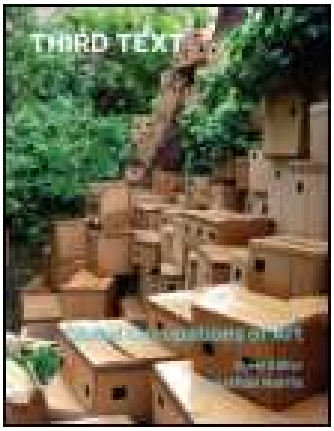

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Biennials of the South on the Edges of the Global

Anthony Gardner and Charles Green

ORIGIN STORIES

A century after their first incarnation in Venice in 1895, biennials are finally emerging as crucial to art history. From the broad sweep of anthologies dedicated to 'biennialogy' as a subject of research, through to monographs on specific biennials (Venice, Istanbul, São Paulo, Dakar) or even on specific editions of particular biennials (such as the third Bienal de la Habana in 1989) – all are making bookshelves buckle under the weight of a new focus in art discourse. These are the infant growth spurts of 'biennial studies', part of the burgeoning market in exhibition and curatorial histories that are redeveloping the discipline worldwide.[1]

Yet, despite the nascence of this scholarly field, two lines of thinking have already begun crudely to shape it. The first is what we might call the 'biennials are bad' model in which biennials are perceived as little more than handmaidens to globalized neoliberalism. Both globalization and biennialization have their roots in nineteenth-century capitalism's competitive and colonial drives that figured most clearly in the world's fairs and universal exhibitions that developed in London in 1851 and spread across Europe, North America and Australasia in subsequent decades, culminating in the formation of the Venice Biennale and Pittsburgh's Carnegie Annual in the mid-1890s. Both phenomena have only increased their voracity in the wake of Soviet Communism, groping their way into previously off-limits locales and transforming them into new markets for new products and new networks. And both thrive on this perpetuation of 'the new' – new artists, new designs, new desires, the list goes on – that, coupled with an insistence on flexibility and mobility, threatens to doom us to fixation on an alluring, ever-changing yet perpetually present *now*, and thus to ignoring the past and the return of colonial spectres within the neocolonial.[2]

The second line of thinking is largely antithetical to the first. This is what we might call the 'biennials bring hope' model in which biennials

1. The term 'biennialogy' was coined by Elena Filipovic, Marieke van Hal and Solveig Øvstebø in the introduction to their edited volume *The Biennial Reader: An Anthology on Large-Scale Perennial Exhibitions of Contemporary Art*, Bergen Kunsthall, and Hatje Cantz Verlag, Bergen and Ostfildern, 2010, pp 12–27. Other path-breakers in this discourse include Yacouba Konaté, *La Biennale de Dakar: Pour une esthétique de la création africaine contemporaine*, L'Harmattan, Paris, 2009; Francisco Matarazzo Sobrinho, Agnaldo Farias, ed, *50 anos Bienal de São Paulo: 1951–2001: Homenagem a Francisco Matarazzo Sobrinho*, Fundaçao Bienal de São Paulo, São Paulo, 2001; and Rachel Weiss et al, *Making Art Global (Part 1): The Third Havana Biennial 1989*, Afterall Books, London, 2011.

2. George Baker, 'The Globalization of the False: A Response to Okwui Enwezor', *Documents* 23, 2004, pp 20–25; Bruce Altshuler, 'Exhibition History and the Biennale'

are positioned as sites for social dialogue and cross-disciplinary exchange, generating a multicultural, temporary utopia to contest what curator Okwui Enwezor calls 'the numbing logic of spectacular capitalism'.[3] Enwezor's own Documenta 11 (2002) is the benchmark for this model, comprising as it was four 'platforms' of symposia staged in Europe, the Caribbean, West Africa and India, each brimming with scholars and artists from different parts of the world debating the stakes of contemporary urban culture. A fifth platform, the Kassel exhibition, continued these modes of global dialogue through the curatorship of a determinedly global selection of artworks. This model is anchored not in the nineteenth century, however, but in 1989, or more precisely in exhibitions staged in 1989 – Jean-Hubert Martin's 'Magiciens de la terre' in Paris, Rasheed Araeen's 'The Other Story' in London and, in rarer though more challenging accounts, the third Bienal de la Habana – that are now heralded as transforming how art is displayed and discussed.[4]

Together, these antinomies underpin a history of biennials rendered ubiquitous or even normalized through the repetition of its citation. What is equally striking about this history, though, is how tethered it remains to a worldview grounded in the metropoles and cultural economies that hug the North Atlantic Ocean. On the one hand, it seems, biennials are inherently the pawn of Euro-American capital, unproblematically collapsing neoliberalism and colonialism through something of a temporal jump cut between the nineteenth century and now. On the other hand, their potentialities draw strength from the presumed openness and generosity of exhibitions held in the art world centres of yore – Paris, London, even New York if we extend the discourse of exhibition histories to an oft-cited *bête noire*, the 1984 '"Primitivism" in 20th Century Art' exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art – and which reach their apogee in the Venice Biennale's greatest rival for international prestige, the Documenta.[5] Biennials are thus signs of either a North Atlantic will to power or a North Atlantic generosity of spirit – or, indeed, a conjunction of these antinomic forces: a quality of power through generosity and a generous quantity through power. In other words, the histories of biennials as they currently stand remain resolutely *Northern* histories – written predominantly by analysts of the North and reinforcing, even in their self-reflexive critique, a lineage of influence within and from the North – despite their claims to globality.

