

TOWARDS A NEW LOCALITY: BIENNIALS AND "GLOBAL ART"*

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Biennials of contemporary art inevitably have cultural and geopolitical ambitions. They seek to be nationally and even internationally significant, by putting forward particular and supposedly incomparable local characteristics, what we might call "locality." Ideally, the concept of locality should be culturally related to the local tradition but innovative and open to international exchanges. The introduction of artworks by international artists is an efficient strategy to achieve this end and is often introduced as a catalyst to accelerate this process. (Geo)politically, this newly constructed locality should demonstrate its singularity when compared to other similar events, especially those happening in surrounding areas. The Busan Biennial, for instance, has direct and indirect rivals or peers in Korea, such as the Gwangju Biennial, Seoul Media City, etc., and across the Pacific Ocean, with the Fukuoka Asian Art Triennial, Yokohama Triennial, Taipei Biennial, or Shanghai Biennial and even, going a bit further, the Asia-Pacific Triennial in Brisbane and the Biennale of Sydney. To configure the locality of such events in contradistinction to their ever-increasing number of national and international counterparts means emphasizing something quite particular to the context of the locale—city, region, or "neighborhood," as Arjun Appadurai would say.¹ This is true of most biennial or triennial organizations across the world today, including the Havana Biennial, Johannesburg Biennial, or Manifesta, to name just a few. The problem of locality provides us, as curators and artists directly involved with such events, a unique opportunity to explore the creative and innovative possibilities offered by the occasion. The challenge that we face is how to imagine and realize a biennial that is culturally and artistically significant in terms of embodying and intensifying the negotiation between the global and the local, politically transcending the established power relationship between different locales and going beyond conformist regionalism. More than ever, biennials of the future should be an occasion to conceive and construct new localities capable of responding to the age of globalization.

As Appadurai argues, "The problems of cultural reproduction in a global-

ized world are only partly describable in terms of problems of race and class, gender and power, although these are surely crucially involved. An even more fundamental fact is that the production of locality—always, as I have argued, a fragile and difficult achievement—is more than ever shot through with contradictions, destabilized by human motion, and displaced by the formation of new kinds of virtual neighborhoods.”² This vision or reality no doubt implies contradictions, conflicts, and chaotic elements, but it also offers an optimistic and futuristic picture of the local scene. Artistically, biennials naturally reflect such a reality. However, it is important that the projects and works presented not only respond to such a reality, but also be able to emphasize the real meaning of their engagement with the event, to articulate the experimentality and vitality necessary to the invention of the new locality.

It has become increasingly evident in today's globalized world that it is impossible to talk about the question of locality without relating it to globality. Historically and especially in the contemporary world, locality is always a product of the confrontation and negotiation of the locale (or the neighborhood) with the global (or “Other”). This vital and intense process of self-reflection, autocritique, and self-innovation allows the individual to continue to survive and obtain meaning within global modernization. The process is automatically one of breaking down and reestablishing territorial borders as well as cultural boundaries at large, whether they have been recently politically determined or historically granted. In our age of globalization when every locale is struggling hard to turn itself into either a member of the global village or a key point on the network of global cities, this becomes drastically intensified and even urgent. Producing new localities is the most imminent task for locales. If the boundaries of locales were once relatively clearly defined and conceivable as being like islands on the world map, today this island-based concept is no longer sustainable. Everyone must leave his or her island and merge into the border-crossing, translocal ocean of global restructuring.

Globalization is a necessary first step in the process of expanding the global economy and its related effects: migrations across borders—from economic and political refugees to technological and intellectual global travelers as well as the development of new technologies of global communication. Accordingly, the globalized culture of electronic media, with multimedia images and languages at its center, becomes the dominant, “mainstream” culture. It has penetrated almost every corner of the world and caused profound changes in local cultures. As a result, established economies, social relationships, and politics as well as collective and individual imaginations, visions, values, and languages are all affected, contaminated, and transformed. For the sake of survival, every locale has to develop new strategies to face such a new reality.

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Politically, we are seeing a kind of reorganization of regional, translocal alliances. Aspirations for peace and the impossibility of coexistence between nations and communities are working hand-in-hand, drawing new geopolitical maps of different scales, from the unification of West and East Germany to the Balkan conflicts, from the tension between China and Taiwan to the latest constitutional change redefining the relationship between the French government and Corsican nationalists.

