



Figure 0.1 Queue of art-world guests waiting patiently on the first morning of vernissage week to visit artist Mike Nelson's installation in the British Pavilion at the 54th Biennale of Venice, 2011. Photograph Charles Green,

## Introduction

### Why Biennials?

This book examines the history, display, and transformation of art by one of the most significant phenomena in contemporary global culture: landmark survey shows of international contemporary art or, as they are also known, "biennials." The term is used inexactly and sometimes inappropriately, encompassing not just biennials but also triennials and even the quinquennial survey exhibition, *documenta*.<sup>1</sup> These regularly recurring exhibitions have come, since the early 1990s, to define contemporary art. For decades now, biennials have been one of the most ubiquitous and celebrated exhibition formats across the globe, appearing in countries as different as Senegal, Albania, and China. Many visitors encounter contemporary art solely within their frames, while their mix of artists and art from diverse cultures and places has ensured that vital intercultural dialogues have emerged. This has brought clear benefits to art history and art-making. Biennials have drawn local practitioners into ostensibly globalized networks of art-world attention and financial support, publicizing regions or cities previously deemed "peripheral" to the metropolitan centers of London and New York. However, on another level, all this equally suggests that these exhibitions may have served as mirrors, even handmaidens, to the spread of transnational capital and imperialist politics associated with globalized neoliberalism. Biennials may be little more than a spectacle of "festivalism," as critic Peter Schjeldahl has argued, with art replicating and reinforcing the neocolonial flows of international commerce, politics and power.<sup>2</sup>

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The primary aim of this book is to uncover, map, and analyze the global history of biennials since the early 1950s. In particular, we intend to examine the remarkable development of these exhibitions – a cultural phenomenon that, following critics Julian Stallabrass, Paul O’Neill, and others, we call “biennialization” – and their relation to both transcultural potentials and international politics.<sup>3</sup> For some critics, the connections between politics and biennials are deeply problematic. Biennialization may, truly, be irrevocably tied to the spectacle culture of neoliberalism, with exhibitions sponsored through a potent mix of state and corporate support designed to lure international tourism to sites struggling on the edges of global trade.<sup>4</sup> This has certainly been true of the “biennial boom” in postcommunist Europe since the mid-1990s. The diversion of state funds from many small-scale cultural projects into the single, short-term event of the biennial can cripple local cultural production, as occurred when Slovenia’s capital Ljubljana hosted the Manifesta biennial in 2000, while the corporate sponsorship of some biennials has suggested that biennialization may be a potent way for funders to penetrate new commercial or cultural markets. As George Yúdice has argued of biennialization in the Americas, biennials and contemporary culture may thereby become expedient means to support the political and corporate interests of their sponsors.<sup>5</sup>

Such accusations are common in contemporary art discourse and need to be considered in any study of the function and influence of biennials. Where this book differs from the general demonization of biennials is in our contention that biennialization can offer profound, critical insights into art’s nexus with globalized commerce and political interests, both after 1989 and, surprisingly, long before it. We are, of course, not alone in this. Back in 2003, with his short essay, “The Unstable Institution,” Carlos Basualdo argued that biennials have the potential for cultural and social subversion.<sup>6</sup> The drive to understand the genealogies of biennials is slowly gaining force in art history, following such esteemed commentators as Lawrence Alloway and Caroline Jones, who recognized biennialization’s roots in nineteenth-century World Fairs and Parisian Salons.<sup>7</sup> But a full account is required of the histories of innovation and influence that led to biennials becoming one of the most popular – perhaps even dominant – formats for presenting and promoting culture today.

Indeed, given the public popularity of biennials, their sustained scholarly analysis has been surprisingly piecemeal. We must emphasize this, for it is at odds with many people’s intuitions that surely they have already digested a considerable quantity of scholarship on the subject of biennials. This lack is

not due to the subject’s relative newness; in-depth research on other aspects of global politics and culture has long circulated in the humanities.<sup>8</sup> Rather, it is the rapid turnover of biennials and their curators, as well as the diversity of their themes and forms of infrastructure, that has resulted in analyses that are either necessarily introductory in scope, such as Charlotte Bydler’s published doctoral dissertation in 2004, and Bruce Altshuler’s two source-books of 2008 and 2013 on famous modern and contemporary exhibitions in general, or limited to anthologies of anecdotes about specific exhibitions, such as Robert Storr’s 2006 edited collection about the Venice Biennale, or else focused on the effects of biennialization on particular exhibitions, as with Rachel Weiss’s comprehensive 2011 collection of essays on the Third Bienal de La Habana (1989).<sup>9</sup> It is as if the features, purpose, and effects of biennials are self-evident. More prevalent still are the journalistic and populist accounts of biennials and contemporary art markets such as Sarah Thornton’s 2008 and 2014 profiles of the contemporary art world, within which the biennial plays one part.<sup>10</sup> Nonetheless, there are exceptions to this trend – John Clark’s fine research on biennials and contemporary Asian art, for example, concentrates on the history of Asian biennials and ranks among the first scholarly examinations of the subject – and what these exceptions reveal is that charting and analyzing the histories of these shows is both possible and necessary. This is reinforced by the number of very well-attended conferences on biennials that have been held abroad in recent years: this includes, most notably, “Landmark Exhibitions: Contemporary Art Shows since 1968” at London’s Tate Modern, and “The Bergen Biennial Conference” in Norway’s Bergen Kunsthall, held in 2008 and 2009 respectively (the latter of which resulted in a landmark anthology about biennials, *The Biennial Reader*).<sup>11</sup>

