ROUTLEDGE ADVANCES IN ART AND VISUAL STUDIES

THE POLITICS OF CONTEMPORARY ART BIENNIALS

SPECTACLES OF CRITIQUE, THEORY AND ART

PANOS KOMPATSIARIS

ROUTLEDGE

The Politics of Contemporary Art Biennials

Contemporary art biennials are sites of prestige, innovation and experimentation, where the category of art is meant to be in perpetual motion, rearranged and redefined, opening itself to the world and its contradictions. They are sites of a seemingly peaceful cohabitation between the 'elitist' and the 'popular', where the likes of Jeff Koons encounter the likes of Guy Debord, where Angela Davis and Frantz Fanon share the same ground with neoliberal cultural policy makers and creative entrepreneurs. Building on the legacy of events that conjoin art, critical theory and counterculture, from *Nova Convention* to *documenta X*, the new biennial blends the modalities of protest with a neoliberal politics of creativity. This book examines a strained period for these high art institutions, a period when their politics are brought into question and often boycotted in the context of austerity, crisis and the rise of Occupy cultures. Using the 3rd Athens Biennale and the 7th Berlin Biennale as its main case studies, it looks at how the in-built tensions between the domains of art and politics take shape when spectacular displays attempt to operate as immediate activist sites. Drawing on extended ethnographic research and contemporary cultural theory, this book argues that biennials both denunciate the aesthetic as bourgeois category and simultaneously replicate and diffuse an exclusive sociability across social landscapes.

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The Politics of Contemporary Art Biennials

Spectacles of Critique, Theory and Art

Panos Kompatsiaris

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1 Introduction
Biennials, Politics, Critique

The 3rd Athens Biennale opened on 22 October 2011, the same day as hundreds of thousands of protesters marched in the city against recently imposed austerity measures. This demonstration in which one person lost his life and many others were injured occurred in the context of a disintegrating urban fabric, where the reality of the economic crisis, unemployment and escalating racist violence against people of colour was becoming a daily routine. As a reaction to this bleak condition, the Biennale announced itself as a site of protest. Deploying the thought of the Marxist intellectual Walter Benjamin, it aimed to generate for its 1.5-month duration a space where progressive political organisations and collectives would reflect upon and coordinate resistant actions. In the evening of the opening of this loaded art event, an unforeseen encounter occurred. Wearing a safari hat, an artist who calls himself the *Biennalist*[1], took the initiative to invite into the Biennale premises an undocumented migrant residing in the area in order to guide him through the show. As they both roamed around the floors of the venue, the awkwardness of the encounter gradually became apparent. The lack of a common language was obvious in more than one sense; there was neither a grammatical nor a conceptual structure through which the communication of radical statements or some kind of resistant action could be made possible. In this case, and also for the duration of the event, the Biennale and its vocabularies seemed to enact a site of exclusion for the most repressed and crisis-hit part of the population living in Greek territory, the migrants around the area. Benjamin's idea of the history of the oppressed (Benjamin, 1999), that is to say the purposeful resurfacing of oppressed historical moments so as to combat the homogeneity and linearity of dominant historical narratives, provided a guide for the Biennale's curatorial strategies. However, the actual subjects that constituted the oppressed par excellence in the Greek public space were not only totally absent from the Biennale's premises, but became largely alienated by the presence of the art crowds in the district during the event.

This short encounter and the subsequent development of the exhibition performed the tensions inhabiting the socio-spatial configurations that

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both the 3rd Athens Biennale as well as biennial cultures in general invoke in their claims to be politically relevant and socially interventionist: What does it mean for a biennial to mobilise political energies and for whom are these energies mobilised? How are these two spheres of action – art and politics – entangled, layered and performed by biennials and their participants? What do the in-built tensions of this conjunction say about the trajectories of the historically conditioned category of art and the contemporary biennial as its key contemporary articulation? What are the forms and affects that this category releases to the world through the institutions that represent it?

The Politics of Contemporary Art Biennials approaches these questions by focusing on the sites that are (or declare to be) at the forefront of a process of claiming a new socially relevant role for art within contemporary societies. Contemporary art biennials, or 'new biennials', are sites of prestige, innovation and experimentation, where the category of art is meant to be in perpetual motion, rearranged and redefined, opening itself to the world and its contradictions; to the world of politics and critical theory; to the world of business and creative branding; to the world of flexible labour and urban renewal; to the world of left-wing activism and social intervention. They are sites of a seemingly peaceful cohabitation between 'high' and 'low' culture, or between the 'elitist' and the 'popular', where the likes of Jeff Koons encounter the likes of Guy Debord, where Angela Davis and Franz Fanon share the same ground with neoliberal cultural policy-makers and creative entrepreneurs and where such contradictions are channelled for wishfully staging challenging and thought-provoking art events. They are sites of coded dissent, where members of the art world employ idiosyncratic languages to enable resistances against dominant hierarchies or raise awareness on the issues of the day. And, as they foster an abundance of cross-cutting agencies, these sites are equally striving to display their capacity to be artistic, to confirm their 'artfulness', so to say, through aligning themselves with qualities and intellectual discourses scattered around the tradition of fine arts.

Far from being accidental, the ambiguous politics that these events employ become indispensable for their long-term durability and functioning. Ambiguity is constitutive, to an extent, of all art institutional efforts to coordinate conflicting rationales. Through its attempts to reconcile the destructive and elitist ethos of avant-gardism with the pacifying and popular taste of the general public, the biennials represent a dynamic contemporary articulation of this process. Their exercise in ambiguity, the cohabitation of contradictory agencies and coded dissent, the balancing acts between radicalism and commerce, or between avant-gardism and mass-culture, is indispensable for maintaining old and approaching new legitimating bodies in the light of a rising European (and global) neoliberal cultural policy. Yet, and as it will be argued throughout this

book, these ambiguous politics do not consist of free-floating, arbitrary efforts of simply 'bringing in' new social actors. They rather designate a practice grounded on the material settings and signifying codes within which these events are placed and around which they are carefully choreographed. These settings and codes may include common-sense assumptions shared by members of the art world about what art is and what is not, emerging discourses that challenge these assumptions, the social and cultural particularities of the host cities, cultural policy and government directives, the mundane requirements of maintaining and expanding institutional legitimacy in the name of art or the personal ambitions of the various contributors.

By exploring the aforementioned themes in two contemporary biennial settings, this study questions a usual claim in recent continental aesthetics that we may have entered some sort of post-aesthetic or post-artistic condition as a result of the image saturation and the collapse of the empirical and epistemological boundaries between artistic and everyday images (i.e., Joselit, 2013; Avanessian, 2014: 54). It does so by focusing on institutional sites that enable an assemblage of agencies, which propagates and reinvents the category of the artistic without doing away with it. The preservation of 'art', as a specific arrangement of seeing, doing and experiencing the world, it will be argued, lies less on the boundaries of the conceptual distinguishability between art and other fields of practice than on the institutional structures and symbolic sites that enact and replicate its form across social landscapes. Despite their opening and expansion to forms of social practice and everyday forms, contemporary biennials are sites that, albeit precariously and varyingly, safeguard and disseminate a quintessentially artistic gaze. They are places that, for better or worse, act as containers of an aesthetic regime of experience, realising an environment that despite its persistent denunciations of the aesthetic as a bourgeois category, it can never be thought as somehow independent of it. There is then a particular 'way of seeing' enacted by these institutions, the construction and upholding of a visual regime through which objects, events and performances are estranged from their actual form inviting non-literal interpretations. Their resilience and durability as global artistic sites of display show that any discussion of a post-aesthetic condition needs to confront the structural, emotional and social frameworks that art institutional settings inscribe in the world.

In particular, *The Politics of Contemporary Art Biennials* digs into a peculiarly tantalising period for biennial politics in the Western world, a period in which the biennial's visual regime was brought into question. It is a moment when their usual impulse to be polemical through popularising art's critical function (a tendency that increasingly dominated the biennial since the end of the 1990s and marked the emergence of the 'new biennial') goes through a phase of intense questioning. The eruption of the subprime mortgage crisis in the USA in 2007 and the sovereign debt

crisis in Europe in 2009 gave birth to an audacious left-wing discourse clustering around new articulations of Marxist theory, class politics and immediate calls for insurrection. As this discourse leaked into the art world, it took the form of art boycotts, protests against free labour and interrogations of art institutions on ethical grounds. This sprouting cultural interchange seemed to brush biennials as hypocritical, suspicious establishments, which may advocate resistant politics (as and through art) but firmly adhere to the capitalist reason. *The Politics of Contemporary Art Biennials* then focuses on a moment when biennials in Europe and most of what is known as the 'West' saw their politics coming into harsh questioning, enabling a crisis of legitimacy through an implicit or often explicit request to operate in more literal and unambiguous ways. Indeed, for their various reasons, in both the institutions I set up in exploring, the 3rd Athens Biennale (2011) and the 7th Berlin Biennale (2012), the desire to perform 'non-ambiguous politics' was prevailing around and often within their manifestations, translated to an impulse to be consistent, to cling to responsible, correct and ethical actions that could 'really' change the status quo, reinvigorate their political commitment, and, as an extension, that of 'art' as a socially relevant category. The impulse to be real and consistent incarnated, one can dare say, a superego, a surveillance mechanism monitoring the politics of these events.

This book tells the story of efforts to radicalise the art biennial, to close the gap between the artistic and the political, in the context of this emerging 'structure of feeling', to use Raymond Williams known term, across contemporary art scenes. It eclectically draws from art theory, anthropology, political theory and visual culture and employs ethnographic material about these two events as well as global biennial politics from the years 2010 to 2015. However, it can hardly be seen as a thoroughly anthropological or art theoretical research. If I were to choose an area for this study, I would tentatively place it within what has recently come to be known as the 'new sociology of art' (de la Fuente, 2007). This perspective employs the sociological ethos of social constructionism, associated with writers such as such as Pierre Bourdieu and Howard Becker, that avoids evaluative judgements in favour of examining the context, social interactions and power relations within 'artistic fields' or 'art worlds'. Questions, therefore, of whether a work is good, pleasing, beautiful, resistant, challenging and likewise evaluative classifications are here avoided as much as possible. At the same time, the 'new' in the new sociology of art sets out to re-inject questions of aesthetics in a discipline that is fundamentally anti-aesthetic (Born, 2010; Fox, 2015). Rather than a peculiar property of privilege found solely in 'works of art', however, aesthetics here signifies the affective and agential states triggered by encounters with various objects or situations that may go under several labels, including that of 'art' (Gell, 1998). Aesthetics then denotes the modes of interaction that artworks unleash within *and* through certain environments; the

ways they carry sense and meaning not only through their shape, colour, content or form and in relation to a larger art historical canon, but also through their embedded materiality and the ways that are socially mediated *as* art.

Biennials as Politics

The idea that biennials[2] are primarily platforms of political rather than aesthetic interventions is a relatively recent phenomenon. Its modalities are bound to the modalities of a post-1990s curatorial discourse, mainly developed in the Western Europe and the USA, whose aims, vocabulary and forms tend to prioritise the 'political' over the 'aesthetic'. Here, the terms 'political' and 'aesthetic' may stir some confusion, as they signify fields that essentially interweave and feed off each other; every political articulation assumes aesthetic components, and every aesthetic experience hinges on political implications, congealed or emerging. For Jacques Rancière, the dimension of the political in art, as the indiscernibility of art and life, is already an essential component of its 'aesthetic regime' born out of the French Revolution (Rancière, 2009a). By referring to the prioritisation of the political over the aesthetic, I mean both the incorporation of critical theory (as a field of knowledge) within the biennial field as well as the tendency to make artistic critique more accessible and influential to the public. This is a double process of art moving closer to critical theory and opening itself to new audiences (usually already equipped with some cultural capital) at the expense of its function as an institution that displays works of art. The new, post-1990s biennial consists of an effort to reach out and approach new social subjects, extending from activists and new social movements to disenfranchised communities and contemporary social theorists, rather than merely the field of art connoisseurs. In the new biennial, then, aspects concerning the form of a work, or its capacity to exert certain emotions through its form, are significantly downplayed or tend to be read in respect to social rather than art historical references. This is, in many respects, the ideological apparatus of the new biennial.

The new biennial draws on certain historical precedents and its rise relies on certain socio-economic conditions. Regarding the precedents, past cross-fertilisations between art, critical theory and counterculture include the now famous exhibition *Les Immatériaux* (1985) curated by Francois Lyotard in Pompidou in Paris, or events such as the *Schizo-Culture* (1975) and the *Nova Convention* (1978) organised by Sylvère Lotringer and his peers at Columbia University. These events brought to the surface an organisational mode of address, redrawing the boundaries between an academic conference and an artistic event, crafting an experimental assemblage of a post-1968 counter-cultural ethos and bridging the fields of post-structuralism, critical theory, activism, new technologies, visual arts,

music and literature with figures such as William Burroughs, Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, Philip Glass, Laurie Anderson and Bryon Gysin, among its notable heroes. During the period of the 'long-sixties', one can find similar endeavours springing from within the traditional field of visual arts, including Allan Kaprow's happenings in the 1960s or the 1972 *documenta 5* (Chapter 3). Twenty-five years and five editions later, in the context of the new geopolitical condition of the 1990s, *documenta X* was the first mega-exhibition, a big-budget, blockbuster and recognised show, which explicitly forged and subsequently popularised dialogues between art, critical theory, activism and desires for artistic social intervention. It was a constellation of parallel events consisting of lectures, publications and performances, exploring and questioning processes related to economic globalisation and social inequality.

The success of this format and its canonisation as the proper biennial mode of address relates to the emergence of a global and widespread left-wing radicalisation after the fall of the Soviet Union, culminating in the anti-globalisation movement and the anti-G8 protests in Seattle and Genoa, which again made anti-capitalism part of the political and intellectual agenda, as well as the enormous and globalising diffusion of artistic theories of social engagement, such as relational aesthetics (Bourriaud, 2002), dialogical aesthetics (Kester, 2004) and, more recently, ideas of art as militant knowledge production (Holert, 2009). The new biennial seems to be both the fruit of and the vehicle for institutionalising this mode of address. During the 2000s then, the biennial came to be perceived as a discursive exhibition, an exhibition that not only displays art, but also carries the format of the conference and the laboratory intervening on current social and political issues (Ferguson & Hoegsberg, 2010: 361; Adajania, 2012; Papastergiadis & Martin, 2011).

In the field of curating, the so-called criticality approach and its satellite concepts, such as participation, knowledge production and social engagement, provide some of the adjacent modalities of the new biennial. As identified by the cultural theorist Irit Rogoff, criticality refers to the ways in which art institutions can mobilise the 'smuggling' of radical discourses inspired by Marxism and critical theory, rather than solely being adversaries to a project of social emancipation (Rogoff, 2006: 1). The approach of criticality involves the effort to actualise such discourses; an actualisation ought not to occur only through artistic but also through educational and discursive means, such as lectures, publications and workshops. The engagement with criticality over the past decade (mainly across contemporary art milieus of Europe and the USA, but also diffused to all parts of the world through travelling curators), has resulted in the inauguration of a multitude of exhibitions, art projects and events that aspire to enable alternative models of educational engagement and knowledge production by simultaneously downplaying their role as sites of art display.[3]

Strongly linked with the model of the discursive exhibition and the scope of *documenta X*, many of these socially engaged projects are also related to the curatorial movement of New Institutionalism. The term 'New Institutionalism' is introduced in 2003 by the critic and curator Jonas Ekeberg,[4] to describe new modes of institutional engagement proposed and implemented by certain European curators since the late 1990s (among them, Charles Esche, Vasif Kortun, Catherine David and Maria Lind). These curators (all of them active in the biennial scene) imagined the art institution, in Esche's words, as 'part community center, part laboratory, part school', putting less emphasis on 'the showroom function that traditionally belonged to the art space' (2013a: 27). The art exhibition here takes the form of 'a social project' (Kold & Flückiger, 2013: 6), a project that invites citizens and communities to participate in its activities instead of simply targeting a small group of art connoisseurs. Informed by a Gramscian framework of hegemonic politics, these curators (claiming to speak from the perspective of the political left) ask *how* to cooperate with art institutions, rather than whether one should cooperate with them in the first place (i.e., affirmation rather than denial). While the movement of New Institutionalism (or Experimental Institutionalism [Esche, 2013a]) as well as the discursive exhibition and David's *documenta X* have not transformed museums or biennials into left-wing agitprops, they did establish a certain mode of curatorial engagement and exhibition format that is dominant today in projects all over the world.

To be fair, the idea that exhibitions are spaces purposed to enact alternative modalities to ones reigning daily life through the promotion of unconventional educational models and thinking is well-rooted in the histories of world fairs, universal exhibitions, cabinets of curiosities and museums (e.g., Rydell, 2006; Pollock, 2007).[5] It is in this particular historical conjunction, however, and specifically after the 1990s that the workings of certain institutions linked to the tradition of visual arts come to be debated in and across diverse sites ranging from art journalism, academic publications, conferences, symposia and other public forums, not only in relation to their capacity of enabling different ways of being, but also in terms of their potential to resist aspects of *capitalism*, an economic-political system with particular practices, methods and epistemological standpoints. What makes the above current intriguing is that with the gradual withdrawal of state funding for the arts, at least in Europe, art institutions depend increasingly on the market for their economic survival. In this regard, as we shall see, there is a hugely tenuous and ambivalent relationship between political biennials and the procedures of the market. This curious phenomenon, a site fraught with continuous tensions and contradictions subject to general social and economic processes and antagonisms, provides a central reference point for this book.

Being potentially a site of antinomy and disagreement, the relationship between political art and the market re-appears forcefully in public

discussions in different parts of the world, with the global rise of an artistic activism in the years between 2008 and 2014. During the time that the empirical material for this research was collected, the institution of the biennial, as a self-pronounced socially engaged agent, came to be threatened with a palpable legitimation crisis, that is to say, of a widespread loss of confidence as to whether these institutions really perform the political role they claim for themselves (Chapter 4). This criticism, performed by a variety of artists, theorists, art journalists, activists and writers targets not only biennials, but also the ethical or political role of contemporary art in its relation to neoliberalism. The intention of biennials and similar institutions to enact critical theory and left-wing politics, then, conflicts with the simultaneous propagation of those very forces they wished to resist, involving the pursuit of corporate sponsorship, the reproduction of unpaid and voluntary work models, the embracing of the role of city-marketers and their appropriation by governmental creative industries agendas. In other words, the crisis of legitimation is an outcome of a questioning of the truthfulness of biennials' politically charged discourses, pointing to a gap between what they say and what they do, a gap that identifies, as discussed in Chapter 4, their lack of 'parrhesia', their failure to speak truth to power (Foucault, 2011; 2012).[6]

Within a climate of insurrection and the lurking threat of social irrelevancy, both the biennials I explore, the 3rd Athens Biennale (2011) and the 7th Berlin Biennale (2012), employed excessive political statements claiming to transform their premises into spaces of action, namely spaces that do not only present artworks destined for reflection and introspection, but also sites of grounded resistance and protest. In other words, they claimed to exceed the role of the exhibition as an aesthetic container. These endeavours, involving unimplemented curatorial statements, border-crossings, internal conflicts, withdrawals, police interventions and press spectacles, make these two biennials unique case studies regarding the relations between capitalism, art institutions, politics and activism. The inoperativeness, and in many cases, the disastrous nature of the efforts to blur the distinction between art and activism eloquently manifested a liminal point of the political turn in art biennials.

Biennialisation and its Limits

One of the most recurrent and persisting frameworks employed to speak about the phenomenon of art biennials refers to the idea of 'biennialisation' (Tang, 2011; Frascina, 2013; Papastergiadis & Martin, 2011; Gardner & Green, 2013; 2016). According to this idea, biennials are the most influential engines of artistic globalisation, in the sense of propagating, enabling and materialising art's vocabularies in and across local settings. In this regard, artistic globalisation, that is, the idea of the expansion and worldwide co-authoring of the field's codes, is accelerated

as biennials multiply as formats for displaying, producing and generating knowledge around contemporary art (Ferguson & Hoegsberg, 2010; Greenberg Ferguson & Nairne, 1996). This framing is usually supported by statistical evidence pointing to the vast increase of the number and worldwide dispersal of these perennial large-scale exhibitions, typically recurring every two years, but also three (triennials) or five (documenta). Whereas up until the early 1990s, there were no more than ten contemporary biennials around the world, at the moment, more than 100 take place in regular or irregular intervals.

The problem with this theory is that, it often describes the rise of biennial cultures as an ongoing, and often frictionless, state of things. While scholars who employ it may accept that frictions do exist, especially in the light of centre and periphery debates and the biennial's internal heterogeneity, it does little to account for the situated complexities through which the biennial unravels as a global, but also grounded set of practice, or a 'global form' in Aihwa Ong's and Stephen Collier's terminology (Collier & Ong, 2005: 11). Global forms, for them, refer to phenomena that display qualities and capacities for 'decontextualisation and recontextualisation, abstractability and movement, across diverse social and cultural situations and spheres of life' (2005: 11). Despite their tendency to code, 'heterogeneous contexts and objects' (: 11), global forms are limited, enabling sites of tension and contestation as they are articulated and unfolded in diverse contexts. Such global forms, according to Ong and Collier, may include neoliberalism, ISO patterns, citizenship, the nation, technoscience and the discourse on human rights.

Approaching the biennial as a global form in anthropological terms, a form marked by idiosyncratic languages and modes of display, rather than as simply a vehicle of artistic globalisation, this study focuses on the ways these institutions and events are staged, performed and articulated in the context of territorially bound localities as well as larger socio-temporal dynamics. Through the participatory observation in the 3rd Athens Biennale and the 7th Berlin Biennale, this book explores how the biennial codes are played out upon settings of action, materiality and meaning. A fundamental point of departure then is the relations that the biennial develops with its outside, whether this outside refers to audiences, places, value systems and other global forms. In this study, the biennial is examined as a practice bound up with academic knowledge and marketing; resistant cultures, social movements and Marxist theory; and neoliberal economic processes, city branding and urban development. Giving rise to an ensemble of values and distributed agencies of people, objects and historical conjunctures, the biennial becomes in this sense, a 'product of multiple determinations that are not reducible to a simple logic' (Collier & Ong, 2005: 12). Under these terms, the idea of artistic globalisation may be conceived not only as an ongoing, scalar process of imposing the logic of contemporary art to different locales, but 'as a

problem-space in which contemporary anthropological questions are framed' (Collier & Ong, 2005: 5).

A central difficulty of this endeavour is to account for an analytic division between the 'global' and the 'local'. Is the language of contemporary art a global one in which certain local subjects and processes are exposed? How about 'local' subjects who may already have access to this language? Where can the dividing line be drawn, and how stable can the separation between the 'global' and the 'local' be? It seems that the preservation of this binary, or even the employment of the concept of 'glocalisation', a concept mostly focusing on processes of adaption of global systems, goods or services by certain localities (Robertson, 1995), is, in the case of the current study, largely inadequate. The focus on processes of adaption presupposes that a stable locality exists somehow uninterrupted by the larger global conditions that the researcher sets out to examine. Therefore, it may pose the danger of fixing subjects and objects into crystallised positions and identities, whether these refer to local or global ones. As the research in these two cities developed, it gradually became clear that it was counterproductive to approach the biennial through setting such a clear division. As these events involve, enable and interact with perpetual flows and relations in terms of ideas, people and capital, the maintenance of this division seemed to obscure more than it could potentially offer.

Yet, while complicating this dichotomy seemed necessary, there is still a need to account for the interaction between the form of the biennial and its contextualisation in certain social, cultural and economic regimes. On this basis, I chose to approach biennials by looking through more dynamic research perspectives, such as the notions of 'place' and 'translocality'. Both these notions were varyingly developed throughout the 1980s and the 1990s, mainly by human geographers, in order to complicate and bring a new light on theorising the processes of globalisation. The notion of place, according to the geographer Lynn Staeheli, is a contested one, having been employed to refer to a physical location, social location, general context, or all of these three together (2003: 58). In the influential work of Doreen Massey (1991; 1994), place is always interconnected with space. Spatial arrangements for Massey are socially constructed over time, are subject to transformation and always involve a degree of dynamism. Space cannot be disassociated from time in the sense that space cannot be seen as an 'absolute independent dimension', but rather as one, 'constructed out of social relations' that occur within and throughout history, politics and power relations (Massey, 1994: 2). Place, then, as a particular articulation and moment of these relations is always open and porous rather than stable and inert, binding other places, processes, locales and global forms that are themselves in motion (Massey, 1994: 5). Here, following Massey and others (Agnew, 1987), I understand place not as a fixed locality, but as an ever-evolving and dynamic territory comprised of materialities, social

regulations and ethical regimes, including infrastructures, legal clauses, values, economic forces, migratory movements, buildings, resources and systems of administration (Collier & Ong, 2005; Massey, 1994). In examining, for example, the Berlin and Athens Biennale, the places are not merely conceived as the respective cities of Berlin and Athens, but all those elements that the biennials mobilise, configure and interact with across their territorial and temporal articulations. This idea of place, in this regard, does not only focus on what the biennial does to a city or on what a city does to a biennial, but on the relations and situated interactions between a diversity of translocal conditions and elements and the forms that a biennial each time assumes.

In turn, the perspective of translocality, initially employed by scholars for providing more, 'territorialised notions of transnationalism', accounts for localised phenomena and forms of belonging not accountable to the nation-state, that is, within cities, neighbourhoods, families and homes (Greiner & Sakdapolrak, 2013: 374). However, translocality is increasingly employed as a research perspective in its own right (Greiner & Sakdapolrak, 2013), describing a range of dynamic and mobile configurations, from music scenes (Bennett & Patterson, 2004) to migratory encounters (Christou, 2011) and practices of poetry-making (Sun, 2010). Through labelling such phenomena as translocal, these studies challenge established dichotomies between centre and periphery or urban and rural, by stressing how ideas, knowledge, objects and symbols circulate and manifest across boundaries. Here, the notion of translocality is useful for following the various flows, movements and mobilities that characterise the biennial and the ways they are enmeshed with the grounded life forms of socio-spatial environments (Greiner & Sakdapolrak, 2013; McFarlane, 2009). In employing the notions of place and translocality, the aim is to provide a multi-dimensional account on the so-called biennial phenomenon in its diverse, plural and contradictory unfolding.

Theory, Method and Focus

This study largely concerns the production of speech, practice and moral standpoints in and about contemporary art biennials with a discursive framework founded in the conjunction of art, critical theory and promises for social intervention. While the new biennial is to an extent built upon and through this critical assemblage (Chapters 2 and 3), it is not always exhausted to it; it may borrow on its scope and methods of display but, at times, it can be also be unapologetically depoliticised. In any case, this assemblage, emerging through the increased interaction between art, the humanities and technological experiments in the 1960s and 1970s is crystallised in what now we commonly know as the 'contemporary', encompassing signifiers of novelty, radicality, self-reflection and social engagement. The 'discourse of the contemporary', then, as the theorist Yates

McKee comments, refers to a 'sector of the contemporary art system that exists in close proximity to academia and identifies itself as a self-consciously left-wing endeavour' (2016: 10–11). The discourse of the contemporary, in McKee terms, is undoubtedly the most dynamic and radical aspect of contemporary art today. What mostly interests me here is the ethos and set of practices it constitutes as well as the ways it can be mobilised as an apparatus for justifying the new biennial's social relevance (Chapter 2).

In this regard, first of all, this study distances itself from what can be called as the 'curator's perspective' on the biennial phenomenon. The curator's perspective's main characteristic is that it intends to produce some sort of positive knowledge about biennials, some knowledge that would expand their social relevance. Partly due to their professional position, the curators writing about biennials (or often the theorists-as-curators) regularly employ concepts deriving from the critical and cultural theory by both critiquing and preserving the relevance of the institution within a shifting social order. I take, in this sense, the knowledge that is produced by biennial curators about biennials as ideological; a discursive formation that is ultimately defending the field that seeks to engage with critically. While, of course, no knowledge can escape ideology, I maintain that these professional stakes need to be underlined. By offering an ethnographic perspective, this study aims to contribute to a critical decentralisation of the scholarly knowledge on contemporary biennials upon which the 'curator's perspective' casts its long shadow.

A central framework of the curator's perspective is provided by what can be called an 'agonistic approach', one that foregrounds the potential of cultural critique within a contingent social order (Mouffe, 2013). This approach both criticises the biennials for adhering to neoliberal policies, and at the same time, sees in them a potential for developing progressive, radical politics. According to Chantal Mouffe (1988; 2013), an author very often quoted in this context, the constitution of every social order is ontologically contingent, contradictory and diverse, and thus the encounter with or the participation in cultural events, sponsored even by multi-national corporations, can potentially carry seeds of emancipation. For Mouffe, social identities are sedimented around collective identifications, norms and orders, but only contingently and temporarily, being unfixed and in constant motion. Echoing Gramsci's idea of hegemony, this approach sees the social as an open battlefield where antagonistic positions engage in a constant struggle for domination. The dimension of antagonism – the political – is, according to Mouffe, ontological and constitutive of all human societies and an ever-present possibility for conflict and exclusion. Through cultural mediations, however, antagonism can take the form of 'agonism', that is to say, a struggle between adversaries, instead of one between enemies, leading to a more open, inclusive and pluralist form of social organisation (2013: 7). Mouffe, who in her book *Agonistics*, admits that she received frequent invitations to

'art schools, museums and biennales', argues that 'in the current stage of post-Fordist capitalism, the cultural terrain occupies a strategic position' (2013, xiv). In this sense (and following Gramsci), Mouffe argues for 'the central place occupied by the cultural domain in the construction of "common sense" ', and highlights 'the necessity of artistic intervention in order to challenge . . . the present order' (2013: xvii). This framework provides a rather widespread rationalisation of the biennial's role within the contemporary art discourse, emphasising its situated potential for social transformation.

It is not an exaggeration to say that nearly all texts that look at biennials from this angle demonstrate increased amounts of self-reflexivity. 'Canonical' texts in the field, such as *The Unstable Institution* by Carlos Basulado, and other influential ones (Enwezor, 2010; Sheikh, 2010; Hlavajova, 2010) regularly highlight the contradictory role of biennials as both agents of resistance and spectacular displays, and before outlining possible dangers, they regularly affirm that biennials have indeed some potential, if properly managed, to enable changes in the system. The biennials here are seen as an instrument within a larger struggle for progressive hegemonic politics, providing platforms where intercultural exchange and pedagogies can be actualised. Constitutive of New Institutionalism, this line of thinking promotes ideas of curatorial strategic intervention for changing art institutions from within, by challenging and experimenting with their format. Although not always referring to it as such, high-profile curators within the biennial scene share to an important degree the considerations of the agonistic approach. In a text republished for the *Biennial Reader*, for instance, Okwui Enwezor, a curator famous for his post-colonial interventions since Documenta 11 in 2002,[7] sees the biennial as spectacular display, while at the same time, stresses its potential for instigating diasporic counter-hegemonic narratives (Enwezor, 2010). Similarly, established curatorial voices associated with New Institutionalism, and that have held in the past, and still hold, key institutional positions within the global contemporary art circuit, including the likes of Vasif Kortun, Charles Esche and Nikolas Bourriaud, have often mobilised similar epistemological frameworks in their writings and curatorial statements. Bourriaud, for instance, has recently called his approach, following Mouffe, 'agonistic curating',[8] stressing how art institutions can produce alternative modalities of thinking and doing. Similarly, Esche in his 2005 edited collection of texts, after quoting Mouffe, stresses how critical curators should be strategically involved with art institutions by using the 'existing objects, conditions and situations' and direct them to more radical goals (2005: 16).

This study wishes to turn the curators' perspective as an object of examination as a cultural phenomenon within a post-1990s geopolitical universe. Put differently, it wishes to enable, as Georgina Born puts it in relation to her study of IRCAM, following Michel Foucault, a 'history of

the present' in respect to 'high art' institutions (2010: 194); to outline a series of genealogies, rationales and modes of being that inhabit and regulate the new biennial, ranging from avant-garde traditions, curatorial ambitions, creative city agendas, labour and policy mandates. The new biennial then becomes an ethos and a set of practices within the larger field of art and the social environment around it. Rather than free-floating, this 'ethos' is structured by and itself structuring a larger a system of art with its own histories, values and subjectivities (Chapter 2).

While to a degree referring to different approaches, some observations developed by the sociologist Niklas Luhmann and the philosopher Jacques Rancière can be useful for the effort at hand. First, through the work of Luhmann, we can look at art as a social system developing temporarily and organisationally through certain system-specific codes and logics. For Luhmann, social systems refer to forms of social organisation characterised by an effort to maintain their function by differentiating themselves from other systems and their general environments. The whole society itself is such a system, which in turn contains several social subsystems, including economics, science, politics and art. These systems are unstable and develop temporally through communication, and thus, their coherence is semantically produced (Rampley, 2009). Art exists as a separate system insofar as 'no one else does what it does' (Luhmann, 2000: 134–135); it is distinguished by other domains of action by being conceptualised as differential to them. One cannot, however, speak of absolute differentiation between systems and their elements; as Luhmann informs us, in a field such as art, 'we discover not unique traits of art', that is, objects that are categorically distinguished from other objects, but 'features that can be found in other functional subsystems as well' (2000: 134). Differentiation then, the maintenance of some distance between a system and its environment, is here a crucial concept for thinking art (and in turn the biennial) temporally, as a socially conditioned and historical phenomenon apt to constant change.

But, one can ask, differentiation on the basis of what? Is there some 'point of origin' or guiding principle upon which the category of art is historically developed? This may be an uncomfortable question for a constructionist sociologist, as now some sort of a priori definition about how art objects look like needs to be given, or at least some kind of encircling of the 'thing' differentiating art from other social systems. Luhmann largely evades offering a precise definition on what art is, but he points out that art in its modern form has a specific social function. For Luhmann, social systems are governed by certain codes that imbue their practices and ways of being. The function of art is to split the world into the real world and the imaginary world (2000: 142). The world of art, in other words, differentiates itself from other spheres of action by claiming for itself a space of 'unreality', a space where the objects displayed are not to be seen 'literally'; they are always expected to be something else

than what we perceive them to be, that is, something metaphorical, allegorical and so on. Similarly, for the philosopher Peter Osborne, art's difference from other fields of practice primarily concerns on its difference from the 'literality of the everyday', its function as an apparatus of estranging the mundane world of appearances (2013: 10). There is always some sort of expected excess associated with art. This is in a certain way the ideological function of art, and it is a fundamental aspect in the constitution of its modern apparatus. Biennials (and art institutions in general) are spaces that largely fulfil this role, the role of the aesthetic container, or the space meant to perform this act of splitting the world and aestheticising ordinariness.

This argument can be developed further. Rancière's observation that the development of an aesthetic regime of art consists of the fact that 'art exists as a separate world as anything whatsoever belongs to it' can act as a complementary idea (2013: x). Although meant to support a seemingly opposite thesis (i.e., that the historical movement of art is supposed to erase its specificity from other forms of life), the idea that what differentiates art from other spheres of action is the fact that *anything* included within this system is analytically helpful. The regime of 'perception, sensation and interpretation' of art, for Rancière, is constituted by 'welcoming images, objects and performances that seemed most opposed to the idea of fine art' (2013, x). In other words, the main code upon which the aesthetic regime of art functions is that of 'all inclusivity', its capacity to both include in its space anything at all and lift this anything to a different status in the context of art's visual regime. This idea can have certain repercussions for critical art and critical biennials. Interestingly, for Rancière, the difficulty for an art that makes claims to critical social practice does not have so much to do with the ways it negotiates aesthetics and politics, but on the ways that it has to reconcile two opposed logics that, however, both belong to the same 'aesthetic regime' upon which art is founded. Critical art has to balance the tension between two logics specific to this regime; the logic of 'art becoming life', and thus indistinguishable from other fields of practice, 'at the price of its self-elimination', and the logic of 'art's getting involved in politics on the express condition of not having anything to do with it', that is, of keeping its specificity as art (2009b: 46). In other words, it is the tension between becoming socially relevant, and thus 'real', on the one hand, and preserving the 'foreignness of aesthetic experience', which makes *art* on the other (2009b: 47).

This 'foreignness of aesthetic experience', however, as this study will hopefully show, that political art, for Rancière, always strives not to abolish, is always already inscribed in the modes of art display, in the politics of the art exhibitions themselves. The politics of estranging everyday objects is an in-built mechanism of all 'formal' exhibition spaces rather than something that individual artists negotiate through their work. It may very well be as Rancière argues against the idea of the postmodern

as a radical break with the modern (brought forward by Hal Foster and the October group among others), that the museum's function since the constitution of aesthetics as a 'regime of identification' is to provide a space of indistinction between art and life (2009a:35). However, there is a particular logic in the ideology of the aesthetic as an apparatus of estranging ordinariness, which is often neglected in Rancière's narrative. The function of biennials, and generally of institutions of fine art display, is to provide the frames within which something called art can become legible and perceptible. These spaces, as guardians of the 'splitting of the world', largely uphold and varyingly reproduce the system of art as a social system of action. The art exhibition is then a site for enabling both the transformation of regular images, objects and performances into art, that is, to things differentiated by everyday reality as well as that of safeguarding the specificity of art as a social system. This is far from saying that everything that takes place within a museum or a biennial is of aesthetic nature and cannot have real effects. On the contrary, it is to say that the visual regime of a formal arts exhibition space, even of a seemingly radical one such as a biennial, is collectively believed to produce a different kind of reality, one where ordinary things should look different than they are outside of it.

In respect to our case then, the calls for reversing the biennial's function as an apparatus of estrangement (and the concomitant demand for reconciling between what a biennial says and what a biennial does) can be thought as a disturbance to the customary functioning of these events. For Luhmann, there are always certain intrusions or 'irritations' in the interaction between systems with other systems and the environment (Rampley, 2009: 117). These irritations can challenge the logic of a system, put its rationale into question and potentially jeopardise its legitimacy. For overcoming systemic crises, in turn, these irritations have to be 'recoded by the system in question', so that it maintains its legitimacy within changing circumstances (Rampley, 2009: 117). Equally, for Rancière, art 'ceaselessly redefined itself' as a response to the 'intrusions of the prose of the world' (2013: xi). As we shall see in Chapter 4 through a discussion on Foucault's concept of parrhesia and what the sociologist Andre Spicer calls the 'extitution' (2010) in this situation of crisis the biennial partially remediated and domesticated these irritations, the intrusions of the 'prose of the world', reaffirming its function as an apparatus entitled to showcase the latest cutting-edge and socially interventionist art.

The aforementioned framework provides a lens to think through the crisis of the biennial (where the demands for art biennials to become activist and 'real' were dominating the biennial field) as well as the ethnographic fieldwork where efforts were made to reverse dominant biennial hierarchies. However, while useful for conceiving art as a system where certain logics prevail and the biennial as a key articulation within it, it may easily slide to a kind of metanarrative, according to which the actors operating

within the field of art obey, consciously or not, the fundamental rules that govern it and reproduce its basic principles. While this framework can provide a guiding light for gauging the biennial whereabouts and speculating on their inner mechanisms, it can become ethnographically suffocating. The employment of a looser connection between theory and ethnographic practice is here largely informed by the work of Howard Becker (2008: 36) and Georgina Born (1995). Becker explores art worlds without a priori producing a theory that separates art from other fields of activity and through which art gains its specificity. Rather than coming up with a definition about art, he explores how does the 'art world makes this distinction', and thus pays attention to the practices of the actors in creating the worlds they inhabit. As a 'regular channel of distribution' (Becker, 2008: 6), the contemporary art biennial is to an extent produced through individual and collective actions that point to degress of creative agency rather than mere replication of the art system. In turn, Georgina Born's 1995 study on IRCAM, the avant-garde centre of musical research and electronic production funded by the French state, is one of the first comprehensive ethnographic studies on a high art Western institution and one that substantially informs this study. As high art Western institutions have, according to Born, the tendency to 'absorb and conceal contradiction' (1995: 7), ethnography can, 'uncover gaps between the external claims and internal realities, public rhetoric and private thought, ideology and practice' (Born, 1995: 7). In *Rationalizing Culture* (1995), Born shows how the contradictions in which modernist musical discourse found itself in with the rise of postmodernism during the 1980s are negotiated and expressed within a prestigious, state-funded musical institution like IRCAM, which at the time was directed by the renowned avant-garde composer Pierre Boulez. Born demonstrates how IRCAM, through its public statements, productions, collaborations and the influential command of its director, constantly strived to maintain its legitimacy as an institution supporting and enabling the circulation of 'serious' music.

