

Contemporary Art Biennials: Prospects and Problems

Eda Aylin Genç¹, Ruhet Genç²

Abstract: The number of contemporary art biennials worldwide - recurring, independent, large-scale and high-budget international exhibitions - have surged since the early 1990s rendering these events key places in production, legitimization and consumption of works created by artists from all over the world. In addition, mediating between culture and changing social and political issues is included in the discourse of art biennials. Globalization has both increased the engagement of non-Western peripheries in the culture industry and homogenized the artwork presented in the art biennials. This article proposes an analysis of biennials through a review of existing literature in the context of contemporary art biennials. Legitimization and promotion of artworks through marketing and branding strategies are presented along with the cultural dominance prevailing in these periodic events.

Keywords: Contemporary Art; Art Biennial; Biennial Exhibition; Globalization; Art world

1. Introduction

International Art Biennials have grown in numbers in the last decade, being held in more than 50 countries around the world (Vogel, 2010). Globalization along with economic and political changes has enabled the rise of new biennials from places as diverse as Bangkok, Istanbul, Gwangju, and Singapore. Furthermore, these exhibitions occur in various cities in certain countries such as Germany, the United States, Canada, France, and so on (Biennial Foundation, 2020).

“Biennial”, derived from the Latin word biennium, means continuing or lasting for a period of two years (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). It refers within the art world not only to large-scale international contemporary art exhibitions but also to festivals and conferences. In this study, the focus will be on exhibitions of contemporary art. The aim of this paper is to examine the opportunities generated by the biennials in the context of contemporary art and existing problems in the current biennial

¹ PhD, Kultur University, Turkey, Address: Ataköy 7-8-9-10, E5 Karayolu Üzeri Ataköy Yerleşkesi, 34158 Bakırköy, Istanbul, Turkey.

² Professor, PhD, Turkish German University, Turkey, Address: Merkez, Şahinkaya Cd. No:86, 34820 Beykoz/İstanbul, Turkey, Corresponding author: drgench@gmail.com.

exhibitions as marketing becomes prevalent in the art world. The methodology of the paper is literature review along with the evaluation of the findings. Common characteristics of contemporary art biennials from across the world is also presented.

Although it mostly is composed of heterogeneous projects with differences in aims, funding, politics, economic and cultural contexts, some common features ascribed to these art events are existing (Kompatsiaris, 2014). They are created in a way that has both a cosmopolitan outlook and an ability to express the artistic and cultural characteristics of their host cities, a quality that makes them agents of what has been called “glocalisation” (De Duve, 2007).

Further, the Biennial is funded by public or private funds, which are typically not directly relying on art investors which in turn gives it greater freedom to include forms of art without a profit motive (Basualdo, 2010). Additionally, biennials are typically focused on a theme or idea to be conveyed by the curator(s) (Tang, 2011), who is considered as a “recent reincarnation of the model of the independent intellectual” (Basualdo, 2010), and a “cultural mediator” related to the “organization of emerging and open-ended cultural encounter, exchange, and enactment” (O’Neil & Wilson, 2010).

2. Potentials and Opportunities of Contemporary Art Biennials

Besides the growth in their number, international art biennials have evolved into one of the most important and acclaimed exhibition, production, and knowledge creation formats for contemporary art (Ferguson & Hoegsberg, 2010; Greenberg, Ferguson, & Nairne, 1996). Other than presenting art, biennials are unique in that they also have a political role and are influenced by current political developments and movements of thoughts. Especially during the 2000s, the Biennial started to be viewed as a discursive exhibition that shows art and at the same time mediate between art and current social and political issues with the format of the conference or the laboratory (Ferguson & Hoegsberg, 2010; Adajania, 2012; Papastergiadis & Martin, 2011).

Biennials encourage critical thinking on topics of history, culture, and society by promoting public debates and provocative artworks (Filipovic et al., 2010). Acting as a catalyst for social, political, and cultural changes, these large-scale international art events further help the audience view the artwork in regard to spatial,

architectural, cultural, and historical features attributed to these events and connect with it (McEvelley, 1993).

Moreover, they establish international networks and promote political openness and tolerance which in turn reduce national, cultural and political isolation. They thereby enhance the social liberation process and ensure permanence and social change by its principle of continuity (Vogel, 2010). In this regard, as Simon Sheikh described, the Biennial is a “spaces of hope” (Sheikh, 2010).

As classical and modern art world revolved around museum and gallery exhibitions (Greenberg et al., 1996), contemporary art is accessible through biennial exhibitions. biennials have long ensured reception, history, and conceptualization of contemporary art, which concentrate on spatial circumstances that secure the popularity of the artwork, rather than the artwork itself (Clark 2010; Ferguson & Hoegsberg, 2010). Even so, these events are only slowly getting included in the literature on art history in the globalization context (Basualdo, 2010; Bydler, 2004; Filipovic et al., 2010).