The mounting international importance of biennials and their historical study has opened up a research gap that scholars are just beginning to address. But as we noted before, the surprise is the sheer scarcity of scholarly research so far published, and on occasion the inaccessibility of the relevant exhibition catalogues. There were calls to redress this all through the first decade of the twenty-first century: renowned German scholar Hans Belting convened a substantial research project in which biennials were meshed with the global transformation of contemporary art. In Belting’s words, “the art market, with its global strategies, invites a serious study that has hardly begun.”<sup>12</sup> James Meyer, at a major 2005 conference on biennials, similarly claimed that “what we lack are studies of the contemporary international show as a *form* [Meyer’s emphasis].”<sup>13</sup> It is past time for a critical overview

of the phenomenon. It is precisely this that we have set out to offer in this volume, as we seek to redress these substantial oversights in the study of contemporary art. And contemporary art is a research field that is particularly significant, given it is one of the main growth areas in art history enrolments, dissertation topics, and curatorial studies courses.

This book is a historical survey of contemporary art and globalization, through an analysis of the biennials of international art that evolved in tandem with both (and so we will not cover biennials that have a national focus, such as the Whitney Biennial). Such a study is especially necessary given that, as Wu Chin-tao writes, “globalization has been the buzzword of the last two decades but the precise ways in which the process of globalization has impacted on the production and reception of art works and their institutional support systems are far from clear.”<sup>14</sup> Contemporary art has boomed since the late 1980s. The period’s key art productions have clustered around spectacular, expensive new art such as video installation and large color photography, implying venues able to provide the resources, scale, and public prominence required by these works. Biennials met these demands, offering newcomers to the global scene a stage on which to participate in the contemporary art industry, while enabling a dramatically expanded audience the chance to see recent art. Now, contemporary art is almost indistinguishable from its exhibitions, especially at these spectacles. These, the topic of this book, are taken to be indicative of the situation of art production and also revelatory of new developments and trends. Both assumptions need, of course, to be critically examined, as they will be in this book, but we need to flag clearly the emergent discourses that map the huge transition into a mode of art-making called the contemporary. This is distinct in theory and practice from the modern and the postmodern.

Discerning what is distinct and what is shared in the shift from the modern to the contemporary is a key challenge that not only scholars but also artists have been answering. For theorists of the art of the contemporary, debates about postmodernism, which scholars across almost all disciplines encountered during the 1980s, were symptomatic of one of postmodernism’s own premises: that progress was no longer inevitable, that no one big story was going to dominate any sphere of human activity. The ideas of modernism and postmodernism did not explain or communicate the changes that ensued from the end of the Cold War in 1989: the era of globalization, the spread of integrated electronic culture, the dominance of neoliberal economics (and politics), the appearance of new types of armed and terrorist conflict, and the change in each nation’s place in the world. All of this suggested the emergence of a new cultural period, and not necessarily a

better one. From this proceeded the contention that the new and controversial terms that locate art as contemporary – terms that include place making, connectivity and, most crucial, for our purposes, world picturing – overrode older distinctions based on style, medium, and ideology that dominated art and art theory during the modernist period. This is, more or less, the argument that has been developed most influentially by Terry Smith and Peter Osborne, each framing the contention slightly differently.<sup>15</sup> Our contention in this book is that art during the contemporary period has been indelibly marked by the biennials that were held around the globe, and this situation stretches back to the start of the Cold War.

This emphasis on exhibitions is a very different situation from more traditional art discourse. For previous generations of researchers, permanent collections and books were the chief means through which they apprehended art. Furthermore, the expansion of the contemporary art world involved the apparently dramatic appearance of new curators, museums, artists, and markets, all of which have been key protagonists in the recent spread of biennialization as well. Indeed, in the early 2000s, the frenzied movement of such art world players across the globe to new centers (Singapore, Berlin, Shanghai, Delhi) seemed to be identical with globalization. Yet, as noted above, art-historical and museum studies have so far resulted in very little sustained research on this radical shift in art and curatorial practice, despite the proliferation of public events ancillary to biennials and the sheer wealth of vested professional interests in biennialization. The transformation of contemporary art and curatorship in biennials demands more than the essay-length papers, lectures, and short catalogue texts that have peppered the discourse to date.

