The branding of the biennial is thus twofold: partly the city as attraction and allure giving context and value to the biennial, and partly the glamour and prestige of the biennial branding and upgrading the otherwise non-descript or even negative image of the city, region or country. In this scenario, it is only logical that most biennials today are taking on a – at least – dual purpose, both highlighting the uniqueness of the particular place or region and its culture, as a way of cultivating the national audience and attracting an international one, *and* bringing international artists and positions to the local situation, cultivating the national citizens as international consumers and connoisseurs of culture: the lure of the local meets the glamour of the global. In other words, biennials do not only situate a place, but they also always establish a connection, and herein lies their potentiality.

Interconnectedness

Indeed, one of the most widespread complaints about contemporary biennials is their lack of connection to the 'local' audience, but this often takes the form of a positivity of the social: that social relations and identities in a specific context are given and whole, if not holy, that the local audience is a singular group with essential qualities and shared agencies. This is a residue of the myth-making of the nation state and its production of citizenry through cultural means, such as exhibitions and institutions, and hardly seems adequate in the postmodern and post-public condition, where identities are, at least, hybrid and agencies multiple, and even contradictory and schizoid. It is, rather, a question of how a biennial produces, or attempts to produce, its public(s) that must be analysed and criticized. One must ask what assumptions of place and participation are at work, what notions of subjectivity, territoriality and citizenship are invoked. And one must ask in what way participation is valued in terms of cultural consumption and legitimation. Additionally, the 'lack of local sedimentation' argument tends to overlook the potential biennials actually offer for reflection on the above-mentioned double notion of publicness: the local audience and the international, and the art world and the world. The potential to not only address presumed existing audiences, both locally and in terms of art-world credibility and circulation, but also to create new public formations that are not bound to the nation-state or the art world. By being recurrent events, both locally placed and part of a circuit, they have the potential to create a more transnational public sphere, with both difference and repetition in the applied mode of address and implied notion of spectatorship and public participation.

Moreover, location is to be understood in the sense of *interconnectedness*: this means that we do not only connect through the public formation of the event of the biennial and the encounter with the artworks, but also that any place is always seen in relation to another place, or a series of possible places. We view other places through the prism of our own place, as subjects with history and geography. Our places of dwelling and of action are also always related to other places, whether visible or invisible, present or absent. What goes on 'here' always has effects 'there', and vice versa, even when we are not aware of these movements. This is, of course, the current global condition, and art today must reflect this double sense of place, public and non-public, presence and absence, the visible and the invisible. Any sense of locality always involves a here and an elsewhere: a constant movement between centeredness and marginality, be it in aesthetic, geographical or economic terms, and one of the characteristics of advanced art is precisely that it allows one to see more than one viewpoint: more than one story or situation, and more than one way to look at them.

Any locality, regardless of its self-image, is connected to other places in subtle and often unexpected ways: what is produced here is consumed there, what is seen there is invisible here and so on. This is also the situation for biennials: they find themselves in an art-world system of exhibitions and festivals (public formations), as well as in an international economy of desire. But how is this made visible to a local community, and how is it relevant to the experiences of the audience, both inside and outside the exhibition, as well as before and after the exhibition? The question is what our relationship is to different spaces, and, moreover, how continuity is established and made productive in a biennial setting. It is therefore not only a matter of what a biennial can give, or give *back*, to its community and constituency, but also what kinds of community and constituency it can produce, put into play or suspension. The relationship between the artworks and the audience created by the exhibition is one of positionality, and as such the position of the speaker is something that must be made visible by the exhibition and its ways of display. The biennial is not only a container of artworks, but also a mass medium in itself, and must as such establish a social space, that is, a place where meanings, narratives, histories, conversations and encounters are actively produced and set in motion. A place where connections are made and unmade, subjectified and suspended. In other words: *politics of translation*.

Translation and Location

Translation is here to be understood in multiple ways, not only between original and copy, primary and secondary culture, also not only geographically, that is, between different places, but also as *locational*, as taking place *in-situ*. However, it would also be too limited and limiting to merely understand translation as a pedagogical exercise of explaining works and their contexts to different audiences and groups. Rather, translation must be understood within the transposition of forms of language, that is be understood in terms of exhibition display, or what I have called *modes of address*, which is the instituent practice of exhibition-making – its placing of objects and subjects within a framing and a horizon, a world and a worldview. [5] This has, then, not only to do with representation in the form of artworks and the (geopolitical) selection of artists, but also with public programming and exhibition design. One can, for instance, try to imagine and implement ways of showing and seeing within an exhibition design that do not follow the historical, apparently neutral museum display of the white cube – hiding its political positioning of the works and the viewers – and rather attempt spatializations that make such positions more visible and locational.