In approaching these issues, this study will not tell the story of the biennial from the point of view of the artist, the art historian, the curator, the art critic, the art theorist and in general, the art professional. While it looks through the eyes of all the above, this study will principally recount an ethnographic story cutting across diverse routes and pathways in an effort to familiarise and unfamiliarise this popular and increasingly trendy cultural phenomenon. To the best of my knowledge, there is no ethnographic study of contemporary art biennials, and in this sense, this work aims to contribute to their scholarly understanding from this perspective. In dissecting a particular historical moment of biennial cultures that of the period from the late 1990s up to the present, this research further attempts to map and document the ways through which the recent economic crisis inflected the modalities of two biennial exhibitions. While

focusing on these questions and sites, I study the biennial as an anthropological and cultural practice with its distinct rationalities, manners, routines, traditions and ethos and with which I developed an experiential relationship over the past few years. In this respect, drawing on multi-sited ethnography (Marcus, 1995; Falzon, 2009), I perceive the site not only as territorially contained area, but as a set of connections, relations and associations that can be traced and mapped across numerous and dynamic spheres and situations. The biennials in Athens and Berlin are the case studies but not the only sites whose codes this project seeks to understand. As concentrated and dynamic spaces of action, they always point to connections with their outside, with global systems, external technologies and devices interfering with and generating the functioning of their workings. Therefore, I engage with numerous locations in which this phenomenon unfolds, such as art exhibitions, magazines, journals, websites, online articles and posts, but also anti-gentrification protests, demonstrations and occupy camps.

The fieldwork in both biennales took place during a turbulent period for Europe, involving the outbreak of an economic crisis as well as the formation of a structure of feeling among critical discussions on contemporary art moving explicitly against capitalism and the market (Chapter 4). This is something noteworthy, as it is not only reflected in the practices circulating in the art field, but also in the ways that the research material for this study has been gathered. Both in the case of Athens and Berlin, the objects, subjects and discourses that drew my attention to these spaces (as well as the ways that I related to them), were inflected by larger discourses and modes of being triggered by the crisis; its governmental management and the emergence of various related micro-struggles and resistances. Traces of such resistant voices were omnipresent in the biennials as a 'social microcosm' (Born, 1995: 35) at the level of expression, affect and discourse. For example, the appeal to economic reason, occupying a dominant place in mainstream public discourse in Europe through austerity politics, was strongly resisted within the value system of the 7th Berlin Biennale. Thus, while conducting fieldwork there, I was often addressed as a 'Greek', a national subject understood as a victim of the markets with access to some sort of deeper insight about capitalist exploitation. Doubtless, my victim status was also upheld by the fact that, as a rather white-dominated, mostly European space (in some few cases, one could argue even hyper-masculine), the Biennale lacked those post-colonial or queer voices that decentre European discourses on exploitation. Being a male researcher aligned to a Northern European university and being interested in social transformation was, in most cases, an identity that could, at least at a primary level, offer access to an art exhibition with a left-wing agenda and almost exclusively European or American participants and themes. In Athens, on the other hand, my informants generally saw me as a relatively privileged university researcher

and less as a victim of the economic crisis. Due to the feverous demonstrations and forms of political organisation that were taking place in the city at the time, the discussion with the participants also constantly veered towards the relations between art and social change. The occupation of a nearby theatre called *Empros* by a team of young artists and activists, which took place 1 month after the opening of the 3rd Athens Biennale, was an event that shaped to an important degree my perception of the Biennale's role as a self-proclaimed agent of critique. Often participating in the occupation's events, including daily performances, lectures and symposia, I was constantly moved to compare the tactics, strategies and relations developed in each site.[9]

Both biennials I look inhabited a series of tensions, conflicts and contradictions occurring in the process of these events and disclosing their inability to preserve an operative working model as art institutions clinging to a radical agenda. These failures are productive to the extent that they display the borderlines and liminal points of the biennial as simultaneously a spectacle and radical agent. In Europe and around the world, the transcendence of this emphatically politically charged model is visible in the toning down of political utterances, indicated in the rise of object-oriented approaches (Venice Biennale, 2013; Whitney Biennale, 2014 and Taipei Biennale, 2014) as well as in engagements with affective encounters (Berlin Biennale, 2014; Bucharest Biennale, 2014 and Liverpool Biennial, 2014) or with popular culture and cynicism (Berlin Biennale, 2016). This notable capacity for self-preservation by constantly absorbing, remediating and repurposing their surrounding environments is a perpetually renewed pact between biennials and wider social structures exceeding, and at the same time, conditioning their modes of being.

Chapter 2 approaches the new biennial apparatus as an outcome of processes of naming and differentiation as well as a tournament of values (Appadurai, 1988), a porous and dynamic entity that renegotiates larger systems of valuation within spatial and temporal landscapes. Chapter 3 lays out the ways in which the tournaments of the new biennial assume a more participatory and discursive mode of address, extending its more traditional, art-centred focus. The expansion of the curatorial authority is a key element in this process. Chapter 4 discusses the legitimation crisis that the biennial underwent as a result of the questioning of its true intentions and as a larger outcome of the prioritisation of the political over the aesthetic. This was in direct discussion with the emergence of social movements placing 'neoliberalism' as their main ideological opponent. In Chapters 5 and 6, I describe my ethnographic fieldwork in the 7th Berlin Biennale and the 3rd Athens Biennale, respectively. At least programmatically, both biennials sought to structure the exhibition around activist-actors in an effort to push artistic and curatorial claims for political intervention to their limits. Finally, in the conclusion, I reflect on how the idea of the contemporary constitutes an ideological formation

that interpellates actors in its codes through its own logic of art as social intervention. Through the biennial, the gaze of the contemporary is produced as a mode of address, a gaze that reflects and interrogates the 'real' world, and at the same time, reproduces it as foreignness, estrangement and non-literalness.

Notes

1 The 'Biennalist' is a fictional character performed by the artist Thierry Geoffroy. The aim of the Biennalist persona is to reveal the contradictions and incongruities in the statements and releases of biennial exhibitions. For this purpose, he visits different biennials for a short period of time in which he attempts to shed light on the contradictory ways through which the biennial's discourse fleshes out in practice.

2 Following Rafal Niemojewski (2010), the 'contemporary biennial' (or simply 'biennial') here will signify the city or region-specific 'large-scale international survey show of contemporary art that recurs at regular intervals but not necessarily biannually' (: 92). Documenta, therefore, which occurs every 5 years as well as triennials that occur every 3 years, are included under this umbrella name.

3 The most commonly cited examples associated with this approach include, among others, exhibitions, programmes and events curated by Charles Esche at the *Rooseum* museum in Malmo from 2000 to 20005; Catherine David at *Witte de With* in Rotterdam; Maria Hlavajova at *BAK*; Nicolas Bourriaud at *Palais de Tokyo* in Paris; Maria Lind at *Kunstvereien* in Munich and currently at *Tensta* Kunsthalle in Stockholm; Nina Montman at the Nordic Institute for Contemporary Art in Helsinki; and VasifKortun at *Platform Garanti Contemporary Art* in Istanbul. For a comprehensive list and extensive discussion on these projects, see the edited volume by Paul O'Neil and Mike Wilson (2010) *Curating and the Educational Turn*.

4 The 2013 issue '(New) Institution(alism)' edited by Lucie Kolb and Gabriel Flückiger for the online journal *on-curating.org* offers a comprehensive review of New Institutionalism and the several persons and projects related to it. The issue can be found at the following address: www.on-curating.org/index.php/issue-21.html#.U9ueJWOkOAo

5 In his book, the *Birth of the Museum* (1995), the cultural theorist Tony Bennett, undertaking a Foucauldian approach, is suspicious of this narrative as regards to the functions of the modern museum. Bennett views the museum as a space of rationalisation and calculation that aims to govern by producing disciplined and 'civilised' subjects. Bennett sees the development of the modern museum vis-à-vis the fair and the universal exhibition, arguing that the museum came to provide an order to collections and other displays according to the principles of science and truth. In turn, recent studies on museums have attempted to perform a break from this Foucauldian framework set by Bennett, focusing instead on the potential of museums to generate critical thinking (e.g., Pollock, 2007). While the contemporary biennial was initiated as a site of experimentation in reaction to the 'conservativeness' of the white cube of modern art museums (Filipovic, 2010), and thus more according to the standards of fairs and universal exhibitions, it is of equal interest for this book

to map, in the spirit of Bennett, some of the cultural codes, behaviours and dispositions that condition this contemporary phenomenon.

6 This separation between the curatorial or other statements of a biennial and the latter's actual practices and routines, or between their 'logos' and 'bios', is a useful one for understanding the qualities and forms of this legitimation crisis. I wish, however, to emphasise throughout this study, and particularly through my case studies, that in reality, the analytical validity is less straightforward (Chapters 5 and 6). That is because the statements are also themselves a way of living, in the sense that they act as binding forces that inform the qualities of public expectations, critical judgements and responses regarding biennials, which in turn, inform the ways that they are communicated and are in a position to communicate themselves as brands, art exhibitions, events, institutions and public goods. Moreover, the biennial statements or any statements, especially by actors with a certain institutional power and influence, cannot only be only seen as words devoid of any practical significance. Biennials attract increased visibility, and as such, they can set in motion emotional investments regarding certain issues, affecting the terms that these issues are discussed with and felt among members of the public.

7 Apart from Documenta 11, Enwezor has been, in the past few years, one of the most internationally active curators. He is director of the artistic centre Haus der Kunst in Munich, adjunct curator of International Center of Photography in New York, Fellow at the Whitney Museum in New York, and has curated, among countless others, very demanding shows in the past decade, such as the 7th Gwangju Biennale in 2008, the Sevilla Biennale in 2006, the Paris Triennale in 2012 and the Venice Biennale in 2015.

8 Mouffe's article 'For an Agonistic Public Sphere' (2002) was published in the book of Documenta 11 *Platform l: Democracy Unrealized*.

9 This brought the Athens Biennale to a somewhat weaker position in my eyes, as its hierarchical structure prevented the active participation it originally advertised in its press release, something that was more effectively taking place in the occupation a few meters away from it.

2 Histories, Values and Subjectivities

Following Gilles Deleuze, the political sociologist Nikolas Rose states that 'naming is itself a creative act: it assembles a new individuation of concepts, symptoms, moralities, languages; it confers a kind of mobile and transferable character upon a multiplicity' (Rose, 1999: 28). When attached to an art event, the name biennial ascribes a formal resemblance to a multiplicity of disparate and contradictory forces, flows and desires, crystallising them into a concrete and transferable linguistic sign. While these events are heterogeneous, significantly varying in terms of funding, aims, visibility, politics and economic and cultural contexts, the name biennial endows them with an aura of likeness. In fact, the employment of this name is a linguistic appropriation of a success story: that of the Venice Biennale, the first exhibition of visual arts to carry it. The Venice Biennale began its operations in 1895 and had strong ties to world fairs of the nineteenth century, expressing emerging discourses of both Venetian regionalism and Italian nationalism as well as the desire to establish Venice as a cultural and touristic centre of the modern world (West, 1995).[1] Since Venice, the name 'biennale', which literally means every 2 years, has been appropriated and re-coded in various settings globally at the point of becoming a unifying and recognisable brand. Followed by the Sao Paolo Biennale in 1951, and then by another small wave of biennials since the mid-1970s (such as those of Paris, Tokyo and Sydney, some of which were short-lived), the name biennale, or 'biennial' as its English equivalent, has gradually inscribed itself into the landscapes of the art world and its public as a periodical and internationalised site of art display that assembles the latest selection of cutting-edge art.

The gesture of applying the name biennial (or biennale) to an exhibition as practiced by a range of periodical art exhibitions proliferating throughout the globe – especially over the last 30 years – triggers an imaginary constellation of already established values related to cosmopolitanism, cutting-edge art or modernisation, which are in turn inserted within the value regimes of various local contexts. As the words 'biennale' or 'biennial' are not copyrighted, anyone can participate in this creative act of naming, assuming they have some appropriate connections in the art

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world and are able to secure some funding. As soon as the name is appropriated by a host city and turns local, it is performed (in the sense of entering into an open dialogue with a site and its affective and discursive surroundings). In turn, each specific local biennial is directed to achieve certain aims and is perceived by its organisers as a brand cultivating its particular and differentiated identity. Its unique trace and signature, its 'soul' so to say, has to be made more or less recognisable to respective audiences or niche markets over the course of time.

The process of differentiating each individual biennial draws on both the prevailing discourses found around the field at a given time and space and enacts the signifier of art in novel ways. Thus, biennials are historically evolved through building a reciprocal relationship with the signifier 'art' and its larger social implications. Their scope is not static; it moves over time and is in a constant process of re-signification. During the period that this research has taken place, for instance, a variety of contemporary biennials claimed, or at least were in a position to claim, that they can challenge capitalist imaginaries. For contemporary writers, curators and theorists, the biennial can perform such functions by acting as mediator for 'an agonistic repoliticisation of cultural labour' (Hlavajnova, 2010), by 'enacting a diasporic public sphere' (Enwezor, 2010: 439) or by even being 'a force for the breakdown of class distinctions' (Basualdo, 2010: 133). However, this radicalised thinking that circulates in the value system of the contemporary biennial is very different to the one surrounding Venice Biennale in its initial inception in 1895. The first Venice Biennale was by today's standards an elitist site, where beauty was seen as a matter of refined taste and enculturation. According to its first statement, Venice Biennale, with its ties to world exhibitions and fairs of the nineteenth century, aspired to be 'a collection of soberly measured original and nominated works', including 'many of the most distinguished artists of Europe' (West, 1995: 404).[2] Or, as the poet and then mayor of Venice Riccardo Selvatico, the person who first proposed the idea of holding a grand biannual exhibition in the city, explained in the inaugural announcement of the Biennale in 1894, the newly founded institution had the purpose of gathering 'a great concept of art as the most noble activity of the modern spirit' (Martino, 2005: 10). If we compare these statements with the curatorial statements of the two biennials that I examine here, we can assume that we are talking about sites of yawningly different value systems. The 3rd Athens Biennale wished to 'transform the biennale into a sit-in and a gathering of collectives, political organisations and citizens involved in the transformation of society, an invitation to create a political moment rather than stage a political spectacle',[3] while the curator of the 7th Berlin Biennale, Artur Żmijewski, stated that 'the Biennale should not be preoccupied with the number of visitors to the exhibition spaces but with the real problems it is able to deal with. This is the political role of the Biennale'.[4] The signifier of art through which

the biennial addresses itself to the public is, therefore, framed in radically different, if not, oppositional ways in the early manifestation of the phenomenon and the contemporary one.

Yet, besides Venice, one can draw connection lines between other historical experience and the contemporary biennial paradigm. As a case in point, the curator and critic Rafal Niemojewski (2010) suggests that the biennial in its contemporary version does not originate from the model of Venice, which according to him more closely resembles today's commercial art fairs. Instead, Niemojewski argues that Venice with its system of national representation has very little to do with the biennial proliferation after the 1990s, which significantly differed in terms of format, content, scope, aims and politics. Thus, the term contemporary biennial may well include events that do not happen biannually, such as the documenta, perhaps the most widely known art exhibition of this kind and occurring every 5 years in Kassel since 1955, or the various triennials around the world. For him, if one wishes to look at predecessors of the contemporary biennial, one should turn attention to the fifth edition of the documenta that took place in 1972 with the title *Museum of 100 days*.[5] This exhibition was the first curated, large-scale, international show similar to the discursive exhibitions of today (Chapter 3). The independent curator Harold Szeemann, inspired by the artistic and political revolutions of the 1960s, 'expanded the traditional limits of art exhibition', making it 'a lively forum for discussions, performances, experiments, and social action' (2010: 94).

Despite its strong affinities with the documenta, it was, however, another biennial that provided the 'blueprint', as Niemojeswki puts it, of the contemporary biennial: that of the Havana Biennial, or Third-World Biennial, initiated in 1984 (2010: 96).[6] For Niemojewski, the Havana Biennial provided a model for contemporary biennials in several respects, principally in 'its relevance from the perspective of exhibition and curatorial history, the conjuncture of historical circumstances in which it came into being, and its distinctly different reading of modernity' (2010: 99). First, Havana Biennial was born in a period when globalisation, postmodernity and neoliberal capitalism were rapidly intensifying. In this respect, Havana and the contemporary biennial proliferation share a common temporal framework, most principally, the rapid transition to globalised economies, the gradual end of the Cold War and the rise of neoliberalism. Second, Havana Biennial employed from the beginning an extensive format including conferences, panels, symposia, lectures, performances and publications; it was, thus, similar to the biennials of today in terms of their durational character. Finally, the subjects with which Havana Biennial has been preoccupied since its conception, such as relations between centre and periphery, cultural hybridism, ecology, diaspora and focus on local contexts, are a constant in biennials after the 1990s. For these reasons, Niemojewski maintains that the Havana biennial is 'one

of the early instances of a new type of heterogeneous discursive sphere capable of addressing current art practice while simultaneously exploring some of the most complex predicaments of our time' (2010: 98). This model is indeed very close to the discursive exhibition that we will explore in the following chapter.

Yet, while historically useful, efforts to trace a point of origin are also ethnographically limited, as they tend to overlook the relational ways that such complex singularities come into being, and the ways they are formed more as, 'an effect', as Foucault puts it, rather than as direct product of certain practices (Foucault, 2008: 49). While neither negating Venice's nor Havana's influence on contemporary biennials, this study avoids granting interpretative authority to an originating moment that defines the current paradigm. Rather, it leaves the question of origin open, following instead the multiplicity of place-bound tensions in regards to its global form (Collier & Ong, 2005). The case of *documenta X*, as a paradigmatic enabler of the discursive model, is discussed in the following chapter in the same sense; a blockbuster show that shaped a structure of feeling within the international art circuit during the 1990s (itself fraught with contradictions and tensions), rather than a point of origin. A grounded reading of the biennial, therefore, has to also to take into consideration the ways that such complex singularities actualise the symbolic role they assume as recognisable art events. It has to look at what these events *do* in their capacity as internationally recognised platforms and how is this capacity maintained, disrupted or remodelled.

Values, Politics, Identities

Biennials are places where certain values – artistic, cultural, political or economic – circulate and attain publicity. The notion of value is here understood in the anthropological sense, as the precarious processes of meaning-making (via objects, symbols and social forms) that prompt identifications, desiring investments and ethical attachments to certain causes (Graeber, 2001: 12). Rather than universal, values are fragile, shifting and potentially contested, having to do with the ways that specific social arrangements, limited in space and time, conceptualise the world and its phenomena (Graeber, 2001). As historically mediated and socially produced, values are always in a process of negotiation; they are congealed in social structures producing canonical (or alternative) viewpoints, but are also exposed to transformation as the symbolisation of social reality, linguistic or otherwise, itself shifts and slides. A biennial, within the various social arrangements in which it is placed each time, cannot straightforwardly impose certain values. It can, however, suggest issues for public attention and propose certain modalities of speech about these issues. As a prestigious platform of circulation, the biennial authorises, supports and allows objects, performances and discourses to become visible, to circulate

and possibly be invested with desire within local and global public spheres.

We can identify some distinct ways through which such values operate within a biennial exhibition. Values, for instance, can be directly or indirectly suggested through artworks and curatorial statements, embodied in the application of general cultural policy directives or enabled through intended or unintended interactions with social contexts. Apart from values related to *cultural agendas*, a biennial also enacts values through the ways it relates with *economic agendas*; through its assignment of sponsors, business models, labour policies and general ways of being. A choice of an 'unethical' sponsor, for instance, suggests that the biennial tolerates socially harmful practices. This can become an issue leading to protest and give rise to sentiments against the individual biennial as an organisation or generally against the institution of the biennial as a whole. The reliance of biennials on unpaid volunteers can have similar results. These, broadly speaking, cultural and economic agendas, where the former relates to what the biennial produces at the level of content and the latter with its modes of economic organisation, often come to conflict and become a source for criticism and contestation.

The economic aspect is the main focus of the next section. Regarding the cultural agendas, an artwork or a curatorial statement can advance social values by making a case about a social issue. To pick one example among many, the filmmaker John Akomfrah through the three-screen video installation, *The Unfinished Conversation*, exhibited in the 2012 Liverpool Biennial, advances values related to anti-racism, anti-colonialism and activism. The film visualises the personal journey of the cultural theorist Stuart Hall by foregrounding the ways that the personal and the political intermingle in a historical materiality marked by racial discrimination, colonial wars and fights for more equal futurities. Throughout the 45 minutes of the piece, Hall's memories of his childhood in Jamaica, his relocation to Britain and his militant academic editing, research, teaching and black activism are unravelled in a dreamlike narrative that problematises the fixity of identities, foregrounding the potential agency of oppressed minorities, common struggles and personal traumas. Through showing this work for free to the public, Liverpool Biennial performs a cultural–political value within the city and beyond, channelling art-making and the thinking through of questions about racial identities, social struggles and political agency. It suggests a non-cognitive pedagogical trope, transgressing a dominant political–economic rationality that racialises class and tends to treat migration mainly through statistics. Here, through the display of this artwork, the Liverpool Biennial, as a platform of extensive visibility, channels these particular value systems in the social world.

The display of artworks, however, is neither an innocent process nor one in which some sort of neutral evaluative criteria are applied by those who are in charge of these events. Rather, it is always depended on the larger politics that those who occupy key positions in these institutions,

the government, the funders, the curators or the artistic directors, wish to express through them. These gatekeepers may not have unified perspectives and viewpoints and they often wish to mobilise the institution in conflicting ways. As such, decisions on what is shown are often made by reaching mutual compromises. Dominant political agendas, however, often connected with economic and even geopolitical interests often *do* play a role in enabling values that can potentially orient public opinion in some desired directions. One such example can be found in attempts to turn the exhibition into a vessel for expressing cultural policy directives attached to larger governmental aims. The historian Nancy Jachec (2005) discusses such a profound case of intervention made by the Italian government in the display policy of Venice Biennale from the years 1958–62. As Jachec notes, in 1957 and in the context of cold-war politics, the Italian government replaced the then president of the institution with the Christian Democrat politician Giovanni Ponti, an advocate of European unification and modernist art (2005: 193). While in its post-war editions the Biennale paid equal emphasis on showcasing abstract and neorealist art, in the exhibitions from 1958 until 1962, it was decided to remove all neo-realist works. The latter style was the established as the official cultural dogma of Soviet Union and drew the support of the Italian Communist Party (the largest communist party in Western Europe at the time). In the exhibitions taking place from 1958–62 then, the Biennale consciously promoted the style of Informalist painting, which, similarly to Abstract Expressionism in the USA, was associated with Western cultural values and the freedom of expression. This gesture was part of the general Western-oriented policy of the Italian government for solidifying anti-communist propaganda and serving its general geopolitical purposes. The chief concern was to overcome the political isolationism of the country after the WWII years in the hope of 'consolidating the centre, winning increased support from persuadable leftists, and strengthening its links with Europe ... using culture and, specifically, painting as a particularly persuasive medium on behalf of these goals' (2005: 196). Here, the values that the Biennale was put to communicate are directly linked to wider governmental agendas. Attempts to mobilise the public in particular directions may not be always successful, but the fact that such attempts take place in such conspicuous ways demonstrates how biennials are not neutral vessels of art display.

Another way of provoking social values through a biennial relates to cases in which the artistic or curatorial intentions explicitly conflict with the cultural context (we will see many of these occasions in the cases studies for Athens and Berlin) and where situations involving censorship, prohibition or public debate occur. In common parlance, these events are regularly read as being, or verging towards, the scandalous and, if not provoked deliberately (which a rather rare case in the biennial circuits), they require some sort of crisis management from the side of the institution. One such incident happened recently in the 56th edition of the

Venice Biennale in 2015 at the Icelandic Pavilion. For the installation, *THE MOSQUE* the artist Christoph Büchel, selected by the Icelandic Art Centre to represent Iceland in the Biennale, converted the Church of Santa Maria della Misericordia into an Islamic religious site. The artist altered the interior of the church in a way that it resembles a real mosque, adding Arabic inscriptions and decorative elements. Büchel invited the Muslim community of Venice to be actively involved in this work, teaching the Koran in different languages and co-creating a space where the 15,000–20,000 Muslims living around the Veneto region could discuss and make their concerns public. The work was meant to comment on current debates around migratory movements in the Icelandic public sphere, involving issues integration, cultural difference and tolerance as well as to comment on the historical ties between the Muslim world and the city of Venice (currently there is no mosque in the city of Venice). Venice, a city that traditionally based its development on trade, has been historically one of the key Europe's Christian cities that established sustained interaction with the Muslim world. Eventually, *THE MOSQUE*, as the work was titled, was opened on 8 May, but was shut down by the local authorities on 22 May on the grounds that it was not art but a place of worship, propagating religious ideas. Here, we can see how the claim of surpassing its role as an apparatus of enabling a non-literary world is used to discredit the art work. Perceiving Büchel's artwork as a threat, the Venetian authorities voiced security concerns as well as brought up issues of overcrowding in the venue. In a subsequent communiqué, the Icelandic Art Centre rejected all charges as unsubstantiated and persisted to the contrary; the installation *THE MOSQUE* was a work of art and had to be perceived as such. The prohibition to display this art work (one would say its censorship) spoke directly to one of the most contested issues surrounding aesthetics and art theory: What is a work of art and who has the power to name it as such? It exhibits the boundaries of what is tolerated to become visible within a certain distribution of roles and practices, the limits of what can be acquire part within the sensible community, to use Jacques Rancière's designation, which in this case is the city of Venice, or even Venice Biennale.

These diverse cases suggest the multifarious qualities of the social values communicated through these events. Here, it may be helpful to bring up what the social anthropologist Arjun Appadurai in his book *The Social Life of Things* (1988) refers to as 'tournaments of value'. Bringing the example of *kula*, a preindustrial system of exchange found in tribes of the Western Pacific, Appadurai suggests that tournaments of value refer to 'complex periodic events that are removed in some culturally well-defined way from the routines of economic life' (1988: 21). For Appadurai, while such tournaments 'occur in special times and places', in reality, 'their forms and outcomes are always consequential for the more mundane realities of power and value in ordinary life' (1988: 21). Tournaments of value are

then at the same time set apart from the ordinary, as spaces of concentrated action where symbolic values such as reputation and status are negotiated, and are grounded on the ordinary, as spaces that resemble certain ways of social organisation and established ideas. In other words, they are both constitutive and constituted in relation to their social surroundings. Within such tournaments, participants often strategise to adjust processes of meaning-making in their own terms, so that they enhance their personal prestige and status. They mark spaces of special, or specialised, rules where the paths and diversions that certain things and discourses assume are often the product of power relations. As a modern formation of such tournaments of value, the biennial may be constituted by the internal value systems of the art world, but it is also porous, continuously communicating and interacting with its outside. The economic aspect of value (pricing of works, budgets, payments, [self] branding), which we discuss below, is a major site of conflict in the context of neoliberalism and biennial's internal heterogeneity.

Economic Value, Communication and Labour

Apart from the values that the biennial performs through its cultural agendas, there are social values raised and communicated through interacting with its wider economies. In its contemporary version, the 'critical' biennial is always caught between a rock and a hard place, a tension of reconciling cultural and economic mandates. Using Pierre Bourdieu's theory of the cultural field, the art historian Jeannine Tang describes how a biennial needs to perform values both as an artistic exhibition and an industry. In relation to the former, according to Bourdieu's sociological account (1993), the work of art requires a degree of misrecognition or even active suppression of its financial value in order to demonstrate its value as art (Tang, 2011: 75). For Bourdieu, it is a prerequisite that the work of art needs to perform anti-instrumental and anti-economic values in order to attain the cultural recognition that may potentially translate to a future financial value. This process does not take place in a vacuum, but in concrete material conditions that relate to the already established artists, movements and ideas in the field, economic interests, platforms of circulation and so on. In the field of contemporary art, possibly one of the most important requirements for something to attain its value is that it is displayed and made visible. Within the field of contemporary art, Tang informs us, the exhibition is 'one such enabler of symbolic value', and as she goes on to say, 'the more prestigious the exhibition, curator and institution, the greater the credibility of the artist and the work in question, and *vice versa*' (2011: 75). Similarly, to acquire and maintain its 'public' character, the biennial should perform itself as a space free from the instrumentality of the market, or at least as a space where the instrumentality of the market does not exclusively determine its modes of

being. Its symbolic capital is boosted through performances of repudiating the economic capital and its calculative frameworks, the 'refusal of the commercial', as Bourdieu puts it (1980: 262). On the one hand, then, the biennial's artistic specialness lies in the ways it counters a dominant economic raison d'être. On the other hand, the biennial needs to employ calculative frameworks within a largely neoliberal context, which is to say, to prove its utility for sponsors, reduce labour costs and so on.

In his book *Art Scenes: The Social Scripts of the Art World* (2013), the artist and critic Pablo Helguera suggests that within today's art world, the production of economic value depends more on the performance of certain codes of communication, what he calls 'social scripts', and less on the mastery and skilfulness of the artworks themselves.[7] Economic value within this transnational network of practices called the art world, Helguera claims, follows the same dematerialising logic of the art object: it is produced through linguistic utterances taking place in the field, which are often antagonistic and conflicting, but in any case, multiple and performative (in the sense of being able to 'do' certain things or have certain effects on artistic landscapes). The construction of value in the artworks, as he suggests, is determined 'less by the objects themselves than by the nature of our interpretative performances, having a trickle-down effect on practically every aspect of art in society' (2012: 2). Helguera associates this phenomenon with the transition to the post-object condition in visual arts, according to which, the form that the artwork takes is subordinate to the idea and not vice-versa. Michael Fried's notion of 'theatricality' (1998 [1967]), associated with minimalist art, that is to say with art that displays an extreme self-consciousness and seeks to activate temporal effects to the viewer related to the intellect, thought and to speech, instead of absorb them pictorially, provides a useful analogy for conceptualising the status of the art world today. For Helguera, we can talk of an 'art scene', upon which certain dramaturgies are performed that have significant effects in the way objects and subjects within this world are valued.

Thus, Helguera argues, economic value in the art world is not as much determined by purely economic forces or the market as it is often believed. The market only capitalises on already constituted values, which are previously enabled in varied art institutional sites. Value here becomes a performance through forms of communication, where communication does not only refer to strategic, self-conscious performances of art professionals planning to advance their marketability and position in the art world. It also involves utterances that are often improvisational and unplanned; what the philosopher Paolo Virno calls 'idle talk', '*speech that happens without any clear* referent' (O'Sullivan, 2012: 256).[8] Whether carefully orchestrated or loosely induced, the speech acts of artistic milieus are of fundamental significance in constructing value across the system of contemporary art insofar they act on a basis of persuasion, of making

others believe that this or that work is of some special significance.

Biennials represent some of the key locations where such performative evaluations are produced within today's art world (the degrees and success of such evaluations relates to different factors, among them the prestige and cultural recognition each one of them possesses). Significantly, curatorial work is heavily invested in justifying and framing its choices in a way that makes sense to publics, critics and fellow curators. A good, and thus valuable, curatorial idea has to be, according to the art sociologist Pascal Gielen 'appropriate' as well as 'innovative' for its contexts (2009: 39). Artistic work equally concerns the communication of ideas or feelings either directly through the art object or through the interpretation of that object. Similarly, other participants, such as speakers, seminar organisers and performers are engaged in work that involves reasoning and the transmission of affects, either directly, through their performances, or by discussing about them. Tour guides and invigilators also transmit knowledge about the exhibition to the public by interpreting works or concepts. This is also the case with the press and art critics, who are similarly communicating the exhibition or parts of it in the media. Beyond official channels, in the course of a biennial, other forms of social interaction occur, what Pascal Gielen calls in a book by the same title as the 'murmuring of the artistic multitude' (2009). This unplanned and improvisational chatting takes place in numerous sites, either onsite, in openings or events, or offsite, in social media or in everyday chatter.

Gielen offers Virno's term of 'virtuosity' to describe the communicative activity of the contemporary art world's, so called 'immaterial workers' (2010: 22). The 'virtuosic' subjectivities are those labouring subjects that employ performative skills in order to convince others for the value of a given object, process, or idea. Virtuosity for Virno typifies 'the totality of contemporary social production' (Virno, 2004: 52), and thus characterises not only artists, but, increasingly, many other labouring subjects. Along these lines, contemporary art seems to be spearheading this process. For instance, the theorist Alexei Pelzin notes that contemporary art offers 'the quintessence of virtuosic practices' because the contemporary artist is probably 'the brightest expression of the flexible, mobile, non-specialised substance of contemporary "living labour" ' (2010: 81). Value then, in the field of contemporary art, depends on a continuous generation of belief, to bring up Bourdieu's older thesis, a belief that something is worthy of attention, appreciation and display. The strictly hands-on labour that takes place in a biennial, such as the setting up and production of the exhibition, one can argue then, is largely secondary in respect to value creation.

The predominance of such communicative actions as regards to value-creation in the art world brings forward a number of issues related to the art institution and its broader position within the economy. According to a prevalent idea that we will see in more detail in Chapter 4, artistic labour

incarnates the ideal speculative practice as regards to value-creation, not only resembling financial production but generating added value for a variety of high-profile economic actors, from collectors to real estate agents, through non-standardised, flexible, disorganised and emotional engagements (Graw, 2009). The art theorist Marina Vishmidt notes how this speculative mode of production in art, a mode of production that relies on performative utterances, brings art to 'closer affiliation with the speculative forms of capital valorisation' (2015). The dematerialisation of art, as discussed above, finds then 'a temporal coincidence with deindustrialisation in the late 1960s and early 1970s' (Iles & Vishmidt, 2011: 146). Art, put under the label of creative industries, or creativity in general, tends to lose some of its specialness that differentiates it from other fields of social experience, notably the economy. While this may sound as a rather technical, 'Adornian' reading of art and of art biennials, its basic premises compose pervasive ways of thinking about them. The opinion that contemporary art's value, similarly to finance's is 'fake', 'exaggerated', 'abstract' or not 'really worth it' is one that I encountered regularly throughout the fieldwork. Biennials, I noticed, are already perceived by the 'learned' as well as members of the general public as institutional tropes that mirror in significant ways the system that they often set out to delegitimise. It was the radicalisation of this latter conviction, the widespread production of this belief, in Bourdieu's terms, that triggers the legitimacy crisis discussed in Chapter 4.

But they do mirror this system in another sense, namely in nurturing promises for self-realization and freedom in the domain of work. The term creative labour is a heavily contested one, on both epistemological and political grounds, but it helps approaching the outlines of a more general lifestyle that is proposed through work in likewise institutional arrangements. The ideology of the creative lifestyle, the 'creativity dispositif', as Angela McRobbie puts it (2016), is a discursive construction functioning as a form of neoliberal governmentality. It becomes an arena of desiring investment and speculation, where personal desires for more flexible and autonomous work interweave with the reality of precarious existences, depression and insecurity. The pleasure and emotional investments one finds at work, or the work as the 'central locus of psychic and emotional investment' (Smith, 2013: 36) is repeatedly portrayed under these terms as exemplary of a new dominating mode of capital accumulation. Autonomy, or better the promise for autonomy and self-realisation in the workplace, according to such accounts, becomes the carrot that demands sacrificial imperatives from cultural workers (Ross, 2000: 38). Contemporary movements against unpaid work in the arts rely to a greater or lesser degree on the above interpretative framework (Chapter 4). In this regard, again, contemporary art professionals represent the most advanced sector of the workforce, the archetype of the contemporary worker. The issue of sponsorship is also a key one as regards

to biennial's positioning within an economy and will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 4. Schematically speaking, the biennial performs as an assemblage of a cutting-edge and unconventional event that acknowledges and reshuffles the 'rules of art' (Bourdieu, 1996) as well as a spectacular and emotionally invested display appealing to workers, audiences, and thus, funders and policy makers. This multimodal form of address produces a type of institutional organisation that heavily relies on the figure of the mediator, or even the brand manager, who has to counterweight incompatible strategies for securing short- and long-term institutional relevance. The above figures, their entailing modes of being and rationalisations are prevailing authorities within the biennial scene.

Rationalizing the Biennial's Critical Potential

As a consequence of biennial's conflicted nature, the critical biennial agents need to rationalise their involvement in such ways that it becomes invested with oppositional qualities. Contrary to say, grassroots artistic experiments where the activities of those involved are more easily understood as oppositional because of the context in which they take place, a biennial exhibition cannot be straightforwardly thought as a potentially activist site; it needs to be conceptualised as such. Partly due to their intricate involvement with critical theory, questions of commodification, opting-out and pseudo-radicalism constantly arise within critical artistic milieus. As such, claims for a politically oriented practice being made from within powerful institutions need to be personally, and often publicly, justified. The question naturally arises: why and under what assumptions are these events conceived as socially interventionist and not, say, elitist, exclusive or mere decors of the capitalist system?

Generally speaking, the habit of rationalising an individual or institutional actions as potentially moral, or as being in the service of some higher public good, is common to any professional field. It relates to struggles for recognition and legitimacy. Rationalisations are then not only linked, at least rhetorically, with what Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot call a 'generalisation', or a 'higher common principle', but they need to be convincing in their capacity to serve that principle (2006). While the qualities of this higher principle are varying, within secular democratic societies, an institutional justificatory narrative regularly seeks to find legitimacy in the name of the 'people's good', and more usually in the name of the weaker parts of the population, the disadvantaged or the oppressed (Stavrakakis, 2014: 506). To use a less expected example, even the proponents of neoliberalism, a system that practically spreads inequality, need to come up with justifications and rationalisations for their actions. For instance, the economic idea that low taxation for the rich stimulates wealth and eventually benefits everyone (what its critics name as the 'trickle-down theory') provides such a rhetorical device for

convincing the public that the institution of neoliberalism is beneficial to all. As everyone will be in benefit, the argument goes, it is desirable that governments reduce high-income taxation. Notions such as the 'rightful' and the 'just', as the anthropologist Karen Ho shows in her ethnography on Wall Street, are frequently used even by investment bankers to clothe the institution of finance with potentially democratic garments (2009: 29).

Rationalisations, however, are relational and audience-depended, rather than universal, and have thus to conform to socially produced codes that prevail within societies and more specialised fields of practice (Bourdieu, 1993). In this regard, drawing on the work of Michel Foucault, Barbara Townley argues that reasons are social and ascribed; justifications are addressed and possibly perceived as reasonable in the context of certain discursive environments with their own codes, norms and values (2008: 5). Within the art world, or more narrowly, the biennial world, we find similar efforts to morally justify institutional involvements that can sometimes appear as alienating, socially damaging or simply insignificant. For rationalisations to appear meaningful, they have to embrace a theoretical substratum, often immediately recognisable, a ground upon which an argumentation can be processed and perceived as legitimate. Niklas Luhmann's idea of art as an autopoetic subsystem can be helpful here. Lukhman argues that rationality is system-specific and generative of the communicative codes that operate within the various systems. Each system is at the same time self-referential, evolving in time through the principle of differentiation from other systems, but is also depended on how other modern systems (e.g., science and law) evolve as they provide its immediate environment. A main shared code upon which contemporary art as a system operates today is, as previously discussed with Rancière, that of all-inclusivity, that is to say, the idea that any object or event can be included in it. But within the discursive environment surrounding contemporary biennials, at least since the mid-1990s, the 'all-inclusivity' code, which can be thought as an axiomatic script that runs through the backbone logic of the field, discourses, objects and events are expected to reflect on codes, such as the 'public sphere', 'social engagement' and prominently 'resistance'. These notions often offer the legitimating grounds on which institutional involvements can be perceived as meaningful and even oppositional.

