

Biennials in the New Age

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In recent years we have witnessed the simultaneous collapse of ideologies and of areas of consensus which were built around notions of progress and modernity.

What Lyotard called the "Grand Narratives", which formed the backbone of the modernistic aesthetic, have been replaced with a much broader questioning of the place of art in society and of the role of the individual artist as a producer of creative capital, if you would like to look at it that way, for use by the community at large.

Today's narratives are neither grand nor monolithic, but personal, multi-layered and contradictory. History has been not so much abolished as made available, as "freely usable material", which sets no example and establishes no generally accepted values. This far-reaching break with the past was consummated, I believe, with the collapse of the binary ideological divisions between capitalism and communism, and between centre and periphery. It signified a possible end to the Hegelian notion of history and the advent of what Francis Fukuyama has described as the "era of integral Capitalism". Okwui Enwezor, the Curator of Documenta 11, has described this very well as "a post-Colonial world of proximities", signalling "the terrible nearness of distant places".

Museums now find it difficult to adjust: With the advent of video and the internet, history, like community (see Benedict Anderson), is a product of the imagination and becomes accessible to people all over the globe that have previously been denied access to anything beyond their immediate vicinity and their most recent past. In the light of this, it might be argued that the narratives, or micro-narratives, offered by the most richly-endowed institutions in the West, appear increasingly ex-centric, to the extent that they refer almost exclusively, to a kind of "trophy art", that offers a largely Eurocentric, colonial or post-colonial, modernist or post-modernist, view of the past. Consequently, what they do, or collect, risks immediate relegation to the status of cultural heritage.

For museums, commercialism and media involvement are the new facts of life, as is the political pressure to cater for the needs of an increasingly diversified public. Nowadays, the Museum of Modern, or Contemporary Art, has to

compete for people's spare time and cash, not only with divergent readings of the past, but with the allures of an increasingly sophisticated leisure industry. They have to offset the diminishing support from the public purse by aggressive marketing and a wide range of funding initiatives, from the sale of publications and merchandise to corporate entertaining and a smorgasbord of social events. Even education is no longer conceived as a purely altruistic or philanthropic activity, but as a marketing tool or a benchmark for government policies of "social inclusion".

I would suggest that new technologies, new types of collaboration between artists, intellectuals and audiences, and new organisational structures, which are at least partially independent of the western-dominated art market and museums hierarchy, have brought us some steps closer to the "socialisation" of art and the "dematerialisation" of the work of art, dreamt of by the conceptual and processual artists of the late 1960s and early 1970s. A new relativism owes less to traditional aesthetic categories than to the collapse of ideologies and the boundless terrains of the internet and the world-wide web. This may have its negative aspects, but it is important, as a democratising force, in abolishing the distances of culture, time and space. Temporary, or virtual events (one very quickly becomes the other), and their global diffusion, have induced a shift in our perceptions of art and its place in our lives. I will refer very rapidly to two examples of this.

The first of these, Manifesta, is a large European Biennial of Contemporary Art, conceived in the early '90s, after the fall of the Berlin Wall, as a new form of nomadic, trans-European event, which would enable artists, writers and the wider public to interact across boundaries and away from the usual political and commercial pressures. Manifesta is not unique, but some of its characteristics, such as its mobility, its collaborative working methods and its reliance on networking, are characteristic of a new era. To this, we should add interdisciplinarity, and the absence of formal hierarchies, since it is fundamental to many young artists today to be able to roam freely across all fields of human endeavour, from architecture and fashion to anthropology and the social sciences, and to be able to enlist all forms of verbal and visual, or non-visual, means of expression to their own ends. Much of the work generated by the artists taking part in Manifesta is of a distinctly informal and open-ended nature, determined by the provisional context. The recrudescence of narrative, biographical and autobiographical elements, which I touched on earlier, is as much an expression of the liberation from inherited dogma (including the modernist narrative of aestheticism) as it is a critique of the artificially constructed sites of memory (the institutional infrastructure of "modernist" art). Events such as Manifesta collectively provide a support structure capable of challenging that of the fixed institutions. They now make it possible for young, relatively anonymous, artists to communicate with a scattered audience beyond the borders of their own countries (where they are frequently ignored) and to create a body of work that is as peripatetic as it is sometimes ephemeral.

The second organisation with which I am privileged to be associated, but to which I can also refer only briefly, is called the Institute of International Visual Arts (inIVA), which was born in part out of the realisation that the larger cultural institutions had done little to reflect an awareness of the cultural diversity of the new Europe. Even in the nation states of Western Europe, which have a history of relative political stability and ethnic and cultural uniformity, it is simply no longer possible to talk, think or argue in terms of what the Germans call a "Leitkultur", or "guiding culture". Better, perhaps, as a metaphor for modern life –with all the ambiguities the image suggests– the former sprawling, multi-lingual, multi-cultural, empire of the Habsburgs, and the Balkanisation of our cherished illusions of undivided nation-

and selfhood! I use the term “Balkanisation” in the positive sense, not with its negative connotations of violence and fragmentation, but concepts and mere words have little more stability than the reality they describe (exile and displacement were defining conditions of the twentieth century)! The best illustration of what I mean is the fact that there may already be living on our continent up to twenty million people whose cultural roots are in other parts of the world. This both serves as a destabilising factor and opens the door to a wealth of exciting opportunities. The role inIVA can play, through its programme of talks, publications and exhibitions, is to bring out concealed historical and cultural narratives, reveal and develop personal histories and form a bridge between the familiar world that surrounds us and the unfamiliar world that is hidden within.

Relations between centre and periphery have, then, been stood on their heads, or rather, the dynamics of these relations has irrevocably changed. London may suddenly appear to be an international centre for culture, media and fashion, but it is probably easier to feel physically, or even spiritually, isolated in a studio in Hackney, which boasts a population of ten thousand artists (the figure quoted in some of the nearby Whitechapel Gallery’s latest publicity) than in Delhi, say, or Sarajevo.

To conclude: The dialectic between art and life is constantly in flux, and constantly renewed. Today, our attention has increasingly shifted from the work itself to, first, the artist, then, the physical, social and political context and, finally, to the very act of communication –the traces of activity, before they are erased. The old opposition between “art” and “world” has collapsed. Either our “Post-modern” planet is gradually being gentrified, transformed into its own image, into a spectacle duplicating itself, in the pessimistic words of the art historian Yves-Alain Bois (26), or we stand at the threshold of exciting new developments and –who knows?– a new, more widely shared Renaissance, and a new form of Enlightenment.

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