The question we want to pose is whether another view of exhibitions and their histories might emerge if we approach the subject differently. To be more specific, does this lineage shift when seen not from the perpetually insistent demands of the North, but from the viewpoints and aspirations of the South? And by 'South', we mean something more than either the geographical mappings of the southern hemisphere or the geo-economic contours of the 'global South' as a category of economic deprivation. While the notion of 'South' can certainly encompass these terrains, it also asserts the histories of colonialism that coexist and are shared throughout the world – what curator Beatriz Bustos Oyanedel calls 'the link of our tragedies' that ties the settler to the indigenous in ways distinct from those imposed by the heavy hand of distant imperial headquarters, and which is not limited to early modern colonialism or its settler migrations but equally pertains to the more recent colonial incursions of neoliberal economics and its international relations.[6] And while

and Caroline Jones, 'Biennial Culture: A Longer History', in Clarissa Ricci, ed, *Starting from Venice: Studies on the Biennale*, Et Al Edizioni, Milan, 2010, pp 17–27 and pp 28–49 respectively.

3. Okwui Enwezor, 'On Mega-Exhibitions and the Antinomies of a Transnational Global Form', *Documents* 23, spring 2004, pp 2–19, p 2; Nikos Papastergiadis and Meredith Martin, 'Art Biennales and Cities as Platforms for Global Dialogue', in Gerard Delanty et al, eds, *Festivals and the Cultural Public Sphere*, Routledge, Oxford and London, 2011, pp 45–62

4. These three exhibitions were the greatest cultural forces of the period, according to the editors of the journal *Afterall*, which held a symposium at London's Tate Britain on 3 April 2009, dedicated to 'Exhibitions and the World at Large' (and which has been particularly important for the development of *Afterall*'s series of books on landmark 'exhibition histories' – though whether monographic studies of singular exhibitions are the same as a broader historicization of exhibitions is something we would dispute).

5. Chin-tao Wu's critiques of the claims to postcolonial openness made about Documenta 11 remain the most significant and withering thus far: Chin-tao Wu, 'Biennials without Borders?', *New Left Review* 57, May–June 2009, pp 107–115. This trajectory can also be traced through the confluence of liberalism and postcolonialism in Thomas McEvilley's writings, especially his critique of *Primitivism*, 'Doctor Lawyer Indian Chief: "Primitivism" in Twentieth Century Art at the Museum of Modern Art', *Artforum*, vol 23, no

historical reflection is central to the South, it does not exclude the significance of constructive initiatives generated out of and in defiance of these histories: that is, the web of potentialities that can connect and be coordinated across the cultures of the South, emphasizing 'South' as 'a direction as well as a place', to cite historian Kevin Murray, and as a zone of agency and creation, not simply poverty and exploitation.[7]

The material that follows is thus guided by a series of questions that can, we hope, open up a much-needed reimagining of the histories of exhibitions across the globe in recent decades. What might a *Southern* perspective of biennials look like? What agitations or alternatives might that perspective pose for the histories of these exhibitions as we have come to know them thus far? Or does the narrative remain in effect the same no matter which direction it faces? We do not presume to address all the nuances in these questions; given its sheer eclecticism, a Southern history of biennials may prove impossible to conscript into a linear narrative. It is nonetheless clear that these still largely occluded histories do not quite fit the habitual framings of biennials as beginning with a first wave at the close of the nineteenth century and segueing neatly into the neo-imperial tidal force of the 1990s and 2000s. They instead coincide with what we consider to be a second wave of biennialization that developed from the mid-1950s into the 1980s and which insisted upon a self-conscious, critical regionalism as the means for realigning cultural networks across geopolitical divides.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF SOUTHERN BIENNIALS

Where might these histories begin? If the usual narratives find their origins in the 1890s, or in the 1955 debut of Documenta and its aim to rehabilitate the art and urban development of postwar West Germany, then perhaps we, too, could start in 1955: on the southern edges of the Mediterranean Sea, in Alexandria, and the development of one of the first regionally orientated biennials, the Biennale de la Méditerranée. This narrative would still sustain the reassuring sensation of familiarity for biennial aficionados for, much like the exhibitions in Venice or São Paulo, Alexandria's biennial divided its participants and presentations according to national origin, with selections determined by (for the most part, consular) officials from each of the nations involved. Moreover – and, again, like its Venetian or Kassel counterparts – this biennial sought to use the display of recent art as the means to loop back to a glorious era of local art production so as to resurrect the city's international and cultural status. In this case, that was the third century BCE when Alexandria was 'the beacon of the Arts, the centre of thinking, the homeland of Philosophy', according to the prefatory text by the biennial's General Commissioner, Hussein Sobhi.[8]

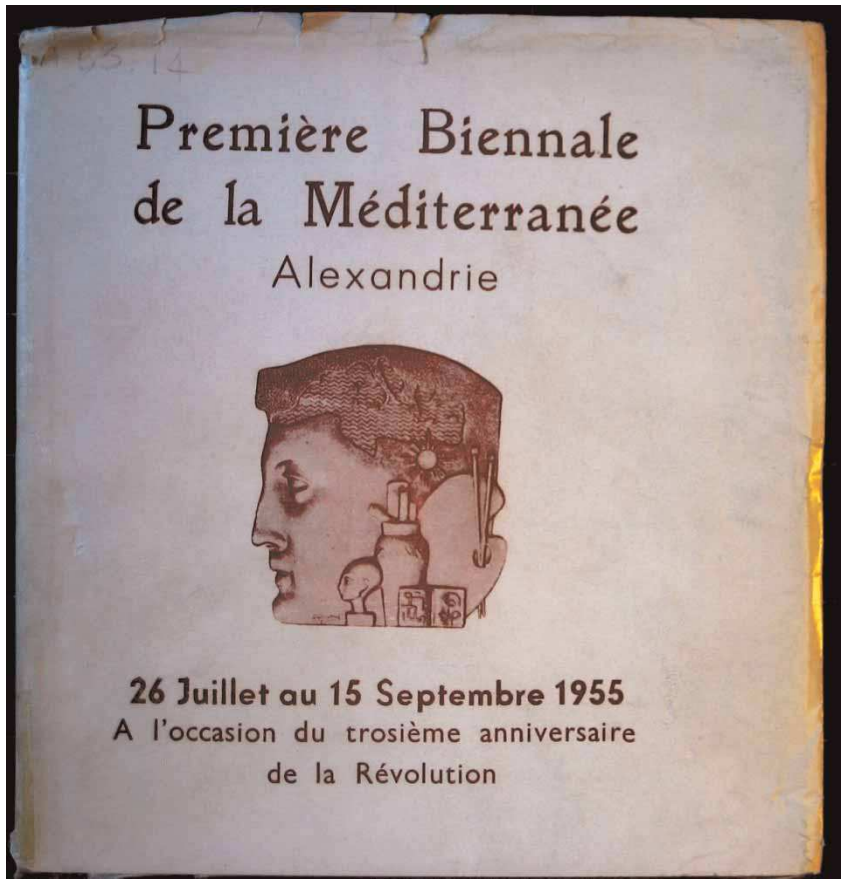
Politics were central to this vision, too, for the Biennale de la Méditerranée was also designed to commemorate the third anniversary of the Egyptian Revolution that eventually swept Gamal Abdel Nasser – the biennial's chief patron – to the country's presidency. Yet while Nasser would later promote a pan-Arab agenda as the cornerstone of