A certain rationality regarding the potential progressive role of the contemporary biennials (on the grounds of contemporary art's all-inclusivity) is offered by using theoretical perspectives drawn from the contemporary critical social theory. For instance, the implicit or explicit mobilisation of Antonio Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony and Michel Foucault's idea that 'power relations are everywhere' often provides an effective ground for advancing this rationality. Let us see how this argument, what was earlier called the 'curator's perspective', (i.e., that biennial involvements are potentially emancipatory) is structured in

an exemplary text of this perspective. This text, titled 'How to Biennial? The Biennial in Relation to the Art Institution', is written by the critic and curator Maria Hlavajova and included in the edited volume *The Biennial Reader*.

In this text, Hlavajova wonders: 'To Biennial or not to Biennial?' (2010: 293).[9] Responding to this dramatic tone set by the organisers of a 2009 conference on biennials in Bergen, Norway, Hlavajova answers that not only, 'we *will* biennial', but also that, 'we *should* biennial' (2010: 293). The 'we' here encompasses art professionals, mainly curators but also artists, critics, organisers and speakers, who, as Hlavajova suggests, should be institutionally but always critically involved with such structures. Hlavajova, artistic director of the institute *BAK* in Utrecht, one of the most prominent spaces related to the political turn in contemporary art institutions in the past 10 years, reminds us that our participation in biennials is always accompanied by a feeling of guilt. This guilt emerges because these platforms are associated with a culture 'that always already embraces criticality as a harmless outlet for oppositional voices according to today's neoliberal logic', and is a phenomenon that 'so closely mirrors the flows of neoliberal capital' (2010: 294–294). Despite these affinities with neoliberalism and all its negative connotations for those who, like Hlavajova's audience, want to align themselves with social critique and the left, one *should*, however, biennial. The question, according to Hlavajova, should not start with an *if* but with a *how*. *How* can a committed art professional engage with such structures so as to counter neoliberalism and its logics from within?

An obvious question resulting from the above reasoning, put within the moral framework that Hlavajova sets up, is: How do critical curators and artists reconcile with the 'guilt' of engaging with the flows of neoliberal capital? Or, if we think about the issue not in terms of curatorial consciousness but larger systemic conditions, we could ask how exactly are these social projects more effective than the flows that these institutions valorise? How can participation in such structures enable a 'critical surplus' as Esche put it in a recent text (2013b: 243)? And, who is the one to decide each time that this may be the case? In Hlavajova's text, she argues that if one rejects participating – if we do not eventually biennial – 'our cause', that of enabling new and more democratic ways of being in the world, will be, in any case, worse-off. This latter assumption provides the 'generalisation' or the 'higher common principle' according to Boltanski's and Thévenot's terminology: our job is not just to make exhibitions but to contribute to a cause linked to the common good. The argument that Hlavajova employs is exemplary of the discourse around the curating of biennials and art institutions related to criticality and New Institutionalism. As she puts it, the refusal to participate in such an institution 'is not the kind of grand heroic gesture it perhaps once was', although she is quick to emphasise that, 'this does not justify the uncritical

ride of those who have readily submitted their curatorial voice to the political and economic status quo with only one aim in their minds: not to engage for changing the system, but to make it work for themselves' (2010: 293). In other words, Hlavajova sees exhibition-making as an attempt to 'change the system', where the system principally refers to capitalist relations or 'the common *capitalocentric* vision' as Marion von Osten, another curator and researcher in the field puts it (von Osten, 2010: 7). There is, however, no outside the system, no external or pure point from which critique can be safely launched; there is always already complicity with this system, and to counter it, one needs its cooperation. The philosopher and critic Gerald Raunig furthers this argument, suggesting that the approach of absolutely no institutional implication in attempts to change the system is at best naïve, and at worst purist. For, as he puts it, this approach, ignores 'the techniques of self-government and the modes of subjectivation and contributes ... to producing ... the imagination of spaces free of power and domination' (2009: 173). In other words, according to these writers, a refusal on the basis of institutional complicity lacks self-reflection, as our predispositions, tastes, language, habits or even possible imaginings of resistance, are (at least to a certain extent) shaped from this same system of domination that we are trying to subvert.

The epistemological substratum of these approaches borrows from the development of the socially engaged cultural theory of the last decades. While one could bring up different examples (e.g., theories of performativity), I specifically focus here on the appropriation of the thought of two intellectuals whose views gained momentum across the political and academic left and the curatorial theory of the recent past: Michel Foucault and Antonio Gramsci.[10] Michel Foucault's writings on subjectivity and its production within different discursive regimes have had a profound influence on Marxism and the cultural theory in recent decades. In his *History of Sexuality Vol. 1* (1978) and in his later work on biopolitics, Foucault famously conceptualised and propagated among Marxist scholars an idea of power and resistance according to which there is no absolute binary between the oppressors and the oppressed. For instance, sexuality has been constructed as a scientific object in modernity, producing categories and identities in which we are already implicated as subjects of knowledge. Thus, movements of sexual liberation, according to Foucault, are already tainted by the power mechanisms they wish to resist. As he puts it, by critically alluding and criticising Herbert Marcuse's idea of resisting commodity culture only by vocally refusing it 'there is no single locus of great Refusal, no soul of revolt, source of all rebellions, or pure law of the revolutionary' (1978: 96). Hlavajova's argument that the refusal to participate is not 'the kind of grand heroic gesture it perhaps once was' ideally performs this position (2010: 293). On the other hand, around the same time, the pre-war writings of the communist theorist Antonio

Gramsci on hegemony were widely acknowledged among Marxist scholars and politicians. Gramsci conceived every hegemonic order as a 'moving equilibrium' rather than a stable order of domination (Hebdige, 1979: 16) that can always be challenged and reversed by counter-hegemonic practices. In this regard, Gramscian sympathisers advocated a 'long march through the institutions',[11] that is to say, the occupation of the liberal state and its institutions so as to instigate revolutionary social change from within. According to this idea, people's common sense could be reversed and made to align with socialism if bourgeois cultural institutions were occupied by revolutionary forces. Gramsci's idea found, especially through postmodern Marxist scholars, such as Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, a fertile ground in critical curating. These counter-hegemonic curatorial practices explicitly or implicitly linked to a proliferation of numerous publications, talks and statements inform the reasoning for advocating critical art institutions (the case of New Institutionalism again is characteristic here).[12] In short, the relocation of Foucault's and Gramsci's ideas to contemporary art theory helps make the argument that, as we daily participate in and reproduce, consciously or not so consciously, exploitative, unethical and abusive structures, it would be hypocritical, and unnecessarily noisy, to simply refuse to participate in an exhibition on the basis of its complicity with neoliberalism. The role of critical art professionals is to make the best of a compromised participation in institutional frameworks so as to empower the cause of social change.

This argument, and its possible variations, provides the grounds for rationalising the capacity of biennials to be (understood as) sites that can challenge the system. It points to how curators and art professionals trained in cultural and critical theory may assume the role of a producer who can potentially imbue the institution with radical values. To do so, the curator becomes an intermediator who alleviates tension and reconciles between the needs of the institution and the commitment to a cause. Interestingly, as we shall also see in the next chapter, the prevailing quality of this mode of articulation is self-reflectiveness. Forced, for instance, to respond to an activist anti-gentrification campaign against the Berlin Biennale, Gabrielle Horn, the Director of the KW Institute of Contemporary Art, where the Berlin Biennale takes place, wonders, in an extreme moment of self-reflection: 'How do we confront the appropriating, neutralising, and instrumentalising of critical potential? Am I a gentrifier? And are Berlin-Biennale curators minions of cultural policy?'[13] Here, Horn not only affirms that 'we' (the art professionals) are trapped within the capitalist machinery, but points to an 'ordinary psychopathology' (Terranova, 2013: 45) regularly confronted in such settings. This 'psychopathology' is where the art professional performs, in a schizophrenic manner, the collapse and blurring of the boundaries between the role of the victim and that of the perpetrator. As subjectivity is shaped by capital (to a degree that we are not capable of exactly knowing), we may think

that we are the victims, who actively resist capitalism, but in fact, we may be the perpetrators, the gentrifiers who work in the direction of valorising capital. This is the guilt that Hlavajova refers to, the undertones of which I encountered very often during my fieldwork.[14] Esche similarly describes himself as a 'curator guilty of all the sins of complicity' with the neoliberal apparatus (2013b: 244). By pushing the above ideas to their conceptual limits, it seems that there is no outside and that the capitalist apparatus has indeed colonised the deepest desires and passions of art professionals in a way that they may not be even capable of realising: caged in the spiralling cobweb of a ubiquitous totality desires to create cracks in the system are always already captured. The way out of this vicious circle for critical biennial professionals where participation already equals co-optation is to claim some level of contingency and focus on the *how* this 'critical surplus' can be produced.[15]

Notes

1 The world fairs or universal exhibitions inaugurated in the mid-nineteenth century in the large urban centres, notably in Paris, Chicago and London, refer to large-scale events taking place in particular cities that bring in and display latest technological and industrial achievements. Apart from stimulating commerce, they are also supposed to display the development and technological advancement of the nation and the host city.
2 The translation from the original Italian text is mine.
3 This statement comes from the first press release of the 3rd Athens Biennale on 3 May 2011 and can be found at the following address: www.athensbiennial.org/cgi-bin/biennial-list/mail.cgi/archive/athensbiennial/20110503220018/.
4 This passage comes from a text written by Artur Żmijewski and uploaded on the 7th Berlin Biennale website on 5 September 2011. The whole text can be found at the following address: www.berlinbiennale.de/blog/en/comments/artur-zmijewski-2–15158.
5 Documenta V, the fifth edition of documenta, took place in 1972 in Kassel. It was curated by the independent curator Harold Szeemann, and it is generally considered a turning point in contemporary curating, as it was probably the first show of such scale to include an extended educational programme.
6 For a comprehensive survey on Havana Biennial's history, politics and organisation, see Weiss, R. 2011. *Making Art Global, Part 1: The Third Havana Biennial 1989*, *Exhibition Histories Vol. 2*.
7 For a comprehensive overview on the transition to the post-medium art, see Martha Buskirk, The Contingent Object of Contemporary Art (2003).
8 In this sense, Bourdieu's theory of the field of cultural production that views cultural producers as rational competitors within a restricted field of action shows its apparent limitations here. If linguistic and performative communication is a crucial carrier of symbolic value within art institutional sites, then it becomes hard to imagine participants perform perfectly rehearsed scripts each time they communicate. Furthermore, all participants may not be fully aware of the rules and available positions in the field. While Bourdieu's idea of the

'cultural field' provides a compass for this study in examining branding techniques, dependencies from stakeholders and attempts to translate cultural to economic capital in relation to the biennial, it proves limited in analysing the *processes* through which objects, projects and people are contested, affirmed and evaluated within a biennial setting.

9 This conference set the question 'To Biennial or Not to Biennial?' to the participants, a question primarily referring to whether a biennial should be initiated in Bergen. A triennial did start eventually in Bergen in 2013, the so-called *Bergen Assembly*.

10 I will be referring to the influence of these two figures in contemporary art circuits throughout this study. Its relation to post-1990s exhibition cultures will become clearer in the discussion on the discursive exhibition in Chapter 3. I should state here that I am referring to how only certain ideas of these theorists are absorbed and performed in contemporary art networks (and more particularly, in critical curating) and not their work as a whole.

11 The phrase 'long march through the institutions' was coined by the German Marxist and activist Rudi Dutschke in the 1970s. Dutschke's ideas emerged together with the radical student movement in Germany in the 1970s that gave birth to a culturally oriented reading of orthodox Marxism through an engagement with the writings of members of the Frankfurt School, principally those of Theodor Adorno, as well as the work of Gramsci.

12 It is interesting to note that Thomas Hirschhorn, considered one of the most noted political artists of the moment, produced works in relation to both these thinkers. His *24h Foucault* was a gigantic installation placed in a 2004 exhibition curated by Nikolas Bourriaud in the Palais De Tokyo and his *Gramsci Monument* was a 2013 community project in the Bronx, New York, with the sponsorship of the Dia Foundation.

13 This excerpt is taken from the post made by Gabriele Horn, Director of KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin, in the website of Berlin Biennale on September 2011. The full text can found at the following address: www.berlinbiennale.de/blog/en/allgemein-en/gabriele-horn-2–15220.

14 A constant tension within biennials, as we will see more clearly in the ethnographic chapters, relates on the one hand with an employment of a rhetoric on social transformation and on the other on their reliance on a language derived from a neoliberal vocabulary having to do with practices of 'branding' and 'creative economy'.

15 Drawing on the writings of Paolo Virno, Pascal Gielen suggests that the 'emotional tonalities' of cynicism and opportunism are effective modalities of operation in such settings, a kind of cure for combating the 'guilt' (2009: 36). Using these concepts in a value-free and non-judgmental way, Gielen describes the cynics as those who consciously turn a blind eye to the distance between the critical discourse produced and the neoliberal reality in which they operate. The opportunist wandering curator grabs every opportunity to organise exhibitions even within unfamiliar to them social and cultural contexts.

3 The Biennial-Form, Social Visions and Curatorial Authorship

We have so far explored how the histories, values and subjectivities compose the apparatus of the new biennial. This chapter expands this endeavour by turning to the theoretical repertoire associated with the new biennial's form and content. Rather than mere sites of art display, biennials, within art worlds and beyond, are today conceived as expanded and multi-layered platforms of public intervention. The notion of the 'discursive biennial' (Ferguson & Hoegsberg, 2010: 361; Adajania, 2012; Papastergiadis & Martin, 2011)[1] is a descriptive term I employ to refer to the post-1990s curatorial emphasis on the exhibition as a site of semiotic production, dialogue, conversation, exchange, education, pedagogy and open-ended encounters through symposia, events, participatory artworks, guided tours and lectures (O'Neill & Wilson, 2010). The turn to discursive exhibitionary formats in global art circuits, as art critic Mick Wilson comments, stands as an arena where relationships between practitioners, institutions and audiences become reframed and reformulated (2007: 206). An essential point of this reformulation is the understanding of images, artistic or otherwise, as carriers and producers of social relations instead of autonomous, singular expressions of gifted individuals (Foster, 1988). Vision, then, the practice of looking at images, depends on the general contexts in which spectators and images encounter each other. Since the mid-1990s, this idea strongly informs curating cultures, resulting in widespread conceptions of the art exhibition as a site of constructing, rather than merely replicating or reflecting visions of the world.

Designating a certain 'mode of address' regarding its format, purpose and objective, the discursive exhibition bears traits that are now omnipresent in all contemporary biennials, involving interdisciplinary educational events and expectations for social intervention. The discursive exhibition relates to the recent cultural theory in several respects: First, via Foucault, and post-structuralism in general, it draws no substantial analytical distinction between art practice and theory; they can be both brought together under the label 'discourse' (Wilson, 2009: 202). Foucault proposed the word discourse, preferring it from the abstract notion of ideology, so as to describe the embodied character of statements, ideas

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and beliefs that circulate around public space and their capacity to shape modes of being (Miller & Rose, 2008: 3–4). Discourse, as a technical term, refers to a set of statements, propositions and ideas found in politics, popular culture, science or art, suggesting implicitly or explicitly ways to think and talk about a subject, and thus shaping social practices, predispositions and tendencies. By facilitating instances of semiotic production, these exhibitions then *create* the culture in which they participate. Contrary to the notion of ideology, which in Marxist tradition is regarded as a dominant system of ideas that distort reality by naturalising unequal social relationships (and thus is mostly repressive), discourses may be dominant as well as oppositional (Foucault, 1978: 101).[2] Thus, by being sites that enable discourses, instead of ideologies, discursive exhibitions can potentially sit in antithetical ways to dominant cultures (Adajania, 2012: 50). Second, via Gramsci and postmodern Marxism, the socially engaged discursive exhibition perceives the social as an antagonistic terrain engaging in a kind of Gramscian 'war of position' (or a 'passive revolution'), a war over meaning and values (e.g., Laclau & Mouffe, 2001: 36). In this context, by working within and taking advantage of the institutions of civil society, discursive exhibitions wish to foster social change and raise awareness. Finally, as we shall see, these exhibitions employ a thematic and transient nature aiming to generate a body of knowledge, whether theoretical or practical, aesthetic or cognitive. This body of knowledge wishes to define and construct (most often in an open-ended way) certain modalities of thinking and talking about certain issues and debates. The discursive exhibition has a strong durational aspect, evolving over time and allowing for open-ended situations of intervention and possibility (O' Neill, 2012: 128). As a temporal exercise in art and politics, it embodies, as the curator Nancy Adajania remarks, 'the hope that the discourse generated can leak outward from the art world to form communicative engagements with the arenas of civil activism and political protest' (2012: 50). The self-reflective, open and dialogical exhibition form, now hegemonic in biennials, is inseparably bound up with questions of social engagement that draw on post-colonial, minority and anti-capitalist critique brought about through the rhetoric of experimentation, interdisciplinarity and flexible forms. As we shall discuss in the following sections, the indisputable author of this discursive happening is the curator, a figure of enhanced creative autonomy that partly through the biennial often rises to the status of a luminous and acknowledged semi-celebrity (Green & Gardner, 2016: 20; Basualdo, 2010: 133; O'Neill, 2012: 32). The discursive exhibition, thus, relates to a grasping of curating as an expanded practice that has the capacity, or indeed the duty, to think through its arrangement of works, signs, knowledge and information within larger environments of social relations as well as questions of political transformation, social change, equality, self-reflectiveness, emancipation and pedagogy.

In light of such conjunctions in the last section of this chapter, I compare the *documenta 9* (1992) with the *documenta X* (1997), arguing that *documenta X* is a paradigmatic moment in curatorial history for thinking through the exhibition as a space of militant knowledge production. This investigation will help outlining the ways that the economic crisis and the protest movements arising as a result of it interfered with established biennial landscapes. I specifically discuss how publications from the 1992 and 1997 editions of documenta perform and relate to such shifts. I regard these publications as artefacts of special significance for several reasons. First of all, they derive from what is generally considered as *the* most influential recurring contemporary art exhibition that can safely be described as a field-constituting event, insofar as the field is defined as the global contemporary art landscape. Occurring every 5 years in the German town of Kassel, documenta, the 'art world's equivalent of the Olympics' (Stallabrass, 2012: 123), is generally thought to encapsulate the artistic and social particularities of extended cycles of time, speculate on and construct the nature of the art-to-come as well as piece together a fragmented space, mobilising enormous artistic and intellectual forces to innovate on experimental modes of address (Downey, 2003: 85; Grasskamp, 1994: 163). In this sense, by recapitulating the artistic and social energies of a period of time, documentas significantly impact the ways that art is debated and practiced in the future. Second, *documenta X* (hereof *dx*) that took place in 1997 was radically different from its predecessor and proved particularly effective in spreading the model of the discursive exhibition. *dx*, reclaimed, according to the art critic Mónica Amor, 'the political project of the avant-garde' and stood 'in opposition to . . . the structure of the mega-show' (1997: 95), vocalising disobedience against globalisation and capitalism (a practice that *documenta 11* furthered in 2002 under the direction of Okwui Enwezor and the influence of post-colonial literature). As a side note, we should mention how this curatorial dissent arises in tandem with a renewed, more internationalist, left-wing agenda, inquiring the dominance of liberal democracies and the so-called 'end of history'.[3] This is globally formulated via the anti-globalisation movement, culminating in the anti-G8 protests in Seattle in 1999 and Genoa in 2001, the inauguration of the World Social Forum in 2001 in Porto Alegre, Brazil, and a new wave of Marxist scholarship clustered around Antonio Negri's and Michael Hardt's book *Empire* (2000). Questions of representation, identity and struggles over meaning, preoccupying critical artists during the 1980s and 1990s were now increasingly seen in relation to the greater narratives of globalisation and neoliberalism. Finally, as the published material of biennials and other large scale exhibitions of contemporary art are integral parts of the discursive exhibition model, part of its socially interventionist arsenal, the documenta publications express significant archival artefacts informing contemporary biennial and curatorial cultures. A publication, for instance, can stand

on an equal footing with the displayed artworks, as they altogether make the semiotic production, the 'discourse' that the show communicates.

Vision in an Expanded Field

Questions surrounding the autonomy of vision and the visual in art and art history became pertinent in the 1960s and 1970s, resulting in the opening and broadening of the disciplines to fields of knowledge other than aesthetics and the philosophy of art, such as sociology, anthropology, linguistics, feminism, psychoanalysis and critical theory. Put succinctly, as the art theorist Christopher Pinney sharply explains, the shift from 'art' to a broader 'visual culture' marked both a 'greater inclusivity of subject matter', from formalist aesthetics to everyday representations as well as a theoretical emphasis on 'cultural practice rather than artists' intentionalities and aesthetic virtue' (2006: 131). During the 1980s, the idea of a disembodied eye guaranteeing the autonomy and purity of vision has been the focus of severe criticism by prominent art critics, such as Rosalind Krauss, Hal Foster and Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, for reproducing Western art cannons or privileging mystified, autonomous art objects. Institutional settings, such as the American journal *October*, the British art theory journal *Block* and the *Whitney Museum* in New York, among others, were key in making popular among artists, curators, scholars and publics a kind of ideology critique targeting the predominance of a Western, bourgeois and male-centred institution of art. The 'pure gaze' of the cultural elitist, as Bourdieu notes, implies a supposedly unmediated encounter with art objects, standing apart from time, transformation and social relations (Bourdieu, 1984: 3). Bourgeois refinement and enculturation is here perceived as complicit with masculine superiority (Berger, 1972) or Western colonialism and cultural imperialism (Mosquera, 1992). The site where such ideas of cultural superiority thrive, according to the well-rehearsed account of the artist and critic Brian O' Doherty (1999), is the 'white cube'. According to O' Doherty, an art object in white-walled galleries is decontextualised, mystified, separated from the outside world and in turn detached from 'everything that would detract from its own evaluation of itself' (1999: 14). This form of display is here regarded as navel-gazing, demarcating lines separating the civilised from the non-civilised 'other'.

For theorists working in visual culture and visual studies, visual experience, first and foremost, has to be understood in culturally specific and not universal terms (Jay, 2002). The universality of the alleged superior sensibilities of the educated elites was questioned as the effect of power relations between different class, gender and ethnic formations. As the cultural critic Martin Jay points out, visual experience 'was never innocent, even in the most exclusive precincts of high art' (2012: 135), but a practice to be read in relation to 'a multi-layered context, involving modes of production, gender relations, and technological developments'

(2012: 135). Moments of visual encounter are seen here as contingent upon the different systems of meaning, values and hierarchies in which spectators and objects are implicated. Vision then, for visual culture theorists, is a socially constructed practice subject to an expanded field of social relations that involved prior, culturally specific habits, predispositions and points of view (Krauss, 1979; Bryson, 1988). The 'vision of the natural human eye' to recount Jay again 'is always filtered through discursive screens' (2002: 273) that mediate our understanding of what we see, the ways we see it and the emotional investments we build around it. As such, the artistic image, similarly to all other images, cannot communicate singular meanings to the viewer as there are no universal criteria against which to gauge the encounter with such an image. The interpretation of this encounter is never neutral, or the result of a good eye; it refers to a process filtered through linguistic conventions that decisively condition moments of reception. This epistemological proposition of visual experience as a 'social fact', as Hal Foster put it in his influential edited volume *Vision and Visuality* (1988: 9), allows for a re-conceptualisation of the art exhibition. Instead of being a neutral space of presentation of 'high' art, it emerges as a space that produces and enables meanings and socialities.[4]

Historically, the exhibition format's turn to discourse also owes a debt to the widespread institutionalisation of the conceptual art practices of the 1960s and 1970s (Wilson, 2009: 205). From the post-war period onwards and up until the 1970s, conceptual art grounded its *raison d'être* in what Buchloh calls an 'aesthetic of administration' (1990: 105), that is to say, an aesthetic that replaced the painterly and sculptural insistence on the optical qualities residing in the objects themselves, with the semiotic view of the artwork as an 'analytic proposition', an arrangement of linguistic signs (Buchloh, 1990: 107). Such an aesthetic, according to Buchloh, was meant to assault and ultimately transform not only the visual regime of artistic representation, but also the positioning of the artist in the social division of labour, the artwork's commodity status and generally its forms of production, consumption and distribution. As an effect, the expansion and proliferation of this type of artistic work brings forward a reliance on skills of an intellectual nature. Accordingly, as already discussed, the post-studio artistic labour process often takes the (albeit heavily contested) label of immaterial labour, in the sense that artistic work can potentially be entirely of cognitive nature, for example, the hands-on labour can be outsourced to specialised firms of fabricators, gallery assistants or, in participatory works, the audiences. (Petry, 2011).

The decade of the 1990s is significant for the broad spread and circulation of such epistemological concerns across academic art departments and artistic sites (Cherry, 2004). Apart from the vast differences in the two documenta editions that we shall explore later on, this decade also saw the birth of a series of new biennials sharing similar points of

departure. A prominent example is Manifesta, the roving European Biennial, that started operating in 1996 and is now a prestigious site of contemporary art display. Indicatively, in its first edition in Rotterdam, the catalogue assured the spectator that 'you will be amused and bewildered, you will not find paintings or monumental sculptures, you will not see a traditional presentation, it will not be a form of art involved only with itself, with art'.[5] From the 'Info Lab', a separate platform of dialogue and exchange included in *Manifesta 2*, to the proposal to build an art school in Nicosia, Cyprus, for the – eventually cancelled – *Manifesta 6*,[6] Manifesta proved foundational for opening-up biennials to public engagements in a European context. In a likewise rhetoric, Berlin Biennale's first edition that took place in 1998 (but was already inaugurated at *documenta X* in 1997 with the project *Hybrid WorkSpace)* wished to 'highlight the permanently changing character of the city and foster interdisciplinary collaborations between individual artists over the course of the biennale'.[7] Under this light, the art exhibition is conceived as a site where dialogue and experimental educational formats circulate, a process described as the 'educational turn' in contemporary art (O'Neill & Wilson, 2010). Art display here is part of a broader knowledge production, with lectures, seminars, publications, tour guides and discussion platforms becoming the 'main event' and performing a central, rather than supportive role to the show. The desire, for example, of 2012 Bucharest Biennale to become 'a form of agency within the city' through connecting 'to other disciplines, longer-term involvement by artists through specific relationships with educational partner institutions and sites, and elements of surprise and playfulness in addition to critical debates'[8] is an eloquent and illustrative case in this regard.

One can draw another connection to this exhibition format with the rise of relational aesthetics at the end of the 1990s. Although routinely reproached for downplaying questions of political economic nature (Martin, 2007; Hatherley, 2009), relational aesthetics was key in posing the artist and the art exhibition as enablers of potentially liberating social relations. Relational art, propagated by the French curator and art critic Nicolas Bourriaud (1998), one of the curators of the 3rd Athens Biennale, conceived the artist-as-administrator, or recycler, re-programmer, ideas-manager, bricoleur, and monteur who rearranges, reorders, reshuffles and ultimately glues together certain signs so as to produce new meanings to be contextualized by a curator at a later stage. These are the formations that cluster around the image, or the 'happening', practices that concern the types of socialities artistic practice can trigger. Using another term to speak about this phenomenon, the cultural theorist Shannon Jackson invokes the concept of the 'performative turn' to describe the 'fundamental interest in the nature of sociality' displayed in post-2000 art (Jackson, 2011: 2). The logic of the performative here, to return to the critical curator's rationalisation of the new biennial, concerns the *how*,

the possibilities and methods through which an exhibited work can enable social values.

Yet, it is useful to note that this trend of reducing visual experience to discursive, social constructions invokes a persistent critical reaction within biennial cultures, a sort of corrective mechanism through which the specificity of the biennial form is reconstituted in regards of its code of artfulness, so to say, in Luhmann's conception of the subsystem. This is an important aspect to stress in this book, which we will further look at the ethnographic chapters, as it manifests how biennials act as containers of aesthetic experience by updating and reshaping art as a field of activity. Although often presenting themselves as post-museum spaces, biennials fundamentally operate through the *logic* of fine art display. According to this logic, the art institution separates certain things from the outside world, putting them in public view and elevating them as worthy of display. The logic of art display lifts objects from its usual place, turning things into artistic images. However much they are 'connotatively deflected by the magnetic field of culture', as Jay succinctly comments, these images 'remain in excess of it' (2002: 275). The excessive behaviour of images, what W.J.T. Mitchell calls the 'surplus value' of images (Mitchell: 2002: 1), or Janet Wolff the 'power-of-images discourse' (Wolff, 2012: 10), transmitting 'embodied experience and affect' (Wolff, 2012: 11) is fundamentally inscribed in the modes of looking at art, raising a barrier that differentiates art exhibitions from other types of events.[9] Thus, while within the discursive exhibition model objects and events point to the production of discursive environments, the idea of an art space as a space that transcends rational deliberation is an ever-lasting and privileged interpretational device.[10] For instance, even a radically discursive exhibition, such as the 2008 Sao Paolo Biennial, which included almost no artworks and consisted of 'the exhibit of a *void space* at the pavilion's second floor', 'a *plaza or open space* for meetings and events', 'a large *library' and 'a* series of *publications*'[11] was still read as a creative effort that points somewhere else, bearing the expectations of an art event and not, for instance, of a conference. The curatorial decision to eliminate art and produce a self-reflective and radically dialogical show (mainly the effect of budget restrictions) has been conceived as a conceptual gesture in itself,[12] and as Ferguson and Hoegsberg point out, was 'probably only really appreciated by the already devoted art audience' (2010: 367). Thus, as we shall see in Chapter 5, it is no surprise that when the 7th Berlin Biennale hosts a social movement within the gallery space this is understood by critics and the members of the public as an act of aestheticising the movement.

The Curator as the Author

Within a post-conceptual artistic universe (a universe in which it is hard to separate 'artistic' images from 'non-artistic' ones by merely looking at

them), the power of the art exhibition to be an apparatus of estranging ordinariness is strongly linked with the emergence of the professional category of the curator. As art and its institutions find themselves within a semiotic labyrinth, the curator emerges as the figure who can 'make sense of things', a connoisseur that has the capacity to orchestrate, organise and give meaning to an otherwise chaotic universe (Balzer, 2014: 40). The professionalisation of the curator as a legitimate job description lies on the requirement to hypostasise the increasing complexity of the modern world and link the accelerated partiality of experience in a unifying narrative. In the post-1970s landscape, the curator is then growingly understood as a creator of her own discourse, an author whose work carries a certain intellectual baggage. Unlike other names, the name of the author, according to Foucault, remains at 'the contours of texts – separating one from the other', and thus 'defining their form, and characterising their mode of existence' (1984: 123). As such, it does not only impress an intellectual signature to certain texts, endowing them with distinct qualities, but is also an 'initiator of discursive practices', able to delimit areas of knowledge from which other ideas, practices and concepts can be introduced (Foucault, 1984: 131–132). The elevation of certain curators to authors, as understood here by Foucault, is a relatively recent phenomenon, gradually established since the mid-1990s. Superstar curators of today within the biennial scene (we can mention here indicatively Charles Esche, Nicolas Bourriaud or Okwui Enwezor) not only possess the capacity to frame through their name expectations about exhibitions, but are also able to enable areas of knowledge related to their past practice. Thus, from a 'carer and behind-the-scenes arbiter', the curator, according to the critic Paul O'Neill, takes a 'more centralised position on a much broader stage, with a creative, political and active part to play in the production, mediation and dissemination of art itself' (2007: 12). Thematic shows played a significant role towards this direction. As O' Neill again argues, large-scale thematic shows increasingly came to be understood as 'the sole work of the "curator-as-auteur" and the curatorial act as a "total work of art" ' (2012: 5). Shows of this kind were crafted already from the 1960s by freelance curators who were independent of fixed posts in museums (O'Neill, 2012: 14). This unbinding of the curator from the bureaucracy of the institution of the museum and its collections was decisive for establishing curating as a practice that involved a degree of autonomous creative agency.

Indicatively, key for thinking through the exhibition as a medium in itself in the so-called Western world were shows like '557,087' curated by Lucy Lippard in 1969 in Seattle and 'Fluxus Concert, Happening and Fluxus by Harald Szeemann in 1970 in Cologne (O'Neill, 2012: 14–16; Balzer, 2014). In these shows, the respective curators not only enacted a form of social commentary, but through and by it, exhibited a certain style of doing, a signature approach, intellectually as much as in terms of

display, that could separate them from other actors in the field. Harold Szeeman's *documenta 5* of 1972, in particular, is widely regarded as a landmark moment in exhibition practice for introducing the curatorial authority that is typical today, where the curator is seen as a highly esteemed initiator of discourse (Richter, 2013; Skrebowski, 2010: 76). Historically speaking, *documenta 5* took place in a period of upheavals related to the varied social struggles of the 1960s: feminism, the black revolutionary movement and gay rights, giving rise to experimental art forms. In the context of curating, the influence of the early avant-garde practices, and more importantly those of Marcel Duchamp, was crucial for conceiving acts of administering, selecting and arranging as meriting artistic, and thus authorial value. As selection can be regarded as an artistic gesture in itself, a curator's choice of artworks, ideas and events can claim an equal standing for achieving authorial status.[13] The critic Dorothee Richter comments on how the widely reproduced picture of Szeemann taken on the last day of *documenta 5*, in which he was surrounded by artists and audiences, brings to mind religious images of sacred figures promoting the idea of a gifted individual who possesses higher creative capacities than the rest of the participants. As Richter puts it, 'the pose adopted by Harald Szeemann on the last day of *documenta 5* established the occupational image of the authorial curator as an autonomous and creative producer of culture, who organised exhibitions independently of institutions' (2013: 42). In a similar vein, tensions between an artist and curator were expressed as competitive, perhaps for the first time within such an institutional setting, with a polemic launched against the prevailing authority of Szeemann by artists participating in the show, including Robert Smithson and Daniel Buren (Skrebowski, 2010: 76). The exhibition, for Buren, 'was tending increasingly towards the exhibition of the exhibition as a work of art and no longer as an exhibition of works of art' (Buren, 1972 [quoted in Richter, 2013: 46]). Through the author function, the curator then emerged as an antagonistic figure in respect to the artist.

The tendency to regard the curator as the grand auteur of a big artwork is today reflected in the art world's 'doxa', to use Pierre Bourdieu's expression for describing the self-evident and non-questionable beliefs that circulate within a culture (1977). This doxa, a Western social construction in the particular era of the 1970s (Fotiadi, 2014), is today recited, rearranged and reproduced by social agents positioning themselves as experts within the contemporary art world culture. To state one example, the noted curatorial theory journal *The Exhibitionist*, which began operating in 2010, has drawn analogies between the curator and the auteur film director. In the first issue of the journal, the editors perceive their endeavour as the curatorial equivalent of *Cahiers du Cinéma*,[14] advocating a 'shared belief in the idea of the author, which applies to exhibition making just as much as it does to filmmaking.'[15] The association

between film-making and exhibition-making serves a particular purpose: to give legitimacy to the figure of the curator as a professional category and argue for its elevated autonomy and appreciation. One can state a number of other curatorial theory journals and magazines circulating during the past few years, which uphold the institutionally established idea of the curator as author. Journals and magazines, such as the *On Curating*, the *Manifesta Journal*, or the scholarly *Journal of Curatorial Studies*, as well as the global proliferation of MAs and MFAs on curating across universities, can be understood as likewise ideological vehicles. In conjunction to these sites, the biennial provides a grand stage for curatorial authorship, a widely recognised and highly respected arena where reputations, display methods and signature styles are forged.

Fragments of 1990s Documentas: Publications in Documenta 9 and X

The qualities of curatorship that we meet in the new biennial become clearer by looking at the big differences in the two documenta exhibitions that took place in the 1990s. As the British art theorist Claire Bishop points out, there 'lies an aesthetic and intellectual chasm' (2012: 194) between *documenta 9* (hereof *D9*), curated by the curator Jan Hoet, and *dX* curated by the art historian Catherine David. Here, I discuss how this 'chasm' ideally performs the modalities of the discursive exhibition, such as reflexivity, promises for social intervention, engagement with critical theory as well as the placement of art within a broader visual culture.[16]

The chasm is manifestly evident if one compares their respective exhibition's published material, the book (s) supposed to accompany and illustrate the show. *D9* that took place, as all other editions before it, in Kassel published a rather conventional for its time three-volume catalogue containing various texts and images referencing the artworks displayed in the exhibition. This catalogue was largely descriptive, and in many ways, principally through the qualities of the texts and their strict separation from images, maintained the idea of Art with capital A – a privileged sphere separate from the rest of the social activities. The images of the catalogue largely represent the artworks displayed in the exhibition, and as such, the catalogue functioned as an illustration of the show. None of the three volumes was titled, furthering the impression that they were mostly conceived as illustrative devices. The first volume contained texts that accompanied the displayed artworks and the other two their pictures and alphabetical listings. All texts contained in the first volume were about the artworks themselves as art historical objects, rather than about their politics, or what they do in the context in which they are presented. The question of 'what the exhibition can do' for enabling some kind of social and political intervention, prevalent in the exhibition model discussed earlier, was nowhere addressed in the texts.

What is also indicative is the professional background of the writers. The first volume contained essays by the art historian and art theorist Denys Zacharopoulos, the art historian and curator Bart De Baere and the art critic and curator Pier Luigi Tazzi, who were all part of the curatorial team. Moreover, it contained smaller texts or experimental writing pieces by the art journalist Claudia Herstatt, the American author Joyce Carol Oates and the poet Jacques Roubaud, as well as excerpts from a conversation taking place on 1 April 1992 between the renowned German theatre director Heiner Muller and Jan Hoet titled 'Insights into the Process of Production'. As this list indicates, all the participants were in one way or another professionally related to art, a gesture that makes the catalogue more bound up with the disciplines of art and art history. Discourses on social transformation or social equality were not present in the catalogue, or whenever glimpses of such discourses appeared, they were mostly looked at from the formalist, rather exclusionary, perspective of 'high art'.[17]

In contrast, 5 years later, the book of *dX*, a weighty volume of 830 pages titled 'Politics and Poetics', transgressed from its usual role as an illustrative supplement to become a literary performance in itself.[18] Texts that referred to variations of Marxism and critical discourses other than art literally skyrocketed. The publication included a ground-breaking selection of politically engaged texts from authors of diverse social, scholarly and cultural backgrounds. For instance, there was a section devoted on Gramsci with texts by the Marxist theorist Nikos Poulantzas and Jean Thibaudeau, the post-colonial author Edward Said and the Italian Communist Palviro Togliatti; texts on Hiroshima by the French writer and film director Margaret Duras and the Japanese film critic and historian Tadao Sato; essays on postcolonialism by the French writer Albert Camus and the anti-colonial psychiatrist Frantz Fanon; writings on the 1956 Budapest uprising by the political theorist Claude Lefort and the French philosopher Francois Lyotard; texts on Maurice Blanchot and Foucault; on world economy by the Marxist sociologist Immanuel Wallerstein; on the political potential of art; and on a critique on the institution of the state by the anarchist anthropologist Pierre Clastres. The form of the catalogue was rather unconventional, informed by practices of collage, juxtaposing content from a wide range of media, such as photography, cinema and text. As the editors put it to justify their practice, such 'effects of juxtaposition ... upset the strict divisions between work, document, and commentary, creating a multifaceted, polyphonic structure' (1997: 13). While in *D9*, the published material mostly functions as a reflection of the show, in *dX*, the book functions as an object that performs a political statement.