In addition to the above-mentioned unique features, the intentions for hosting a biennial in any city differs. As is usual, biennials are also a means of joining international trade and culture by increasing tourism activities or fostering economic regeneration through contemporary art (Byrne, 2006). They became the chance to import the most creative works of art to attract visitors and impress international press alike.

As the relationship between art and economy, society, and culture renders the art biennials and important component of the culture industry and an opportunity for global peripheries to be included and gain visibility in the contemporary art world (Nadarajan, 2006), urban development programs has involved art biennials (Markin, 2016). Urban revitalization becomes easier to realize with new art spaces, restored historical neighborhoods, and increased cultural consumption through art biennials as the hosting cities become popular cultural tourism destinations (Kwon, 2004; Stallabrass, 2004).

Apart from these, biennials introduce local artists to the world of contemporary art and provide them with opportunities for financial support. Thus, biennials help local art practitioners draw international attention and publicity by displaying their work to critics, curators, and gallery directors from across the world owing to its large audiences, as well as encouraging cultural tourism (Tang, 2007).

3. Problems and Criticisms of Contemporary Art Biennials

While Sao Paulo Biennale (Brazil), Documenta (Kassel, Germany) or the Kwangju Biennale (South Korea) have been acclaimed internationally, almost a dozen other biennials have failed to reach their status, showing that branding and sustainability are critical within the global contemporary art world (Rodner, 2011).

Differentiating one social group from another was thought to be depending on the cultural capital it has by the sociologists of the Bourdieu school. Now that economic capital is also considered to have the same effect, creating art has become associated with making money (Hughes, 1984). Large-scale art events as biennials are too related to profit and commerce along with marketing and branding activities. The study presents the monetary value of the artwork as well as the prestige of the artist is affected positively by the branded auctions, branded dealers, and the roots of branded collectors (Thompson, 2008).

Art practitioners such as artists, curators, gallery owners, dealers, and critics often create narratives, for adding value to contemporary artwork by using the discourse in lieu of the work itself (Rodner, 2011). Furthermore, in the modern art world, recognition of new works is not gained according to consumer demand, but it is created from scratch. Drummond's (2006) five-stages model - Creation, Quotation, Interpretation, Recontextualization, and Consumption - demonstrates how the interaction of particular people, events, and contexts can develop a new cultural and commercial market even for Old Masters like Caravaggio. Fillis (2004) suggests that arts organizations establish a more creative entrepreneurial marketing approach instead of pursuing existing marketing strategies. Schroeder and Salzer-Moerling (2006) investigate in their book how the inclusion of a cultural component in branding is needed.

Creating an identity for their product to tell what it represents is an important marketing method for brands in attracting the consumer (Aacker & Joachimsthaler, 2000). Rodner's (2011) research presents that identity is of utmost importance in branding of individual artists and improving the cultural positioning of nations that engage in biennials.

Engaging in a distinguished art biennial is considered as a way of gaining recognition for the artwork and symbolic power by the artists (Swartz, 1997). For artists, participating in Venice Biennale is a way to advance their career, increase the prices of their work, and reach a prominent dealer (Velthuis, 2011). Takashi Murakami sets an example in this regard, as his attendance in 46th Venice Biennale in 1995 led his

presence in other major exhibitions in Australia, Austria, France, and the USA and secured his brand equity which then provided him with a corporate association with Louis Vuitton, museum retrospectives and a permanent exhibition at the Los Angeles MOCA and the MoMA in New York (Thornton, 2009).

Furthermore, Moody (2002) remarks that artists are more interested in the marketing of their work than creating it. Contemporary artists benefit from marketing and branding to increase the attraction to their work and gain success (Aspden, 2009).

However, these particular characteristics attributed to contemporary art biennials draw criticism as well. As globalization progresses, the proliferation of biennials develops the so-called biennial culture and biennial artists, which translates to the occurrence of similar works and themes in several art biennials (Jones, 2010). Therefore, biennials produce a kind of global standard for contemporary art that leads to a homogenized artistic environment (Byrne, 2006; Filipovic, 2010).

The development of this particular kind of art, ubiquitous at biennials comes along with a considerable fall in the 'specificity' of localized cultural production, only alternative to it being a return to more traditional forms of artistic interpretation which avoids the problem (Byrne, 2006). For example, Adrian Searle (2004) indicated in his article 'Visual arts: Scouse stew' that the presentation of similar works in biennials is an endemic problem and that the indifference of international art overshadows the appreciation of culturally specific distinctions.

On the other hand, biennials have been criticized for underrepresenting works of artists from outside the Western hemisphere compared to their Western counterparts. Although biennials focus on contemporary art globally, even the artistic careers of artists from peripheries, who pursue acknowledgment within the international art world, begin in global cities, such as New York, London, and Berlin (Wu, 2007). It is argued that, even though biennials aim to stand as an alternative to Western museum institution in order to reform conventional notions of art and culture and to equally represent cultures, histories, and politics of non-Western nations, they reproduce the Western museum's classical frame 'white cube' (Filipovic, 2014).