In terms of culture, a new phenomenon, as Appadurai emphasizes, is the unprecedented acceleration of the destruction of local cultures and the formation of new communication and cultures based on the "virtual neighborhood," which brings people from different parts of the world in closer contact than they are with their actual neighbors thanks to the Internet and other electronic media.³ In this context, the process of inventing new localities in every locale is inevitably open to global or other cultures. Everyone has to live a kind of "unhomely" life, as Homi Bhabha puts it.⁴ Events like contemporary art biennials, initiated by local authorities to promote the position of locales on the global map, are then global events by nature, while they claim to be locally meaningful and productive in terms of new localities. The introduction of "foreign," international knowledge, cultures, artworks, and discourses are not only proof of the capacity to master international cultural exchanges and thereby better defend local characteristics. More significant yet, this process reveals that international or global cultures influence and even condition the new reality of the locales. The home is being voluntarily turned into a kind of non-home, a constantly changing and evolving in-between space, a kind of "glocal" land. The new localities being generated are definitively impure, hybrid, and therefore innovative. Accordingly, the question of cultural identity is no longer based on the logic of the nation-state. Instead, it is about transnationalism, and identities themselves continuously transform. Even taken-for-granted distinctions between Eastern and Western cultures, for instance, are definitely losing their meanings. Permanent confrontation, negotiation, and hybridization between different cultures and identities are all that remain.

Along with economic globalization, the logic of late or global capitalism and the ideology of consumerism are now spreading and "conquering" the planet, an irreversible trend thanks to new technologies and electronic communication. Popular cultures and their images, mainly electronically generated and distributed, are becoming common sources of imagination, fantasy, and even moral values for people, especially youth, whether they live in the developed "First World" or the developing "Third World." This new global culture is, as already suggested, pluralist, hybrid, and interactive. One should not, however, be automatically optimistic about it. The fact that globalization is actually producing further divisions between the rich and the poor, between the empow-

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ered and the exploited, clouds euphoric visions of the new reality like those in the post-World War II war years in the West embodied by pop art. On the contrary, this new reality must be continuously examined and criticized, eliciting more fundamental, political critiques of global capitalism itself. However, the recent economic and political dominance of this new form of capitalism have rendered its critique much more complicated and difficult. We are living in a time of self-contradiction: Consumerism so thoroughly dictates the cultural context in which we live that even intellectual notions, such as locality, globality, multiculturalism, and hybridity, in spite of their original political bias, are systematically appropriated by the marketplace and turned into commodities or consumable signs—the most infamous example being the advertising strategy of Benetton. Furthermore, localities, embodied in the promotion of tourist spots, local specialties, etc., are actually one of the most reliable economic revenues for local communities. They are first of all commodities. We are losing what Frederic Jameson has called the necessary “distance of critique.”⁵

Facing such a contradiction, contemporary art has to come up with more innovative solutions in order to continue to exist. Using different mediums, notably electronic means, artists in different parts of the world or those sharing various types of localities have developed similar methods to re-appropriate images from electronic media and commercial advertisements, turning them into subversively ironic statements and even critical commentaries on the originals. Putting the “detoured” images back into circulation in the media, they affect and transform the collective consciousness as well as fantasies governing popular cultures. This is only one example of how contemporary art is being re-harnessed to transform society.

Obviously, one of major results of globalization is the gradual disappearance of borders separating nation-states and the establishment of new boundaries according to the rules of global capitalism. Concomitant with such a tendency, contemporary art is also going through a transitional period of self-deconstruction. Increasingly, art concepts and practices merge with other disciplines, especially architecture and urbanism, providing a larger space for social intervention by means of the reconstruction of visual environments beyond the framework of art institutions or the market. In the meantime, like the internal transformation of architecture and urbanism into a domain between the “real” and the virtual, contemporary art is being “dematerialized” and rematerialized within the network of global communication and hence incorporated into every level of cultural and quotidian activity. The arts can no longer remain confined in a separate enclosure.

Another driving force of globalization affecting the world order is global migration. Populations are traveling at an unprecedented speed across the planet. Their compositions are diverse: from economic refugees to political

International biennials are to the art market what fusion food is to the culinary world: mainstream ingredients with a local flavor snuck into the mix, but not enough to aggravate the conventional palate. What recipe possesses the right balance to allow for necessary mass consumption? Of course, nothing too excessive: Let's

start with something a little unusual, say papaya? And then mix it with a chicken pâté. Everybody eats chicken, right? And systemically, those with purchasing power dictate the margins of taste.

In the process of “glocalism” or fusion, power politics play the determining role. Getting back to contemporary art, give me something familiar enough, say Olafur Eliasson, and mix in a little Solmaz Shahbazi? That's just about mild and new enough. I like chicken, and papaya sure sounds sexy.