Apart from the morphological terms, there are substantial differences in the language the curators employ to refer to their practice and rationalise their aims and objectives. Jan Hoet performed a conventional

idea of authorship in which he seems to *possess* the art display. On the contrary, Catherine David, the curator of *dX*, with her focus on montage and intertextuality, presented herself as an expanded discursive agent with a role to *facilitate* open-ended and socially engaged encounters. For instance, throughout the forward note for *D9*'s catalogue, Jan Hoet refers to the exhibition as his own work, ignoring for the most part the contributions of the rest of the three co-curators (Denys Zacharopoulos, Bart De Baere and Pier Luigi Tazzi). Note, for example, the following passages written by Hoet in the first volume of the catalogue[19]:

> My exhibition is an offer and a challenge; it is an invitation and an argument that can be experienced through the individual encounter with art. If a text that accompanies an exhibition is to be anything beyond self-justification – *defending the work for which one has assumed such total and minute responsibility* – then the only statements that count are those that *direct the eye straight back to the exhibition itself*.
>
> (Hoet, 1992: 17)

> *My* documenta takes the artist and artist's work as its sole point of departure. Organizing an exhibition is always a battle, a struggle for every work, an engagement to the point of physical exhaustion
>
> (1992: 19)

> This exhibition is *my* text; every work that is contributed is a postulate; and the discourse unfolds as one walks through the spaces. It shows how one can think in and within reality, and it shows how one does not necessarily need a blank piece of paper in order to think; it shows art.
>
> (1992: 21)

> I wonder, sometimes, whether I really want people to read what I think. I find talking more important. I want to see the power that dwells within art become a reality within our society. I am sure that society needs art more than ever
>
> (1992: 21, italics mine in all the above)

Hoet is (self-)represented as an all-encompassing authorial voice that permeates the exhibition and assumes for it absolute responsibility. Following the anthropologist James Leach, we can see how Hoet enacts a form of 'possessive individualism' (Leach, 2007: 99), expressed in a neo-romantic, heroic fashion. In fact, the same spirit of individualism runs throughout his text, reproduced in phrases as the 'individual encounter with art' and directing 'the eye straight back to the exhibition itself'. In these excerpts, the visual experience seems to have a straightforward,

unmediated and unproblematic relationship with the eye's retina, without making allusions to 'discursive screens' standing between the eye and society. If we compare the above passages with those found in the introduction for the short guide in *dX* by the curator Catherine David, we see how 5 years later, the curator's individuality is denounced:

> In full awareness of these limits, *we* have sought to provide a multiplicity of spaces and a broadened platform of discussion . . . To complement the exhibition in the city *we* have published a book . . . Finally, in the framework of the '100 Days – 100 Guests' program *we* have invited artists and cultural figures from the world over . . .
>
> (David, 1997: 4, italics mine)

The 'we' here, while obviously purporting to encompass the assistant curators, is also meant to question, at least rhetorically, the irrefutable authority of the curator as the sole author of the event.[20] Apart from bringing to task individual curatorial authority, there is also a further element in David's discourse that questions the impartial nature of the objects included in the exhibition (and we can assume objects in general). In the blurb in the catalogue cover, we are informed that 'this book is necessarily incomplete, and necessarily biased by the subjectivity of those who contributed to it', and at the same time, 'internally fissured by the attitudes of utopian or critical intransigence which characterise the relations of art to the real' (David, 1997). David here recognises the biases of the creators (including her own) as an unavoidable aspect of the exhibition, further acknowledging that the end result may also reflect attitudes characterising the institution of art. In the typical post-structuralist fashion that solidified the 'curator's perspective' in the recent years, she shows, or at least she does not attempt to conceal, that the viewer's encounter is conditioned by forces and fields implicated in certain institutional arrangements. In this sense, the curator cannot make claims for the absolute responsibility of the aesthetic result through her own unmediated effort.

Similarly, there are noticeable differences in the ways the two respective curators perceive what the aims of the exhibitions are. For Hoet, the strength of an exhibition 'lies in revealing energies that are the motive forces of the world, energies that maintain life in motion, that manifest – for a single instant – beauty in its pure state' (1992: 19). There is a desire to show or even *uncover* the hidden beauty lying beneath the surface of things. Comparing this passage with the excerpts from David's short guide to the *dx*, a leaflet that was distributed in the press, one once again finds noticeable differences:

> What can be the meaning and purpose of a documenta today, at the close of this century, when biennials and other large-scale exhibitions

> have been called into question and often for very good reasons? It may seem paradoxical or deliberately outrageous to envision a critical confrontation with the present in the framework of an institution that over the past twenty years has become a Mecca for tourism and cultural consumption. Yet the pressing issues of today make it equally presumptuous to abandon all ethical and political demands (1997).

The argument used in the preceding passage forecasts what will eventually become a formal curatorial attitude within 'New Institutionalism' and modes of criticality. Hoet's idea of the curatorial gesture, as uncovering some hidden beauty, stands miles apart from today's curatorial statements. Within this framework, in Hoet's statement, the artist is elevated to the status of the shaman, where, the artist, similar to the curator, seems to have the capacity to *reveal* hidden beauty, ecstasies and world energies:

> Artists do not *investigate* the aesthetics of things; they *reveal* the hidden beauty, the essence, the ecstasy . . . The encounter with art begins at the point where the eyes reconstruct the artwork . . . (1992: 17–19, italics mine).

The eye here is pure, as in Bourdieu's 'pure gaze', having the capacity to initiate and communicate directly with the artist's work. While the artist's gesture, according to this narrative, is redeeming, mediating between a motionless world and its forthcoming progress, this redemptive act seems to emerge out of an unmediated, inner need. The art objects are magical and mystified manifestations made by gifted but unruly individuals. The curator, for Hoet, must play a disciplinary role to the exhibition, delimiting the uncontrollable energies that can be released by the inner drive of the artists:

> But for me there has only ever been one starting-point, and that is art, artists and their works: things created by inner necessity, which have sought and made a place for themselves [. . .] Artists are the motors of the world; but they need the rest of the vehicle if their power is to become a propulsive force and not merely run for waste. This exhibition is intended to be a drive-belt.
>
> (Hoet, 1992: 19)

In contrast to this conception of the artist as a Dionysian shaman and the curator as their Apollonian counterpart, David regards the artist as one who investigates, an interrogator expected to denaturalise the given state of things, instead of revealing their hidden truth. In terms more familiar to contemporary cultural theory, where truth appears as construction rather

than revelation, the artist in David's narrative problematises and poses questions about the given state of things:

> For most of these figures (some of the artists participated in the show), the critical dimension appears in a radical questioning of the categories of the 'fine arts' and of the anthropological foundations of Western culture, through a subversion of the traditional hierarchies and divisions of knowledge (1997: 25).

Again here, there is a tremendous difference in how the aims of each exhibition are articulated: in Hoet's expressionist narrative, the artist through a heroic gesture is expected to reveal true essences that inhere in the world, while in David's constructivist narrative, the artist is expected to engage in political actions where no underlying essence seems to inhabit things. The general surrounding context, and in particular that of globalisation, is also framed by Hoet and David in explicitly antagonistic ways. In Hoet's narrative, the actors of the world seem to equally participate in a process of endless circulation of bodies and information; hierarchies and power relations are unproblematically left outside of the picture; everyone seems to have access to everything; the world is demystified and in the process of becoming a unified whole:

> This world has grown smaller: the 'global village' that was outlined by McLuhan now forms the horizon of our everyday lives. *Almost everything is available; we have access in seconds to information, impressions and experiences of every kind*. The world is atomized; the holistic vision is increasingly disappearing from our lives. Everything has become an image mediatized. Our contacts with the world outside ourselves are concentrated in the eyes and in the immaterial experiences that they convey. No longer does the world seem alien: it has become a kind of object, a thing we think about we can be sure of. . . . We feel secure because we have risk-free visual access to all phenomena, however distant (1992: 18, italics mine).

By invoking McLuhan's global village, Hoet suggests a flat concept of humanity where all phenomena are accessible to everyone. For David, on the other hand, the world is asymmetrical, determined by forces and power relations of political and economic nature. Globalisation is not presented as a linear process; it includes as much as it excludes and exploits:

> In the age of globalization and of the sometimes violent social, economic, and cultural transformations it entails, contemporary artistic practices, condemned for their supposed meaninglessness or 'nullity' by the likes of Jean Baudrillard, are in fact a vital source of imaginary and symbolic representations whose diversity is irreducible to the near

> total economic domination of the real. The stakes here are no less political than aesthetic – at least if one can avoid reinforcing the mounting spectacularization and instrumentalization of 'contemporary art' by the culture industry, where art is used for social regulation or indeed control, through the aestheticization of information or through forms of debate that paralyze any act of judgment in the immediacy of raw seduction or emotion (what might be called 'the Benetton effect') (1997: 17).[21]

The attempt to reverse the 'end of ideology' discourse of the post-1989 era is obvious as is the resemblance to the critical curating that appears in the years to follow. With its politically charged and self-reflexive attitude, *dX* mirrored a climate of escalating dissent against economic globalisation. In this sense, the event was warmly received by factions of the left, and in fact, signalled a leftist mode of engaging with biennials as sites of actualising Marxist and critical theory. In his 1998 article for the *New Left Review* titled 'Radical Art at documenta X', Masao Miyoshi asserted that *dX* 'was an extraordinary event', mounting 'a fearless challenge to today's general premise and practice of art, and indeed to the entire art and culture industry', whose consequences 'could turn out to be truly important historically' (1998: 151). Indeed, his expectations were fulfilled, for apart from making *dX* a 'kind of global standard for criticality',[22] this exhibition brought to the forefront a discussion of the potential of biennials to enact radical politics.

Interestingly, the fear of a spectacularisation and instrumentalisation of critical art practices is always already present. The significant question is, to go back to the previous chapter, *who* is to judge whether the show has managed to transgress its co-optation or not. And, in fact, *why* should one even accept such a standard of measurement for evaluating the politics of an art show in the first place? The discursive exhibition model that frames vision as a process constructed by social conventions, media representations and hegemonic effects poses the question of transgression emphatically and in a very particular way. As vision is not related to the authority of a pure gaze, but socially constructed, the role of the discursive exhibition is not to reveal beauty through special objects, as Hoet would suggest, but to enable counter-hegemonic environments that can construct a situation leading to a transformed consciousness. The tensions formulated in *dX* between the political aspirations of an art biennial and their possible co-optation from economic forces strongly echo the critical curatorial predicaments of recent years. The predicament of reconciling spectacle and critique through promises of social intervention holds forth among biennials' cultures and their critical readings. During the period of the recent economic crisis a new vocabulary, ethnical framework and militancy are introduced, disturbing certain aspects of the discursive model and making the tensions inhabiting it more apparent.

Notes

1 In light of the so-called 'educational turn', several attempts have been made to describe the characteristics of these types of shows. See, for example, the title O'Neill & Mick Wilson (2010) *Curating and the Educational Turn*. The name 'discursive exhibition' is probably the most widespread to describe this exhibitionary model and is preferred here, as it also resonates with the notion of 'discourse' as found in the work of Foucault.

2 As Foucault puts it in *History of Sexuality Vol. 1*: 'We must make allowance for the complex and unstable process whereby discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy' (1978: 101).

3 The idea of the 'end of history' refers to how the victory of capitalism over socialism welcomes the advent of a final form of human government based on the principles of liberal democracy. It was proposed by the American political scientist Francis Fukuyama in his 1992 book, *The End of History and the Last Man*.

4 For Irit Rogoff, visual culture questions art history's conventional procedures, its connoisseurship and enthusiasm for 'a good eye', offering instead 'an understanding of embodied knowledge, of disputed meanings, of the formation of scholastic discourses of material value, of viewing subject positions within culture, and of the role of vision in the formation of the structures of desire' (1996: 190).

5 This is an excerpt from the announcement of the 1st Manifesta that took place from 9 June to 19 August 1996 in Rotterdam. It can be found at the following address: www.manifesta.org/manifesta1/index.html.

6 *Manifesta 6* was cancelled due to the tensions arising from its efforts to reconcile Greek and Turkish populations living in the island of Cyprus.

7 This is an excerpt from the announcement of the 1st Berlin Biennale that took place from 30 September to 30 December 1998 in Berlin. The whole announcement can be found at the following address: www.berlinbiennale.de/blog/en/1st-6th-biennale/1st-berlin-biennale.

8 This phrase is used in the announcement of the 5th Bucharest Biennale to describe the latter's role in Bucharest's urban setting. The whole text can be found at the following address: www.biennialfoundation.org/2011/06/the-5th-bucharest-international-biennial-for-contemporary-art-generated-by-pavilion-journal-for-politics-culture-set-for-25-may-22-july-2012-under-the-curatorship-of-anne-barlow-ukusa-re/.

9 The idea of finding agency in the objects themselves, independently of their discursive contexts, is lately re-inserted to curatorial and artistic worlds through the so-called object-oriented ontology and the philosophical movement of speculative realism. Examples of large-scale exhibitions influenced from such epistemological positions include documenta 13 (2012) as well as the 55th Venice Biennale in 2013.

10 It is no coincidence that one of the most quoted theorists in this new paradigm of art-as-education is the French philosopher Jacque Rancière and especially his work on pedagogy. In his 1991 work titled 'The Ignorant Schoolmaster', he advocates a teaching approach based on the teacher's ignorance that challenges predetermined top-down learning architectures. Phrases often used in post-optic art contexts, such as 'non-didactic pedagogies', 'process-based

knowledge' and 'non-instrumental encounters', similarly point to a practice of learning that is not based on certain criteria, taking the form of open-ended confrontations, with no expectations for tangible outcomes.

11 These phrases come from the official announcement of the 28th Sao Paolo Biennial that took place from 26 October to 6 December 2008. The whole text can found at the following address: http://universes-in-universe.de/car/sao-paulo/eng/2008/index.htm.

12 The curator Jens Hofmann, for instance, in a text for Frieze, speaks about the gesture of curators to stage a self-reflective show amidst budget cuts in the biennial as producing 'a sophisticated artistic and curatorial discourse' www.frieze.com/issue/review/28th_sao_paulo_biennial/.

13 For instance, the art theorist Boris Groys suggests in his text 'Politics of Installation', published for the online magazine *e-flux*, that 'today, there is no longer any "ontological" difference between making art and displaying art,' and in this sense, 'in the context of contemporary art, to make art is to show things as art' (2010). Later on in this text, he sees an analytical distinction to be made between an 'installation artist' and a 'curator' based on the former's capacity to display an environment, without having the need to justify or explain their decisions. His text can be found at the following address: www.e-flux.com/journal/politics-of-installation/.

14 *Cahiers du Cinéma* is a French film magazine, founded in 1951, which popularised the notion of the cinema director as an *auteur*, an author with an individualised filmic style, creative vision and signature.

15 This phrase is taken by the first editorial of the magazine titled 'Overture' and written by the curator Jens Hofmann, the founder of the magazine. The editorial can be found at the following address: http://the-exhibitionist.com/archive/exhibitionist-1/.

16 In its online post 'Politics/Poetics: Documenta X', the research, publication and exhibition project *Former West* argues that the catalogue of documenta X went 'far beyond any traditional catalogue and fundamentally changes the way that contemporary art exhibitions make use of publications in years to come.' The full post can be found at the following address: www.formerwest.org/Research Library/PoliticsPoeticsDocumentaXthebook.

17 It needs to be noted, however, that it was one of the first times in the history of exhibitions of contemporary art where a catalogue included a text by a political philosopher. This was an essay by the philosopher Cornelius Castoriadis called 'The crisis of Marxism and the crisis of Politics' – a five-page essay on why politics that make claims to the notion of 'historical necessity' should be abandoned and why Marx's belief in 'progress' through the rational mastery over nature is a myth.

18 One of the most discussed aspects of *documenta X* that mirrors the 'discursivity' and temporality of today's biennials was the programme *100 Days/100 Guests*. Each day, a thinker, filmmaker, artist or philosopher offered a lecture or presentation in *documenta* premises. As the critic Monica Amor put it, *documenta X* 'discursively constituted itself as a "cultural event" imbued with the political aspirations that characterised postwar neo-avantgarde practices.' (1997: 95).

19 All Italics in the passages below are mine.

20 This rhetoric of course conflicts with how David is today considered *the* author of *dX* within artistic milieus, and thus, in a Foucauldian sense, as the initiator of a certain discursive practice.

21 In fact, David's language becomes even more polemic as she loathes how 'the end of "real communism" in 1989, with German reunification and Soviet disintegration, is greeted by media triumphalism and a new celebration of the commodity aesthetic', while pointing out that these ideologies 'cannot veil the extreme uncertainty of the present, dominated by the expansion of unbrindled capitalism, the reassertion of neocolonial relations between the economic centres and a fractured multitude of "peripheries", the fading of the nation-state as an effective structure for the expression of popular sovereignty, and the emergence of identity groups as vectors of consensus and conflict across the world' (1997: 25).

22 This quote is taken from the text 'The Sublime Whiff of Criticality' by Radical Culture Research Collective posted in the website *post.thing.net* in 2007. The full text can be found at the following address: http://post.thing.net/node/1741.

4 Gaps Between Words and Deeds, Social Movements and Legitimacy Crisis

The New York-based art critic Ben Davis began his *9.5 Theses on Art and Class* with the phrase 'class is an issue of fundamental importance for arts' (2013: 27), uttering a prevalent idea among critical artistic milieus during the years following the 2007–08 recession in the USA and the Eurozone crisis.[1] Wishing to expand, modify and challenge the perception of the art exhibition as primarily a site of discourse and semiotic production, this idea resulted in a heightened distrust of the socially interventionist role of large-scale art events and their correlation with social inequality and privilege. Decisively affecting the intellectual milieu of both biennials I explore, this sense of distrust led to a growing conceptualisation of the art exhibition as a site where forms of exploitation and capitalist relations of production are replicated, rather than as a potential vehicle of overturning dominant hierarchies (Gielen, 2009; Sholette, 2010; Harutyunyan Özgün & Goodfield 2011; Dimitrakaki, 2012). Under that view, the radicality of the biennial is not only related to the discourses it mobilises, but also to its mode of production, labour policies and potentially unethical forms of sponsorship. Previously, debates on art and economy have flourished in socially engaged art worldwide since at least the 2002 *documenta 11*,[2] an exhibition that signalled the incorporation of Autonomist Marxist theory in art circuits.[3] From around 2010 until 2014, these frameworks seemed to occupy a powerful position in the debates around socially interventionist biennials, whose raison d'être, however, was now facing new challenges. An exhibition form that was 'threatening to slide into neoliberal conformism', as the organisers of the second edition of the World Biennial Forum note in 2014, 'has again become the site of conflict and controversy'.[4] A largely polemical structure of feeling in counter-biennial articulations, threatening the biennial form with a kind of legitimacy crisis, rose concurrently with anti-austerity and Occupy movements appearing in European and international landscapes.

In his short article 'Against Political Art' published in the May 2014 issue of *ArtMonthly*, the artist Daniel Miller points to what he diagnoses as the insincerity of political art and socially engaged institutions. Miller expounds that the latter present themselves, above all, as anti-neoliberal

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'even though no sector better embodies the gated utopianism of global neoliberal society than the ultra-mobile and hyper-networked art world' (2014: 34). In effect, Miller admonishes the hypocritical function of these institutions, which claim to be something, in this case, anti-neoliberal, but at the same time, propagate the opposite of what they claim, which is to say, the structures of neoliberalism. His suggestion is that there is a lack of truthfulness in the statements of these institutions, a pretension emerging from the gap between what they say and what they do. Miller's polemic applies to socially engaged biennials, insofar as they, through their explicit forms – the discursive exhibition and criticality – employ a critical attitude as a pretext that masks their conceptual and organisational interweaving with the ethos of capitalism.

Indeed, similar polemics were launched against several biennials at the time, putting their *raison d'être* under pressure. Among the most discussed was the boycott against the 19th Sydney Biennial by various participating artists who protested against its main sponsor, the corporation Transfield, main stakeholder of an offshore detention camp in Papua New Guinea. The protest resulted in the withdrawal of the corporation from sponsoring the festival and the resignation of the Biennale's chairman (who was also chairman of Transfield) from the post he had held for 14 years. While the activist artists celebrated this withdrawal as a victory, the Communications Minister of Australia, Malcolm Turnbull, found the incident 'disastrous', threatening to cancel government funding from the institution.[5] In a similar circumstance, harsh critiques on the blogosphere and social media denounced the 2014 version of Manifesta, which opened in June 2014 in St. Petersburg, for its unwillingness to take a stance against the then political situation in Russia that involved the 2013 law targeting homosexuality and the LGBT rights as well as the country's intervention in Ukraine, following the Maidan protests. Many artists protested against Manifesta, with the Russian art collective Chto Delat withdrawing their participation from the event stating that they could not 'be held hostage by its corporate policies' because 'it is clearly art over politics'.[6] The practice of withdrawal, followed by the engagement with different, less institutionalised, forms of action (Chto Delat mentioned that it intended to initiate a counter-exhibition project with Russian and Ukrainian artists) are here advocated as an effective strategy of resistance.

Similar incidents abounded during the period of my fieldwork. In October 2011, a group of activists in Athens threw bags of human excrement and dead fish into several venues of *ReMap*, a recurring contemporary art event cooperating with the Biennale, in order to protest against gentrification.[7] In *Documenta 13* in the summer of 2012, activists of the Occupy movement (labelled as *dOCCUPY*) occupied the garden area in front of Fridericianum, turning it into a space of action and protest for 3 months. In February 2012, the members of the Occupy movement asked the Whitney Museum to stop its biennial, as 'it upholds a system

that benefits collectors, trustees, and corporations at the expense of art workers'.[8] In June 2013, in light of the Gezi park protests in Istanbul, a group of 100 artists signed a statement condemning the *13th Istanbul Biennial* whose corporate sponsorship and hierarchical structure was 'highly in contradiction with its claims to 'activate social engagement and public fora to generate a possibility for rethinking the concept of "publicness" '.[9] The art critic and curator Jacquelyn Davis in her 2014 article with the revealing title 'The Biennial: In Flux or Dead End Street?' eloquently summarises the dissatisfaction against such events, arguing that it is 'becoming more difficult to justify time and money going into these events during times of economic or political upheaval, recession or impasse'.[10] In a 2014 talk for the inaugural conference of the recently founded *International Biennial Association*, Hlavajova confirmed the suspicion of such a crisis and warned the delegates in her opening talk that 'as we hear the agonistic voices of artists, activists, and intellectuals intensify these days, from Sydney to St. Petersburg, Istanbul to Bussan, Athens, New York and elsewhere, the biennial itself seems to have become (anew) a vital site of political contestations, though oft times it is its own politics that is questioned and questionable'.[11] Besides, a year before, Esche expressed similar concerns, noting how the 'demonstrable gaps between word and deed' in curating politically loaded shows 'would be unsustainable to many other professions' (2013b: 243). The biennial, it seemed, its practices and modes of being were now put under scrutiny and pressure, being exposed as hypocritical even by recognisable figures within the biennial circuit.

Parrhesia, Legitimacy Crisis and Institutional Work

Maintaining a distinction between word and deed, between what one 'says' and what one 'does', seems to run up against some of the most fundamental assumptions of contemporary cultural theory. Foucault's idea of discourse, in terms discussed in the previous chapter, or J. L. Austin's idea of the speech acts, as words that make things happen (1975) and Judith Butler's subsequent understanding of gender as performative (2011) are dominant theoretical pathways of contemporary scholarship implying that a separation between speech and action is a categorically false one. Insofar as speech is action, enacting identities and triggering certain processes to take place, a division between a 'word' and a 'deed' can be hardly maintained in analytical terms. Assuming, however, that there is no division between the two may lead, in our case, to an analytical impasse, as the peculiar conditions of the crisis in the biennial model seem to rely precisely on this basis. Rather than attempting to reconceive the relationship between words and action, however, the focus will here be on the ways that this 'gap' manifests itself and functions as a potentially delegitimating device. As long as a 'gap' is understood to be problematic,

a condition that needs to be privately and publicly addressed by critics, writers, artists and activists, it becomes, in Luhmann's terms, an 'irritation' to the field of relations maintained with and through the social subsystem of contemporary art biennials. This irritation, here, brought forth accentuated debates around issues such as the 'true' role of art biennials as well as possible co-optation of artistic critique by structures of power and the 'selling-out' of its critical premise. Given that, while the gap between words and actions does not objectively exist 'out there' but is discursively produced, its very production prompts a potential crisis on the ways that critical biennials construct their public agendas.

But under what conditions can the invocation of this gap generate a form of crisis in the ways these institutions are run? Here, it may be useful to think of this gap in terms suggested in the later work of Michel Foucault through his elaboration of the concept of *parrhesia* (2011; 2012) and look at the potential crisis of the discursive biennial model as a crisis of truthfulness, as a betrayal of its supposed role to be socially interventionist. In exploring ancient Greek and Roman texts, Foucault conceptualises parrhesia as a style of enunciation in which the speaking subject takes a risk to tell the truth to power, a risk that subsequently inflicts retroactive effects upon the subject's ways of being (2011: 68). The speaking subject (or in this case the art institution as a social agent purported to challenge power) practices parrhesia when the statement, which it utters, transforms or determines the subsequent development of its way of life. For Foucault, the one practicing parrhesia is *bound* to the statement of truth; by asserting that a statement is true 'one constitutes oneself as the person who tells the truth, who has hold the truth, and who recognises oneself in and as the person who has told the truth' (2011: 70). Rather than axiomatically separating between speech and action, Foucault prompts us to focus on the processes triggered in the course of attempts to challenger power, or the contract between the enunciator of truth and their subsequent way of life, a 'style of life as a site of emergence of the truth' (2012: 180). And, thus, rather than seeking to uncover true and false statements, Foucault suggests to turn our attention to the interplay between the statements that are meant to challenge power and the ways they are reflected upon the enunciator's modes of being. In order to practice parrhesia, the enunciators that intend to reshuffle the existing power relations (such as a socially interventionist biennial) are bound to attain a life that 'bears witness, breaks, and has to break with the conventions, habits, and values in society' (2012: 184). To be truthful in challenging power and legitimise themselves as such, these institutions need to resemble the values that they preach, to rise to the challenge of their self-proclaimed critical social role.

The realisation of what can be called a parrhesiastic mode of production can then be thought as a ground for achieving institutional legitimacy. By having to appear convincing in its declarations, the biennial (as an institution) is, in this sense, always in a process of shaping and reshaping

itself, adjusting changes in its milieus by manipulating the rationalities and codes of the field. In traditional functionalist sociological accounts, institutions are thought to exist in order to serve certain social functions, helping, for example, to align 'individual and collective interests' (Holm, 1995: 399). In this view, institutions somehow mirror social needs and have a purely operational purpose: to hold a social arrangement together. Max Weber's idea of the iron cage, which is to say the rationalised modern logic that ensnares individuals in systems of efficiency and control, is very influential for this sociological tradition. Without losing focus on such insights and the regulatory role of institutions they assume, a strictly functionalist account of institutions can often slide in a reductive metanarrative that is analytically unhelpful in conceiving the transformations occurring *within* institutions, consisting of efforts for recognition and legitimisation, but also of conflicting and opposed dynamics. To account then for the persistent and often self-contradictory struggles for actualising a publicly convincing biennial image, a brand 'inculcating trust' in Julian Stallabrass' words (2014: 150), it is helpful to think through the institution in terms of its moving, conflicting and shifting positions, rather than its determinate role within a particular social order. Institutions then are porous entities that strive to maintain and prove their usefulness in relation to certain, often changing, social circumstances (e.g., Lawrence Suddaby, & Leca, 2009; Meyer & Rowan, 1977). The avoidance of illegitimacy, and thus of social irrelevance, according to the influential account of Meyer and Rowan (1977), forces them to adapt larger institutional habits and traits having to do with the already dominant technologies and social roles. For example, in order to avoid irrelevancy, a biennial needs to follow specific avenues regarding its marketing plan, curatorial statements and professional networks as well as conform to current specialised ideas on art's rationalisation and the legitimate professional roles within the art field (i.e., a biennial always needs to be curated in order to be taken seriously by its peers). On the other hand, as it is demonstrated with the lurking crisis on the biennial model, legitimacy needs innovation, taking the risk to create one's own rules for the sake of retaining and expanding their social relevancy.

A useful account, in this regard, comes from the sociologist Spicer (2010), who offers the term 'extitution' to refer to areas of social life that do not fit in certain institutional arrangements. Spicer suggests that in order to adopt a role and expand their legitimacy within shifting environments, institutions – artistic, scientific, military, political or otherwise – attempt to domesticate such areas. They discursively construct areas of tension within the extitution, and in turn, they announce themselves as experts for resolving or simply exploring these tensions (2010: 29). For example, it is in the strategic interest of the institution of medicine to extend the category of the 'medical problem' to a wide range of states and activities, say from alopecia to madness, so as to continue proving its social usefulness. As Spicer comments:

> An institution always needs its problems to work on. The prison needs criminals, the hospital needs the sick, and the asylum needs the mad. Indeed, most of these institutions actually seek to extend the number of subjects who they address.

In this regard, we can look at the legitimacy crisis of the new biennial in relation to a crisis of truthfulness and the subsequent embracing of the category of activism as a means to expand its social relevance. The activist qualities of the biennials of the Athens and Berlin events, as we will see later on, can be seen as efforts to escape a crisis and re-arrange the model, recode the irritation, assigning the logic of contemporary art to resistant cultures and social movements.

However, an account of institutions merely on this abstract basis can be hardly convincing and illuminating in our case. Institutions are composed by actors who may have their own ideas, desires and agendas that may often be at odds with institutional rationalities. These actors may attempt to mobilise their positions to make institutions work for causes not directly related with pre-ordered institutional aims (e.g., Hirsch & Bermiss, 2009; Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006; Spicer, 2010). In order to explore the dynamics of organisational settings, Lawrence and Suddaby offer the term 'institutional work' to refer to 'the purposive action of individuals and organisations aimed at creating, maintaining and disrupting institutions' (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006: 215). Practices of disrupting the institution or escaping it, may, in this sense, contribute to new lines of institutional formations with differing rationale, scope and approach. While then more traditional approaches may see strategies of re-purposing institutional aims as attempts to maintain or re-enforce the institution, the institutional work approach pays attention to the ways that actions themselves affect institutions and their larger environments (Hirsch & Bermiss, 2009). While it carries the risk of romanticising certain individual acts, the idea of institutional work as action with a certain potential to transform is ethnographically useful for accounting on the ways that efforts to re-articulate the institution play out in larger socio-spatial dynamics. For instance, in an attempt to distance themselves from usual institutional practices in a climate where the biennial model leaned towards a condition of legitimacy crisis, both biennials I looked announced themselves as 'non-biennials'. It was not, however, the institutions as abstract entities announcing themselves as such, but the curators of these biennials, or in other words, actors who occupied short-term and indeterminate roles within them. The question then of whether institutional actors re-affirm, disarticulate or escape the institution through their actions remains fraught with tensions in the context of larger social and organisational dynamics. The main thing to keep here is that the growing distrust against the discursive biennial (and contemporary art in general)

had to be confronted institutionally and individually at the level of structure and at the level of the agents; it created a discursive formation that called for enhanced parrhesia, a formation that had to be taken into account publicly in artistic, intellectual and curatorial terms.

Crisis, Neo-Anarchism and Them Versus Us

As discussed in Chapter 2, social values are in a process of constant negotiation and act as the backdrop and environment against which events such as biennials take place. As tournaments of values, biennials are recollecting and refashioning the social values of the outside world. The identification of a gap between words and actions and the demand for increased truthfulness evolves amidst a process of shifting values in the context of rising social movements within the public spheres of Europe. Social movement cultures provide the grounds where certain values spring, develop and possibly stream in social settings (Greenwald & McPhee, 2010). The grassroots mobilisations growing in many parts of the world since 2010 amplified, in this regard, an oppositional structure of feeling among leftists, activists, artists and generally democratic movements. The so-called Arab Spring, a wave of riots, protests and other insurrectionary activities that took place in the Arab world in 2010 and 2011, and the squares movement, a series of occupations of various city squares as a form of protest mainly across Europe, the middle-East and the USA brought to the surface a constellation of countercultural and radicalised voices against dominant modes of governance. Broadly speaking, the central target of this emerging structure of feeling, especially in its European variations, was the organisation of the current economic system. More precisely, the main enemy appeared to be the agents and manifestations of the doctrine of neoliberalism. Social movements, activists and Marxist scholars alike portrayed the crisis as an effect of neoliberal policies and the imposed austerity as an attempt to intensify the neoliberal project (Harvey, 2010; Lapavitsas & Kouvelakis, 2012). Little state intervention, the liberation of entrepreneurial freedoms, the minimisation of social welfare, the maximum possible privatisation and market deregulation were the classic neoliberal remedies progressed in Europe's handling of the crisis.

Apart from a system based on certain economic theories, neoliberalism is also a rationality of governance purporting to construct models of calculative, optimised and competitive subjectivities (Foucault, 2010; Peck, 2010; Brown, 2003; Dean, 2008; Gershon, 2011).[12] In other words, neoliberalism has a social constructionist character, focusing on fashioning subjectivities according to its own dogmas. The social movements that sprung during the crisis, and especially the ones putting emphasis on practices of self-education, such as the Occupy Wall Street (OWS)[13] and

to a certain extent, Indignados in Greece and Spain, were conceived as oppositional to neoliberalism. This rhetoric forged a social division that appeared forcefully in the European public space: the big capital, the banks and the financial system stood on the one hand and the 'ordinary people', or at times, the more politically charged term of the 'multitude', on the other. This division can be best envisioned, for instance, through one of the most widely popular slogan of OWS, 'we are the 99 percent'.[14] Here, the exploitation in society becomes something undeniable and objective and is manifested in the separation and unequal distribution of wealth between them, the 1 per cent, and us, the 99 per cent.[15]

On these grounds, the identification of biennials as neoliberal institutions, or as institutions that legitimise neoliberalism by becoming its ideological alibies, was not difficult to maintain. Biennials are deeply enmeshed with, and in effect, legitimise neoliberal structures, by being typically funded by rich collectors, big corporations or states that advance neoliberal policies. A question that often surfaced when introducing myself as a biennial researcher, especially within activist circles was, 'How are biennials funded?' or 'How do they relate to neoliberalism'? As neoliberalism and its calculative frameworks appeared as the main ideology to be resisted, this question was voiced in a more emphatic way. Among countless other examples, Istanbul Biennial's major sponsor was Koc, a multinational corporation; the main sponsor of Sydney Biennial until recently was Transfield, a corporation that, as we saw, owns a detention camp; Athens Biennale used to have Deutsche Bank as its sponsor; Bucharest Biennale is funded by the UniCredit Tiriac Bank; and the Berlin Biennale is sponsored by the German state (which was nodal in pushing forward the neoliberal European restructuring) as well as by BMW and other multinational corporations. Here, the biennial's consistency between words and actions is challenged, its connections with classic neoliberal agents put it on the wrong side of the division. While curatorial statements may announce that they wish to combat neoliberalism, their intentions may well be seen as hypocritical insofar as biennials actively rely on the same neoliberal structures. The gap then is already formulated for the socially interventionist biennial. These events claim to instigate anti-neoliberal values while legitimising some of the most prominent neoliberal actors, and in effect, neoliberalism's social constructionist project.

To make matters worse for the new biennial, these movements advanced (against the alleged 'pragmatism' of neoliberal policy) a type of idealistic humanism both in theory and practice, clustering around values of direct democracy, grassroots initiatives, cooperation and ecological thinking. In some respects, what Alex Williams and Nick Srnicek call, albeit derogatively, 'folk politics' became the guiding spirit of these movements (2015: 9–13). Folk politics privilege the local and the immediate and maintain an implicit or explicit faith on the 'people' as a category of action, organisation and resistance. As a case in point, the OWS opened

their first public statement in September 2011 as 'one people, united', who acknowledge that 'the future of the human race requires the cooperation of its members' and that 'no true democracy is attainable when the process is determined by economic power'.[16] Or, similarly, the manifesto of the movement 'Plataforma ¡Democracia Real YA!'[17] in Spain underlined that 'instead of placing money above human beings, we shall put it back to our service', as 'we are people, not products'.[18] The 'them' versus 'us' binary then was reinforced by the activating the category of the people against an abstract economic logic, a financial abstraction. The signifier 'people' then, acting as a locus of truth and site of potential progressive change, structured some of the ways of acting and thinking within these movements (Stavrakakis, 2014).

This elevation of the 'people' to a privileged signifier was further linked with the radical questioning of all forms of representation and authority. Central to these movements was a growing suspicion against politicians and political parties, who were seen as tied to economic wealth, corruption and hypocrisy. This often resulted in an opposition against any form of political representation,[19] the disdain of which often gave rise to a celebration of practices of direct democracy. According to this thinking, every member who participates in a given constituency has equal opportunity to voice and be part of the decision process, instead of delegating responsibility to representatives through voting.[20] The insistence on recovering a 'truer' form of a democracy against the economic neoliberal rationality was then prevalent in numerous Occupy assemblies across the world, where decisions were taken deliberatively, by consensus. The rationale here was close to an anarchist ethos of organising that avoided placing the hopes of social transformation to the moment of some future revolution (which could be constructed through the counter-dissemination of oppositional discourses, e.g., through the discursive biennial) but instead aimed at prefiguring the future society in the present.[21] Resistance then emerged as a process of seeking to invent new forms of socialities, based on participatory, horizontally oriented structures of decision-making that took the form of general assemblies, working groups, eco-communities, art collectives, online networks, zines and mailing lists. In this sense, what is most interesting about this type of activism is the denial, or at least the de-emphasising of counter-hegemonic politics based on the Gramscian model of hegemony. Radical change, for these movements, would not come merely through infiltrating civil institutions, but by acting and constructing situations whose practices would be hopefully diffused in society.

Here the question again becomes obvious: How could a biennial that makes vague curatorial claims to social intervention, typically through works that display intellectual ambiguity, or what Stallabrass calls works that 'could be stretched to include just about everything and just meant very nearly nothing' (2004: 31), act in the here and now for spreading forms of direct democracy? Or, what sort of horizontal, prefigurative

politics could be enacted through a biennial, which essentially depends on the authority of the curator-superstar? The curatorial self-reflexivity in this respect can be perceived as an empty gesture insofar as the curator, as active participant and author of such events, gains enormous material and symbolic capital. Again, these challenges can be thought as irritations against the socially interventionist biennial insofar as they underscore its untruthfulness and associate it with a system that, at least since dX, it claimed to be against.

Art as a Site of Struggle

The vocabulary circulating on these social movements shares intellectual affinities with incipient ways of thinking about art, exhibitions and biennials, taking place within art circuits at around the same period. Perhaps, the most noticeable recent trend in such manifestations is the understanding of the art field as an economically productive area, subject and often subservient to neoliberal logics (Dimitrakaki, 2013). Issues such as labour, class and the commons, appearing emphatically in critical contemporary art milieus a decade before, were now structuring the rationale of contemporary art theory. To state a common example, the tendency to treat artistic activity as labour, in Marxian terms, an activity that generates value and is thus subject to exploitation, is a reflection of the growing influence of the Italian Autonomist framework of 'immaterial labour' in art theory (e.g., Smith, 2013). Within this framework, practicing artists can be conceptualised as advanced subjects of exploitative neoliberal policies in the framework of post-Fordism and in the context of what the urban geographer Sharon Zukin has previously called the 'artistic mode of production' (1989), involving the employment of art as vehicle of urban regeneration in state and regional agendas. The position of the biennial within this conceptualisation is again an ambivalent one; on the one hand, biennials, as institutions of visibility and prestige, can potentially highlight the wrongs of exploitation and gentrification, and on the other, they may be often themselves implicated in these processes.