3, November 1984, pp 54–61, and support for so-called 'third world' biennials, 'Arrivederci, Venice: The "Third World" Biennials', *Artforum International*, vol 32, no 3, November 1993, pp 19–21.

6. Discussion with the authors, 26 September 2011. See also Nikos Papastergiadis, 'What is the South?', *Thesis Eleven*, vol 100, no 1, February 2010, pp 141–156.

7. Kevin Murray, 'Keys to the South' (as part of 'The Idea of South: Australia's Global Positioning'), *Australian Humanities Review* 44, March 2008, p 26. A similar insistence upon the South's generative capacities can be found in Raewyn Connell, *Southern Theory: The Global Dynamics of Knowledge in Social Science*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 2007, and such journals as *Revista del sur* and *Nepantla: Views from South*. We should also note, though, that 'there is no single answer to the question, "What is the South?"', as Anthony Gardner claims in the introduction to *Mapping South: Journeys in South–South Cultural Relations*, The South Project, Melbourne, 2013. 'If anything, the South is itself a mode of questioning… As it sparks new links between artists and audiences from different regions, it provokes new ways of thinking about global cultural currents. It is thus a question always open to debate and discussion – including, it has to be said, debate about whether "South" is in fact an adequate frame for such discussions, or a category that still limits the actual complexities of transcultural relations, setting them in overly simplistic opposition to the "North", to the canonical and to the "normal" narratives through which globalisation is often understood today.'

8. Hussein Sobhi, untitled preface in *Première Biennale de la Méditerranée Alexandrie*, Musée des Beaux-Arts, Alexandria, 1955, p vii. All translations are by the authors of this article.



Cover for the catalogue of the first Biennale de la Méditerrannée, 1955, photo: the authors

his political philosophies, it was a *Mediterranean* regionalism that was the force driving the first Alexandrian biennial. Such a Mediterraneanist focus was, of course, not new to the region itself (the Egyptian, Greek and Roman empires had clearly emphasized that), but it *was* a different model for presenting a biennial. Rather than foreground competition between artists from different countries and cultures – most obviously through the awarding of prizes to specific artists, which in Venice, Pittsburgh and elsewhere had often resulted in bitter and jealous rivalries as much as arbitrary determinations of 'quality' – Alexandria's biennial sought (at least rhetorically) 'a certain provision for artistic co-operation' among its participants, who came from the full circumference of the Mediterranean Sea: from Egypt, Spain, Greece, France, Italy, Lebanon, Yugoslavia and Syria, with artists from Albania, Morocco and Tunisia joining the roster in 1957.[9] On one level, this 'artistic co-operation' would (or so the biennial's organizers hoped) reveal a 'common denominator [that] is properly Mediterranean', an aesthetic rapprochement that could cross different cultural traditions.[10] But we should also remember that 1955 was the very height of the Cold War. Bringing together artists from both sides of the Iron Curtain, as well as from countries subject to

9. This was the argument made by Abdel Latif el Baghdadi in the Biennale catalogue, *Première Biennale*, op cit.

10. This claim belongs to Hanna Simaika, the Director of Alexandria's Musée des Beaux-Arts and Cultural Centre, in another untitled preface in the catalogue, *Première Biennale de la Méditerranée Alexandrie*, op cit, p 8.

post-fascist dictatorships, isolationism and despair, was no small feat. For Sobhi, in particular, regionalism would be a way to break through those geopolitical divisions, ensuring that 'the biennial will re-establish friendly relations between Mediterranean countries'.[11] And while it would be easy to perceive the biennial and its regionalist ambitions as little more than a pawn in Nasser's identity politics, such a view tends to ignore the significance that regionalism has played in the development and wake of liberation and independence movements. Indeed, if the catalogue for the second Biennale de la Méditerranée is anything to go by, with its frequent references to liberation and new nationalisms along the shores of the Mediterranean, it was precisely the cultural development of decolonizing states – of the new evolving regional identities that could challenge old colonial and new Cold War decrees – that was a primary concern.[12] And it was the medium of the large-scale international biennial that was considered one of the best ways to manifest that regional amicability and transcultural potential.