Our analysis of biennialization also tackles the second, broader issue of understanding the globalization of contemporary art. Many of the world’s metropolises – New York, Istanbul, Bucharest, São Paulo, Taipei, Shanghai, and a long list of other cities – stage biennials. The announcements for new biennials grow exponentially in promotional e-alerts such as e-flux. Many exhibitions are beginning to work together as well, coordinating schedules and openings so that international visitors travel from one biennial to another in a twenty-first-century version of the Grand Tour. Such coordination has spurred increased public attendances: 2007’s *documenta 12* attracted a record 750,000 visitors and *DOCUMENTA (13)* was attended by 860,000 visitors, while the 2008 Gwangju Biennale drew more than a million visitors. It has also revealed a turning point in the history of biennials: biennials work with each other to consolidate the power of regional (rather than strictly local) cultures within the global. As American

art historian Pamela Lee noted presciently in 2003, “our most urgent challenge is to account more critically for the way the art world has internalised the conditions of the global and its institutional, political, and economic imperatives.”<sup>16</sup> The transformations within biennialization offer a powerful new impetus to reflect back on the history of biennialization, with the significance of exhibition histories central to that analysis.

Biennials appeared in close, and sometimes symbiotic dialogue with temporary exhibitions of contemporary art in museums. Sometimes, the two were almost identical, with many theme-based exhibitions indistinguishable from biennials and many biennials, particularly in the second decade of the twenty-first century, closely resembling art museum exhibitions, excavating forgotten historical works and revising art history. Some art museum exhibitions have exerted considerable influence on the development of biennials. The most famous case was *Magiciens de la terre* (1989), held between Paris’s Musée nationale d’art moderne at the Centre Georges Pompidou, and the sprawling exhibition halls at the outer-suburban Parc de la Villette. *Magiciens* had an enormous impact on the curatorship of contemporary art and on the future of biennials, as we will see, and biennial directors have constantly acknowledged its influence ever since 1989. But as well, we shall discuss biennials that were hosted by art museums, and in these instances the art museums often systematically collected works from their biennials. Other biennials operated in more ambiguous spaces, partly housed in local art museums and partly in a changing roster of alternative, artist-run, and even commercial exhibition venues.<sup>17</sup>

Finally, this book focuses attention on earlier, relatively neglected periods in art biennials. Central here is the period between 1951 and 1989 – between the nineteenth-century origins of biennialization and the “biennial boom” from the 1990s onwards – during which a spate of biennials was launched worldwide. Some of these exhibitions concentrated on introducing audiences to young or relatively inexperienced artists, as with the Biennale de Paris (also known as the Biennale des jeunes, or Biennial of the Young), which ran from 1959 to 1985. However, certain other biennials sought more complex regional and transcultural exchanges, drawing together artists from across the globe rather than from a particular locale, so as to spark new artistic dialogues between practitioners from hitherto disparate or even isolated contexts. In 1974 in Baghdad and 1976 in Rabat, the first installments of the Arab Art Biennale attempted to forge long-term networks among artists from across North Africa and the Middle East, using art practice and display as the tools for pan-Arab cultural relations. In a similar vein, the inaugural Triennale-India in Delhi in 1968 was advertised as the

first triennial of “contemporary world art,” promoting an alignment of cultures outside the usual binary axis of Cold War politics. Exhibition histories from around the globe enable us to address the task that the 1968 Triennale-India already sought to confront – namely, the emergence of a “world art history,” a history inclusive of art around the world that will slowly replace the North Atlantic canon that still dominates art-historical discourse.<sup>18</sup>

During this book, it will sometimes seem as if we are avoiding works of art in favor of curators and art museums, and that works of art appear merely to explain curators’ intentions. This is partly true, we admit, but there is a reason. A counterweight to artist-centered art history is needed. Landmark biennials offer clear, provocative insights into the structure and changes underlying the development of contemporary art and globalization since the Second World War. Art is imbricated with contemporary geopolitics and politics of display, and context informs the chronological development of biennialization.<sup>19</sup> Consequently, we want to ask three main questions. Firstly, how have postwar biennial cultures functioned, and to what uses have they been put within broader social politics? Secondly, how have art and exhibition histories been changed by the conditions of “peripheralism,” and the sly, subversive politics they can engender? And thirdly, how have artists, curators, and other key figures within postwar art potentially exceeded our usual understandings of biennialization, so as to generate new modes and genealogies of transcultural exchange through the exhibition as a medium and as a context for dialogue?

## Part 1. The Second Wave

Chapter 1 will focus on the great exhibition *documenta 5* (1972), through which one of the first star-curators, Harald Szeemann, established still-dominant curatorial methodologies for understanding and exhibiting contemporary art. His exhibition was a *statement*, akin to a work of art in itself. It was the precursor of what Maria Lind has called “the curatorial.”<sup>20</sup> Harald Szeemann’s *documenta 5* and, in a wider sense from this point on, biennials in general presented themselves as neither “the enemy” nor “the system.” They were now to become the spectacular sites where cultural and political change would be described and debated, as if biennials were social laboratories.

Chapter 2 looks at the post-Venice biennials that emerged along the supposed “edges” of twentieth-century art history, yet which sought to bring modern North Atlantic art to the South: the Biennale of Sydney (1973–) and