One of the ways to achieve this is *historization*: interconnectedness in time. Exhibition-making has certain historical forms of display, and a part of biennial enterprise could be to focus on historical forms of exhibition making, an exhibition on exhibitions. Exhibitions are, to paraphrase Walter Zanini, 'micro-cosmoses of the possible', and as such directly connected to our political imaginary: what is possible and impossible, visible and invisible, to be done and not to be done, and so on. Biennials are not only part of the present, but also always the past, in forms of the previous editions of the particular biennial itself, art history in general and, naturally, the history of the place, with its contestations of space, cultural hegemonies, forgetting and remembrance of struggles past. And by immediately inscribing itself with art history and processes of marketability and canonization of the artists included as well the institution of the biennial itself, it is always an investment in the future: a statement about art (and thus specific artists and practices) is an attempt to achieve hegemony, not just instantly, but even more so in the short *and* long run.

This connection with history, or with the making and unmaking of history and its relation to our view of the world, our horizon of possibilities and impossibilities, connects to an important nodal point, *the sense of place* and *the situation of exile*. These terms may seem to be strange bedfellows, especially within the context of art and culture, and its privileging of place, location, site and specificity. Today, our sense of place has as much to do with that place's connection to other places, be they possible or impossible, permeable or incommensurable, perceivable or invisible, as with the originality of the place. Places exist through connections, within the global flows of objects and subjects, rules and (de)regulations. We can thus only sense a place through other places, albeit only from one place at the time. But we also move from place to place, geographically and politically, within larger global flows of migration. So, how exactly does one belong to a place, a culture and a language, both as a cultural producer *and* consumer? Who can speak for a place, or even *speak the place*? Is it the 'local' artist and / or community, for instance, or is it, conversely, the specialist cultural producer dealing in intervention and / or site-specific strategies?

These questions have both concrete and abstract answers, but always in terms of time rather than space. Politically, citizenship is either something you are born with, or something that is acquired after living legally in a given country for a certain number of years. The option of getting a new citizenship obviously varies greatly depending on the country. However, as we know from the nationalist debates that have swept Europe for the last decade, citizenship in legal terms does not equate citizenship in cultural terms. And even though cultural terms of national identity are arguably of a symbolic nature, they are perceived and discussed – culturalized – as *real*. To have Danish citizenship, for example,

does not necessarily make you a 'real' Dane, thus the distinction in media reports and debates between 'Dane' and 'Danish Citizen', with the former being the real Dane. This can, of course, be even more fine-tuned when talking about a specific region or city: there may be several different people, even of the same colour and creed, living in a place, but the 'real' ____ (insert your place / identity of choice here) are the ones who were born here. A sense of place known as roots, indicating an organic relationship to the place. However, as mentioned before, we are, regardless of origin and current location, rarely in a position of full coherence and identity, but rather selves in the making, and on the move.

Ways of Travelling, Ways of Seeing

To be on the move is, naturally, one of the characteristics of the much-maligned star curators and artists of the international biennial circuit. But expertise is also implied through method, and through commitment over time: how long has a curator or artist spent in a place? How deep is their work? Even though this can be measured in terms of time, such a measure is ultimately meaningless in terms of assessment and judgment, obviously, but also in terms of critique and potentiality. Rather, we should look at what connections are made and unmade: what sense of place is analysed through the prism of which other places? Hence, the situation of exile, both inside and outside of one's given nation or society. Exile is not just a matter of leaving a nation geographically, be it voluntarily or involuntarily, but also leaving it conceptually and politically, that is, an exodus from the current state of affairs, from the state of the state, as it were, again both voluntarily and involuntarily. It is no coincident, I believe, that Giorgio Agamben titled his Italian diary of 1992-1994 *In This Exile*, writing as an Italian in Italy, but somehow outside of the current hegemony, both politically and culturally. [6] Everybody is, surely, involved in some sort of movement – even when staying still geographically, one might be moving ahead, or up or down, socially and economically. But we do not all travel in the same class and according to the same itinerary, nor even with similar destinations, or, for that matter, destinies. Some are sidelined to the margins, others exiled on main street, but everybody is in some sense displaced: where one comes from and where one is, or is going, is no longer the same place, neither in terms of time nor geography, and one can never go home again. Our sense of belonging and place are, in this way, becoming more and more conceptual and relational. It is therefore obvious why a major theme in contemporary art production should be an *uncertainty of place*, not only geographically, but also socially: who has access to which spaces, both generally and locally? Access should not only be understood in terms of physicality, but also symbolically and culturally. When thinking about the politics of translation implied in the contemporary biennials, one must think in relations of difference and contextuality, and the fragmentation of the public sphere (including a fragmentation of the art world), and what this means transnationally. One must look at connections and lines of flight between different points of departure and arrival. Such theorizing could perhaps be employed as a form of actualization; realizing, imagining, representing and communicating that which is possible, but has not yet been implemented.