This might be one starting point for rethinking the histories of biennials. Another might emerge if we venture to the other side of the globe to the Indonesian city of Bandung, which – again auspiciously in 1955 – held the conference at which Asian and African countries that were not aligned with either the US-led capitalist First World or the Soviet-backed Communist Second World sought an alternative, transversal community of so-called 'non-aligned' nations. This was the birth of the Third World not as a racialized category of poverty or under-development, as it would become in the First World's hierarchical imagination, but as a critical geopolitical entity, one based less on explicit ties of solidarity than on shared experiences of decolonization and an insistence on independence from the Russian–American binary of the Cold War.[13] The following year, at a 1956 UNESCO conference in New Delhi, the Bandung Accords took root in international *cultural* relations as well, for it was during this conference that the newly described Third World dedicated itself to promoting alternative routes of cultural as well as commercial exchange from those focused on the First and Second Worlds.[14] By 1961, these routes would be formalized in Yugoslavia in two significant ways: in the official creation of the movement of Non-Aligned Countries in the 1961 conference in Belgrade; and in the new waves of biennials in the country's west that gathered works by artists from across the northern and southern hemispheres in spite of ideological difference. This occurred in music with the first Muzički Biennale Zagreb (or Zagreb Music Biennial, subtitled an 'international festival of contemporary music') taking place for a week in May 1961. During the first editions of the Muzički Biennale, Zagreb hosted Igor Stravinsky, John Cage, Pierre Schaeffer and other significant composers and musicians from across Europe and North America, many performing with the Zagreb Philharmonic Orchestra as well as with students in the Workers' University in the city centre. But it is the visual arts we want to focus on here, given the significance by the early 1960s of Ljubljana's Biennale Grafike (or Biennial of Graphic Arts). It was an exhibition that, to a surprising extent, anticipated calls for an alignment of non-aligned cultures, for the 1961 Biennale Grafike was already the fourth edition in its history.

Like the Biennale de la Méditerranée, the Biennale Grafike was first staged in 1955 with artists from both sides of the Iron Curtain receiving

11. Sobhi, op cit, p vii

12. See the frequent references made by the commissioning consuls-general to post-liberation cultural development in *Deuxième Biennale de la Méditerranée*, exhibition catalogue, Musée des Beaux-Arts, Alexandria, 1957.

13. The Bandung Asia-Africa Conference has recently become a focus again in biennials (most notably through the Bandung Pavilion, 'Bandung Exquisite Corpses and Other Memories', curated by Defne Ayas, Charles Esche, Davide Quadrio and Agung Hujatnikajennong for the 2012 Shanghai Biennale), albeit in terms that erroneously conflate decolonization and postcolonialism, displacing the subtle distinctions between these terms and the significance of those distinctions for reimagining globality and neo-colonialism today. See, for instance, Defne Ayas et al, 'Exquisite Corpses and Other Memories of the Twentieth Century', press release for the Bandung Pavilion, 2012 Shanghai Biennale, available at http://arthubasia.org/archives/9th-shanghai-biennale-bandung-pavilion/, accessed 11 November 2012.

14. This was led chiefly by the accord on the 'Mutual Appreciation of Eastern and Western Cultural Values', a precursor of such projects as 'Dialogue among Civilizations', New Delhi, 2003, that rank among UNESCO's central means for promoting transcultural development and exchange today.

the exhibition's highest awards. Armin Landeck from the United States was the winner of the grand prize, the Prize of the Executive Council of the National Assembly of the People's Republic of Slovenia. Other awards were given to artists from Yugoslavia, Great Britain, Poland and, in a curious deviation from nation-based assignations, to Germaine Richier, who was listed as coming not from France but from the Ecole de Paris. Subsequent editions of the Biennale Grafike through the 1960s would extend the embrace further, including artists from Asia (Japan, China, Thailand, Malaysia), South America (Brazil, Chile, Argentina, Peru, Uruguay), Africa (Sudan, South Africa), as well as Australasia, Eastern and Western Europe and the United Arab Republic, Nasser's short-lived dream-state of Arab unity between Egypt and Syria. The purpose of the Biennale Grafike, as its officials would later recount, hinged directly on contemporary political developments. Its melange of artists and cultural affiliations had as its primary task the 'linking of east and west by the bridge of art', such that it would 'underline the same active non-engagement that coincides entirely with our conception of international relations'.[15] This, in turn, would empower cultural engagements 'without violence… and which give hope for the future'.[16] These were horizontal rather than vertical connections, the ambitions of which were (according to Zoran Kržišnik, the Biennale's founder and long-term Director of Ljubljana's Moderna Galerija) the 'democratisation and dynamisation' of cultural and exhibition practices.[17]

There were obvious complications with these arguments. On the one hand, prizes were retained at the Biennale Grafike; their persistence meant that supposedly 'objective' assertions of quality remained, contradicting the egalitarianism and transversality underpinning the biennial's politics of democratization and its 'active non-engagement' in geopolitical partitions.[18] Moreover, by replicating the political agenda and discourse of the Non-Aligned Movement, the Biennale Grafike risked being little more than promotional fodder for Tito's ambitions to become the Movement's leader or Secretary-General (a position he would indeed hold between 1961 and 1964).[19] This was an ambition shared by Egyptian President Nasser – who in turn succeeded Tito as Secretary-General – such that the Biennale Grafike and the Biennale de la Méditerranée stood as markers in the respective leaders' struggle for hegemony among non-aligned nations. Nonetheless, and as was also the case with the Alexandrian biennial, the Biennale Grafike's history reveals how these exhibitions were also a significant way 'to pursue politics by other means', as Caroline Jones has observed of biennials at their best.[20] What they could create was an arena for experimenting with alternative modes of cultural exchange than those demanded by more dominant models of international relations.