While the conceptualisation of art as a site of economic production does not refer to a unified approach and often differs in method and subject matter, it shares a common underlying point of departure: contemporary art (as a field) ought not just to be read merely in terms of representation, but also, if not primarily, in terms of the economic relations its upholds with its actors, shareholders and funders. Since the second half of the 2000s, an array of books, texts and critical commentaries brought explicitly to the fore likewise interrelations between art, activism and economy. They coincided with the emergence of a new wave of artistic activism focusing around issues of labour, gentrification and unethical sponsorship.[22] An equally important development was the emergence of notions such as 'the commons' and 'the common' within the art field. These

notions generally refer to ideas, objects, states and labouring conditions that elude the capture of the capitalist value-form, being able to enable communal and collective forms of life. The fascination with collectives in the art world as sites of non-alienating potential emerges concomitantly with the academic popularisation of such terms, updating in many ways theories of relational aesthetics. Artistic labour is seen as a form of labour that does not exactly submit to the logic of the commodity and the value-form, having the potential to generate de-alienating engagements with material reality (Bishop, 2012). In this sense, apart from being an activity seized by the capitalist mode of production, artistic labour can also foster an inherently non-productive process whose valorisation does not follow the standard measure of value (Virno, 2009; Berardi, 2009). In this light, the biennial could be seen as a site that both activates the excessive behaviour of artistic labour as well as captures its radical potential by turning it into a big-budget spectacle.

An exemplary case resembling the spirit and concerns of the social movements as well as of artistic activism and critical contemporary art theory of the time is the book *Dark Matter* (2011) by the artist, activist and critic Gregory Sholette. As a 'salient call-to-arms to all cultural labourers',[23] *Dark Matter* brings to light a series of artistic projects, taking place mainly in New York and some parts of Europe that foreground how art is an activity organised around relations of power. The works that Sholette explores employ tactical media and cultural jamming, sharing affinities with the scope of the early avant-gardes movements, such as Dada, Surrealism and Constructivism, as well as with Situationism, Minimalism and Conceptual Art, which is to say movements that compose the history of the 'contemporary' and use concepts as political tools. For Sholette, contemporary art is a field of immense inequality. One the one hand, there is a 'small cadre of successful artists' (the ones who become visible in official art institutions such as museums, galleries and biennials), and on the other, the 'creative dark matter' that consists of all of the shadowed, amateur, informal and self-organised practices that remain invisible (2011: 2–3). It is then the labour of this invisible mass of art workers, those excluded from the institutionalised scripts of the art world, which sustains the system. These invisible art workers manage the careers of the art superstars, teach art, purchase books and journals, visit art shows and generally cultivate the infrastructures of the system by offering their time and effort.

After setting up a binary between the visible and the invisible art workers (or one can argue a variation between 'them' and 'us'), Sholette argues that if this invisible mass gave up its aspirations for professional careers, or set out to initiate alternative networks of art exchange, the art world, as we know it today, would cease to exist. In the past few years, through the rise of the web technologies and a post-Fordist enterprise culture that increasingly demands creative inputs from its workers, this creative dark

matter has, according to Sholette, only proliferated (2010: 5). It is, therefore, at this historical moment that the invisible cultural workers come to surface, demand visibility and rearrange the rules of the institutionalised art world. While this dark matter is not intrinsically revolutionary, it possesses 'a *potential* for progressive resistance, as well as for reactionary anger' (2010: 44). The current moment then begs for a refreshed critical approach, where the centrality of Marxian concepts, such as value, exploitation, and above all, class would target the social relations of production that reproduces the field of art. The post-structuralist model of cultural hegemony, advocated by authors such as Mouffe and Laclau, and providing the rationale of the 'curator's perspective', in which 'the very narrative of class was in need of deconstruction' (2010:14) and where 'class' is conceived as another node in the chain of signification, rather than assuming a privileged role, was useful for bringing forward demands of excluded social agents; however, in the face of the current crisis, it lacked, for Sholette, the necessary political gravity. Now, as the economic crisis exposes the ways in which global capital attacks mostly the working class and the poor, the artistic field needs to be conceptualised as a field of unequal relationships through the theoretical arsenal of Marxism (Hardt's and Negri's work is here privileged). *Dark Matter* then is inspired by a Marxian desire to engage in a political gesture that brings to light those who actually produce through their labour the wealth for the few within the art world.

In close proximity to Sholette's 'call to arms', a series of artist activist initiatives were formed in Europe, the USA and globally during that time, sharing the concerns of OWS and the square movements and attempting to realise an insurrectionary post-1968 moment across contemporary art. In the agendas of these groups, issues of labour and gentrification loom prominently. For instance, the US-based groups *OWS Arts and Labour* or *Occupy Museums* proved key for popularising an activist structure of feeling across the art world. By assuming the position of the exploited, art workers participating in these initiatives argue that 'we are all art workers and members of the 99 percent', advocating 'in the spirit of Occupy . . . direct and immediate action against the economic exploitation'.[24] Exemplary, in this regard, is also *The Gulf Labor Artist Coalition*, a mostly US-based, but essentially international group, which was founded in 2010, in order to address the harsh conditions of exploitation of migrant workers in the construction of a new Guggenheim museum in the Saadiyat Island of Abu Dhabi. The group, active in the same struggle today, constructed around this issue an acute and internationalising counter-discourse confronting the Guggenheim fiesta on ideological and material terms. Benjamin's famous aphorism that there is no 'document of civilisation which is not at the same time a document of barbarism' is here echoed and updated (1999: 248). Again, the turn to labour pertains to the fact that artistic achievements have to be thought in relation to the collective toil

that makes them possible, rather than as unique accomplishments of gifted individuals.

Several such artist activist collectives sprouted out of the student demonstrations against the rise of university fees in November and December of 2010 in Britain. Indicatively, the popular *Carrotworkers Collective* (now called *The Precarious Workers Brigade*) was born as a counter-information and action platform against unpaid internships and voluntary labour, employing creative and playful ways to interrogate art institutions. Similar British-born groups include the *Ragpickers Collective* or *Future Interns*. The collective *ArtLeaks*, whose members include international curators, critics and artists, were likewise formed 'in response to the abuse of their [art workers] professional integrity'.[25] *ArtLeaks* is an informal artists union using whistle-blowing tactics against maltreatment in the workplace. The group maintains a webpage in which artists and cultural workers who have been 'abused' by institutions are invited to report their stories. For *ArtLeaks*, this practice can become a means to 'protest against the appropriation of politically engaged art, culture and theory by institutions embedded in a tight mesh of capital and power'.[26] Again, here, the separation between words and actions formulates a discursive trope for challenging these institutions on moral grounds. The implicit division suggested here, characteristic of the class-based discourse of *OWS*, is the one between the politically engaged, underpaid artists and the art system that capitalises on and exploits critical practices. In the spirit of the new social movements, this class-based cultural politics and activism works to re-activate the line between the dominant and the dominated within the contemporary art world.

The above polemics hail the new biennial as a problematic site of production, a site bound up with logics that annul its socially engaged declarations. Organisationally, biennials employ hierarchical structures and lines of command. Despite their otherwise experimental and politically charged vocabulary, they maintain a customary division of labour, where the relationships between the various participants, from sponsors to curators and invigilators to cleaners, are sharply defined. A tension between the biennial's aim to produce radical politics and its actual organisation exposes the weakness of this conventional hierarchical model to challenge the current dominant institutional formats or experiment with the new anti-hierarchical organisational forms cultivated within protest cultures. Moreover, biennials are already implicated with practices of city branding, public and private funding and advertising and tainted by the value-form to such a degree that for all their radical discourse, capture rather than release activist energies. The biennial then can also be seen as hindering the possibilities of any substantial change, as it drains political energies and resources that could be used elsewhere in potentially more radical ways. In turn, the activities of the labour activist groups conflict with the biennials' reliance on flexible and very often unpaid work.

As Sholette writes in *Dark Matter*, capturing in many ways the zeitgeist of the critical thinking around contemporary biennials at the time,

> . . . this machine-like circuit [the biennial] resembles the deregulated operation of deregulated finance capital – invest in an underdeveloped region of the globe, boast that capital has made infrastructural improvements and increased multiculturalism, actively deplete these same regional economies through 'open' borders and so-called free market policies favouring wealthy nations, then remove the primary investment at the first sign of economic contraction.

The legitimacy crisis then happens in a period when the space between the cultural–political and the economic values that biennials are expected to enable becomes blurred, questioned, and in need of re-formulation. Yet, the conceptualisation of art as a space of production, labour and economy is not categorically opposed to the discursive exhibition. In fact, the political claims of the discursive biennial are a condition of possibility of its own questioning. The forms and modalities of this questioning can be better understood as an effect of the prior turn to discourse and its claims for social intervention. As the contemporary biennial colonised the extitution of critical theory, it did so at a cost; the cost of not being able to fulfil its promise, effecting to what Spicer names as 'cracks and fissures' in the politics of the institution itself (2010: 26). This 'machine-like circuit' could not but respond to such critiques. As there is no singular administrative body responsible for all biennials, the response was not co-ordinated but enacted varyingly from different actors within the field. In a balanced event such as documenta (13), for instance, the curator Carolyn Christov-Bakargief appeared 'sceptical of the persisting belief in economic growth',[27] giving stage to projects such as the artist-run initiate *AND AND AND* or e-flux's *Time Bank*, both addressing the crisis and seeking practical alternatives on it, as well as welcoming the so-called *dOCCUPY* movement in the exhibition premises. Enwezor, the artistic director of the 56th Venice Biennale, declared that the exhibition will seek to 'make sense of the current upheavals' (2015: 18), as a team of performers was daily reading excerpts from all three volumes of Marx's *Capital* throughout the duration of the event. The biennial circuit, taking into account the surrounding protest and adjusting itself in respect to it, assumed perhaps its most radicalised form (although for slightly different reasons) in the two exhibitions we look in the subsequent chapters.

Notes

1 Eurozone crisis refers to the economic crisis starting in 2010, which affects the countries of Europe and especially the ones of the European South.
2 The curator of *documenta 11*, Okwui Enwezor, crucially conceived artistic resistance within the context of economic globalisation, framing it within what

Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt have called 'Empire' in their book of the same title (2000).

3 Autonomism refers to a school of Marxism that first emerged in the 1960s and 1970s in Italy. Autonomist Marxists stressed that working class resistance precedes capital control and disciplining. Thus, labour has autonomy over capital, but also over the state, parties or unions. After the 1990s, and especially with the publication of Hardt's and Negri's *Empire* in 1999, the Autonomist theory has seen a resurgence. A main claim, often incorporated in art debates, is that economic production is now increasingly becoming immaterial, affective or aesthetic, and thus artists are spearheading capitalist work ethics. Terms often met in art theoretical debates and are associated with this approach include immaterial labour, precarity and artistic mode of production.

4 This quote is taken from the announcement of World Biennial Forum for the event *How to Make Biennials in Contemporary Times* organised in Sao Paolo from 26 to 30 November 2014. The full announcement can be found at the following address: www.e-flux.com/announcements/no-2-how-to-make-biennials-in-contemporary-times/.

5 For a report on the issue, see Bridie Jabour's article 'Malcolm Turnbull slams Biennale's 'vicious ingratitude' to Transfield' published on 10 March 2014 on *Guardian* at the following address: www.theguardian.com/world/2014/mar/11/malcolm-turnbull-slams-biennales-vicious-ingratitude-to-transfield.

6 These excerpts are taken from the post 'Chto Delat withdraws from Manifesta' written by Chto Delat and published in their webpage on 15 March 2014. The full post can be found at the following address: http://chtodelat.org/b9-texts-2/vilensky/chto-delat-withdraws-from-manifesta-10/.

7 For more information on the incident, see 'To See and Be Seen': Ethnographic Notes on Cultural Work in Contemporary Art in Greece (2014).

8 This excerpt is taken from the post 'End the Whitney Biennial 2014' uploaded on the website of the group 'OWS Arts & Labor' on 24 February 2012. The full post can be found at the following address: http://artsandlabor.org/end-the-whitney-biennial-2014/.

9 These excerpts are taken from the post 'Call to Rethink the 13th Istanbul Biennial and Response of the Biennale Curators' published in the webpage *ArtLeaks* on 9 June 2013. The full post can be found at the following address: http://chtodelat.org/b9-texts-2/vilensky/chto-delat-withdraws-from-manifesta-10/.

10 This article was written for the Baltic online daily art magazine *Echo Gone Wrong*. Its full version can be found at the following address: www.echogonewrong.com/review-from-latvia/the-biennial-in-flux-or-dead-end-street/#comments.

11 The conference took place from the 10th to the 13th of July 2014 in Berlin. The talk of Hlavajova 'Why Biennial?' can be found at the following address: www.youtube.com/watch?v=XVO7T2_Bf3o.

12 The so-called 'governmentality school', for instance, sees that the exercise of power by political authorities in neoliberalism does not happen so much through the figure of the nation-state, but through the employment of diverse techniques related to scientific and technocratic expertise that attempt to rationalise human conduct on an ethical basis. See, for instance, in bibliography Rose, *Powers of Freedom* (1999).

13 Occupy Wall Street was a protest movement that started with the occupation of the Zuccotti Park located in the Wall Street district, New York, on 17 September 2011. The protesters were forced to abandon the park on 15 November 2011, but, in the meantime, the movement of occupying public spaces spread to many different countries and cities across the world.

14 As Jodi Dean and Jason Jones suggest in their text 'Occupy Wall Street and the Politics of Representation' (2012): 'we are the 99 percent' highlights the gap between the wealth of the top one per cent and the rest of us. It politicises a statistic that expresses capitalism reliance on fundamental inequality – 'we' can never all be counted as the top one per cent. In so doing, the slogan asserts a collectivity '[. . .]as the "we" of a divided people, the people divided between expropriators and expropriated. In the setting of an occupied Wall Street, this "we" is a class, one of two opposed and hostile classes, those who have and control wealth, and those who do not'. The full text can be found at the following address: http://chtodelat.org/b8-newspapers/12–38/jodi-dean-and-jason-jones-occupy-wall-street-and-the-politics-of-representation/.

15 As it was previously discussed (Chapter 1) mainly through Foucault and post-structuralism, many Marxists since the 1980s have abandoned the idea of this clear separation.

16 The full statement can be seen in the post 'First official statement from Occupy Wall Street' by the website *Daily Kos* published on 1 October 2011 at the following address: www.dailykos.com/story/2011/10/01/1021956/-First-official-statement-from-Occupy-Wall-Street.

17 *Plataforma ¡Democracia Real YA!* (Spanish for *Platform for Real Democracy Now!*) started as a non-hierarchical protest movement in March 2011 in Spain advocating citizens' participation in decision-making, self-organising and community initiatives as well as control of the current economic system.

18 The full statement published in the webpage of ¡Democracia real YA! in May 2011 can be found at the following address: www.democraciarealya.es/manifiesto-comun/manifesto-english/.

19 For a fruitful debate on the Occupy's thesis against any form of political representation, see Jodi Dean and Jason Jones, 'Occupy Wall Street and the Politics of Representation' (2012) that can be found at the following address: http://chtodelat.org/b8-newspapers/12–38/jodi-dean-and-jason-jones-occupy-wall-street-and-the-politics-of-representation/.

20 Expressing this anti-representational feeling, Real Democracy Ya claim in their manifesto that, 'democracy belongs to the people (demos = people, krátos = government) which means that government is made of every one of us'. The full statement published in the webpage of ¡Democracia real YA! in May 2011 can be found at the following address: www.democraciarealya.es/manifiesto-comun/manifesto-english/.

21 One of the main advocates of the anarchist politics of Occupy has been the anthropologist David Graeber. In his text 'Occupy Wall Street's anarchist roots' published in the webpage of *AlJazeera* on 30 November 2011, as the title indicates, he argues that the Occupy movement has an anarchist structure: www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2011/11/2011112872835904508.html.

22 Other recent texts that bring the connections between art, activism and the economy to the foreground include Brian Holmes' *Unleashing the Collective Phantoms: Essays on Reverse in Imagineering* (2008), Nato Thompson's *Seeing Power: Art and Activism in the Age of Cultural Production* (2014), James Marc

Leger's *The Brave New Avant-Garde* (2012) and *The Neoliberal Undead* (2013), Ben Davis' *9.5 Theses on Art and Class* (2013) as well as the edited volumes by Tatiana Bazzichelli and Geoff Cox *Disrupting Business: Art & Activism in Times of Financial Crisis* (2013) and Marco Scotini's *No Order: Art in a Post-Fordist Society* (2012).

23 This quote is taken from the back cover of *Dark Matter* and is written by Julia Bryan-Wilson.

24 This passage is taken from the 'About' section of the group *OWS Arts & Labour* webpage. The full text can be found at the following address: http://artsandlabor.org/about-al/.

25 This excerpt is taken from the 'About' section of the website of the groups *ArtLeaks*. The full 'About' section of *ArtLeaks* can be found at the following address: http://art-leaks.org/about/.

26 Ibid.

27 This phrase can be found in the second page of the documenta 13 *Guidebook*.

5 7th Berlin Biennale

Enacting Dissent, *Forget Fear* and Occupy

While approaching the contemporary art centre Kunst Werke (KW) on 26 April 2012, the opening day of the 7th Berlin Biennale's (hereof BB7), I encountered an unusual spectacle. For two or three blocks, the street was heavily guarded by armed policemen and police vehicles. As it was later confirmed by participants of the Biennale, a politician had visited the Gerhard Richter exhibition held in a gallery next door. The conversion of the street into a police zone during the inauguration of BB7, an art exhibition already controversial for its proclaimed political radicality and its unorthodox onsite hosting of activist social movements, acted as an inadvertent reminder of the larger tensions between artistic autonomy and disciplinary power. In this chapter, I focus precisely on how such controversies relate to BB7 and its very unusual institutional experiment: hosting in its main showroom, and for all its duration, activists from the Occupy movement. These activists were invited to camp inside the building and organise protests, anti-capitalist actions and network internationally with fellow activists. Through detailed descriptions of the ways activist and other projects were implemented (or not) throughout the course of BB7, this chapter asks how such activist logics, wishing to turn the institution into a generalised site of dissent, clash with, transform and adjust according to their encounters with settings of established power. The value system of BB7 was manifestly at odds with the exhibition as a site of discursive and semiotic interventions.

The programmatic declarations of BB7, the polemic works of the artists, the militant spirit of the participants, the almost obsessive prioritising of action over reflection, the activist pamphlets, slogans and dramaturgies present in the show weaved together a stage upon which activist politics were performed. The rhetoric of this setting revolved around a set of key issues that traditionally occupy left-wing politics and were high in the agenda of the post-2010 movements, such as the critique of economic exploitation, nationalism, racism and ideology of the market, the invention and promotion of strategies of resistance, the belief in and planning of revolutionary politics hoping to abolish the existing state of things, the dissemination of ecological states of mind as well as the insistence on

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collective instead of individual processes of doing and being. Although, as we saw, these themes have been touched upon in many contemporary art biennials during the past 15 years, in BB7, they were evoked to an extreme, colouring every aspect of the show, constituting its raison d'être. BB7's activist attitude was then explicitly influenced and boosted by the worldwide events discussed before, including the emergence of the global square movements and their quest for new modes of political representation. In essence, the Biennale wished to tackle most of the aspects raised by the activist art of the period, namely the exploitation of artistic labour, gentrification, revolution, nurturing an anti-neoliberal structure of feeling through a turn to notions such as commons, collectives, resistance and artistic labour. By insisting on insurrectionary action and the abolition of the category of the artist in favour of that of the activist, BB7 seemed to ideally practice Srnicek's and Williams' 'folk politics' and operate as a counter-establishment, populist apparatus that takes the risk to speak truth to power. In other words, it wished to erase the traditional role of the exhibition as an aesthetic container and turn it as an machine of practical action.

Of particular interest is the institutional work of the curator of BB7, Artur Żmijewski, who openly used the power and legitimacy of Berlin Biennale so as to support causes and individuals related to his larger vision

Figure 5.1 Police Blockade: Augustusstrasse in BB7's Opening.

about art and politics; a vision not in full agreement with the institutional agenda of the organising committee of the Biennale. Despite the organisational autonomy that is regularly granted to the curator within biennial cultures, the implementation of this vision often took radical and unexpected forms, as certain projects had to be negotiated, modified or even abandoned. To understand the dynamics through which such processes unfolded, I begin this chapter by describing the general context in which the Berlin Biennale takes place in organisational and institutional terms. More specifically, I discuss its history, background, hierarchical structure and situatedness within local and global settings. This brief account aims to outline the institution's entanglement in a web of conjunctions that set certain limits and define the parameters in the way it operates (Born, 1995), for example, its obligation to account to taxpayers as it uses state funding.

In turn, I look at the actual event of BB7. The curatorial strategy employed by Żmijewski and co-curator Johanna Warsza is exemplary for its effort to break with the discursive exhibition model and its ambiguous politics. Żmijewski programmatically denounces this model for hypocrisy as well as most of its recurrent aspects, such as the reliance on grand theoretical concepts, the extended educational events and the rhetoric on open-endedness. From this aspect, this break took flesh and bones through Żmijewski's projects and strategic decisions. The invitation to Occupy activists was one of these projects, and the one that drew the highest visibility. Through the aid of the activists, BB7 attempted to associate itself with the global mobilisations against austerity taking place at the time. Under this light, I discuss the conflicting and deemed problematic appearance of an Occupy group within a prestigious venue of high art as well as the ways that this movement struggled to perform its political values through self-organised educational endeavours, a garden project, daily assemblies and a generalised enactment of dissent.

The provocative artworks and projects that I look at later on are also reflective of the difficulties that BB7 encountered in its attempts to instigate immediate social change. In fact, as a result of its teaming with active practices of resistance, BB7 was hugely controversial, alienating the majority of the art scene and triggering a great amount of negative response to the show. To account for the ways that the show has hitherto passed into art history, the next section outlines what were the most significant reactions against BB7 by the press and the art critics. This discussion is based on a collection of secondary material, mainly Anglophone texts published both in international art journals as well as in Germany, such as *Frieze*, *Afterall*, *Art Journal*, *Art Agenda* and *Texte Vor Kunst*. Despite some differences in the views expressed, these texts convey the idea that the Biennale was in several respects a failed event. BB7's shrinking of the division between art and popular culture was largely perceived as a simplistic move, as this division, 'could only truthfully end with the end of social antagonism'

(Jarvis, 1998: 73), to repeat the thesis of Adorno that is inscribed, as we shall see, in the rhetoric of these texts. The repudiation of this strategy by the biennial world happened through interrogating its scope according to a fundamental code of the field: the affirmation of the biennial as a space that guards the foreignness of experience.

Interestingly, for this discussion, Żmijewski found several formal aspects of the discursive biennial too elitist, most significantly the idea of discourse as a privileged form of cultural–political intervention as well as the incontestable authority of the curator. However, it is more precise to say that the model of the discursive biennial, as described by New Institutionalism and David's curatorial language, was not really abandoned but radicalised. This radicalisation consisted in an effort, rather than success, to close the gap between what a biennial says and what it does, an effort to practice parrhesia that presented itself as a straightforward mobilisation against neoliberalism and its apparatus. By attempting to be truthful and authentic, this effort rendered the event (and potentially the institution) rather inoperative in the long run, as projects were caught up in spiralling webs of controversies, conflicts, cancellations and claims of censorship. The last section of this chapter is devoted to this latter category of projects, involving polemics between participants, tensions between activism and the institution of art as well as the realisation of a controversial conference with representatives and spokespersons of 'terrorist' organisations.[1] Representing an extreme moment in biennial practice and repeatedly claiming that it was not really a biennial but an action space, BB7, a blockbuster art event tied to an institution considered one of the beacons of German culture and an organisation with a conventional hierarchical structure, displayed through its extremity the limits of a certain prioritisation of the political in biennial-making.

Accounting to Taxpayers

As with all the previous editions of the Biennale, the central venue of the exhibition, or of the 'action' in our case, was the building and the exterior space of 'Kunst Werke' (KW), a contemporary art institution responsible for organising the Berlin Biennale roughly every 2 years. While the KW, during the rest of the year, regularly holds art shows, the Biennale is its largest project and officially belongs to it since its first edition in 1998 (since July 2016 the two institutions operate as different business units although under the same institutional umbrella). The front part of KW is the oldest part of the building, built in the late eighteenth century and last used as a factory of margarine. After 1990, during the process of German reunification, the factory was given to artists by the city council. At that time, the curator Klaus Biesenbach, currently one of the directors of the MoMA, along with other artists and theorists founded KW there. Located in the area of Mitte, in former East Berlin, KW lies in an area that gained

important social and economic capital during the 1990s after the fall of the Berlin wall as many artists and other creatives flocked there by virtue of its central location and cheap rents. Currently, the district is one of the most gentrified areas in Berlin, with a big change in demographics. In the past 15 years, as a recent newspaper article puts it, a 'yuppie invasion' occurred there, pushing out both old residents and most of the artists who moved there right after the unification.[2]

Since December 2003 and from its 4th edition onwards, the Biennale receives regular funding from the German Federal Cultural Foundation (GFCF), the official body of the German state responsible for funding and supporting cultural activities. The funding the Biennale receives is around 2.5 million euro per edition. This provision has been described to me as the single-most crucial development for the sustenance of the Biennale. Mark,[3] the person responsible for the press and communication at KW at the time, whom I met on 21 April 2011 in Berlin, asserted that as a result of this sum, the Biennale has now, 'a more stable situation than in the past and can better plan everything in advance'. Before the 4th edition, Mark noted that, 'it was as it is with KW now; we had to apply for everything again and again', and as a result, the Biennale often found it hard to keep its 2-year intervals (the required funds had to be sought through applications to different state and private sponsors). Mark stressed the significance of the GFCF funding, portraying it as the solution to many of the Biennale's problems and as an important factor for its evolution to a worldwide recognisable institution. The GFCF, according to Mark, gives contracts for 5 years, which is to say two and a half editions. This contract had been renewed for the 7th Berlin Biennale:

> It is fixed and safe now but it is going to be decided this year whether they will do it again. We are very positive about that and hopefully they will do. If not, it is really a problem because it is really hard to get the funding which we are missing now, so if we have to acquire everything [from external sponsors] it will be really really hard.

The funding from the GFCF is then indispensable for the realisation of the Biennale in its current form and crucial for its development over time. The Biennale, apart from GFCF, received some support in cash or kind through other bodies, for instance, national councils, such as the Goethe Foundation and the British Council, or private sponsors such as BMW. Mark, in fact, calculated the whole budget to around 3.5 million euro. There was, however, a clear dependency on GCFC, as the maintenance of these funds is of paramount importance for institutional preservation. Tensions around this dependency became apparent when certain projects during BB7 were often discussed, as we shall see, as being inappropriate for receiving 'taxpayers' money'. The Biennale then was largely accountable to this particular funding body, and in effect, to the respective agendas

of the government. In this sense, although Mark assured me that 'content-wise they [the GFCF] are not interfering', in my fieldwork, I encountered much more complex procedures. The actual realisation of certain artworks and projects had to go through processes of negotiation between different institutional bodies, artists and other participants being subject to certain historical conventions, juridical rules, mediatised communication and inscribed social values in Berlin and Germany at large. The possibilities and limitations of the Biennale seemed liable to this substratum of historically and socially specific conditions. The fact that after the 3rd edition the organisational platform of the Biennale was redefined (and as a result of secured funding long-term planning was more possible) had to be maintained at all costs.

The Berlin Biennale is, in this sense, a private institution claiming to enable cultural and economic values within the public sphere so as to secure funding from the state or other sources. The private association that manages it comes, in Mark's words 'really from within the art world', rather than from a municipal or regional authority. In this respect, similarly to the Athens Biennale, the Berlin Biennale is an organisation built and run by a team of individuals who wish to intervene in the artistic scene of the city by adopting the brand name 'Biennale'. This team then pursues different forms of funding and collaborations. The symbolic value of the name 'Biennale' among people in the art world and beyond proves crucial for negotiating a number of issues with diverse partners, ranging from economic support and the provision of infrastructure to making the show attractive to critics or even cultural workers (who may often work for free or very low pay just to fill their CVs). GCFC offers funding to the Biennale both on the basis of its ability to stand as a 'cultural beacon' for Germany and its capacity to add prestigious artistic vibrancy to a city that largely grounds its economy on the capitalisation of art and culture. In this sense, despite the fact that it is a Biennale directly 'coming from within the art world', as Mark asserted, it is both expected to invoke some sort of national pride, as an exemplary exhibition of German culture, and contribute to the economic development of the city.

Here, it is useful to note that apart from its enhanced capacity for long-term planning, what also changed after the 3rd edition was the process of selecting the curators. Before the GFCF's funding, the curators were appointed by the 'Berlin Biennale association', a group of collectors, critics and patrons. After the 3rd edition, the Biennale developed a model that is still at work today, according to which the choice of curator is decided by a selection committee. A different committee is appointed for each biennale edition, comprised of international museum directors, curators and art critics. Mark describes this process in detail:

> We have a board of directors for the Biennale; two members of this board are from the German Federal Cultural Foundation, the director

> of KW and the Berlin Biennale, Gabriele Horn, and then there are Klaus Biesenbah, founding director of both KW and the Berlin Biennale, and three more persons from the former Berlin Biennale association. They select or appoint the selection committee and invite them to do it. They are well connected to the art world and know what an interesting theme will be. And then these persons from the selection committee, who are around six, propose one curator or curatorial team each and all the former curators of the Berlin Biennale also hand in one name or a team. So we are getting more and more proposals for each Biennale and then the selection committee is totally free to choose around three or four curators or teams to hand in a concept and then based on this concept they start to talk with them.

The public funding from the GFCF enables in this way a more transparent selection of curators, themes and artists. Other participants in the Biennale include a few people working in the office of the KW, who hold permanent or semi-permanent positions, and a number of temporary workers hired specifically for the show, such as invigilators, production assistants and tour guides.

From its very first edition, the Berlin Biennale functioned as a socially engaged platform, performing the most significant aspects of the discursive exhibition, including an interdisciplinary nature, a durational character, an increased self-awareness regarding its positioning within capitalism and a desire to explore politics within the city. It also attempted to rhetorically distance itself from megashows, such as the Venice Biennale, and their touristic agendas. This was obvious in the curatorial statement of the first Berlin Biennale. In 1998, the curators Klaus Biesenbach, Hans Ulrich Obrist and Nancy Spector wrote:

> For us as curators, the task of inventing a biennale for Berlin has not been uncomplicated. From the start we have acknowledged the fact that such exhibitions are, in general, commercial ventures and venues for barely disguised nationalistic gestures. Beyond this, however, the city poses its own very unique challenges . . . Our initial response to this paradoxical situation was to propose a biennale that would take place in time, an exhibition that would occur over a two-year period rather than happen every two years. This was to reflect the emphatically temporal nature of a city that looks forward by eliminating its past and looks backward to decorate its future. Our impulse to create a non-static exhibition also represents a certain resistance to the traditional, neatly packaged biennale (that usually takes place during peak tourist season) as well as an attempt to mirror the ephemeral nature of much of the contemporary art being produced today.[4]

Despite initial declarations to be a counter-biennial, the Berlin Biennale is now a rather conventional big-budget show, and from its 4th edition onwards, regularly takes place in spring and summer, that is, during the peak tourist season. Over the next years, the shows that followed shared similar curatorial aspirations to intervene within the city of Berlin, interweaving art with social commentary and a desire to open up social questions and fields of investigation. Indicatively, the 2nd edition of the Biennale explored notions of 'connectedness, contribution and commitment', aiming to launch a 'critique of the commercial and profit-oriented art world by moving away from artistic narcissism and elitist approaches opting instead for a dialogue with the public'.[5] From the 3rd edition onwards, while the critique against the commercial art world or gentrification seemed to be rhetorically de-emphasised, the discursive elements that uniformly characterised biennials at the time remained and were expanded on. The 3rd edition curated by Uta Meta Bauer aimed to create 'a temporal space of discourse by fostering connections between local players of art and knowledge production',[6] while the 4th edition, the first to receive the GFCF funding and the first to come up with a title, *Of Mice and Men*, although stressing the 'obscurity' and the 'almost magical power' of art objects, similarly engaged in a discursive exercise through what the curators Maurizio Cattelan, Massimiliano Gioni and Ali Subotnivk called an 'archaeology of the quotidian'.[7] The 5th edition evoked the show's temporal dimension, emphasising how the event was conceived as 'an accumulation of transient experiences', with its venues spreading across the city and 'along the duration of the biennial, night after night'.[8] The 6th edition,[9] curated by Kathrin Rhomberg declared in stark opposition to the 7th that followed that 'the aim of the show is not to provide answers, but to pose questions' and that it will reach, 'this goal when it succeeds in calling attention to the questions'.[10] In short, all previous biennial editions drew heavily from the interdisciplinary model of the discursive show, with a desire to be socially interventionist and enable effects within the city of Berlin. Although it shared the form of these shows, the 7th Berlin Biennale, in its attempt to be in tune with the new activist demands, was, to a large extent, in its stated aims, content and background, a break from the previous endeavours.

Dramaturgies of Resistance in *Forget Fear*

Venues, Context and Curatorial Approach

BB7 took place from the 27th of April until the 1st of July 2012. The show was visited by 120,000 visitors, 40,000 more than the previous one. This number of tickets, partly fuelled by the newly introduced free admission to all events, was a record high in the history of the Berlin Biennale. Apart from the KW, the Biennale spanned several other venues

including the 'Akademie Der Kunst', one of the most respected art academies in Germany and the building of 'Deutschlandhaus', a 'container of repressed or excluded German history',[11] as BB7's newspaper puts it. This building was used by Nazis to house government services and currently by the German state to host permanent exhibits related to the dislocation of German populations from neighbouring countries during and in the aftermath of WWII. St. Elisabeth-Kirche, an old church used both for religious and cultural occasions, also hosted one art project. Apart from these sites, other indoors or outdoors spaces usually loaded with social or historical significance were used to hold different events and projects. The Biennale, in this way, and also through the polymorphous actions of its participants, embraced many different parts of the city of Berlin, touching themes related to its history, its current physical and conceptual space as well as the potential for rewriting the social space. But while this selection of historically charged places may sound like a familiar biennial tactic, let us see how BB7 was clearly conceived as an 'anti-biennial' against the irritations of its externals environment.

The head curator of the Biennale was the Polish artist Artur Żmijewski, considered one of the most renowned post-socialist critical artists. During the 1990s, he drafted his idea about 'applied social arts'.[12] This idea, reflected in his approach to the Biennale, views the artist as a functionary of emancipation, whose skills should be put in the service of social change. This stance is mirrored in the exhibition's title *Forget Fear* meant to highlight the courage and bravery one has to summon against all forms of oppression. Żmijewski, with an established reputation in the art world for producing works that purport to challenge established institutions often via the exercise of psychological violence or the tackling of repressed historical memories, was accepted by the Biennale's selection committee on the basis of a curatorial proposal that he submitted in 2010. This proposal, is described by many, including the co-curator Joanna Warsza in a personal interview, as prophetic concerned the investigation of the relationship between art and activism. With the Arab Spring, the Indignados and the OWS bursting onto the scene in 2011, Żmijewski's idea could not seem timelier.

Warsza, a scholar and curator working in the field of theatre, joined the curatorial team in late 2011 after randomly meeting with Żmijewski a couple of times, where they both showed interest to each other's work. She did not have a name in the art world, and as she put it in a personal talk on 29 May 2012, she was not well-known enough to be listed as a curator of such a thing. In the Biennale, she would mainly compensate for Żmijewski's inability to handle sensitive issues related to the press and media, and who, according to a tour guide I met, was not good with communication.[13] Also, with her experience in administration and organising, she expected to act as mediator between the curatorial team and the different parties involved in the production of the show.

In December 2011, in addition to Warsza, the Biennale also announced the Russian group Voina as associate curators. It is worthwhile taking some time to describe Voina's case because it is, in many ways, exemplary of the discourses and practices taking place in and around *Forget Fear*. In the past few years, the group has achieved notoriety in Russia and the global art world for their scandalous performances, involving violence and sabotaging of state institutions, such as burning police cars and drawing a gigantic penis on a bridge opposite the building of the Russian secret services in Saint Petersburg. Voina consider themselves anarchist revolutionaries and the statements they produce have strong romantic origins, often portraying the normative role of the artist as an agent acting exclusively for social emancipation and against established social norms. Also, in some of their interviews, Voina members invoke notions that can be considered dated in the context of postmodern art discourse, such as that of real art and the true artist.[14] Because of their violent performances and political opposition, Voina are regularly accused of criminal behaviour and hooliganism and are a constant target of Russian authorities. According to their interviews, some of the group's members are currently held in police custody, while others live in secret locations to avoid imprisonment. Notably, due to their underground position, they also claim that they reject the use of money and live from scavenging and supermarket lifting.[15]

At a first glance, Voina's radical anti-institutionalism, garnished with statements such as 'all exhibitions are utterly pointless'[16] and 'holding exhibitions can only harm real art',[17] appears contradictory to their participation as co-curators of the Berlin Biennale, an institution funded by the German state, BMW and other private sponsors. This tension was supposedly reconciled through the revelation that their participation was due to their personal relationship with Żmijewski, whom they regard as a true radical. Both Voina and Żmijewski publicly stated that he visited them in December 2011 in St. Petersburg asking them to help him, 'transform art into politics'.[18] There, Voina decided to check Żmijewski's radicalism, the way they 'check out everyone who comes to Voina'. They made him pretend that he was a drunk tourist during a supermarket lifting in St. Petersburg so as to distract the cashier. After Żmijewski 'passed the test' and his radicality was confirmed, they started building a relationship of 'total trust', 'with absolutely no boundaries', where 'limits do not apply', 'laws don't exist' and the only thing that mattered was to 'do politics.'[19]

In practical terms, Voina made clear that they were not going 'to occupy themselves with exhibition management', which they find 'rather useless'. Instead, in an interview right after their participation was announced, they triumphantly declared: 'We have taken Berlin. The next thing is the Russian revolution' ('voina' in Russian means 'war').[20] Indeed, Voina did not have any curatorial responsibilities expect their informal communication with Żmijewski on matters that no one apart from the two parties

was aware of. In reality, Żmijewski simply offered Voina the opportunity to connect their name with the prestigious title of the associate curator of Berlin Biennale so as to give them the international visibility necessary to put them in a better position in their negotiations with Russian authorities. As Warsza put it in the *Forget Fear*'s newspaper, which served as a guide for the exhibition, 'our curatorial alliance with Voina creates a situation in which the institutional tools of the Berlin Biennale – access to press coverage, legal representation, or funding – can serve Voina's cause; through it, they are legitimised as artists and their actions are deemed art'.[21] Voina would receive different kinds of benefits from this position, without really having to contribute or commit to any of the show's responsibilities in some substantial way.

The case of Voina is exemplary of the ways that Żmijewski saw his involvement in the Biennale and his general curatorial strategy. Żmijewski's strategy of enacting dissent involved the conscious and explicit exploitation of the symbolic capital of Berlin Biennale as an institution so as to defend, support or give visibility to persons or discourses that he saw as resistant to dominant structures and ideas. In this sense, Żmijewski's 'institutional work', consisted of repurposing and taking advantage of the symbolic power of the institution by disrupting, or better dislocating, its institutional agenda. Interestingly enough, the language that Żmijewski used in public occasions and private talks significantly resembled that of Voina in its polemical tone.

Before the show started, Żmijewski made his intentions clear. In these serious times for the world, there was no time for play or passive contemplation. In contrast to the decisively political, but more reflective and deliberative approaches that characterised the discursive exhibition paradigm, according to him, art should act and act now. In a statement that the Biennale released some months before the show started, Żmijewski declared that 'art now is no longer just an intellectual safari for philosophers but also a political safari for politicians and the local administration', and that 'art today mostly represents the ambitions of individual artists, being the interests of the members of neo-liberal elites'.[22] Żmijewski invited around fifty well-known cultural producers based in Berlin to write statements responding to his call for 'drafting and signing a new social contract between artists . . ., curators, directors, and representatives of commercial and non-commercial cultural institutions in Berlin, and also politicians'.[23] This new pact for art was perceived as a motivation to empower the artists in reclaiming the fruits of their creative, intellectual and manual labour that contributed to the redevelopment of Berlin's cultural capital.[24] In this sense, the rhetoric on art as a site of production, instead of discursive interventions, was profoundly reflected in Żmijewski's statements.