This also applies to the discussion of a decentralization and / or globalization of the art world and its biennials. Rather than viewing biennials and mega-exhibitions as essential categories having fixed representations and implications, I would suggest this contextual and relational view on them. They offer a stage, surely, but one does not have to follow the script. That is, we can look at their specific placement and relation to their surroundings, each other and the general circulation of discourse through the art world. What is, for instance, the relationship between site-specific art projects and the notion of the local, the relationship between site-specific projects and tourism, and, finally, between tourism and migration? Often site-specific projects not only bring a cultural value to remote areas, and interact with the local in a displacement of art from the centres to the margins, but they

also bring financial rewards to the site in terms of increased tourism. And the same can of course be stated about international biennials and other recurrent mega-exhibitions. But the notion of tourism should not be separated from another form of travel that brings about cultural exchange and interaction, that is, migration. The differentiation between these two kinds of travel not only indicates the content of these forms of travel, but also their contexts; tourism indicates legalized travel and spending, usually from richer countries to other rich countries and / or poor countries. Tourism equals income and enlightenment, consumption and information – just like in a biennial. Migration, on the other hand, is nowadays mostly illegal, and usually viewed as unwelcome as it is unprofitable and culturally alien. One only has to watch the literal fence on the US side of the US-Mexican border, or the establishment of an internal open market in Europe while its external borders, especially against North Africa and the Middle East, are increasingly guarded and closed, turning the European Union into a *European Fortress.*

Global flows are not only voluntary, as art tourism supposedly is, but also brought about by the same structures and strictures of global capitalism that produce the demand for city-branding and the surge towards monopoly rent. The art world, for instance, is not so much multicultural, as it is multicentred, hence the global spread of the biennial phenomena, but also the seeming interchangeability of participating artists without any shifts of signification. Perhaps, then, interconnectedness should be foregrounded over the uniqueness of place? Perhaps we should think in what Sathya Rao, a network scientist from India, has called 'Non-Colonial translation', and its non-homogeneous and even chaotic space without residues of the colonial original, and without any unifying textual-ontological plane of reference? [7] In this way art and its institutions can become public platforms that relate not only to a more or less centralized art world, but also to other fields of knowledge and modes of production in a society that seems more and more specialized and fragmented, thus creating several public, semi-public and even counter-public spheres within the existing ones. From such formulated platforms we can relate to other spaces and spheres, indicating that biennials are not predominantly to be seen as utopias, but rather as heterotopias, capable of maintaining several contradictory representations within a single space. Obviously, biennials are part of (inter)national cultural hegemonies as well as city-branding and the creation of monopoly rents, but that does not mean that they can only represent these features, or that they can only affirm them. Indeed, they can question them by highlighting them, as well as by creating other possible connections, other ways of concepts for stranger sociability and senses of place and placement. It is improbable that a biennial can exist without taking part in such processes of capital accumulation (both symbolic and real, of course), so the question is rather, can they do something else simultaneously? That is, can they produce something other than merely more symbolic-turned-real capital for the involved cultural producers, curators and artists alike, something else in terms of interconnected global political transaction and translation? While biennials remain spaces of capital, they are also spaces of hope.

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Footnotes

1. David Harvey, *Spaces of Capital* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 405.
2. Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau and Slavoj Žižek, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality* (London: Verso, 2000), 178-179.
3. Ibid.
4. The notion of a 'politics of translation' indicates a shift from, as well as affinity with, what Michel Foucault termed 'the politics of truth'. But where the politics of truth has to do with a questioning of authority, and a wish for being governed in a different way, politics of translation seems to confront different regimes of truth, the ways in which truth is produced.
5. Simon Sheikh (ed.), *In the Place of the Public Sphere?* (Berlin: b_books, 2005).
6. Giorgio Agamben, 'In This Exile (Italian Diary 1992-94)', in: *Means Without Ends* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 121-142.
7. Sathya Rao, 'From a Postcolonial to a Non-colonial Theory of Translation', in: Naoki Sakai and Jon Solomon (eds.), *Translation, Biopolitcs, Colonial Difference* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2006), 73-94.

Tags

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