It would not be overstating things to suggest that what these biennials of the non-aligned, of the Third World, of the South, were trying to do was to give form to *cultural* independence in the aftermath of *national* independence – or, to be more precise, in that grey time between decolonization and absorption back into the tectonic undertow of North Atlantic modernity. What new modes of connection could emerge from the interstice between national independence and Cold War diktats? The answer, for the most part, was neither neo-nationalist retreat nor hubristic drives toward globalization but an insistence on *reimagining the*

15. Miha Košak, 'Avant-Propos', in Zoran Kržišnik, *10. Biennale Grafike, Moderna Galerija, Ljubljana Jugoslavija*, exhibition catalogue, Moderna Galerija, Ljubljana, 1973, no pagination. Košak was the President of the Ljubljana City Assembly, the state sponsors of the Biennale Grafike. Significantly, Košak's claims would pre-empt the very similar rhetoric espoused by the itinerant European biennial Manifesta by more than twenty years.

16. Ibid

17. Zoran Kržišnik, 'Introduction', in *10. Biennale Grafike*, op cit, no pagination. Kržišnik was also the Secretary General of the Biennale Grafike and ran the Moderna Galerija from 1957 to 1986.

18. This was in fact a major concern for Kržišnik as well. He devoted a great deal of his introduction to the 1973 exhibition to deflecting any criticism about awarding prizes (especially in the wake of the Venice Biennale's withdrawal of prizes after the artist- and student-led protests at the Biennale in 1968), instead emphasizing the need for prizes to guarantee quality and 'a constructive spirit of competition'. See ibid, no pagination.

19. Kržišnik later argued that the Biennale Grafike was an explicit materialization of Tito's politics, claiming that 'the idea of non-alignment arose and at that time [in the mid-1950s] I proved to Marshal Tito… that the biennial of graphic arts was actually a materialisation of what was being referred to as openness, which was then seen as non-alignment'. Interview with Beti Žerovc (2007), available at http://29gbljubljana.wordpress.com/history/interview-with-zoran-krzisnik/, last accessed 4 September 2012.

20. Jones, op cit, p 46

Installation view of the 2nd Biennale of Sydney, 1976, display at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, including, in the foreground, Kishio Suga, *Things Dependence*, 1976, image courtesy of the Biennale of Sydney

regional. In Latin and South America from the late 1960s to the early 1970s, for instance, a spate of biennials opened. In large part, these biennials sought to redirect the axis of cultural and economic influence away from the North (whether that be the United States or Iberia) so as to concentrate on exchange with neighbours in the Caribbean and other parts of South and Central America. In 1968, the Colombian city of Medellín held the first Bienal de Coltejer – named after the city's textile business, the largest at the time in South America, and organized by local dentist and artist Leonel Estrada – with hundreds of works shown by artists from across the Americas and the Caribbean, as well as some from Canada, the United States and Spain. Masks from Haiti, kinetic art from Venezuela and Argentina, mail art from Peru, paintings, engravings and installations intermingled to emphasize the diversity of Ibero-American practices, all the while dispensing with the separation of artworks according to their makers' nationality (the exhibition model familiar from the world's fairs, the Venice Biennale, the Bienal de São Paulo and many others). A similarly regional focus also developed in the first Bienal del

Grabado Latinoamericano in San Juan, Puerto Rico, in 1970 (albeit with a strict focus on graphic arts rather than the expansive range of practices shown in Medellín), as well as the Bienal Americana de Artes Gráficas in Cali, Colombia, in 1971, and the Bienal Internacional de Arte in Valparaiso, Chile, in 1973.

At the same time, biennials across Asia and in Australia were also seeking to integrate the local within the regional. Again, these exhibitions sought viable modes of internationalism that departed from the Cold War binary. The Biennale of Asian Art in Dhaka, Bangladesh, concentrated primarily but not exclusively on South Asian painting, sculpture and works on paper for its first instalment in 1981. After its launch to commemorate the opening of the Sydney Opera House in Australia in 1973, the Biennale of Sydney's second edition, in 1976, gathered together sculpture and performance from the Pacific Rim, bringing Australian land art and modernist sculpture into dialogue with similar works by Japanese and Korean artists, as well as with installations from the San Francisco Bay Area (most notably a 'Mother's Day' time capsule and three-channel video installation by the Ant Farm collective). The goal, according to curator Tom McCullough, was to encourage 'a "Pacific Triangle" of exchange and mutual influence, with Australia and New Zealand forming a third angle' in conjunction with Asia and the American West Coast.[21] In 1974, meanwhile, the Baghdad-based Union of Arab Artists established the Arab Art Biennial, an exhibition designed to unite and showcase:

> . . . all the plastic arts in a contemporary approach, inspired by Arab heritage and world cultural developments for the purpose of formulating, through interaction of Arab art. . . a convenient atmosphere for the strengthening of artistic and social ties among the Arab artists, and the creation of distinct Arab art.[22]

Moreover, while the first edition of the Arab Art Biennial would be held in the Union's home-city of Baghdad, it would also migrate to 'every other

Installation view of the 1st Arab Art Biennial, 1974, as published in *Intégrale: Revue de création plastique et littéraire*, December 1974, p 4

21. Thomas G McCullough, ed, *Second Biennale of Sydney: Recent International Forms in Art*, exhibition catalogue, Biennale of Sydney, Sydney, 1976, no pagination. This curatorial focus would be redirected dramatically in the third Biennale of Sydney, however, with curator Nick Waterlow presenting a 'European dialogue' that excluded all artists from Asia and the US in an attempt to sever the domineering influence of the US, and especially of New York, on Australian art. Despite this reactionary gesture, *European Dialogue* remains a landmark for being the first international biennial to exhibit Aboriginal painting as contemporary art with Yolngu bark paintings showcased as forms of contemporary abstraction.