Some months before the publication of this newspaper, Żmijewski announced an open call for artists willing to participate in the Biennale.

In this rather unusual gesture from a renowned Biennale exhibition, artists were invited not only to submit their artworks, proposals and projects in hard copy formats, but, more crucially, to identify their political positions. Around 5,000 artists from all over the world responded to the call, sending their work and describing where they belong politically in a few words. Yet, in a move that caused controversy, as a result of the big volume of applications these proposals were not taken into consideration by the curators. In fact, the art works presented in the Biennale had nothing to do with these applications; they were instead a result of research that the curators made themselves. The only artist who replied to the open call and eventually took part in the exhibition was Marina Naprushkina (who was invited by Żmijewski after they met in a demonstration without him knowing that she replied to the open call). The visitors, however, could see during the Biennale a number of the files that contained the applications of the artists who submitted to the open call placed in piles in a room close to the entrance of KW. This room also displayed on one of its walls a large-scale graph representing the political views of the artists as described in their submissions, creating a network of links between their various political orientations. For the record, the vast majority of the artists who submitted work to the Biennale were self-described as 'left-wing'. The Berlin-based media activist and writer Pit Schultz was invited to develop a so-called 'ArtWiki', an ongoing digital art library based on the model of Wikipedia, which was linked to Biennale's official website and included all artist's names, their political orientations and information about the work.

The main curatorial strategy the curators used was described to me by Joanna Warsza as 'following the news'. According to this strategy, rather than doing studio visits, the curators operate like journalists, selecting artworks and projects in response to current political and social events. As Warsza put it in a text circulated through the process of the Biennale,

> . . . this form of curatorial research does not involve deadlines, hunting for interesting portfolios, or studio visits. We searched for art in civil disobedience, in politics, in representative state art, in the politics of memory, in capitalist appropriation, or in educational activities seen as 'bad art'.[25]

The main idea that guided this approach was the desire to discover the art in politics, and inversely, the politics in art. In other words, the art shown in the exhibition was chosen on the basis of its capacity to act. Żmijewski's own curatorial statements seem to perfectly fit and embody the shift from the discursive to the activist vocabularies of the recent years. In fact, Żmijewski not only reflected this shift, but actively propagated it by openly dismissing the hitherto model of the new biennial. In the foreword of the publication of *Forget Fear*, an edited volume with texts and interviews related broadly to the themes of the Biennale, released

during the days of the opening, he explicitly embraces an activist vocabulary by attempting to reunite art with society for the cause of social change. His main objection is that the art of our times does not have any concrete effects: 'people otherwise extraordinarily well-equipped – artists – produce paradoxical or utopian visions and a social critique which neither they nor their viewers are willing to translate into a political (or any other) practice of any tangible social value' (2012: 10). However, because 'we are witnessing an attack on the fiscal foundations of culture' and because 'the majority of artists are in fact part of an artistic proletariat', art cannot afford simply being 'a décor for a neo-liberal system' (2012: 12). For Żmijewski, it is not only art and art objects that are a décor, but also 'the intellectual discourse that frames them' (2012: 12), that is to say, the theoretical frameworks that claim to propagate art's social engagement. Instead of being subversive, for Żmijewski, this system only serves to drain 'into its centre each and every radical proposition, transforming it into speculation and theoretical reflection – but not into action' (:12). In this sense, 'artists, as well as the theorists and philosophers' of the past decades 'have become "practitioners of impotence" ' (:12–13). By launching a full-front attack against the political statements of the discursive biennial, Żmijewski states, echoing the tone of Voina, that 'the curator' has in fact 'become a traveling producer of exhibitions', who 'speaks of social issues in the soft language of pretended engage-ment' (:13). Instead, his conception of political art refuses 'to ride the postmodernist merry-go-round of cultural pluralism, slow reform, and gradual development of new languages that satisfy everyone', declares 'disobedience to a falsity of aesthetics, existence, and humanity of art' and abandons 'the ship named 'the free market of ideas' or 'the post-political feast of differences', beginning to form a movement on its own' (:16). Żmijewski then interrogated the new biennial as being untruthful, lacking the quality parrhesia, a pretentious and conformist and not being able to rise to the stakes that itself has set. The critiques taking place around the biennial have now moved within it, expressed by a curator who wished to revolutionise the scope of an internationally acknowledged institution. BB7 wished to initiate a radical break from the model of semiotic production in favour of an insurrectionary artistic activism.

Notwithstanding his desire to escape from previous models, Żmijewski's break with the past was not as holistic as claimed. This biennial shared many aspects of the discursive show: an edited volume that expanded on the curatorial approach was published, several theorists, philosophers and social scientists were invited to talk in its premises, regular and daily guided tours were running, it contained works of interdisciplinary nature, and it had a strong temporal dimension, as various events were occurring every day. Reportedly, even when Żmijewski decided to remove all the labels under the works before the opening of the show so as to protest against institutional confinement, these were hastily replaced by other

biennial workers. The embracing of questions of insurrection, labour and action were partly adapted to the previously existing system of showcasing, its codes and vocabularies.

The Occupy Berlin Biennale

Despite similarities with previous models, however, the eccentric nature of Berlin Biennale was made evident from the beginning, and as a result, many critics went as far as to question its status as an exhibition. The unconventionality of the show was evident in several of its manifestations, ranging from the ways it engaged with the press to the actual exhibits themselves. For instance, some weeks after the Biennale's opening, a black and red flag appeared hanging from KW's façade. The flag, fluttering on a balcony not accessible to the audience, was put up by members of the Occupy movement in order to declare affiliations with the movement of anarchism. The encounter with the anarchist flag gave the somehow paradoxical impression that this well-established and prestigious institution with its top-notch art world connections in a gentrified street of Berlin was somehow propagating anarchist causes. Similarly, for most of the 2.5-month period that the show was running, invited and uninvited activists and members of the Occupy Berlin movement placed in its yard

Figure 5.2 KW's Façade During BB7.

Figure 5.3 KW's Yard During BB7.

several banners that directly called the visitors to action. For instance, slogans such as 'This is a Class War Fight Back' and 'Don't Play with the Dictator' (referring to the possible boycott of the hockey games organised in Belarus in 2014 by the president Alexander Lukashenko) were on daily public display for the largest period of the show. The straightforwardness and unambiguous nature of such performances with which one was confronted seriously downplayed the expectations of a traditional art exhibition where political issues are usually discussed from a remove.

The eccentric character of *Forget Fear* came largely as an effect of Occupy Berlin, the Berlin section of the Occupy movement, invited by Żmijewski, some months before the opening, to take part in the show. The participation of the Occupy movement in the Berlin Biennale epitomises, not only the translocal nature of the interactions taking place in and around the show, but also the radicalisation of ideas of criticality, as here an activist social movement, formless and improvisational as it was, took over the direction of the biennial's main space.

The Occupiers were essentially carriers of a globalising language and tactics that were placed within the territory of Berlin Biennale, resulting in situations that revealed the internal dynamics of the group as well as the limits of the biennial as a site erasing the boundaries between art and life. The group, a local manifestation of the global Occupy movement,

eventually agreed to participate on the basis that its members would have total freedom to exercise politics and organise actions. Occupy Berlin accepted the invitation on the basis of strengthening its position in Berlin (it had recently been evicted from the park it was located at), offering visibility to the cause of Occupy in general and networking with global activists. Some Occupy members did not agree with this participation, as the Berlin Biennale receives state and corporate funding, and decided to leave the movement. However, as a participating activist informed me, most of these disagreeing activists were forced, one way or another, to return to the biennial as this was the main activist hub in Berlin at the time.

Around 4 months before the beginning of *Forget Fear*, Occupy Berlin announced an open call to which potential participants were invited to propose the organisation of actions, events or working groups. No specific formal restrictions were applied for accepting proposals, although they had to be sympathetic to the idea of direct democracy and propagate values related with anti-capitalism, environmentalism, anti-colonialism and the like. Also, the initial Occupy group invited several activists and activist movements from around the world, most notably from Spain and the USA, to co-create actions during the show. Eventually, several activists from outside Berlin and Germany showed up, taking up different tasks and responsibilities. All decisions for these tasks were taken through a general assembly, which they called *assamblea* (after the Spanish word for assembly), in which anyone could participate. The assamblea was held regularly in the main space of KW. In the first assambleas, the Occupiers were divided into different working groups, which met independently and were responsible for separate issues. Such groups included the 'Occupy Communication Group', the 'Creative Actions Group', the 'Autonomous University', the 'Garden Group' and the 'IT Working Group', which all together made the larger group of 'Occupy Biennale'. As such, according to one participant, Nelly, Occupy Berlin was not a homogenous movement, but

> there are various assemblies, various affinity groups . . . we came together with these preparatory brainstorming meetings and it became immediately clear that some people were very interested in content, like what kind of content we were going to provide at this space which is going to be offered to us at KW, and other people were interested in art and performances or visuals . . . I don't want to call it arts and culture because we were from the very beginning very adamant about not producing art and keep it very controversial and political . . . eh, I think it was called the 'actions groups', having things like street theatre, direct action, you know more lively things that will bring the spirit of Occupy from the streets and demolish this barrier between the public and the gallery.[26]

The working groups mostly co-operated with each other and formally discussed matters together in the assamblea, although communication was mainly established informally through day-to-day conversations and interactions. A very important part of social life for the members of Occupy Biennale was the 'kitchen', which was a room above the main space and in which the participants spent a great amount of their time, chatting, sharing ideas, eating and drinking. The duties for cooking and keeping the kitchen tidy and clean were generally split through rotation among the activists. While the kitchen room was similarly open to all participants, and even the visitors, it was somehow more reserved for the Occupy insiders. The kitchen also functioned as a symbolic space because ideas related to 'organic food' and 'eating healthy' were an important part of the Occupy culture.

In the course of the show, a backyard, which was accessible from the back door of the main space in KW, was turned by the Occupy activists and volunteers into a garden where they grew spices and herbs. The garden, gradually, as the weather became warmer, ended up being one of the most vibrant areas of *Forget Fear*, functioning as a meeting space for different events where ideas related to social change and gardening were discussed – another indication of the BB7's enactment of folk politics.[27] One of these ideas was that of 'guerrilla gardening' that involved turning abandoned sites into gardens and green spaces. One of the weapons of guerrilla gardening that the group made was the so-called 'guerrilla gardening bombs' or 'seed bombs'; compressed bundles of soil containing seeds that participants were encouraged to drop into abandoned lots so as to flower gardens.

Yet Occupy Biennale's political views were far from unified. In many of the assambleas that I participated, there were several occasions where people would fight over ideological or other differences. Decision-making, in this sense, was not an easy task, as even the Occupiers themselves could not easily locate their role within an art institution, and indeed a rather well-established one, for 2.5 months. As an Occupy member, called Tessa, commented to me during a chat:

> We have not made it clear among ourselves whether the space in Biennial was an exhibitionary space or our working space. It took a long time to make it clear . . . the first month of meetings was fully dedicated to that issue.[28]

Furthermore, although the movement wished to challenge the expectations of a normal gallery show, and not 'present art', it was often forced to succumb to several of the logics of an art institution. For instance, before the opening of the show, there was widespread concern about what the Occupy members will 'show' to the visitors. The institutional logic of the art exhibition was then inexorably shaping the actions and attitudes of its participants. As Tessa put it regarding this concern:

> For all of the Occupy team the issue was what we were going to show. I think it would be much more critical and challenge the so-called institutionalization of the movement [if we were not thinking about that] . . . myself as well as all the others in the preparation team for Occupy were in a kind of stress, we were saying 'what are we going to show'?

The tensions and contradictions among the group were also obvious in other ways. After the first weeks of the Biennale activists of the so-called 'Global Square' movement, who were invited by other Occupy members and were there since the opening, abandoned the Biennale, as they felt oppressed by the rest of the Occupy activists. Tensions grew higher as the days passed and various uninvited activists started appearing, changing the dynamics of the group. As Tessa remarked, 'to a very large degree the team of Occupy Berlin felt that the activists coming from elsewhere were destroying what they had already built'. Such tensions culminated when towards the end of May, some newcomers from Spain vandalised an artwork that was put on display in the main yard of KW by the curatorial team because they mistook it for a corporate advertisement. They covered the artwork and some parts of the exterior wall of KW with the painted slogan 'RISE UP!'. This artwork was, in fact, an appropriation of an original banner of *Mobinil*, a major mobile phone company, which was exalting the courage of the Egyptian people after the Egyptian revolution has taken place. However, during the same revolution, the company cut-off their network service on government orders. By putting the banner up, the curators wished to expose the hypocrisy and the unethical tactics of the corporation that attempted to capitalise on the revolution. When the vandalism took place, KW felt disturbed and sought to charge the activists for defacing both the artwork and the wall of the building. The codes of contemporary art here, by not being understood, activated a situated clash between two different participants, the organisers and the activists, reflecting a larger conflict between the logic of estranging ordinariness, inscribed in the landscapes of art professionals, and that of taking things literary, as they appear, performed by these activists.

The diversity of agendas between participants in the Occupy movement was something strongly noticeable during my ethnographic fieldwork. Whereas many activists employed a class-based rhetoric, mainly holding big corporations and banks accountable, other participants perceived the movement in more spiritual terms. For instance, one of the participants I interviewed, Joshua, who joined the Occupy Biennale from its early days, thought of the Occupy as a, 'cosmic thing' in terms of 'the whole history of evolution.'[29] Joshua believed that 'a very special field of energy will come in the summer' and the change will eventually 'happen in 3 or 4 years'. For him, the Occupy was the spark of a forthcoming planetary movement. Joshua's beliefs, who along with others constructed and hung from the

Figure 5.4 Replacing Mobinil with RISE UP!

ceiling of the foyer a metallic sculpture of the 'sacred' New Age symbol, the 'Flower of Life', stood in complete disparity from these of other participants who perceived social change in much more mundane and materialist terms.

Despite such differences, the presence of the Occupy was emphatic from early on, acting as the main point of attraction for media and critics. The much discussed press preview resembled an assamblea, with the chairs of journalists, visitors and organisers put around in a circle. There, the participants in the Biennale, and especially the Occupiers, questioned the journalists, rather than the other way round, about how objectively they represent the news. In a similar fashion, on the night of the opening, a large assamblea with around 100 participants took place in the main space where the activists were camping. Despite the increased numbers, however, many of the participants moved in and out of the assamblea, making decisions for action nearly impossible to reach and some of the Occupy Berlin members unhappy. As Tessa confirmed, 'in the opening we started the assamblea and some members of the Occupy Berlin were very frustrated because loads of people were coming in'. The chaos was further amplified by the decision of the activists to avoid using a real microphone and instead employ the technique of the 'human microphone'. According to this technique, when a participant speaks, the rest of the group repeats like a chorus of her or his statement so as to make it audible to everyone. This technique was developed by the OWS in Zucotti Park, by necessity, as a way to amplify the words of each speaker, as the police forbid the protesters to use conventional loudspeakers. However, given that not even half of those present in the space participated in the assamblea, the surrounding noise was extreme and the whole process ended up being more like an exercise in cacophony.

Regardless, the activists stuck with the Occupy movement's global protocols and vocabularies that were brought 'inside' the exhibition space. In an effort to reduce this chaos, 'senior' members began transferring functional skills required for taking part in the assamblea to the 'newbies'. The Spanish activists had developed a specific hand language in the square movements during the previous months for making the assambleas operational and limit noise in the process of deliberation. This language involved specific hand signs that one would use whenever they wished to communicate something to the group, especially to the person speaking, such as 'I agree', 'I disagree' or 'move faster'. Those aspiring to participate in the assambleas had to learn the basic gestures of this language. Otherwise, the whole process could easily become dysfunctional. In fact, if a newcomer was not aware of some basic hand signs, it was impossible to attend the meeting. For this reason, many people wishing to join were often discouraged and left. Those who already had the experience and expertise in this language had to transfer this skill to the others, and through this system, a hierarchy of seniority was allowed to develop.

Furthermore, while the assamblea proceeded during the opening, there was a constant tension between the participants, especially the more experienced ones, and the art crowd. This tension was an outcome of the different expectations that activists and visitors had about what the gallery space 'really' stands for. Many activists, for instance, during the opening, felt extremely uneasy as the Biennale was proving to be a space overloaded with expectations of spectatorship. Although they started calling members of the public to participate in the assamblea, most of the visitors, being there to see art or network, did not bother to join. In the following day's assamblea, this was translated as a failure of the movement (they 'scared-off' the potential activists), as some members believed that yelling at the visitors was disrespectful. This pressure put on the Occupy Biennale by the expectations of spectatorship resulted in a daily, almost ritualistic, reiteration by its members that they were not mere instruments in the hands of the Biennale and its sponsors. Performing, thus, a daily form of dissensus against the authority that invited them, the Occupy Biennale seemed to perceive the art institution not only as an ally, but an adversary. The values of the art field, then, including beliefs of the art exhibition as a space of representation, clashed with activist mentalities of action, unquestionable political engagement and determinate decision-making.

In most assambleas I participated, from the very first day of *Forget Fear* until the last one, the tone, aims and content of the conversations revolved around certain issues that were approached through specific vocabularies. The most prominent idea among them was that the increasing implementation of neoliberal policies in Europe and the world has given rise to a financial dictatorship – indeed a rather common idea among social movements (Chapter 4). This idea was often framed within more catastrophic scenarios according to which, as a participant put it in the opening, 'humanity as a whole will have rough times' and 'the environment will collapse'.[30] For the Occupy Biennale, the solution against this situation was immediate action against neoliberalism at every possible level, and as such, a multitude of diverse actions were organised by the group during the exhibition. One of the most notable of these actions was the co-organisation of the so-called 'Blockupy' protest in Frankfurt, a protest against the bankers and the banks, to which the great majority of the participants travelled to demonstrate. During the days of the protest, the main space was almost completely empty and disorganised, and as a result, several dysfunctional situations occurred. For instance, when an invited international speaker arrived on 12 May, there were merely two persons attending his speech, among them late-sleepers who were just emerging from their tents.

While the discursive model of extended educational events was denounced by Żmijewski, it found its place in the exhibition by one of the most active Occupy groups, the so-called 'Autonomous University', a self-

Figure 5.5 The Occupy on the Night of the Opening.

organised educational endeavour set up by the Occupy Biennale. This smaller, transient set up was conceived a few months before the opening and designed specifically for *Forget Fear*. Its coordinators managed to obtain some room inside the main space, and their primary aim was to create an active space, filling most days of the schedule with events in the form of lectures, seminars and panels. At least in the beginning, apart from a general anti-capitalist orientation, there were no hard-lined principles regarding the issues they wished to cover or the political statements to promote.[31] However, a certain political direction, according to Nelly, was clear: 'The "Autonomous University" was mostly meant to communicate knowledge; to tap into the local activist scene and bring together activists, community members, academics and exchange knowledge'. The process of scheduling talks and other activities was mostly based on an individual initiative. If a member had an idea, this would be presented to the rest of the group, which, as Nelly informed me, never, 'vetoed something or refused an invitation'. After accepting the person's proposal, it was their 'responsibility to make this happen'. For instance, if they 'proposed to bring someone to talk about ethical consumption, it's up to them to schedule it and they have the microphone, the beam and the projector, advertise it and so on'. In this sense, it was a very loose organisation based on individual commitment and voluntary

participation, rather than some programmatic principles that had to be strictly followed.

The Autonomous University was described by Nelly as 'one of the most successful working groups in the Biennale' and while 'the urban garden project, the public kitchen all of these things were also successful . . . the "Autonomous University" had probably the biggest exposure'. This was generally true as large numbers of people attended the lectures given by some high profile speakers such as David Graeber, Peter Marcuse and Brian Holmes. The talks were also uploaded on YouTube and promoted through the Biennale channels and accounts. As Nelly explains, organising such an enterprise was much easier through the support of a well-known institution such as the Berlin Biennale:

> You know what, as 'Occupy Berlin Biennale' it was very easy for us to organise all these things because when you call yourself the 'Autonomous University' and you explain to people that on the one hand you are involved in the Occupy and on the other you have a space in the Biennial, which are both very attractive things for various reasons. It turns out that everybody is willing to come and talk to you. . . . Well in most cases the people that came were already here for other reasons. Because it is summertime and all these star-academics were already on the speaking circuit, or they went to Documenta and so on, and they were in the neighbourhood and it was easy for them to come.

Although this endeavour was set up with 'zero financial support' on behalf of the Biennale, the 'space' and 'location' were the most significant factors that gave visibility to the Autonomous University and the rhetoric it wished to make public. The issue of visibility, in other words, was the precondition for its success.

Put briefly, the most important tensions in the Occupy Berlin, which were present from the beginning and were constant, had to do with two interrelated things: the first was the question as to whether the movement had been institutionalised by a state and corporate-funded institution, and second, if that was the case, how to counter this appropriation. For the most part, most of the activists agreed that the situation could be reversed only if spectatorship, or the practice of looking at art objects, with which everyone more or less associates art galleries, was turned into active participation. The biggest challenge then for the Occupiers was to turn the visitors entering the exhibition into activists for social change, which is to say, to participate in assambleas, organise actions and spread the word of revolution to others. In this sense (similarly to what was discussed in Chapter 4), the art space would turn from a site of representation to one of action, keeping in mind, as a participant from the 'Radio for the 99 percent' put it, that, 'everyone entering the space stops being audience and

they become potential activists'. Efforts to address this condition involved the attempt to organise the workers of KW for demanding a pay rise as well as the gradual and rather symbolic development of a horizontal working model in the course of the Biennale, in which hierarchies between the Occupiers, KW staff, the curators and other participants were supposed to be eliminated. The curators, for instance, during the last month of the Biennale were referred as 'former curators.'[32] This was a practical manifestation of the ways that the horizontalised ideas of social movements were key in actualising a less hierarchical (although merely symbolic) curatorial paradigm than the one of the discursive biennial of the past.

Interestingly, the questions posed in the microcosm of the Occupy Biennale resemble the ones posed within critical curatorial discourse. Given that participation in the Biennale was meant to empower the cause of social change, the main question was *how* to participate: how to use the symbolic power of the institution so as to balance out the guilt of participating in an organisation that receives corporate and state funding? To divert this power for their own ends, the conspiracies of Occupiers against neoliberalism had to be organised, channelled within art institutional scripts, involving public expectations about art, spectatorship and aesthetisation. In other words, and as we shall see more emphatically in the critiques of

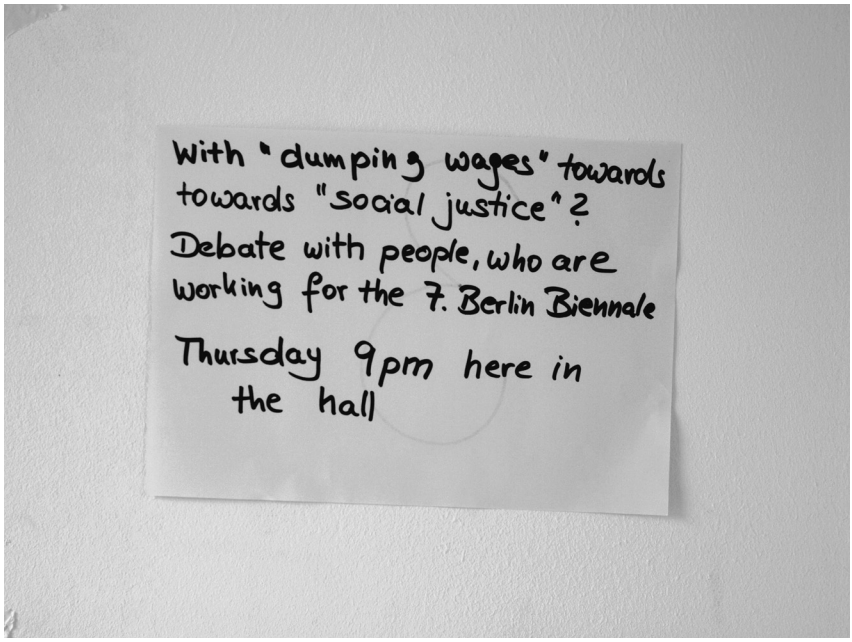

Figure 5.6 With Dumping Wages Towards 'Social Justice'?

BB7, the activist impulses of the Occupy were caught and performed within the logics of the art institution. In another sense, a main difference between the impulses of the Occupy Biennale and these of critical art professionals was that for the latter, participation also meant professional opportunities, and thus compromises are easier to make. Looked at through the lens of the curatorial theory, the decision to bring in the activist scene then, a crowd that does not have any real stakes in the art world, thwarts the discursive model by enabling an agency of activist desire.

'Doing Resistance': Artworks, Projects and Events

Not surprisingly, the very few art projects by artists, much less than any other past edition, were mostly fuelled by a similar activist desire. Most – if not all – of the works included, either produced by artists directly for the Biennale or re-contextualised by the curators, communicated political messages in a direct and straightforward fashion. In this sense, most works displayed a clear-cut immediacy, narrowing the limits of subjective interpretation and contemplation as much as possible. As the curators emphasise in a section titled 'Eliminating the Audience' in the P/ACT FOR ART, they aimed to create a 'situation where audience members lose sight of their position as observers, turning spectatorship into citizenship'.[33]

Several projects attained widespread publicity, engaging social actors far beyond the traditional art world, with themes ranging from diplomatic relations and ethnic diaspora to German history and politics. In the courtyard of KW, after entering the main gate, the curators placed the so-called 'Key of Return', possibly 'the biggest key in the world',[34] according to Berlin Biennale, which was brought over from Palestine. The key, made by steel, weighing almost 1 ton and 9 m long, was manufactured collaboratively by the residents of the Aida Refugee Camp in Bethlehem. When dislocated from their houses in 1948 and 1967, many Palestinians kept their keys, passing them from generation to generation. As such, the key was meant to stand for remembrance as well as symbolise a possible Palestinian return. This collaborative project was spotted by Żmijewski on one of his visits to Palestine. There, he asked the representatives of the community whether he could ship over the key to Berlin. As expected, the key attracted visibility in the media catching the attention of the public. While visiting the exhibition, the head of the Palestinian diplomatic mission in Berlin stated in *AlArabiya News* that 'to bring it to Berlin is to show to the German people [. . .] the Palestinian refugees and tell them the story of the Palestinian narrative.'[35] During the show, many Palestinians living in Berlin visited the exhibition and were photographed in front of the key as a way to connect with their roots. In addition to this work, the Palestinian artist Khaled Jarrar presented his project 'The State of Palestine', in which he asked visitors to stamp into their passports the logo of the Palestinian state. This gesture was expected to give visibility

to the Palestinian cause through the participants' agreement to officially recognise a Palestinian state and risk harassment at possible future passport checkpoints. Through the unambiguous nature of these works, *Forget Fear* intended to explicitly confirm its solidarity with Palestinian struggles, and in this sense, involve respective audiences.

BB7 was the subject of many other such general public debates. Yet, a great deal of these debates portrayed the exhibition in explicitly negative terms. A main reason of these debates was the piece 'Germany Gets Rid of It' by the Czech artist Martin Zet. A few months before the opening, Zet set up several collection points around Germany and publicly asked from those who own Thilo Sarazin's 2010 book *Germany Gets Rid of Itself* to dispose their copy at one of these points. Sarazin, a German social democrat politician, makes in his book racist remarks, supporting that the intelligence of the German nation was threatened by immigrants who did not wish to integrate (*sic*), pointing his finger specifically to the Turkish population. The book sold a very high number of copies in Germany, around 1.5 million, and attracted widespread publicity. Its influence on middle- and working-class Germans is noted by critical commentators. The book is also invoked as an indication of the alleged existing hyper-nationalism in Germany – even in the centre-left of the political spectrum. Zet planned to collect all the disposed books and produce an installation out of them to display in the Biennale. However, the call for disposing books at collection points was badly communicated in the German public sphere, provoking associations with the Nazi past. The media were quick to refer to the banning of books and book-burning during Nazism. According to a tour guide, the German Federal Cultural Foundation, due to the seriousness of this incident, saw the forthcoming Biennale as a political disaster and threatened to stop funding it. The Biennale had to negotiate the situation with the public, and as a result on 20 February 2012, 2 months before the beginning of the show, it organised a public event called 'Debate on the Occasion of Martin Zet's Campaign' so as to defend the project and reverse the negative public opinion. As Żmijewski commented:

> Immediately the media jumped on this idea and created this absolutely fantastic work of flames, Nazi associations. Instead of following his proposal people started to fantasise about something that was not mentioned by the people who are in the team of the biennial.[36]

Initially, the artist wanted to construct a lengthy carpet with the disposed copies of the book that would represent, as form of protest, a big Turkish flag in the ground floor of KW. He calculated that he needed 60,000 copies for that cause. The Biennale published the press release, advertising the collection points and hoping that at least 60,000 owners of book would realise its racist undertones and dispose of it.

However, only five disposed copies were collected, and thus the initial idea had to be abandoned. As Warsza explained in a guided tour in the final day of the show, the project's effects rippled through society in many different ways:

> We have been accused for starting a book-burning process, that we want to destroy these books and that we actually are fascists . . . The right-wing portals organised a protest at BebelPlatz, which is the place where the Nazis used to burn books in 1933 against this project . . . We also had letters of support by Turkish organizations and a group of antifascists blocking Augustrasse to prevent the possible protest of the right-wingers. Eventually, the project stopped being about the effect of collecting but rather what it has triggered in the society with this reaction.[37]

Although the project was finally allowed to be implemented, it caused controversy even among liberals and leftists.

Meanwhile, the entire main ground floor space of KW was given over, as we saw, to the Occupy Biennale group for general assemblies and for placing their tents, posters, works and other material. Between the floors, on the staircase's interior walls Marina Naprushkina's displayed her project 'Self Governing'. Naprushkina, an artist from Belarus, sketched onto large strips of carton representations of different social and political situations and imagined how a socialised economy could function in Belarus if its president Alexander Lukashenko was disposed. Also, with the help of the Biennale, Naprushkina published a newspaper, again with the title 'Self-Governing', which was freely distributed throughout the show. The newspaper informed readers on the current political situation in Belarus, calling into question both its oppressive character and neoliberal policies. In the first introductory page of the newspaper, we read:

> Democracy and human rights can be secured permanently wherever people live in modest wealth, but the prevailing model of 'predatory capitalism' destroys this foundation. It is time to reconsider. 'Occupy' is one beginning in the western democracies; a corrupt administration in Russia is also coming under pressure, but new forms of economy have to be found and tested everywhere. It's the beginning of a new time all over the world, and soon in Belarus.[38]

Naprushkina, in this newspaper, seemed to share the ambitions of the Occupy movement to transform and overthrow capitalism. Apart then from the voices within the Occupy Biennale group, her work launched the most explicit polemic against neoliberalism. A project sharing a similar desire to protest was the so-called section of *Breaking the News*, which was

presented on the third floor of KW, for which Żmijewski assembled together and screened various film footage from demonstrations and protests around the world taken by different artists, journalists and video-makers (more on this work in the next section).

While it is beyond the scope of the chapter to look in detail at all the projects included in the Biennale, let us have a brief look at some that further reveal its explicitly politicised nature. Two of the most recognised pieces in the show, which were placed opposite each other on the second floor of the exhibition, were 'PM 2010' by the Mexican artist Teresa Margolles and 'Blood Ties' by Antanas Mockus, the former mayor of the city of Bogotá. Margolles' piece is an installation consisting of tens of covers of a daily Mexican tabloid, called PM, hung on a wall. Each of these covers displayed photographs of those killed during recent drug wars in Mexico alongside erotic and sensualised advertisements. Margolles draws attention to the ordinariness of drug-trafficking killings in Mexico and how scenes of murdered gang members are part of a daily routine. In turn, Mockus was asked by the curators to make a piece and place it anywhere he wished within the exhibition space. He chose to make an installation opposite Margolles' piece so as to start a debate on the subject. Mockus asked from the visitors of the Berlin Biennale to sign a statement in which they personally commit to stop using, or at least reduce the consumption, of drugs for the duration of BB7. The visitors were asked to supplement their statement by donating a drop of blood. Every day that passed, a Mexican flag hanging from the ceiling dropped lower towards a bucket of acid. If a visitor signed the statement to reduce drugs, the flag would move some millimetres up. In this way, Mockus wished to make the visitors aware that their personal drug consumption was complicit with the Mexican drug-wars and its deadly business. Perhaps, the only artwork in the show that did not share the belief in the 'positive' role of art in combating some sort of oppression or exploitation was the installation and documentary film 'A Gentrification Program' by the artist Renzo Martens. Martnes' work was split in two parts. The first part was presented in the form of some photographs on the first floor of the Biennale, showing a supposed gentrification project that he initiated in Congo. The photographs depicted the Berlin Biennale flag placed within some African forest, accompanied by a written statement on the wall that read: 'If we feel art should fully embrace the terms and conditions of its own existence, it may be good to inquire where art has a bigger impact on social reality'. By that, Martens meant, echoing Sholette's critique of the biennial, that the most visible effect of art was the gentrification of the impoverished areas in which it appears. The second part of his work was a documentary screened on the last day of the show, in which Martens described his alleged gentrification project in Congo. In this documentary, he presented the process of setting up a seminar to inform local plantation workers about themes such as institutional critique and immaterial labour.

In this seminar, art theorists and curators related to social engagement, such as T.J. Demos and Nina Möntmann, were invited to speak. By assuming the role of a modern creative colonialist who attempts to teach to the locals what critical art is, Martens purports to disclose the interrelations between art, critique and economic development. Due to the use of a version of the tactics of over-identification,[39] however, the work caused again confusion and spite. An online blog, devoted to shadowing the exhibition wrote that 'any thinking and feeling person would be insulted by such imagery', while on the night of the screening, there were many objections against the 'insulting', as several visitors put it, imagery of Martens.[40]

Another theme of *Forget Fear* was related to national history, and especially the history concerning WWII. For the work 'Berlin-Birkenau', which could be found on the fourth floor of KW, the Polish artist Lukas Surowiec brought 320 birches from the surrounding area of Auschwitz and planted them all around the city of Berlin. This was meant to be a symbolic gesture intended to keep the memory of Auschwitz alive. The dialogue between Poland and Germany, and their respective WWII national histories, was another very important recurring motive of the show. However, such discussions would sometimes lean towards a kind of uneasy rhetoric often promoted by Żmijewski himself. For example, in the publication of Forget Fear, in an interview with the Polish historian Dorota Sajewska, Żmijewski starts the discussion with the slightly awkward phrase 'let's talk about Germans', and carries on with similar uncomfortable questions, such as, 'is it really the case that the Germans feel guilty about the war, or they are secretly proud of it?'[41] The engagement with questions surrounding the relationship of history and the present was the cause of another controversy, the installation 'Peace Wall' by the Macedonian artist Nada Prlja. Prlja erected a wall of 12 m wide and 5 m high in the middle of a busy street in the area of Friedrichstrasse. The wall, built by blocks of cement, symbolised the new economic and social segregations in the area, particularly between the touristic business district and working-class housing projects. Some weeks after the installation of the piece, several people from the neighbourhood started complaining, especially traders and business owners, for its disrupting effect on the movement of tourists and residents. Eventually, on the 15th of June the artist and the Biennale representatives agreed to knock down the wall after daily pressures by citizens living in the area and even verbal abuse against the Biennale representatives.[42]

Project and Events

Likewise to the discursive exhibition model, BB7 (also owing to the Autonomous University) staged daily events and projects, most of which articulated direct and provocative statements on social and political affairs.

Several of these, often varying in method and scope, caused new controversies and tensions by employing (similarly to what we saw before with the Polish–German affairs) the category of the 'people', either in ethnic, religious or national terms. One of such projects was the organisation of the 'First International Congress of the Jewish Renaissance Movement from Poland' by the artist Yael Bartana. The project was centred on a video installation made by the artist propagating the return of 3,300,000 Jews to Poland whose families were expelled during WWII. In addition, a 3-day conference that called for debate on the same issue took place in Berlin from the 11th to the 13th of May. Equally controversial was the project 'Rebranding European Muslims', a project initiated by a group called 'Public Movement' and which the Biennale decided to advertise through its website. Inspired by the method of nation branding, the project's leader Dana Yahalomi wished to initiate a campaign for rebranding the European Muslim population so as to make it more attractive to Europeans. These two projects were discussed in particularly negative terms during the Biennale by visitors or members of the Occupy for clinging too much on national or religious identities and being unreflective on the more refined role that art is supposed to play in touching upon such issues.

Even though it is not possible to mention all of the contentious projects and events that took place during BB7, there are some that achieved much notoriety to ignore. The first of these events took place in the St. Elisabeth Church, one of Biennale's venues. There, the artist Paul Althamer invited, for the duration of the Biennale, members of the public to engage in a collaborative art work. He encouraged everyone to sketch or paint on the carton strips covering the walls of the church with their ideas, engaging in a visual dialogue with each other. In the same venue, on 9 June 2012, in an event titled 'Politics of the Poor', the curators invited some members of the Brazilian group *Pixadores*. Pixadores is part of the *Pixação* graffiti movement in São Paulo. Pixação mainly consists of young people living in favelas from poor and working-class backgrounds. The main practice of the movement is the tagging of high buildings as a form of making them visible across the cityscape of Sao Paulo. In other words, Pixação is a means through which the language of the excluded and the poor is heard, or as Joanna Warsza put it in the Forget Fear publication, 'an expression of the antagonism of the suburbs toward the centre . . . a protest of the lower class against a city ruled as corporation' (2012: 206).

The movement of Pixadores is notorious across the institutional art world after a number of 'art attacks', where they intervened by spraying and tagging institutionalised spaces. The most notorious of them took place in the 2008 Sao Paulo Biennial (the exhibition that suggested a radical discursive moment as we saw before). The curators of this particular Biennial announced that the second floor of the venue will be completely empty and freely available to the audience to express their own reflections. At the night of the opening a group of fifty members of the Pixadores

invaded the show, spraying on the walls of the venue different tags. Immediately after the event, the Pixadores were chased by the police and arrested. As Sergio Franco, a Pixadores member describes to Warsza:

> The *pixacao* action was provoked by the curatorial statement, which invited artists to intervene in the empty space, to occupy it and propose works. However, the curators acted against their own concepts, and made a threat during a press conference, saying that the *pixadores* didn't realize what the consequences of such an attack were. Nevertheless, on the opening day, the *pixadores* went up to the second floor of the building and tagged it all over it, which led to a serious struggle with the guards and the police. The *pixadora* Caroline Piveta da Mota was held in detention for nearly three months . . . This time art was used as a vehicle to shift the position of the *pixadores*, and make visible the anger of the periphery. *Pixadores* don't wreck the streets; they visualize the class struggle (2012: 214).

For the BB7 event, Warsza invited members of the Pixadores to St. Elisabeth Church, asking them to give a presentation and painting workshop within a predetermined framed space inside the church. However, while the workshop was taking place, a member of the group climbed up one of the church's wall and sprayed in an unauthorised area a black logo of the group. Żmijewski, who was present in the workshop, saw this action as an abuse of hospitality and reacted by pouring a bucket of water over the head of a Pixadore. As soon as this happened, another Pixadore, as a response, poured a bucket of yellow paint over Żmijewski, while the others took their spray cans and started spraying all over the church's walls. As a result, Żmijewski called the police to restore order. In contrast to Żmijewski, Warsza, the associate curator, asked Pixadores to engage in a discussion so as to resolve the conflict. Żmijewski denied entering in a dialogue with Pixadores. A few weeks later, the Pixadores received a letter that summed the cost of cleaning St. Elizabeth's walls to 18,000 euros, asking them to appear at a hearing at the Brazilian Ministry of Culture. In the end, however, all charges against them were dropped.