The recent increase in the number and popularity of contemporary art biennials globally does not necessarily imply the same mobility and interaction opportunities for every nation (Siegert, 2014), or the formation of a decolonized and democratic art world (Bethwaite & Kangas, 2018).

Venice Biennale is considered as the Olympics of contemporary art since it promotes artistic productions worldwide (Adam, 2009), however, only 77 countries were 600

present in the 53rd Venice Biennale, which is very low when compared to the Olympics and demonstrates that these large-scale exhibitions are constraint to culturally and economically powerful nations (Rodner, 2011). The national pavilions at the Venice Biennale are still considered to be formed according to the geopolitical power of various nations (Wu, 2007), and powerful countries are privileged (Tang, 2007). Despite the fact that The Biennale's discourse aims to remove cultural hierarchies, the artworks of countries from the non-Western hemisphere with temporary pavilions still cannot find a place in locations that attract the visitors most such as the pavilions close to the main entrance (Tang, 2007). Thus, biennials contribute to the cultural hegemony of the West or Global North (de Duve, 2007).

Biennials are also criticized for changing the symbolic value of art with marketing practices (Basualdo, 2010) and becoming showcases with commercial motivations (Filipovic et al., 2010). In addition, it is argued that the work to be exhibited at biennials is determined according to corporate funding (Grace, 2015; Kabov, 2016) which may damage the autonomous status of art. The fact that most governments from non-Western regions do not have enough resources to finance the costs of pavilions at Venice Biennale makes private funding necessary for Southern artists, which may lead them to work in accordance with Western funders (Kabov, 2016).

4. Concluding Remarks

Biennials as a global phenomenon are considered as most convenient site where production, legitimization and consumption of contemporary art takes place and new stories, histories and relationships are constantly produced. They have been central to the development of new contemporary art practices such as the curatorial. Over the last decades, these large-scale art exhibitions occurring periodically have made it possible for the most problematic cultural, societal, and political issues to become apparent by wide audiences. They have enabled a globally networked culture industry. Additionally, they served as an opportunity for a hosting city to gain visibility and attract tourists.

As the criticisms in the contemporary art literature shows contemporary art biennials have played a role in reproducing cultural domination of the Western countries. Although there is no doubt that participating in a branded biennial event helps artists gain popularity and wealth, artists from the non-Western peripheries are

underrepresented or create similar, homogenized artworks under the influence of their Western funders.

4. References

- Aacker, D. A., & Joachimsthaler, E. (2000). *Brand Leadership*. New York: Free Press.
- Adajania, N. (2012). Knowledge Embedded in a Replenished Sociality: The Discursive Biennial. In J. Hoffman (Ed.) *The Exhibitionist*, No. 6 (pp. 49-53). Berlin: Archive Books.
- Aspden, P. (2009 September). On the brand wagon. *Financial Times (Life & Arts)*, p. 11.
- Basualdo, C. (2010). The Unstable Situation. In E. Filipovic., M. van Hal & S. Øvstebø (Eds.). *The Biennial Reader* (1st ed., pp. 124–135). Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz.
- Biennial Foundation. (2020). *Directory of Biennials*. Retrieved December 10, 2020, from <https://www.biennialfoundation.org/network/biennial-map/>.
- Bethwaite, J., & Kangas, A. (2018). The Scales, Politics, and Political Economies of Contemporary Art Biennials. *Arts & International Affairs*, (2), 73-90.
- Bydler, C. (2004). *The Global Artworld, Inc.: On the Globalization of Contemporary Art*. Uppsala: Uppsala University.
- Byrne, J. (2006). Contemporary Art and Globalization: Biennials and the Emergence of the De-Centered Artist. *The International Journal of the Humanities: Annual Review*, 3(1), 169-172.
- Clark, J. (2010). Biennials as Structures for the Writing of Art History: The Asian Perspective. In M. van Hal, S. Øvstebø, & E. Filipovic (Eds.). *The biennial reader*, (1st ed., pp. 164-183). Ostfildern: Bergen Kunsthall and Hatje Cantz.
- De Duve, T. (2007). The Glocal and the Singuniversal: Reflections on Art and Culture in the Global World. *Third Text*, 21(6), 681–688.
- Drummond, K. (2006). The Migration of Art from museum to Market: Consuming Caravaggio. *Marketing Theory and Practice*, 6(1), 85-105.
- Ferguson, B., & Hoegsberg, M. (2010). Talking and Thinking about Biennials: The Potential of Discursivity. In S. Øvstebø, M. van Hal, & E. Filipovic (Eds.). *The Biennial Reader* (1st ed., pp. 360–375). Bergen: Bergen Kunsthall & Hatje Cantz.
- Filipovic, E., van Hal, M., & Øvstebø, S. (Eds.). (2010). *The Biennial Reader*. Bergen: Bergen Kunsthall.
- Filipovic, E. (2014). The Global White Cube. *oncurating.org*, (22), 45–63.
- Fillis, I. (2004). *The Entrepreneurial Artist as Marketer: Drawing from the Smaller-Firm Literature*.