22. Hamed al Jeboori et al, 'Foreword', in Higher Committee of the Arab Art Biennial, *The Arab Art Biennial*, Union of Arab Artists, Baghdad, 1974, no pagination

Arab capital' as the first of the world's itinerant biennials. (The feat was only achieved once, with the Arab Art Biennial concluding in Rabat, Morocco, in 1976; it nonetheless pre-empted the similarly roving Manifesta by nearly twenty years and the intended mobility of Robert Filiou and René Block's Art of Peace Biennial by more than a decade).[23]

As the catalogues for these biennials make clear, the selections hinged on an artistic conservatism, at least during the exhibitions' tentative early years. With the possible exception of the Bienal de Coltejer and, to an extent, the second Biennale of Sydney, these biennials of the South turned to traditional mediums of painting, paper and sculpture as the support for new modes of contemporary practice. Disparate artists were frequently linked by the unifying patina of modernist mannerism and its attendant sentimentalities. Even when emphasizing a specific cultural heritage – as with the Arab Art Biennial – much of the work shown was comfortably figurative, often made by artists trained in Western Europe's art schools or, at their most radical, attempting to link Ecole de Paris abstraction to 'Islamic civilisation', as Hussein Sobhi from the Alexandria biennial argued, 'in which abstract, geometric and stripped-back art comes close to pure poetry'.[24] This does not mean, of course, that we should seek to recognize or emphasize a 'belatedness' in these selections or displays; we have to beware of perceiving each aesthetic judgement through North Atlantic vanguard blinkers. Iraqi artist Dia al-Azzawi, who exhibited at the First Triennale of 'World Art' in India in 1968 and the fourth and fifth editions of the Biennale Grafike, might until the twenty-first century have been categorized as a mere adapter of Picasso, like hundreds of now forgotten artists across the world; with the wisdom of distance from New York hegemony, the eclecticism of al-Azzawi's great paintings of contemporary history, such as *Sabra and Shatila Massacre* (1982–1983), as well as his earlier works of the 1950s and 1960s, looks as deliberate, abrasive and edgy as Leon Golub's paintings of the same decades and not belated at all (Golub, of course, has been similarly re-valued over the period).

But as students of biennial histories would no doubt assert, and as is often the case with contemporary biennials as well, the strengths and weaknesses of specific artworks are sometimes secondary to the significance of the exhibition as a whole, or at least to those aspects of an exhibition that are supplementary to the artworks presented. This was certainly the case with these Southern biennials, the importance of which often lay less in the assemblage of artworks than in the gatherings of artists, commissioners, writers and publics from within and outside a given region. In some instances – and this was especially true with Ljubljana, which became a vital meeting-point for artists, curators and diplomats from the US, Britain, Romania, Yugoslavia and elsewhere – biennials allowed people to acquire visas and cross frontiers that would have been extremely difficult, if not necessarily impossible, to cross without the justification of attending the exhibition.[25] On other occasions these borders could be more than geopolitical. One of the starkest and most complex images from 'European Dialogue', the third Biennale of Sydney in 1979, is not of artworks or their installation in the Art Gallery of New South Wales, but an informal meeting between two respected elders of art, the French critic Pierre Restany and the Aboriginal artist and activist David Malangi, engaged in a conversation that would

23. Ibid. Within a decade, however, another pan-Arab biennial, the Cairo International Biennial of Arab Art, emerged to replace the defunct roaming Arab Art Biennial. The Cairo Biennial opened in 1984, only to remove the focus on specifically Arab art in later editions. It should be noted that this list of exhibitions is not exhaustive; other regional biennials emerged in other parts of the world as well. The Baltic region, for instance, had two large-scale exhibitions concentrate on artists from around the Baltic Sea, including artists from Russia, Lithuania, Estonia, Poland and East Germany, as well as Finland, West Germany and Sweden: the Baltic Triennial of Young Contemporary Arts in Vilnius, Lithuania in 1979 (later renamed the Baltic Triennial); and the Rauma Biennale Balticum in Finland from 1985. For more on the Baltic Triennial, see Charlotte Bydler, 'Global Contemporary? The Global Horizon of Art Events', in Jonathan Harris, ed, *Globalization and Contemporary Art*, Wiley-Blackwell, Malden, 2011, pp 464–478.

24. Sobhi, untitled preface to *Deuxième Biennale de la Méditerranée*, op cit, p ix

25. Zoran Kržišnik provides a remarkably open account of this – and the significance of the Biennale Grafike for bringing curators, artists and politicians together from both the Eastern and Western blocs of Europe – in his interview with Beti Žerovc, op cit.

Meeting between David Malangi and Pierre Restany in Sydney, 1979, as a result of their invitations to the 3rd Biennale of Sydney, 'European Dialogue', image courtesy of the Biennale of Sydney

most likely not have been possible without the opportunities offered by the Biennale.

Whether other durable opportunities eventuated from such meetings is open to speculation, yet it is precisely this drive for both formal and informal models of regional and transcultural dialogue, and the frequency with which those meetings were documented, that sets the biennials of the South apart from their earlier, more celebrated counterparts. 'European Dialogue' is a watershed exhibition not only for its series of hitherto unexpected meetings, nor just for its inclusion of Aboriginal artists' paintings as *contemporary* rather than so-called 'primitive' or 'traditional' art (the first time this happened in a major international exhibition like a biennial). Just as important are the three publications launched alongside the Biennale, documenting and debating its lifespan, from the initial competition to curate the exhibition through to reflections on the Biennale after its closure.[26] These documents included installation shots, all of the exhibition's press clippings, audience commentaries (both critical and supportive), as well as transcripts of the numerous town hall meetings held between curator Nick Waterlow and Sydney audiences in the year before the Biennale opened – meetings which were intended to provide open engagement with, and commentary from, local artists about the biennial's focus, context and direction, but which often resulted in a hostile reception from an art scene that felt excluded from the biennial's pro-European agenda.