The perspectives of the curators, Żmijewski and Warsza, on the issue differed. When I met Żmijewski towards the end of the exhibition, he was still furious with the Brazilian group, mentioning that while they wanted to be transgressive, they abused his and the Biennale's hospitality. Justifying his action to call the police, he said, it was a stupidity on their side because the church was a community-run space and all they achieved was to harm the community, for which he felt responsible. Calling the police, for him, was a justified move that brought justice to the name of the community of the people who structure their daily lives around St. Elizabeth. Warsza, on the contrary, was rather disapproving of

Żmijewski's decision, perceiving the role of the curator to be more mediating than suppressive.

At times, Żmijewski also appeared publicly at odds with KW and the Berlin Biennale institution. One such occasion was triggered when Żmijewski invited the group 'BRIMBORIA institute' to KW in order to present an event titled 'An Evening without Christian Worch'. Christian Worch is a high-profile Neo-Nazi and Holocaust denier in Germany, participating in groups that endorsed assaults on leftists and foreigners. According to the initial statement that BRIMBORIA released, Worch was not invited to the event. In their press release, BRIMBORIA stated that they wished to make the public aware about contemporary extreme right-wing ideology, without giving much information about what the event involved. However, it turned out that Worch made clear to BRIMBORIA that he wished to participate. Eventually, the group decided to give him the stage, announcing his presence in KW a few days in advance of the event. In light of this development, the event, scheduled to take place on 26 June 2012, was eventually cancelled by KW a day before. Three different statements were written in response to the cancellation of the event, distributed through the BB7's webpage, one by KW, one by the BRIMBORIA Institute and one by Żmijewski. KW stated that they cancelled the event, 'after the well-known neo-Nazi Christian Worch had been invited to participate in the panel against previous agreements and information'. The statement emphasised that the director of KW, Gabriele Horn, 'clearly opposes an equal dialogue with neo-Nazis in terms of a mutual acknowledgment' and the KW 'refuses to function as a stage for any type of neo-Nazis, legitimizing participating people through a public discussion in a recognised art institution'.[43] On the contrary, BRIMBORIA and Żmijewski essentially accused KW of censorship. BRIMBORIA stated that 'for quite a long period of time it was uncertain whether Mr. Worch was ultimately going to be present at all or not', arguing though that they made it clear to KW that having a real Nazi at the event would be a 'desirable situation.'[44] For them, the institution was afraid to support the project because under no condition could 'taxpayers' money' be channeled to an event that hosts a Nazi. After they expressed their discontent with KW's decision, they thanked 'Artur for trusting in us' and 'Mr. Christian Worch for his willingness to confront critical questions.'[45] On the side of BRIMBORIA, and against KW, was also Żmijewski. In his statement, he wrote that it is Mr. Worch's 'right in a democratic system, which Germany still is' to publicly express his opinions, and that the decision taken by Gabriele Horn to cancel the event 'shows the limits of curatorial and artistic freedom'.[46] Controversies of this kind expose how the conflicting agendas between participants within a biennial setting are subject to general social conditions and antagonism, where curatorial or artistic autonomy can be contested and even repressed in direct or indirect ways.

Criticism from the Press

BB7 was severely attacked by the art press, receiving unprecedented negative criticism by critics, especially on issues related to curatorial strategy, effectiveness and aesthetic quality. These criticisms gave rise to a rather strained climate within the show, where curators, organisers and participants were compelled to be apologetic about their decisions on different occasions. Indicatively, the first question that Żmijewski asked me when I met him for an interview was along the lines of 'are you also one of those that found the show terrible'?[47] The criticisms that drew most attention and were discussed in different conversations that I was involved in can be summarised in the following: First, Żmijewski, according to critics, utilised the participants in order to produce his own meta work, which indexed much of his past work. Second, the show produced an easy and ineffective radicalism that exoticised resistance, and third, it over-emphasised a theoretically weak and largely unsubstantiated opposition between reflection and action (or art and reality). The texts that I draw from appear in some of the most established art journals and periodicals, and as a result of their explicitly polemic nature, we can safely assume that BB7 was perceived in largely negative terms within the context of international art networks. In general, all these criticisms, whether they see the violation of the curator's role or the overlooking of the exhibition's aestheticising effect, have one thing in common: they challenge the show in terms of 'ignoring' the codes of the field, and in this regard, wish to produce a sort of corrective mechanism, a varying reaffirmation and reminder of these codes.

Żmijewski's 'Meta Work'

One of the most significant reproaches, directed personally against Żmijewski, was his alleged manipulation and utilisation of the participants in order to fabricate his own meta-work of art. This critique was initially launched publicly immediately after the press preview in a text simply titled '7th Berlin Biennale', written by Ana Teixeira Pinto for *Art Agenda*. In this widely circulated text, Pinto instigates a polemic against the alleged megalomania of Żmijewski, arguing that 'through the hand of the curator the many become one, and that one is Żmijewski himself', as the 'show's closing statement is: Żmijewski. Żmijewski? Żmijewski!'[48] Pinto, in a discourse that has been repeated in different variations throughout the show, rebukes Żmijewski for staging a show that 'stands for left-wing positions through the enactment of right-wing methods and "vigilance" rhetorics'.[49] A similar position was shared by other critics, such as Monika Szewczyk, who in her text with the ironic title 'Courage, Comrades' published for the established contemporary art journal *Afterall*, a little more than a month after the opening of the show, points out how Żmijewski

set up an exhibition that revolves around his personal practice as an artist and as a Polish national subject. As she writes:

> There was also frustration at the sense that there were too few artworks, though too many Polish ones; and finally utter indignation at Żmijewski's allegedly having moulded the work of participating artists to reflect his own practice – shaping this biennial, the criticism held, into his own Gesamtkunstwerk.[50]

The allegation that Żmijewski moulded the work of participants to fit his own mega-artwork was mainly enabled through the inclusion in the exhibition of a number of works and projects that resemble and draw on Żmijewski's own past work as an artist. For instance, one of these works was the section *Breaking the News* (referred to previously), displayed on the third floor of KW. This project contained multiple film projections within a room, showing footage from riots around the world from Egypt and Ukraine to Greece and Germany. These films displayed demonstrations and clashes between protesters and the police, without, however, providing any contextual information about the exact place or the reason why these events were taking place. This project is very similar to Żmijewski's own 2009 installation project *Democracies*, which again involved different films showing people protesting in public spaces in different parts of Europe and the world, without providing any other contextual information.

On top of that, Żmijewski included in the exhibition a work of his own, which, according to Szewczyk, is something of a 'taboo in the province of artist curated exhibitions'.[51] The work was a short video titled 'Berek (The Game of Tag)', in which naked people are running around inside chambers of former concentration camps, playing a children's game of tag. In 2011, the work was removed by the curator Gereon Sievernich from the exhibition 'Side by Side. Poland-Germany: 100 Years of Art and History', which took place in Berlin, with the excuse that it was disrespectful to the victims of the Holocaust. Żmijewski perceived the removal of his work as an unacceptable act of censorship, and for this reason, decided to exhibit *Berek* in the Biennale, to react, as he puts it 'against this impulse to censor, self-censor and close off discussion'.[52]

Apart from these two cases, there was also the art project *Draftsman's Congress*, organised by a personal collaborator of Żmijewski, the artist Paul Althamer. This time, the project resembled a past video of Żmijewski titled 'Them'. In this video, first shown in documenta 12 in 2007, Żmijewski invited antagonistic social groups into a room, including elderly Catholic women, members of a Jewish Youth Group and left-wingers, who would express their different ideologies to each other, voicing disagreement and dissensus, and thus 'performing democracy'. Similarly, Althamer, in an open invitation to the public, invited people to freely paint on to

cardboard covering walls of the church. The participants in this way would engage with one another in a dialogue using visual language. Once more here, the dialogical engagement among different identities, such as religion fundamentalists, left-wing activists or Nazis, becomes the vehicle through which democracy will be performed. All these similarities in the above art projects plus the more general exhibition's resemblance with the general style of Żmijewski were foregrounded by critics as a means to degrade the show's legitimacy through the accusation of narcissism and manipulation.

Fake Radicalism, Occupiers as Savages and the Exoticisation of Resistance

Another important point of critique against BB7 refers to the issue of appropriation and exoticisation of the Occupy movement and of the concept of resistance in general. Here, the curator is attacked for aestheticising resistance, and thus, rendering it inoperative. In an article for the *Art Newspaper*, Christian Viveros-Fauné echoes this dissatisfaction, noting that 'activists became an exhibit at the biennial' and that the curator tended to 'anthropologise and humiliate global movements.'[53]

This criticism, combined with allusions about the political ineffectiveness as a result of Occupy's 'neutralisation', was expressed by the majority of the exhibition's critics. Furthermore, the Biennale Occupiers, according to these critics, betrayed the meaning of the name of the movement. The participation in a Biennale had nothing to do with the occupation of public space that is against the law and is radically against established power – what the Occupy movement was originally supposed to represent. Instead, the movement's participation was based on an invitation from an institution funded by the German state, which contained the movement's potential within its institutional agenda and gallery walls. This, as we saw, was something that the activists participating in the Biennale had realised before the show has started and tried to address it in various ways. For instance, in a particularly polemic text against BB7 titled 'Propaganda of the Deed' written for the renowned German art journal *Texte vor Kunst*, Sven Lütticken *et al.* wonder 'what does it mean to "occupy" by invitation?'[54] Later in the text, they associate the participation of the Occupy in the Biennale with colonial exhibitions of the past:

> The similarity of the 'Occupy Biennale' camp in the KW Institute for Contemporary Art to 'living history museums' was hard to suppress – as was, going back further in time, that to nineteenth century colonial exhibitions with their exhibitions of 'savages'.[55]

Most often, this criticism against the participation of the Occupy resulted in a questioning of the political effectiveness of BB7's political

aims in general. This argument was usually justified through the invocation of certain determinates, upon which the Biennale was dependent, and that it could not exceed however radical it may appear programmatically. For example, a common critique of BB7 evokes economy and economic power as tainting radical art. This critique is explicitly articulated in the aforementioned text by Sven Lütticken *et al.*, who regard that the institutional partners and affiliations of Berlin Biennale are suspicious agents:

> What to think of a project based on a call for radical, real-world action that still takes the form of a biennial that prides itself on its connections to Berlin Biennale founder Klaus Biesenbach, and exists in symbiosis with Gallery Weekend Berlin?[56]

In a similar variation of this type of 'infectiveness argument', Christy Lange for *Frieze* puts emphasis on the economic relations of Biennale, where its sponsors prevent the project from being radical enough:

> But I'm not sure if the Berlin Biennale – an exhibition funded by the German Federal Cultural Foundation and BMW, in a city to which artists still flock for cheap studio space – is a context that can produce enough friction.[57]

The group *Rosa Perutz* expresses this argument in a more condensed way in a particularly polemical text, titled *Trust Your Angst*, bringing to mind the incident with the road blocking, described in the beginning of this chapter:

> The programmatic fusion of art and politics disconnects art from their specific social context and instead, places art in a decisionist act as a symbol of unconditional radicalism. It requires the authorities that it denounces to express such a radicality.[58]

In Christy Lange's article the argument for the ineffectiveness of Occupy's participation is framed by a quasi-deterministic affirmation that art exhibitions are destined to be sites bound to representational logics safeguarding the foreigness of aesthetic experience. As she puts it:

> Titled 'Forget Fear', it presented a staging of conflict under controlled conditions, drained of spontaneity or urgency – a performance of politics rather than politics itself [. . .] The attempt to frame political movements within an art exhibition, as in the oxymoronic 'invitation' extended to members of Occupy and the Indignados to inhabit the ground floor of KW, neutralizes their activism by filtering it through the lens of representation, rendering their action less urgent and their presence more harmless.[59]

In this narrative, representation, or, better, the expectation of entering a space where representation occurs, overshadows, and in a way, overdetermines the Occupy's actions. A variation of this opinion is shared by the group *Rosa Perutz*:

> But what else should happen in an exhibition hall, if a scattered group of 'activists' are to perform democracy in front of an international audience?[60]

This question sets up an opposition between reality, where social struggles occur out in the streets, and art, where these struggles can only be represented. In other words, this is precisely the binary we saw in the introduction between reality as a space where objects and actions are literal and art as a space that initiates a split in this literalness. To repeat Boris Groys somehow pessimistic statement here, this 'quasi-ontological uselessness' through which our society sees art 'inflects art activism and dooms it to failure' (2014: 3). We clearly find this view in an equally critical text for the *Art Journal*, 'Administered Occupation: Art and Politics at the 7th Berlin Biennale' by Olga Kopenkina:

> . . . . the curators' idea to install 'the open process of collective negotiations, debates, and decision making, free from administra-tion by official political institutions', seemed to commit the usual mistake, namely, replacing the experience of a social struggle with its representation.[61]

Again, the author here emphasises how as soon an object enters the art gallery, it is meant to be perceived as representation, rather than, say, in terms of its own materiality and efficacy: the context determines the event. These argumentations here (re) constitute, consciously or not, the idea that the art institution is primarily a site where 'art' happens, where whatever comes into its premises becomes overdetermined by the effect of aestheticisation. Moreover, these critiques point to the practical impossibility of producing radical critique against the system when working within the institutions of power due to the inextricable link between cultural institutions and capitalist structures.[62] Irrespective of whether the argument of determination is here rehearsed intentionally or not (or has been triggered by Żmijewski's own insistence to 'become real'), it occupies public space in times of crisis in a paradoxical way. It displays that even though in a time when art activism is on the rise and institutions are called upon to perform a more explicitly political role, BB7's hyper-activist model causes unease and perplexity in the art world. Żmijewski's model, thus, by performing the practical impotency of art objects as activist gestures in their own terms, necessitates and pushes to a critical renegotiation the boundaries between art and social intervention.

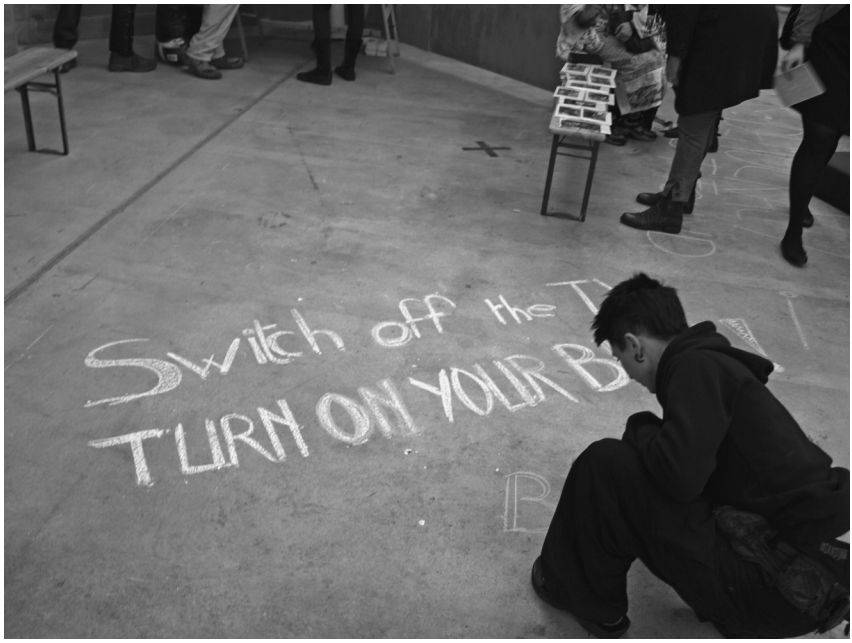

Figure 5.7 'Switch Off the TV Turn On Your Brain' On the Floor of KW.

The effort to produce an immediate form of social intervention within an art setting here is annulled not only because the singularity of the art biennial is threatened with collapse, but mostly because the art exhibition is understood in society's collective inscriptions principally as a space that aestheticises reality.

Crude Opposition Between Art and Action

A similar point of criticism against BB7 regarded its theoretical, and in effect, its epistemological position. Żmijewski's public statements were to blame for promoting a crude opposition between action and reflection that leaves little or no space in between. Żmijewski's foreword in the book publication of BB7 is a very characteristic example of rhetoric totally opposed to the postmodern Marxist theory that informs the field since the 1990s. Phrases such as 'open-ended encounters' and 'dialogical processes' are here systematically avoided (when not accused as ideological), being replaced by phrases such as 'real action', 'concrete activity', 'tangible social value' and 'problem-solving art'. The insistence on this kind of phraseology turns art from a supposedly non-functional activity to a means employed to achieve certain ends. The following excerpt from the Żmijewski's foreword in the publication of BB7 is exemplary in this regard:

> What interested us were *concrete activities* leading to visible effects. We were interested in *finding answers, not asking questions*. . . . artists produce paradoxical or utopian visions and a social critique which neither they nor their viewers are willing to translate into a political (or any other) practice of any *tangible social value* . . . What we need is more an art that offers its tools, time, and resources to *solve the economic problems* of the impoverished majority. For the actual limit to the possibilities of left-leaning art is effective engagement with material issues: unemployment, impoverishment, poverty (2012: 10, italics mine).

I discuss several complications of this curatorial strategy, as it develops within the institutional framework of BB7, in the next section. For now, let us note that this rhetoric in the context of an art biennial is historically unprecedented, as it directly aims to 'solve the problems of the impoverished majority', rather than engage in social critique or critique of the art world, that is, institutional critique. Żmijewski's activist approach then aims at converting the institution itself into a radical social agent (or one could say a type of a temporal NGO), modifying the gallery space, the context within which art is expected to be presented. For Groys, even comparisons with the Russian avant-gardes and their desires to mobilise art in the service of revolution are, in this case, misleading (2014: 3). This is because, while the latter were officially supported by the Soviet authorities, such attempts have, in essence 'no reason to believe in external support' (2014: 3). But, also, in these current times, the re-purposing of an art exhibition into a space providing social aid and support to activists, conflicts with regular ideas of what the 'ontological' purpose of an art space ought to be. Thus, Żmijewski's will to convert the art institution by renouncing aesthetics (in other words, the raison d'être of art) is further accused of theoretical arbitrariness, lack of reflexivity and non-dialectical thought. For instance, Sven Lütticken *et al.* see that:

> *Forget Fear* (the title of the Biennale) is predicated on what must be a willfully crude opposition between art and action . . . The undialectical crudeness appears to be a cipher for radicality. Art must be rejected, and our actions must be voided of aesthetic niceties that in the end only serve to bind us to a corrupt system. . . . illustrating an abstract and rigid opposition between aesthetics and ethics, between contemplation and action.

In a similar fashion, Szewsczyk regards this rhetoric both arbitrary and deterministic in its insistence on action as the one and only solution. As he mentions, 'a sense of inevitability is actively bolstered by . . . Żmijewski's writing' that not only 'contradicts reality', but 'faithfully performs a form of determinism that seems undemocratic or at least impatient

with reflexivity'. Here, Żmijewski's announcement that resistance against capitalism and the economic crisis is now an absolute imperative is regarded as a random point of curatorial departure that serves Żmijewski's own ends. Christy Lange, in *Frieze*, finds the dichotomy between effective art and less effective art as equally arbitrary:

> It presumes a false dichotomy between art that 'works' and art that doesn't, between art 'objects' and art 'actions' – a binary that ignores large swathes of contemporary artistic practice. Furthermore, Żmijewski's notion of politics being 'performed' is ambiguous: the definition of 'performance' could imply efficiency and efficacy; or, on the other hand, a rehearsal or staging.

Again, the question of how far art activism can go in the context of an art institution becomes pertinent. These critiques against the exhibition and the curatorial choices, published in some of the most prestigious art forums, reflect how BB7 has been communicated across the official art world. Through their rejection of the exhibition, they constitute a discursive device (Foucault, 1978), circumscribing an ethical framework through which the political biennial loses its value when assuming immediate and instrumental forms. It would be unfair, however, not to mention that among the countless talks I was involved, there were many voices (especially from members of the public) that were very sympathetic to the exhibition. As these voices were hardly heard in official accounts, BB7 is now ensconced in art history as a rather problematic experiment. The criticism around BB7 brought to the fore how the dismissal of the exhibition is based on specific presuppositions about art, namely that as a form of social practice, it must preserve some distance from 'reality' by displaying reflexivity and non-functional modes of being.

Rehearsing the 'Codes': Conflicts and Tensions Over Meaning

For and Against

As a tournament of value that encompasses multiple and contradictory forces, BB7 was variously conceptualised by social actors holding diverse positions, such as activists, artists, members of the curatorial team and other participants. Through these conflicting conceptualisations, participation in this institutional structure was performed through idiosyncratic and non-uniform ways. The predetermined roles of the curator, the activist or the artist, were, in this sense, played out in the context of certain value regimes, systems of meaning and material constraints. As we saw above with Pixadores, the BRIMBORIA Institute and the incident with the Egyptian poster, controversies did not only emerge externally, from the

critics or the public, but also internally, from the ways the exhibition developed through time. Conflicts, alliances and the practice of choosing sides proved to be integral for maintaining affiliations, supporting one's practice, vision and work and surviving the pressure from critics and the public. In the case of the BRIMBORIA Institute, for example, in the letter written as a response to the cancellation of their event by KW, they explicitly disregard the political potential of the Occupy Berlin, dismissingly referring to it as a 'courtyard to the children's birthday party of the poor Occupy-people.'[63] Similarly, for many of the Occupy participants I met, the exhibition was boring, or in some cases, even 'awful'. In response to the questions, 'how do you feel about the politics of the exhibition?' and 'did you enjoy the exhibition?', Nelly gave the following answer:

> Oh no, I think it is garbage. I think it is conceptually weak and politically very superficial, it is promoting a very liberal notion of politics of creating this space of inclusivity where everyone's voice can be heard, where everyone has equal rights, it is this insipid view of liberal colourised equality without any larger social vision of a good life . . . It has not been really reflexive or really ambitious. I understand that the art world is notoriously apolitical, but this is not really the kind of politics that I would like to see disseminated, that's already the politics of UN and UNESCO and so many other institutions that function under the umbrella of international organizations. There was not anything politically very radical.

This was not an isolated incident. In fact, most of the Occupiers that I talked with did not visit the rest of the exhibition. This was in complete contrast with most participating artists that I met, who seemed to share to a lesser or larger degree the political vision of Żmijewski. For instance, Marina Naprushkina spoke to me about his serious effort to produce art with particular social and political effects in the context of the mainstream art world.[64] For Naprushkina, the fact that Żmijewski was an artist curating a biennial, and not a professional curator, was particularly important for maintaining their professional collaboration, as he was able to understand better the perspective of the artist. In this regard, in light of all the negative criticism, her emotional attachment to the exhibition motivated her to write a letter of support of Żmijewski, a letter posted on the BB7 website. As she writes, defending Żmijewski's practice against the storm of negative criticism:

> The idea of the exhibition is clear and simple; one does not need to have an art history background to understand the idea of art that can influence the reality with measurable effects. It is a paradox that exactly this idea got so many enemies in the art scene. Why? Do not we believe in our work anymore? Is it naïve and, what comes with it,

> unprofessional, to believe in the effectiveness of art? . . . Is it possible, that the rejection of the Biennale for many is a result of their own disorientation? How else to explain the fact, that despite the calls for artists to take radical positions, the Biennale was dismissed as a provocation. Or another, not so rare statement, that artists that would like to do politics, should become politicians. Why cannot we stay here?[65]

Furthermore, for Naprushkina, who as she described to me could barely sustain herself from art, one priority for looking at whether the exhibition was fulfilling or not had to do with whether the artist's labour was compensated. As most exhibitions do not pay the artists, it was particularly important for her that in this case, BB7 covered production fees and included an artist fee of 1,000 euros. The same issue of labour was similarly debated by the Occupy Berlin although in different terms. To the question, 'were there any second thoughts in the movement about participating in the Biennial?', Nelly replied:

> Yes, there was a constant apprehension or fear that we might get co-opted and that we are just doing work for the curators Artur Żmijewski and Joanna Warsza and we are basically helping them promote their careers while doing free labour.

Here, it is the different social framings of the issue of 'labour' that determines the degree and perception of exploitation. In other words, while both activist and artistic labour are socially recognised as being self-fulfilling, artistic labour as a professional field is (still) expected to be paid. On the contrary, the activists neither established a professional relationship with BB7 nor expected to have work opportunities through their participation. Their presence, however, was crucial for BB7's publicity across broader social circles. Thus, while producing symbolic capital and value for the exhibition, the institution and curators, paying Occupy Berlin's participants was out of question. In this sense, a generally accepted social code that evaluates artistic and the activist labour in different terms becomes formative for the social scripts circulated around the exhibition.

The Occupy Berlin was reflective of its possible institutionalisation, displaying what Ong and Collier, following the sociologist David Stark, call 'reflexive practices' (2005: 7–9), which is to say, practices enacted by subjects that actively question their participation in institutionalised settings and act in relation to this questioning. In this sense, the process of institutionalisation here cannot be simply perceived as the incorporation and programming of a practice in order to reflect a larger institutional logic. As the practicing subjects are self-conscious about their possible 'programming', the larger institutional logic can be equally disrupted or acted upon. The institution can only try to manage these tensions as they

occur. In this sense, participants had already realised that the art institution and the social expectations around it may hinder the generation of more radical effects. As Nelly from the Autonomous University aptly puts it:

> . . . . there was also the structural fear or scepticism that whatever we were, or whatever hopes we had for the movement, to broaden it to help it grow, or to bring it in the public eye, that this could not be realised from within the gallery space. But we thought that simply by being aware of these issues we could keep them managed, like by structuring our relation with the curators and the stuff of the KW in an egalitarian, open, transparent way, that this would prevent any power dynamics and would prevent us from being co-opted. We also thought that if we keep the space free from artistic installations, like we would still have installations but they all should be overtly political, that we would avoid the problems that come with being institutionalised in an art space. Obviously these turned out to be illusory thoughts or simplistic. Our relationship with the curators and the KW stuff has always being very good, they were very supporting, they have been very encouraging of all of our work, they never demanded or imposed their own agenda on us. But as far as the in – built problems of the gallery space are concerned we had very little control there . . . Yes of course, putting ourselves at display and create this 'human zoo' effect, there was very little that we could do about that. One, because people who come in the biennial they expect to see a show, so they already enter the space as the spectator. . . . and . . . they are not that ready to join and participate, while our hope was that if we showed them how our assemblies work, how our signs work, what a wonderful feeling of solidarity and hope and transparency and the transformational capacity the assemblies create, something we have all felt, which is also a big reason why we are in the movement, we thought that also other people may feel infected with the same bug and join us.

As the Occupy Berlin did not manage to mobilise the activist energies that it hoped, it was largely perceived as a failure, or, better, as an incomplete effort, by most participants. This condition gave rise to an intense speculation that the Occupiers will eventually really occupy KW after the end of the exhibition on 1 July 2012, in order to continue the struggle and prove that they have not been really co-opted. However, the thought of really occupying the institution was perceived as unethical by some members, whose ethical code propelled them to respect the hospitality they received. For instance, to the question: 'is there any chance that the Occupy will stay in KW?', Nelly replies:

> I don't know. I couldn't tell you. I'm sure that some people would like to but again it is . . . It would make me feel so uncomfortable . . .

> After we had such a nice relation they would have to kick us out, yeah . . . and also because that's not the place for Occupy to be. If it really wants to have a place under a roof, I am sure there are other better places than the KW. But some people would probably encourage a forceful occupation not even for strategic reasons that we need a space to exist in not just outside but also indoors. But maybe some people would do it because of a juvenile, a childish sense of proving something . . . because we have often been accused that this is not an occupation, because we have been invited, so then the point at which you can revert this situation is by overstaying their welcome.

Immediately after the Biennale, Occupy Berlin ceased to exist as a collective and continued to be a loose network of individuals. Eventually, it followed the fate of the rest of the Occupy movement and gradually sunk into invisibility.

Complicating the Curatorial Strategy

The possible discordances between the art institution and the invitation to an activist collective was an issue heavily reflected upon among the members of the curatorial team. In a revealing interview I had with one of the members of BB7 organising team, Ivan described to me in detail the background processes involved in implementing the curatorial strategy. Ivan is a Polish activist and personal collaborator of Żmijewski, and both are members of the Polish left-wing organisation 'Political Critique'. Political Critique was active in BB7, organising a number of events including talks, music performances and workshops. Ivan acknowledged that his relationship with Artur was 'more personal than professional' and that, therefore, his participation in the show came as a result of Żmijewski's will to include in his team somebody he could trust, or in his words, 'somebody who could be a kind of a mirror for him in the process of the show.'[66] Indeed, Ivan seemed to be an outsider to the art world circuit. His general manners, affect and way of speaking did not really reflect contemporary art's institutionalised scripts. When I attended the first meetings of the Occupy on the ground floor of KW, I saw him very often speaking and being involved in the organisation of different actions. Thus, I was under the impression that he was an Occupy activist and not someone hired by Żmijewski to help him set up the show. Tessa, for instance, similarly confirmed when commenting on curatorial politics that 'Ivan considered himself part of the Occupy'.

Ivan's main focus was on two different but interrelated projects in the show, the practices of 'Political Critique' and the organising of the Occupy movement in Berlin. Żmijewski and Ivan invited 'Political Critique', their own organisation, to BB7 so as to mobilise political discussions within the Biennale. Apart from this inclusion, when the Arab Spring took hold, they

also thought it important to support the square movements. The most appropriate method to do this was to establish face-to-face contacts with activists. Thus, Żmijewski asked Ivan to visit Spain so as to meet and interact with activist groups. There, he was expected to ask what the Berlin Biennale can do to support the movements. Ivan describes their curatorial practice as following:

> We were travelling, we went to Spain, then to Paris, there were marches to Brussels, Joanna Warsza, the associate curator, went to the United States and the Arab countries and we were simply talking to the people. We went to Spain, I went to Plaza Del Sol and I simply started interacting with people. That's how finally we got to the point of personal, direct relationships, we got to the point where we could formulate an invitation, we asked from people with whom we met before to spread the invitation among their people in a way and this is how it started.

Part of his job then was to make the activists believe that their participation in the Biennale could really help the causes of the movement. As it was not clear-cut what an activist movement could do within an art institution for 2.5 months, he had to convince the activists:

> From the very beginning it was not clear for them what we want. It was a long process but we were trying to convince them and we were trying to be very clear that we want to support the movement, really to support the movement. So we said we have a few things. We have space in the centre of Berlin, we have quite a big visibility in the city in mass media and son on, we have some means, also financial means, and we have the two months period where around 60,000 people come about 1,000 people each day. We asked them how we can support the movement with these means . . .

However, the process of negotiating and balancing between activist and art institutional rationales was far from smooth. It was not easy, in turn, to convince the institution (that carried certain artistic agendas) to assume a more directly political role. This difficulty had also to do with the fact that the Biennale was not merely an event but an institution, involving certain stakeholders and dependencies, which was expected to continue and maintain its status as a contemporary art event after the end of the show:

> Yes, there was an element of risk. As Artur wrote in his forward, it was a very difficult process. In the very beginning of course the institution was very open but the furthest we were going more problems would appear. And. . . . yes it is another aspect: how to force

> the institution to become a political subject. And here we were not capable of proceeding. We were somehow encouraging or pushing the team somehow to openly fight and also to give their own voice about what they think about these initiatives . . . but I don't think it really worked . . . In the sense that the gallery, the people from the office they wanted to avoid any kind of open political conflict and they were rather putting themselves in a position of simply professionals who were either able or unable to organise something. In the framework of the legal issues, in the framework of what is acceptable of German society. A very typical situation also is that it should be very clear that there is something excessive in such a thing like a Biennale. Because you become a curator, you come here for two years and the institution afterwards stays. Anyway, I think that we did a lot of work here and also in terms of personal relationships, which is banal but still institutions are people, and I think we opened some possibilities and also it is somehow very important to show to the institution that the institution itself should somehow 'forget fear' (laughs), meaning that we very often project to things very bad feelings and suddenly they appear to be not that bad and often appear to be very good.

In this regard, KW thought that the invitation to the Occupy movement was an extremely risky affair for the Biennale. On the other hand, this invitation could not be cancelled, as blocking a curatorial decision is taboo across biennial cultures. Ivan states how the institution responded when the participation of the Occupy Biennale was announced to them:

> . . . the institution was totally terrified regarding the Occupy project. People from KW were expecting some sort of aggressive activists and it was very difficult to convince them that the Occupy movement and Indignados are of a different quality, they have to do with horizontality, participation, democracy and so on. For example, for long time it was difficult to convince people from the office to contact Occupy activists directly, personally, and not to exchange tons of email but simply to go and talk. We were also trying to convince people from the office that when a question, a problem or anything else appears, it is good to take part in the assembly, propose and somehow decide and agree on the fact that decisions need to be taken collectively, including all the subjects taking part in the situation.

However, as the exhibition developed, the relations between the Occupy Berlin and the institution gradually became more collaborative:

> You know that we started making assemblies with the KW team? We started one or two weeks ago. Because this is something very beautiful that people from Spain invented in a way or somehow thought that

> we should start form the place that we are. So if we want to intervene with activists from Berlin for example we should first start from KW, and then slowly go out and develop. So, on the one hand, it was not under control, but on the other if you know how the movement acts you know that it is related with a good democratic quality.

Similarly to Ivan, Żmijewski thought, as he told me towards the end of the show, that probably the institution will return to 'business as usual'. As the Biennale was approaching an end, Żmijewski and his collaborators felt unable to influence decisions conceding that there was not going to be any lasting effect on the institution through BB7. For Żmijewski, this process of losing power was exemplified in the cancellation of the BRIMBORIA institute's event that happened towards the end of *Forget Fear* and that was decided by the office without taking into account his opinion. In this respect, here, the biennial, as a recurring event, fails to radically transform the functioning of the institution in a lasting way. Indeed, after the show, the organisation of Berlin Biennale carried on in the same hierarchical way. Its institutional status as a public art institution had to be re-affirmed through more purely, artistic-oriented exhibitions in order to maintain the government funding and its art world connections (e.g., the exhibition *ONE TO ONE* that followed inviting visitors to individual encounters with art).

Inviting 'Terrorist' Organisations

Perhaps the most controversial moment in the entire Biennale was the 'New World Summit', one of its most interesting and debated projects. Apart from an installation in KW, the project also consisted of a 'summit' that took place in Sophiensaele, a venue nearby KW. During this summit, representatives of terrorist-listed organisations and three lawyers were invited to speak and give details on their cases. These organisations, which vary from communist, anarchist to nationalist were internationally considered by national and supranational entities such as EU and the USA to be a 'threat' for world peace. The project, in this sense, intended to explore the following paradox: How is it possible that in the context of democracy, where debate is supposed to be open to everyone, certain groups and populations are systematically excluded and repressed under the label of terrorism. Which legislative, discursive and ethical apparatuses are used to disqualify these people as equal citizens, and what can a more inclusive democracy look like? Jonas Staal, the initiator of this project, suggested in this regard a democratic form that he called 'fundamental democracy', democracy as a 'movement' that should constantly reflect on how successfully it implements its democratic promise rather than as an accomplished state of things. In this model, the voices of all citizens should be included in the public dialogue.

The 2-day summit took place on 4–5 May 2012 and was well-attended and generally regarded as one of the most effective projects of the Biennale. Seven speakers where invited to speak representing or affiliated with outlawed organisations, such as National Movement of the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA), the National Democratic Front of Philippines (NDFP), the Tamil Tigers, Basque Peace Process and the Kurdish Women's Movement. As the original voices of these organisations are excluded from contemporary political and media outlets, Staal, by putting forward the idea of art as a space of 'freedom' and 'autonomy' offered to these organisations a stage. The project, in this sense, was conceived as a step in the process of deepening democracy and showing what art can do in this direction. As it was planned, the speakers in the event had the opportunity to publicly express their opinions without interruptions and a lively debate with members of the audience followed.

The process of implementing this project, however, was far from smooth. A researcher and collaborator of the project, Daniel, described to me the various complications and negotiations they went through in the process of its materialisation. Among other things, the team asserted that their communication with these groups was part of an artistic project that was not trying to justify or celebrate violence. In effect, they developed the project in part with Żmijewski and Warsza, who supported the project from its conceptual stage. However, as Daniel asserted: 'We decided from the very beginning that we are going to realise it . . . [but] we were never sure until the day that it took place actually'. This uncertainty came as a result of a series of impediments that resulted from the 'sensitive' nature of the project itself. Daniel further describes how the project had to be realised in a world where it could be interpreted as 'material support to terrorist organisations' and where sponsors of the biennale might not want to be affiliated with it.

Given the sensitivity of the project as well as the media 'scandal' that Martin Zet's work had already caused, the organising team had to enter into difficult and cautious negotiations. As Daniel further explains in detail:

> Then we were still determined to make this go on. We put some pressure, saying that it would be a bit strange for the city of Berlin where the only marketing point is art and culture to be censoring one of its art events [. . .] it was a bit more subtle and at least we wanted to have a conversation with the people who took this decision [. . .] We had to balance how we were going to deal with this in the media, and what kind statements we were making and at what time we should be publishing it in the website of the Biennial, this was not about the scandal for us. This is part of a larger project and if we had created a scandal no other big institutions would want to work with

> us. So we wanted to realise it, but not as children or adolescents who create a big scandal, and the general media is not what we were interested in.

The 'taxpayers', in other words, in whose name, as the sponsors of the event, the Biennale occurs, was a key discursive terrain upon which arguments and counter-arguments were performed. The implementation of the project had to persuade the director that such a project was for the benefit of democracy, and thus for the taxpayers themselves. It is important, however, to note that this persuasion was made possible by labelling the project as 'art' rather than 'politics', as a 'non-literal' rather than 'real' event. And even more importantly, that the project was negotiated with the guarantees of a major contemporary art institution, which was publicly legitimised to frame and determine art. Staal's project then consciously transgressed the conceptual and material limits of the word 'art', by way of an engagement with clear political ideological commitments. As it is taboo to censor an art project in the context of Western liberal societies, and because such an intervention could potentially harm the reputation of the German state and the Biennale, the project was allowed to materialise. Strategically positioning itself within the context of art's autonomous realm, New World Summit displayed the possible strategic advantage of art in the context of Western liberal democracies to 'enact dissent'. Yet, the limits of this advantage are always contingent, negotiable and not always clear-cut for all participants. For instance, Żmijewski asserted to me that if the project was going to be banned by GFCF, the curators were planning to release, as a form of protest, a statement that would clearly explain the reasons for doing so. Taking place within the larger discursive arenas that effect conceptualisations of the role of public art, such negotiations manifest how the supposed 'de facto' autonomy of art-making becomes a contested terrain upon which restructurings and compromises are performed.

To conclude this chapter, in all its complicatedness and unconventionality, BB7 aligned itself with the rhetoric of contemporary social movements that spread across contemporary art landscapes and put the new biennial model in crisis. The effort to reach out to an international condition, such as the Occupy movement, was performed locally, through a particular institution, urban setting and infrastructure with their particular histories, practices and reputation; a curatorial team and the selected artists; as well by the participating audiences, media and funding bodies. The main criticism raised against the Biennale, as we saw, was marked by a rejection of the potential of projects working under the banner of art to escape both economic determination and art's aesthetic realm. This often resulted in a veiled defence of art's specificity as an aesthetic condition, or art's duty to reject functional politics. This boundary between aesthetics, as pure purposiveness, and functionality, as a means

to an end, has historically been negotiated in different ways from the avant-gardes of the nineteenth and twentieth century onwards, and retrospectively integrated in art cannons. Here, Żmijewski's gesture was perceived as pushing the boundary too far, stripping art of its raison d'être and collapsing it in the realm of day-to-day activities through the rhetoric of 'problem-solving' and 'practical effects'. In this narrative, a curious paradox is at play: as the art biennial denounces its 'unreal' or 'magic' qualities and announces its attachment to reality, in effect it is seen by critics as an 'unreal' art space. In this rather suffocating scheme, the biennial is both not real enough to showcase art, and at the same time, neutralises the potential of 'reality'. It becomes then an aesthetic container in limbo, a paralyzing gesture that withholds any transformative potential whether of 'artistic' or 'activist' qualities.