All of this is problematic because art is not food, and within the aggressive parameters of the market-driven culture industry, international biennials are the market's white lie: International Food Day. They are about consumption, they are about tourism, they are about branding, and they are about new product lines. But thankfully, they also have a comforting slogan: promoting international cultural exchange, art, and ideas.

When the meal is over, although we believe we have widened our horizons (even though it was just chicken!), we are often still too uncomfortable to pick up a papaya the next time we are at a fruit stand. Perhaps it is indeed time to regain our Jamesonian “distance of critique” because fusion food has yet to fulfill its promise, and we are always still hungry after leaving the table.

Mai Abu ElDahab, Cairo-based independent curator and co-curator of Manifesta 6

exiles, from cheap labor forces to jet-set political, economic, and intellectual elites. These different groups of global travelers, however, are all closely linked to the logic of global capitalism. They are at once the very symptoms and the catalyst of this irreversible trend. This tremendous global movement not only creates new opportunities for economic and cultural activities across the world. More significantly, it also profoundly influences localities everywhere in the world and provokes their generation. The departure of certain groups from the local community and the arrival of "Others" are fundamentally transforming every city, region, and nation-state. The conditions, discourses, ideologies, and values of the production of localities are producing totally new adventures. Apart from the problems and difficulties caused when one departs from one's culture, displacement can also provide certain opportunities for the exile, while his or her experience of global traveling and adaptation in new contexts can be re-imported to influence the locale of his or her origin. Culturally and artistically, this intensive struggle to lead a new life in a new environment can also present an opening to an innovative perspective of creation. As the American-Vietnamese cultural activist Trinh Minh-ha argues, "Displacement involves the invention of new forms of subjectivities, of pleasures, of intensities, of relationships, which also implies the continuous renewal of a critical work that looks carefully and intensively at the very system of values to which one refers in fabricating the tools of resistance."⁶

No doubt, "the invention of new forms of subjectivities, of pleasures, of intensities, of relationships" is not only an inspiring moment for the cultural imagination and artistic creation. It also provokes a necessary process of a more fundamental nature—the transformation and mutation of the relationship between subjectivity and society. The Internet is perhaps the most evident symbol of such a new cultural structure. Subjectivity and identity should be understood as comprising continuously changing and evolving processes. The border around the self is blurred, and the self merges more and more actively with the Other. Intersubjectivity, rather than subjectivity, is a more relevant and meaningful notion, while artistic and cultural creations demand a new foundation beyond the ideology of individualism. Art making should be a process and expression of intersubjective communication, exchange, and collaboration. We are now witnessing more and more artists working in groups, while transdisciplinary collaborations are becoming the focus of artistic experiments. In working collectively, different individual talents are accumulated and combined to generate new languages, concepts, and especially new cultural categories that suggest a revolution of the social order, both globally and locally.

Eventually, contemporary art created from and for different localities but immediately involved with the swirl of global information, communication, and displacement can become an efficient means of resistance, interruption, and deconstruction of the established, dominant, hegemonic power of global capi-

talism and its ideology. And it should remain so. To resist the materialist values of consumerism and evolve along with the possibilities that new communication technology offers, contemporary art is now being explored and developed increasingly towards immateriality, interactivity, instability, uncertainty, and spatial temporalization. This process, inevitably affecting the global communication network, produces fragmentation, interrupting critical moments in the flow of communication and the production of value. It always plays the role of the Other, an alternative to the "mainstream," voicing different and unexpected feelings, understandings, knowledge, and projects. As a consequence, artworks constantly create vacant spaces or voids. The works are then open to free interpretation, interactive participation by the public, and the constant reinvention of meanings through endless negotiations between different individual and collective experiences and aspirations on their equally endless journeys between the global and the local, between history and the present, between reality and projection.

Projects to produce new localities should start by considering the dynamism of the global-local nexus. This is the very context of locality production today. If Appadurai is right and localities are the product of specific contexts and, at the same time, present new contexts for the generation of social life, then cities can potentially become the most vital spaces for the production of localities, when they introduce international or global artistic biennials.

* An earlier version of this text was written for the catalogue of the 2000 Pusan International Contemporary Art Festival (now the Busan Biennial), which was never published. The essay appeared in my collection *On the Mid-Ground*, ed. Yu Hsiao Hwei (Hong Kong: Timezone 8, 2002) and appears here in a revised form.

NOTES

1. Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).
2. *Ibid.*, 198.
3. *Ibid.*
4. Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994).
5. Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991).
6. Trinh T. Minh-ha, "Cotton and Iron" in *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*, ed. Russell Ferguson et al. (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art; Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990), 331.