Other biennials similarly complemented the display of artworks with an emphasis on commentary, analysis and informal reflection on the biennials as they took place, transforming the model of exhibition display into an expanded field of discourse. The Arab Art Biennial was, for critic Keith Albarn, particularly notable for the activities staged 'at the end of each

26. The three publications are Nick Waterlow, ed and curator, *European Dialogue: The Third Biennale of Sydney 1979*, Biennale of Sydney, Sydney, 1979; Art Gallery of New South Wales, *European Dialogue: The Third Biennale of Sydney: A Commentary*, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, 1979, and Vivienne Binns et al, *Sydney Biennale: White Elephant or Red Herring? Comments from the Art Community*, EveryWoman, Sydney, 1979.

Covers for the three catalogues and commentary stemming from the 3rd Biennale of Sydney in 1979: the exhibition catalogue to *European Dialogue: The Third Biennale of Sydney 1979*; *European Dialogue: The Third Biennale of Sydney: A Commentary*; and *Sydney Biennale: White Elephant or Red Herring? Comments from the Art Community*, image courtesy of the Biennale of Sydney and Ian Milliss, photo: the authors

day when all men [presumably the artists] became poets, philosophers and musicians, sitting in large circles entertaining each other through to the early hours of the morning'.[27] This was clearly not a closed-off activity – the presence of a white Anglo reviewer showed that, at least in relation to race, it was neither exclusive nor exclusionary – but instead an open means for asserting what Albarn called 'a common ethos' among participants, one that could subtend and extend the Baghdad biennial's pursuit of pan-Arab commonality through the artworks themselves.[28] In Havana, as has become well known, small makeshift bars were established alongside the exhibition venues that dotted the city during the Bienal's third edition, a strategy designed to bring residents and visitors together during the course of the Bienal's existence. In this way, informal debate – or what co-curator Gerardo Mosquera tellingly called 'a "horizontal" South–South platform very much based on personal contact between people from different art worlds'[29] – would complement the Bienal's more formal symposium and its analyses among artists and scholars regarding the Bienal's theme of 'tradition and contemporaneity' (a line-up that included Geeta Kapur, Charles Merewether and other figures from across the belt of non-aligned nations and the region of the South more broadly). And in Medellín, the second Bienal de Coltejer became a venue in which participating artists and audiences could discuss and sign petitions against the alleged political fraud and potential coup that struck the Colombian presidential elections just before the Bienal's launch in 1970. These open acts of critique and defiance subsequently spread to other subjects, including the rise of

27. See Keith Albarn, 'The First Arab Biennale', *Studio International* 187, May 1974, p 257.

28. Ibid

29. Gerardo Mosquera, 'The Havana Biennial: A Concrete Utopia', in Filipovic et al, *The Biennial Reader*, op cit, p 205

dictatorship and torture in other parts of South America, as well as US influence and imperialism in the region. In the process, the Bienal de Coltejer emerged as a rare platform for the dissemination of knowledge about fraudulent politics in the region, for debate among participants and ultimately for protest against the new impositions of power in South America.[30]

This is only a glimpse at the history of the biennials of the South during the second wave of biennialization from the 1950s onwards. Nonetheless, that brevity does not prevent us from stressing two particular points. The first is that the insistence on regionalism found contemporaneously in many different parts of the world was both a critical and a reconstructive project: critical in the sense that it sought to complicate, and in some instances repudiate, the Cold War binaries of East and West, capitalism and communism, and the trepidations and antagonisms associated with them both; and reconstructive in that what this signalled was a shift from vertical axes of influence from one (economically developed) region to another (less developed) toward more horizontal axes of dialogue and engagement *across* a region. In this way the internationalism of the regional could be promoted as transcultural, even egalitarian, and driven by attempts at commonality rather than a will to geopolitical authority and to the attendant hierarchies of power. This leads to a second point: it was through informal modes of discourse and discussion that such commonality was emphasized as much as (or even more than) through the formal presentation and official structures of the relevant biennials. The horizontality of localized exchange – by which we mean the face-to-face discussions, informal philosophizing, song and so forth – was thus inseparable from the horizontality of regional exchange, the one pivotal to the possibility of the other.

That the biennial should be the medium of choice for this informal, critical regionalism may strike us as odd today, given the current ubiquity and uncanny similarity of these mega-exhibitions worldwide. Yet biennials also opened up opportunities for the South that were arguably not afforded by other cultural forms. Their recurrent timing could allow a steady and relatively stable base from which to generate new cultural ties – or what the Union of Arab Artists, for one, called a chance for 'getting Arab artists to know each other through regular and periodical gatherings' – during a period notable for profound instabilities and threats of hostility and war.[31] That recurrence might also catalyse new cultural infrastructure within each biennial's host city: infrastructure that was both conceptual (through access to and the generation of new theories, practices and politics of art) and material (through new exhibition venues, audiences and sponsors), and which could stimulate new manifestations of 'locality' during the struggles for decolonization throughout many of these regions of the South.

This produced a paradox, however, for the format of the biennial had a significant colonial heritage, as we noted earlier, one that could potentially hinder or undermine such attempts to use biennials as a way to give form to cultural independence. What the wide-ranging turn to biennials suggests, though, is that the South's attempts at regionalism were not a radical withdrawal from all forms or histories of colonialism; this was not a struggle for absolute autonomy from either the recent past or other regions and cultures (or what Walter Mignolo, among others, has

30. On the petitions and protests at the second Bienal de Coltejer, which were criticized by the reviewer as 'a somewhat empty and safe gesture', see Charles Spencer, 'No Revolution in Colombia', *Art and Artists* 5, August 1970, pp 60–62, p 62.

31. Cited in Albarn, op cit, p 257

championed as a process of radical 'delinking' from coloniality).[32] Nor did biennials highlight a willingness to replicate or be easily assimilated within the cultural forms and debates of the 'centre' (especially given the insistence on pan-Arab or Ibero-American identity politics, and the frequent exclusion of artists from the United States or Spain). The reality was more complex than either of these two positions. What these exhibitions suggested instead was that the colonial-era format of the biennial could be transformed from within, redirected so as to regenerate local cultural infrastructure, and used as a platform for debating the existing state of 'centre–periphery' exchange and developing new practices of international relations in their place. These biennials thus epitomized how the deep histories of colonialism could not be disavowed in the South's new spirit of regionalism; rather, they were central to connecting the cultures of the South through 'the link of our tragedies', to reiterate Beatriz Bustos Oyanedel's words, and more importantly to finding ways to overcome them.

THE STAKES OF SOUTHERN HISTORIES

The legacies of these biennials are precarious. It can be tempting to seek solace or inspiration in historical exhibitions so as to reformat and recontextualize contemporary biennials whose ubiquity threatens to topple over into homogeneity. Yet, just as the return to a supposedly better past risks fetishizing the obsolete, it also valorizes exhibition models that have stagnated since the period of Southern regionalism. As critic and curator Bassam El Baroni astutely points out, this has been the fate of the Alexandrian Biennale which continues to promote the same agenda of Mediterraneanism through the lens of Egyptian nationalism as it did in the 1950s. For Baroni, not only has this become 'an ailing ideology with little effect on regional or international politics', but it has doomed the Biennale de la Méditerranée to one solitary enervated theme throughout its fifty-plus years.[33] Other second-wave biennials have either changed focus entirely – the Biennale of Sydney quickly shed its single-minded interest in the Pacific Rim after 1976 – or become defunct through lack of interest, stability or funding.

There are nonetheless clear stakes in taking a Southern perspective of biennials, not least because of their art historical significance. One of the frustrations with the development of curatorial and exhibition histories in recent years, even at their best, has been their tendency toward inaccuracy and lacunae informed by a Northern bias. Recent claims by Charles Esche and Rachel Weiss, for instance, that the Bienal de la Habana was 'only the fourth international two-yearly contemporary art event on the planet' when it opened in 1984, or that its 1989 edition was the first to conceive of biennials as discursive platforms as well as formal exhibitions, are, as a broader understanding of Southern biennials clearly shows, not correct.[34] If anything, the Bienal de la Habana's importance lies not in its status as beginning but in many ways as *culminating* nearly three decades of steady transformations in exhibition making. Nor did biennials come to reject national representation or, to cite Esche again, define themselves 'in terms of the political and social mix of the cities that host them' only in the late 1980s, as biennialization began to enter its third wave.[35] These

32. See, for instance, Walter D Mignolo, 'Delinking: The Rhetoric of Modernity, the Logic of Coloniality, and the Grammar of De-coloniality', *Cultural Studies*, vol 21, nos 2–3, March–May 2007, pp 449–514.

33. Bassam El Baroni, 'Remodeling Required: Official Biennales in Egypt and International Biennale Culture', paper presented at 'Art Criticism and Curatorial Practices in Marginal Contexts: AICA Conference, Addis Ababa, 26–28 January 2006', available at http://www.aica-int.org/IMG/pdf/09.elbaroni.pdf, accessed 2 July 2013.

34. See respectively Charles Esche, 'Making Art Global: A Good Place or a No Place?, in Weiss et al, op cit, p 11; and Rachel Weiss, 'A Certain Place and a Certain Time: The Third Bienal de La Habana and the Origins of the Global Exhibition', in ibid, p 14.

35. Esche, op cit, p 11

were phenomena already present and highly disputed in Sydney, in Medellín and in other so-called 'peripheral' cities seeking to transform the international scope of biennials in the 1960s and 1970s.

What is perhaps most stark about these 'peripheral' exhibitions, though, is that they do not sit comfortably within the stereotype of biennials as neoliberal symptom with which this article started. While they were certainly internationalist in ambition, it was often a *socialist*, or at least socialist inspired, internationalism that subtended their rhetoric and objects. This was as true for the itinerant Arab Art Biennial, created by the Union of Arab Artists to redistribute attention, funds and education towards and throughout the Arab world, as it was for those biennials promoting the socialist agenda of Tito's presidency in Yugoslavia and Nasser's in Egypt, or even the grounding of many second-wave biennials in the ideologies of socialist solidarity among non-aligned nations. These socialist inspired internationalisms, and not the trajectory of North Atlantic capitalism, must be the primary reference points for re-visiting the biennials of the South. That lesson is made especially clear by remembering the protests in Medellín against right-wing dictatorships and American neo-colonialism in South America at the start of the 1970s. Whether these biennials could be successful in their endeavours or were simply pawns in the ideological battles of the Cold War – or, in the case of Alexandria, even risked championing the deeply problematic politics and persecution of intellectual and cultural figures by Nasser – is, however, a question that remains very much open.

Regardless of the answer, the still emerging field of biennial studies needs the perspectives of the South to complement – and even more, to challenge – those of the North, and to staunch the relegation of these major exhibitions and cultural histories to the outer edges of supposedly 'global' art histories. Given the renewed urgency of reimagining the 'global', it is no surprise that critical notions of regionalism have once again become a core socio-cultural concern in North Africa and West Asia, across Central and South America, and throughout the South more generally. Indeed, with the legacy of Southern biennials uncovered, the durable vitality of what theorists Ranjit Hoskote and Nancy Adajania term 'critical transregionality' becomes clear.[36] It is a world picture that the biennials of the South present as double-sided. They had grasped their place in the postwar arc of neo-colonial globalism. But, even more importantly, they then converted that place into the resistant image of cultural, art-historical and international reconstruction. That ongoing process is one in which the biennials of the South still have a significant and creative role to play.

36. Nancy Adajania and Ranjit Hoskote, 'Notes Towards a Lexicon of Urgencies', *Dispatch*, available at http://curatorsintl.org/journal/notes_towards_a_lexicon_of_urgencies, accessed 4 September 2012

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