Notes

1 It is very telling that the 8th Berlin Biennale that followed totally renounced BB7's model in order for the institution to continue operating smoothly and receiving funding.
2 The journalist Peter Beaumont wrote about 'yuppie invaders' in Berlin in his article 'East Berlin fights back against the yuppy invaders' published online in *Guardian* on 16 January 2011. The article can be found at the following address: www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/jan/16/berlin-gentrification-yuppification-squat.
3 All participants throughout this study are anonymised.
4 This excerpt is taken from a post titled 'Klaus Biesenbach, Hans Ulrich Obrist and Nancy Spector in the catalogue of the 1st Berlin Biennale' found on the website of the Berlin Biennale. The full curatorial statement can be found at the following address: www.berlinbiennale.de/blog/en/allgemein-en/klaus-biesenbach-hans-ulrich-obrist-and-nancy-spector-in-the-catalogue-of-the-1st-berlin-biennale-12496.
5 This phrase is taken from the post '2nd Berlin Biennale for Contemporary Art' found on the Berlin Biennale website. The full post can be seen at the following address www.berlinbiennale.de/blog/en/1st-6th-biennale/2nd-berlin-biennale.
6 This phrase is taken from the post '3rd Berlin Biennale for Contemporary Art' found on the Berlin Biennale website. The full post can be seen at the following address: www.berlinbiennale.de/blog/en/1st-6th-biennale/3rd-berlin-biennale.
7 These quotes are taken from the catalogue of the 4th Berlin Biennale 'Of Mice and Men' from a text by the same title composed by the three curators Maurizio Catelan, Massimiliamo Gioni and Ali Subotnick (page 24–25).
8 This excerpt is taken from a post titled 'Adam Szymczyk and Elena Filipovic in the catalogue of the 5th Berlin Biennale' found on the website of the Berlin Biennale. The full curatorial statement can be found at the following address: www.berlinbiennale.de/blog/en/allgemein-en/adam-szymczyk-and-elena-filipovic-in-the-catalogue-of-the-5th-berlin-biennale-12533.
9 This last show was the target of anti-gentrification protests who accused BB6 for employing a venue in the gentrifying neighbourhood of Kreuzberg, contributing in this way to the immense rise in rents of the past years.

10 These quotes are taken from the catalogue of the 6th Berlin Biennale 'What is Waiting Out There?' from a text by the same title composed by the curator Kathrin Rhomberg (page 12).
11 This phrase is taken from a post titled 'Deutschlandhaus As Venue', found on the website of the 7th Berlin Biennale. The full curatorial statement can be found at the following address: www.berlinbiennale.de/blog/en/projects/deutschlandhaus-as-venue-22127.
12 His full manifesto of the 'applied social arts' can be found at the following address: www.krytykapolityczna.pl/English/Applied-Social-Arts/menu-id-113.html.
13 This phrase was communicated to me by a tour guide of BB7 on 3 May 2012.
14 See, for instance, the interviews in the following footnote.
15 Such things are admitted, for example, in their interview titled 'Russian art collective Voina: 'Zhlobs are in power in today's Russia' given to Annie Rutherford on 5 December 2011, for the webzine 'Café Babel' as well as in an interview of one of the Voina's members gave to an unnamed person that was published on 26 April 2012, on the website 'Free Voina' titled 'Vor: *To fuck them in a way the people can grasp, but with all the brilliance that is our wont*'. The full interviews can be found at the following addresses: www.cafebabel.co.uk/culture/article/russian-art-collective-voina-zhlobs-are-in-power-in-todays-russia.html and http://en.free-voina.org/post/21855280663.
16 The quote is taken from the interview 'Free Voina' titled 'Vor: *To fuck them in a way the people can grasp, but with all the brilliance that is our wont*'.
17 Ibid.
18 This phrase is mentioned in the post titled '7TH BERLIN BIENNALE. STATEMENT BY VOINA', found on their website 'Free Voina'. The full text can be found at the following address: http://en.free-voina.org/post/2226705 1835.
19 The quote is taken from the interview 'Free Voina' titled 'Vor: *To fuck them in a way the people can grasp, but with all the brilliance that is our wont*'.
20 All the above quotes are taken from the post titled '7TH BERLIN BIENNALE. STATEMENT BY VOINA'.
21 This excerpt is taken from the text 'Doing Things with Art' by Joanna Warsza, which was also published on the Berlin Biennale website in 2012. The text can be found at the following address: www.berlinbiennale.de/blog/en/allgemein-en/doing-things-with-art-by-joanna-warsza-27688.
22 The quote is taken by a statement of Żmijewski published in 2011 on the Berlin Biennale website titled 'Artur Żmijewski artist and curator, 7th Berlin Biennale, Berlin and Warsaw'. The full statement can be found here: www.berlin biennale.de/blog/en/comments/artur-zmijewski-2–15158.
23 Ibid.
24 Żmijewski's tone in the New Pact' brings in mind a widespread demand of the past 15 years, that of the 'basic wage', which is to say a guaranteed basic salary for everyone for life, regardless of whether they work or not. This is usually justified through the idea that post-Fordist economies heavily depend on sociality, something that turns all people to 'workers', that is, through their lifestyle choices, creativity, desire to network and share.
25 This excerpt is taken from the text 'Doing Things with Art' by Joanna Warsza published on the Berlin Biennale website in 2012. The text was also included in a newspaper that BB7 released that served as a guide for the exhibition. The

text can be found at the following address: www.berlinbiennale.de/blog/en/allgemein-en/doing-things-with-art-by-joanna-warsza-27688.

26 This excerpt, as well the ones that follow, are taken from a recorded interview I had with Nelly, an activist and member of the Autonomous University on 26 June 2012 in Berlin (the name is not her real name).

27 The participants in the garden project propagated through flyers and other material the idea of gardening and self-sustenance as a deeply political act and strategy of resistance. For example, in a catalogue publication of the Occupy Biennale, which was released after the first month of the show and cost 5 euros, we read: 'People no longer know how to grow their own food, which has resulted in an increasing disconnect with nature and seasonal produce. We are now mostly dependent on the corporate system of agricultural production, consuming industrialized goods from supermarket shelves and without any real idea of where our food actually comes from or what it really contains. Food is essential for survival, so the economic elite use this necessity to their advantage by creating communities that are largely not self-sustainable. Today we largely rely on food produced through industrialized agricultural practices, enslaving us to a system that is wasteful, over regulated and environmentally destructive. Gardening is independence and is a form of civil disobedience~ it is one of the most subversive activities in our society today.' This quote is taken from a section in the catalogue titled 'Guerilla Gardening' (page 36).

28 This excerpt, and the ones that follow, are taken from a recorded interview I had with Tessa, an activist of Occupy Berlin on 17 June 2012, in Berlin (the name is not her real name).

29 This excerpt, and the ones that follow, are taken from a recorded interview I had with Joshua, an activist of Occupy Berlin on 25 May 2012, in Berlin (the name is not his real name).

30 These phrases were heard by a participant of the assamblea in the opening of BB7.

31 As Nelly described to me, 'these things are just impossible to do, to begin with, because there is not one correct analysis of capital'.

32 In an announcement titled '7TH BERLIN BIENNALE IS MOVING TOWARDS HORIZONTALITY', the Berlin Biennale website writes: 'More than halfway into the 7th Berlin Biennale for Contemporary Art, the invited global movements challenged the hierarchical structure of the Biennale, initiating a move toward horizontality. Horizontality means de-centering power away from leadership hierarchies and making decisions through group consensus.' The full post can be found at the following address: www.berlinbiennale.de/blog/en/comments/7th-berlin-biennale-is-moving-towards-horizontality-30631.

33 This particular phrase is found in the newspaper 'P/ACT FOR ART' (p. 7). While in the newspaper, the phrase is attributed to Żmijewski, a phrase that is almost the same is attributed to Warsza in her text 'Doing Things with Art' posted on the Berlin Biennale website.

34 This phrase can be found at the Berlin Biennale website in a post called 'Key of Return probably the biggest key in the world' at the following address: www.berlinbiennale.de/blog/en/projects/key-of-return-probably-the-biggest-key-in-the-world-19705.

35 The full interview in *AlArabiya News* can be found at the following address: www.youtube.com/watch?v=OE9JD1e8c0w#t=51.

36 This phrase is taken from the video '7th Berlin Biennale: Krytyka Polityczna in Berlin' posted in YouTube at the following address: www.youtube.com/watch?v=owiopz2IDoQ.
37 This excerpt is heard in a guided tour by Warsza that I recorded on 30 June 2012.
38 This excerpt is taken from the front cover of the newspaper 'Self-Governing' that was given the audience during BB7.
39 Over-identification refers to an artistic practice that, broadly speaking, identifies with the object it aims to critique instead of approaching it from a critical distance. For an overview of the approach, see BAVO (2007) *Cultural Activism Today: The Art of Over-Identification*.
40 These quotes are taken from a post titled 'Another Aggressively Stupid Berlin Biennale 7 Provocation' posted on the website 'The Season for Treason', which was conceived as critical project against BB7. The full text can be found at the following address: http://2012istheseasonfortreason.wordpress.com/tag/gentrifizierung/.
41 This quote is taken by the interview 'A Topography of Identity, Dorota Sajewska in conversation with Artur Żmijewski' that was included in the book 'Forget Fear' (page 287).
42 In the clip, '7th Berlin Biennale: The Story of the Peace Wall' published on the official YouTube channel, such incidents can be clearly seen. This video can be found at the following address: www.youtube.com/watch?v=XZxi806Cnhk#t=295.
43 These quotes are taken by the text 'CANCELLATION OF THE EVENT BY BRIMBORIA INSTITUTE: A statement of KW Institute for Contemporary Art' that appeared on the Berlin Biennale website after the cancelation of the event. The full statement can be found at the following address: www.berlinbiennale.de/blog/en/allgemein-en/cancellation-of-the-event-by-brimboria-institute-2–31512.
44 These quotes are taken by the text 'Statement on the cancellation of the event 'An evening without Christian Worch' by Brimboria Institutet that appeared on the Berlin Biennale website after the cancelation of the event. The full statement can be found at the following address: www.berlinbiennale.de/blog/en/allgemein-en/cancellation-of-the-event-by-brimboria-institute-2–31512.
45 Ibid.
46 These quotes are taken by the text 'STATEMENT REGARDING THE CANCELLATION OF THE BRIMBORIA INSTITUTE'S EVENT' by Artur Żmijewski that appeared on the Berlin Biennale website after the cancelation of the event. The full statement can be found at the following address: www.berlinbiennale.de/blog/en/allgemein-en/statement-regarding-the-cancellation-of-the-brimboria-institutes-event-31489.
47 Interestingly, however, most of the viewers who were not initiated in the rituals of the artworld I had chatted with, apart from finding the show bizarre and even paradoxical, were for the most part positively inclined to it, perceiving it as an unusual experiment in activist politics.
48 The full text '7th Berlin Biennale' by Ana Teixeira Pinto for *Art Agenda* can be found at the following address: http://art-agenda.com/reviews/7th-berlin-biennale/.
49 Ibid.

50 The full text 'Courage, Comrades: The 7th Berlin Biennial' by Monika Szewczyk for *Afterall* can be found at the following address: www.afterall.org/online/courage-comrades-the-7th-berlin-biennial/#.U1ulY1eeiAo.
51 Ibid.
52 This quote is taken from the text 'Berek' by Żmijewski published on the website of the Berlin Biennale at the following address: www.berlinbiennale.de/blog/en/projects/berek-by-artur-zmijewski-22243.
53 The full text 'Biting the hand that feeds them: Activists turn "human zoo" into Occupy-style working group' by Christian Viveros-Fauné published for the *Art Newspaper* can found at the following address: www.theartnewspaper.com/articles/Biting-the-hand-that-feeds-them/26755.
54 The full text 'Propaganda of the Deed' by Sven Lütticken, Johannes Paul Raether and Kerstin Stakemeier, Margarita Tupitsyn, and Victor Tupitsyn for *Texte vor Kunst* can found at the following address: www.textezurkunst.de/86/propaganda-der-tat/.
55 Ibid.
56 The full text 'Propaganda of the Deed' by Sven Lütticken, Johannes Paul Raether and Kerstin Stakemeier, Margarita Tupitsyn, and Victor Tupitsyn for *Texte vor Kunst* can found at the following address: www.textezurkunst.de/86/propaganda-der-tat/
57 The full text '7th Berlin Biennale' by Christi Lange for can be found at the following address: www.frieze.com/issue/print_back/7th-berlin-biennale/.
58 The full text 'TRUST YOUR ANGST' by Rosa Perutz for the website by the same title can be found at the following address: www.frieze.com/issue/print_back/7th-berlin-biennale/.
59 The full text '7th Berlin Biennale' by Christi Lange for can be found at the following address: www.frieze.com/issue/print_back/7th-berlin-biennale/.
60 The full text 'TRUST YOUR ANGST' by Rosa Perutz for the website by the same title can be found at the following address: www.frieze.com/issue/print_back/7th-berlin-biennale/.
61 The full text 'Administered Occupation: Art and Politics at the 7th Berlin Biennale' by Olga Kopenkina for *Art Journal* can be found at the following address: http://artjournal.collegeart.org/?p=3457.
62 This argument is expressed in several of these texts discussed, but Kopeknika is the most indicative example. As she further put it: 'In fact, a contemporary art of resistance is formed inside the system of the neoliberal state. This is why the opinion that it becomes more and more difficult to draw the line between official art and a position of resistance is by no means baseless. Artists, however, continue to be attracted by aesthetics and the practice of resistance. . . . The phenomenon of "revolutionary practices" of the 1960s still appears to be an unfailing source of inspiration for new generations of artist-activists. But one has to keep in mind that cultural projects such as Emory Douglas's with the Black Panthers, or the street art of the Madame Binh Graphics Collective, emerged not only outside the art world, but also *in direct opposition to the liberal welfare state* of the 1960s. Such is not the case for contemporary art, a brainchild of the late-capitalist, neoliberal world.' The full text 'Administered Occupation: Art and Politics at the 7th Berlin Biennale' by Olga Kopenkina for *Art Journal* can be found at the following address: http://artjournal.collegeart.org/?p=3457.

63 These quotes are taken by the text 'CANCELLATION OF THE EVENT BY BRIMBORIA INSTITUTE: A statement of KW Institute for Contemporary Art' that appeared in the Berlin Biennale website after the cancelation of the event. The full statement can be found at the following address: www.berlinbiennale.de/blog/en/allgemein-en/cancellation-of-the-event-by-brimboria-institute-2-31512.

64 I conducted a recorded interview with Marina Naprushkina on 12 June 2012, in Berlin.

65 This excerpt is taken from the text 'The Taboo-breaking 7th Berlin Biennale When art does not ask questions anymore, is it still art?' by Marina Naprushkina published on the website of the Berlin Biennale. The full text can be found at the following address: www.berlinbiennale.de/blog/en/date/2012/06/26.

66 This excerpt, as well the ones that follow, are taken from a recorded interview I had with Ivan (not his real name), an activist and organiser of the Berlin Biennale on 22 May 2012, in Berlin.

6 3rd Athens Biennale

Reflective Indeterminacy, *MONODROME* and the Failure of the Nation

In contrast to BB7, the district around which the 3rd Athens Biennale (hereof AB3) was held is considered by Athenians a no-go zone. Since the mid 2000s, this district, 'Plateia Theatrou' (Theatre Square), located in the centre of Athens, came to achieve notoriety in mainstream discussions on the rise of criminality in Athens, especially the one related to drug trade, trafficking, robberies and sex work. The land value around the area, mainly populated by undocumented migrants, has lowered dramatically during the past few years. For these reasons, it is often invoked in public discourse, especially by extreme right commentators, as a spectacular indication of the effects of the migration from countries of the global South. Given the squalid conditions of the area, the mayor of Athens praised in the press conference of AB3 the curators' decision to locate it there. Such initiatives, according to the mayor Yorgos Kaminis, help revitalise what is usually referred to in mainstream debates as the 'debased historical centre of Athens'. In this sense, while the physical surroundings of the Athens and Berlin Biennale were very different, in both cases, expectations for generating economic value through a cultural event were apparent and, for some actors, predominant.

The immediate social conditions around the venue were not the only challenges this edition of the Athens Biennale had to reconcile with. Since the beginning of 2010, Greece has experienced an unprecedented economic crisis that was increasingly escalating by the time AB3 opened its gates. At the time of my research, the public disapproval against government policies and especially against the forthcoming austerity measures was enormous and as a result massive demonstrations often materialised in Athens and other Greek cities. On 22 October, the day of the opening, more than 500,000 people demonstrated in the Athens city centre against the austerity measures, where one person lost his life and serious clashes between protestors and the police occurred. This demonstration was the culmination of countless similar ones that have taken place in Greece since 2010. In other words, for AB3, the crisis, and in effect the resistances against it, not only reflected of a global discourse, but an everyday agitation manifesting in urgent ways within its local materiality.

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Happening in the context of such extreme conditions, the Biennale could not avoid commenting on political and social concerns. In its first official statement, released on 3 May 2011, AB3 accepted the idea that the biennial model is in crisis, questioning its legitimacy in ethical and affective terms, as it is, 'no longer poignant – or even moral – to simply keep making exhibitions in the way that had become the norm in pre-vious years'.[1] Wishing to differentiate from the dominant model of biennial-making, AB3, similarly to BB7, polemically declared that it wished to 'transform the biennale into a sit-in and a gathering of collectives, political organizations and citizens involved in the transformation of society, an invitation to create a political moment rather than stage a political spectacle'.[2] This statement, which was rather unique for a biennial at the time, was a reaction and anticipation of the crisis in the biennial model, suggesting that, rather than discursively attempting to construct reality art has to become a site of immediate political countermobilization.

However, despite this ambitious announcement, AB3 proved to be a rather traditional thematic show that resembled the discursive model in its most important elements. Centred around the idea that Greece has failed in social, economic and national terms, AB3 hoped to enable a stage for questioning and expanding on the nature and failures of Greek national identity. Its critical stance against the crisis, articulated through a 'soft' anti-neoliberal rhetoric, purported to enable social energies of varying individuals, media outlets and strands opposed to austerity policies. By employing the format of the discursive exhibition, AB3 strategically articulated a sort of reflective indeterminacy, that is to say a desire to reflect upon the official narrative of Greek history and its mainstream effects on the perception of Greek identity, without, however, being explicit neither on how this perception relates to the current crisis nor how AB3's framework intervenes in relation to this perception. This rhetorical device, involving the mobilization of ideas related to melancholy, failure, nostalgia and self-reflection, helped the Biennale to critically position itself within the current polarised climate and mainstream debates about the crisis without taking a clear side.

Representing in many ways a liminal biennial due to the critical urgency of the general environment in which it took place, AB3 was caught up in the web of conflicting social values that it set out to reconcile. As a result of the mass protests taking place for over one and a half years in the country there was, on the one hand, a generalised contempt against mainstream political parties and distrust against institutions cooperating with tradit ional sources of power, which were often deemed responsible for the situation. On the other hand, the biennial was according to many commentators 'broke', it had to fund itself, to maintain high-profile connections that would secure the future support of the institution and to negotiate its role as a possible vehicle for revitalizing downtrodden dis-

Figure 6.1 The Surrounding Area of the 3rd Athens Biennale.

tricts. These tensions exerted pressure on the development of curatorial and artistic tactics, approaches and strategies.

Similarly to the previous chapter, the first part here provides some general information about the Athens Biennale's structure, history and identity that helps positioning it as an institution and organisation within Greek and art international landscapes. I present AB3's curatorial strategies and the ways they came to be articulated mainly through excerpts from the press preview and personal interviews. As there is no catalogue or edited book to accompany AB3, an initial construction and elaboration of the curatorial narrative is necessary. As noted above, the attempted interventions of AB3 changed through time and, in this sense, it became clear that its modes of display were often dictated by serious material constraints. The strained social condition in Greece, in this regard, sensed as the breakdown of an era's horizon, became visible not only in the public language of AB3 and the debates around it, but also in the ways the exhibition space was arranged. The artworks, the events, the archival material of AB3 as well as the venue, an old crafts school abandoned for years, were univocally and altogether expected to reflect upon and respond to this troublesome situation.

One of the most notable differences in relation to BB7 is the amount of publicity that AB3 acquired. Contrary to BB7, AB3 was hardly commented

on by international art journals and the press and, in this respect, it mostly concerned local debates and discourses. The next section then looks at how apart from some rare exceptions, most, if not all, of the articles looking at the show in the international press were restrained to a strictly descriptive lining up of artworks, events and curatorial tactics, without in any way delving into the particularities of the biennial's curatorial or artistic language. The well-rehearsed motive of the 'country in crisis' literally framed every account of AB3, making it extremely difficult to see the show, similarly to BB7, as a usual art exhibition. In this sense, apart from informing the curatorial language, the social conditions around AB3 cultivated conceptual frameworks for interpreting the show.

The final section engages with the controversies and conflicts that arose during AB3, including the withdrawal of one of its three basic organisers for political reasons, the contentious issue of volunteerism and the lack of meaningful interaction between the Biennale and the surrounding area. Again here, the ways that certain elements of the Biennale were produced and performed within such translocal frameworks, demonstrate how its values become subject to situated encounters and acquire diversified meaning for groups, individuals or authorities.

Centralised Structure

The Athens Biennale was established in 2004 by three young Greek art professionals, the curators and artists XK and PY and the curator and art critic AZ. This Biennale was perceived as an intervention in the context of the local as well as the international art scene, attempting to bring the two in dialogue through foregrounding the city's vocabularies and artistic vibrancies. Most of the information for the Athens Biennale's past life, comes from two interviews I conducted with the organisers, one in August 2011, a few months before the opening of AB3, with PY and XK (who were also the co-curators of AB3) and one with AZ in November 2011, who decided some months in advance to retire from the show for reasons that will be discussed later. The three of them, according to PY, set up the Athens Biennale as a farce, announcing its inauguration, as he said, through 'a wrinkled flyer'.[3] As a matter of fact, according to him, the Athens Biennale commenced as an extremely fluid and precarious endeavour as 'from the beginning it was a thing where no one knew until it happened, whether it is a hoax or it was actually going to become a Biennale'. The improvisational character of the Biennale was an outcome of their attempt to approach, as both PY and XK claim, the biennial phenomenon with a 'rebellious spirit' wishing to 'hijack something that appeared to be crafted by precious materials by doing the exact opposite'. The first edition of the Biennale, however, resembled, as we shall discuss, in many ways the dominant biennial format; it was a big-budget event, attracted some international publicity and had as its main sponsor one of

the biggest banks in Europe, Deutsche Bank. In any case, XK and PY claimed that one of the reasons for setting up the Biennale was to undermine the biennial phenomenon from within, by simply adopting its title and working against its assumed prestige.

Similarly to the Berlin Biennale, as the private initiative of three individuals, Athens Biennale was perceived as an independent organization, in the sense of not being directly organised by the state or some other authority. However, in contrast to Berlin Biennale, to this day the Athens Biennale has not managed to secure stable funding, and for each edition the organising team had (and still has) to look for different kinds of sponsorship. This process makes the whole enterprise rather unstable and improvisatory. In the first two editions, however, the organization managed to obtain some generous funds. As was claimed by AZ in our interview, the difference in budget between them and the Berlin Biennale, in these first two editions, was not so significant. After Deutsche Bank helped fund the first, the next edition continued with having as its major sponsor Cosmote, a major Greek mobile phone provider.

Overall, the Biennale's funding includes different kinds of corporate sponsorships, paid in cash and in kind, grants from charitable, cultural and educational organizations and institutions, embassies, private donations (Group of Friends of the Athens Biennale), limited funding from Greek Ministry of Culture, for which they apply each year and some revenue income that comes from the entrance fee, the catalogue sales and souvenirs. As I was told, the Athens Biennale usually covers part or all of the production of new works, logistics, transport, hospitality and *per diem*, but does not offer any other financial compensation for the participation in the exhibition. Also, as there are no full-time employees in the Biennale, they have to principally rely on volunteers, who are trained to contribute to the production of each edition. The volunteers, as well as general debates on volunteering proved to be a fertile field of tension and disagreement in AB3.

Another crucial difference between the two biennials is in the ways the theme and the curator of each edition are selected. Whereas, as we saw, in Berlin Biennale there is an official international committee of trustees and previous curators who screen curatorial proposals, in the Athens Biennale the curator and the theme is hitherto chosen by the founders of the organization. As a result the whole enterprise is much more centralised. Not only are the three organisers (currently two) responsible for selecting the curators of each edition, but are most often themselves part of the curatorial team, selecting artworks and setting up events. In AB3, for instance, although in newsletters and across the international press the name of Nicolas Bourriaud appeared most prominently, the main curatorial work was carried by XK and PY.

This mixing up of roles is partly an effect of the original organisers' desire to be involved in creative and not only administrative work.[4]

As XK conceded in our interview 'no one of us was dreaming to be behind an organisation that produces cultural work . . . we were all demanding to produce ourselves the cultural work and not to support its production'. This more centralised condition, which necessarily brings about a situation in which the roles of the organiser, the participant, the curator and the artist merge and interweave, however, is partly an outcome of the Biennale's non-stable financial condition. Particularly for AB3, in which there was no definite budget to count upon, the production of the exhibition had to remain relatively flexible and adaptive to new circumstances. As a result not so many openings to outsiders could be pursued.

It is also interesting to note that in all past editions of the Athens Biennale, including the 4th that took place in 2013, there was at least one Greek member in the curatorial team.[5] This made the Athens Biennale a much more locally conditioned event than its Berlin counterpart. The peripheral status of Greece in relation to the big contemporary art centres was from the start a central aspect in the decision to set up a biennial, even with few resources. Overcoming Greece's cultural and artistic remoteness in the contemporary art circuit, however, as PY put it, demanded the invention of a particular narrative that could be used in order to address partners, capital and visitors from the art world and beyond:

> There were several myths with which we were working that we had to take as axioms. One of them was that there is no international interest about what happens in the art scene of Athens for the reason that Athens is neither a Third-World country, nor a metropolitan centre. It is something like saying Cincinnati or Minnesota. Someone who lives in the U.S.A is not interested about what is happening say in Wisconsin. This was a myth though. This thing is not valid. When we tried to decode our time so as to build the first narrative about Athens and we made the 'Destroy Athens' [i.e. the 1st Athens Biennale] – which was also prophetic as was proven with what happened even a few months later – for the first time we went out and said something that displayed an image of Greece outwards, internationally that was completely different than the usual beatified rhetoric. We saw that this was tremendously interesting.

However, always according to PY, to set up a biennial and become visible across contemporary art networks, a certain differentiation should be pursued from what already exists in such networks. The term 'differentiation', according to him,

> is a term derived from the business world . . . In the world of biennials, regardless of the fact that one may use business terms that come from marketing or anything, one has to have a different tone . . . Paying

> attention on differentiation is a condition for survival. And this is a term that we wanted to bestow on the Biennale . . .

Marketing-wise then, given also the city's marginalised status across contemporary art landscapes, the Athens Biennale had to establish something like a niche, a field of practices, discourses and vocabularies capable of arousing the interest of translocal audiences and stakeholders. The specificities of this new field of interest were principally framed as a reinterpretation of Greek official historical narratives, circumventing the usual and unproblematic identification of Athens seen through the lens of antiquity. In the first decade of 2000s, when the Athens Biennale was born, there was a generalised sense of success and euphoria prevailing in the mainstreams of Greek society. Greek identity was modernised, and in a way empowered, by becoming more European. The 2004 Olympic games and the building of big infrastructural projects such as the Athens Metro, Attica Road and Rio-Antirrio bridge, as well as various national victories, such as the Euro cup in 2004 and Eurovision in 2005, contributed to the construction of the narrative of the strong European nation with a booming economy. This new Greek national identity was based on a modernised, de-balkanised nation that even though small, could revive the 'deeds of its ancestors' in the body and soul of celebrated modern Greek athletes, pop singers and yuppie entrepreneurs. According to PY, the Biennale, founded in 2004, had to take into consideration this general atmosphere:

> [We had] to create an institution that can stand alongside a rhetoric of a cultural agenda, which says 'Live your Myth in Greece',[6] the post-Olympic era in which there is a certain euphoria or to put it differently a 'rebranding of antiquity'. In reality, we have the antiquity, which we sold for decades now, this is the only thing that we distribute as an exportable product and in these recent years there was a trend of refreshing this image of antiquity. But all this stopped there. A kind of solemnity with no mood for self-criticism, or any criticism in general I would say, self-sarcasm, any kind of mood to see who we really are. So this thing was out there when we began. We began at the same time with campaigns like 'Live your Myth'. And although foreigners may not be consumers, direct consumers, of Greek reality, they experience it through representation – it's like an advertisement for a product you are not buying, however, this does not mean that you do not know that it exists over there; it is a product that you perceive. The perception of the outside world of Greece relates to our mood for freshening up at best, as well as with a sense of pomposity and antiquity-worshiping. There was no space for criticism. But criticism cannot not exist in a country facing all these issues; issues that later came emphatically to the surface.

The translocal branding of the Athens Biennale, as embraced by the organisers, was activated through the above conceptual lines. The Athens Biennale was perceived, in this sense, as a localised manifestation, originating from and intervening within an international circuit of display and biennial forms. As PY, himself also a brand strategist, comments, this image of the Biennale,

> somehow derives from the qualities of the people who assembled it and somehow tries to leave its different stain in a puzzle, in a global network of relevant exhibitions. However, it is not that if our character is such, the Biennale will be such. No. It is the whole condition, the state of things here in Greece as well as the oversight of what is happening outside, plus the mood for differentiation.

Or, as XK notes, while there is a certain similarity with the biennial model in terms of the event's periodicity and flexibility, the model stops being copied insofar 'as our critique in an organization or an institution is very different than the critique that a person from central Europe does, as here the structures are rather more liquid and of a different style'. Similarly to other emerging biennials of the mid-1990s, and similarly to the Berlin Biennale, Athens Biennale adopted the discursive model. In contrast, however, to the Berlin Biennale, as well as to most of the other biennials that mushroomed in the past few years, Athens Biennale is nomadic, in the sense that it lacks a stable venue, having to find different spaces for each edition. As a result, the choice of the venue's physical space, history and symbolisms, in all editions so far, plays an integral and particularly significant component of the exhibition's concept and display.

The first two biennial editions can be described as exhibition-blockbusters, with relatively big-budgets, many commissioned works and a strong desire to have international appeal. The first one, titled 'Destroy Athens', took place in Technopolis, a spacious events space housed in an old gas factory in the area of Gazi, an emerging entertainment district of Athens at the time, with an abundance of newly opened bars, cafes and restaurants. Informed by debates on identity and cultural studies, the general theme of the exhibition dealt with the ways personal identity is fashioned through the perspective of others. The artistic director of the first Athens Biennale was Marieke Van Hal, later Founding Director of the Biennial Foundation and Vice-President of the International Biennial Association. Van Hal and the organisers of Athens Biennale called for the symbolic destruction of the stereotypes that have hitherto structured the identity of the city of Athens. In fact, Destroy Athens presented the city as a symbolic space, associated with stereotypical images of democracy and ancient civilization, which 'belongs to everybody', as a site of potential demolition.[7]

Faithful to the discursive model, the exhibition displayed a multi-layered nature involving the release of a booklet, titled *Suggestions for the Destruction of Athens*, a conference some months prior to the opening, the publication of an edited book based on that conference and multiple projects and events that took place during the course of the show. Despite its counter-establishment rhetoric, the Biennale was not perceived warmly by activists and social movements. Some months before its opening, the Biennale was a regular target of criticism in on-line forums, accused of attempting to capitalise on the activist energies of Athens for initiating a spectacular event funded by Deutsche Bank. The main bulk of this criticism concentrated on the ways that the Biennale was complicit with the gentrification of parts of Athens, for its connections with specific galleries and institutions and for the alleged neutralisation of radical political theory. In this sense, this biennial was already questioned for its co-operation with structures of power.

As a response to this widespread criticism, the curators drafted a reply that they circulated on the Greek cyber-sphere, insisting that the Biennale is an independent, non-profit organisation that did not maintain any relationships with particular investors, real estate, collectors or otherwise, and only wished to support art.[8] In an elaborate article circulated on-line after the completion of the Biennale (and probably the only one employing Marxist political economic and critical theory), the author and ex-Biennale collaborator Michalis Paparounis portrayed Destroy Athens as an ideological mechanism in which contemporary art blatantly and unashamedly embraces the market, espousing branding and city promotion techniques with a self-referential subversive rhetoric.[9] Through similar discussions, Athens Biennale achieved negative publicity among activist circles, a phenomenon that would only start to be relatively reversed from its third edition onwards, which, as we shall see, was far less spectacular than the first two.

The second version of Athens Biennale, titled 'Heaven', took place in Faliro Delta, a remote and uninhabited area of Athens, in facilities of the 2004 Olympic Games. Partly as a result of its remote location, Heaven was not widely debated in the public sphere, as its predecessor did, and its effects were mainly circumscribed within the boundaries of the official art world. The exhibition was similarly planned as a discursive and multi-layered contemporary art event rather than simply a show, involving, apart from the showcasing of art, actions, film screenings, performances, lectures and the publication of a catalogue. This time the curatorial trio XYZ operated as artistic directors, bringing together an eclectic mix of two Greek (Nadja Argyropoulou and Christopher Marinos) and three internationally-based curators (Diana Baldon, Chus Martínez and Cay Sophie Rabinowitz). While there was a loosely defined theme around the idea of 'heaven' as a kind of ideal and utopian condition, the five curators were invited to simultaneously curate their own shows in relation to that theme. Unlike

the previous edition, Heaven did not generate serious debates beyond the artistic scene, while it has been reviewed by a couple of art international magazines including *Frieze* and *ArtForum*.[10] In any case, it is useful to note here that the first three Biennales in the series were conceived by the organisers as parts of a trilogy. The first part had to do with the impasses of Athens as a modern urban centre, the second with the idea of Utopia and hope and the third looked at the collective dead-ends of the nation.

Squalid Encounters in MONODROME

Walter Benjamin and the Idea of Failure in the Curatorial Approach

The 3rd Athens Biennale opened its doors to the public on the 22 October 2011, the day that, as referred above, more than 500,000 people demonstrated in the centre of Athens against the austerity measures, and closed its gates on 11 December, after one government had already collapsed in Greece.[11] Diplareios School, the main venue of the Biennale, is one of the few examples of 1930's Greek modernist architecture still standing. It has seen many changes in use, operating as a school for manufacturers and craft makers, city-planning offices and a nursery school. The building, representing the obsolescence of its manufacturing sector, was chosen to illustrate the historiography of the Greek economy and its 'failures'. Already out of use for a couple of years before the opening of the Biennale, the Diplareios School was in a state of material disrepair. The graffiti on the walls, broken windows, old abandoned classrooms, dead pigeons and droppings in the windowsills that were found there were left for AB3 unmodified. This decision was part of a general process of aesthetising ruins and desolation that came partly as a result of AB3's serious budget restrictions, the extremely limited funding it received and the gloomy economic climate.

Apart from one computer company, the banners of which could be seen when entering the Biennale's space, the project was financially supported by the so-called 'Friends of the Biennale', a group of wealthy collectors who have vested interests in the promotion of the Greek contemporary art scene. As I was informed by the organising team, AB3 did not receive any state funding.[12] Thus, AB3 had a very tight budget, something that was reflected in almost every aspect of the show, from the free and voluntary participation of all workers, including the curators, to the abandonment of several pre-announced projects, including a film and a catalogue publication as well as the change of its initially announced location.[13] Most people I met during the opening of the show commented on how appropriately the building expressed such issues, and why such a 'gem' had not yet been exploited by the Greek state. This gave rise to

Figure 6.2 Diplareios, the Main Venue.

a public discourse with entrepreneurial undertones (further enhanced with other incidents as we shall see), according to which, the Biennale, as a private initiative, does the work that the state should have already done. The almost total contempt towards the state and its institutions, dominant in Greek public life at the time, expressed, albeit for different reasons, by most sides of the political spectrum, helped the Biennale to appear as an alternative private venture.

Apart from Diplareios, which hosted the main bulk of AB3's artworks and projects, the organisers used two venues in the so-called Eleftherias Park (Park of Liberty), upon which the headquarters of the *Special Interrogation* Section of the Military Police (EAT-ESA) was located during the Greek dictatorship years from 1967 to 1974. The venues included a space called 'Arts Centre', which was the closest to a traditional museum room compared with all the others, and the Eleftherios Venizelos Museum, a museum dedicated to the Greek mid-war politician by the same name. In this sense, all venues carried certain historical connotations for a Greek context, wishing to articulate historical events of modern Greek history in relation to the present condition.

The theme of AB3, articulated in more vague terms than the one of BB7 – partly as a result of the limited resources AB3 had at its disposal – engaged in a direct dialogue with the general economic and social situation

of Greece. The curators presented the localised tensions of the general atmosphere of the crisis (a structure of feeling having to do with anti-state, anti-austerity discourses and an injured national identity) through a conceptual display of art objects, archival material and physical spaces. While some months before the beginning of the show, on 30 May 2011, the biennial's statement emphasised the need for action instead of reflection, the final version of AB3 appeared to be more of a commentary on the crisis and a fragmentary renegotiation of Greek identity. Its title *MONODROME* (One-way Street) is the Greek translation of Walter Benjamin's collection of texts and aphorisms *Einbahnstraße*, written in 1928 in the context of mid-war Germany. The curators in this way tried to draw a parallel between the Athens of today and the Berlin of 1920s, and more precisely, between the economic crisis and the fearsome and unsettling social conditions that it entailed.

In this sense, the more hopeful tone, sparked in art and social movements by the emergence of the Occupy movement, was largely absent from *MONODROME*. Despite its initial action-centred statement, the invocation of a general ambiance of resignation and despair was a main difference with *Forget Fear*, which was essentially an exhibition about the celebration, faith and transformative effects of the capacity of art to act rather than reflect. *MONODROME*'s almost exclusive focus on Greece and its leading role in the development of the European debt crisis, through the showcasing of a very large number of Greek artists, was posed almost as a necessity to the curators. As they admitted on several occasions, the choice to speak specifically about Greece, rather than engage with more internationalist agendas was forcefully dictated by the dramatic events unravelling in the country. The 'local', in this sense, was a concept expressed in every manifestation of the event, whether this referred to the choice of the venue, the theme or the budget restrictions.

Let us, however, briefly look at the larger political and social spectrum in which AB3 found itself in. In November 2009, two years before the opening of the Biennale and almost a month after the election of the socialist democrat party of PASOK, Eurostat revised the Greek public deficit forecast and its total debt to GDP ratio, resulting in panic in the bond markets. In December 2009, the Greek government in an attempt to 'calm the markets', to use a commonly used phrase of the time, announced economic reforms, including the reduction of public spending, consumption costs and the trimming of the public sector. The then Prime Minister, George Papandreou, presented Greece's lending problems as a major opportunity 'to address and resolve, once and for all, deep-rooted problems that are holding the nation back'.[14] Despite the efforts of the Greek government to adhere to the neoliberal paradigm, state borrowing problems only worsened in the following months, as gradually it was becoming clear that a default on its debts could be a probable outcome. On 2 May 2010, the Eurozone members and the IMF eventually agreed to borrow

Greece the sum 110 billion Euro in order to pay its creditors. In exchange, Greece agreed to implement further harsh reforms, under the supervision of the group of lenders called 'Troika': the IMF, the European Commission and European Central Bank. The so-called 'austerity package' that was agreed to by the government and its lenders followed a classic neoliberal recipe, including the cutting of pensions and state expenditure, firing public sector workers, fast-track investments and abolition of collective bargaining. Again, this didn't manage to bring the economy back on track, and the Greek government, amidst intense public disapproval, agreed in June 2011 to a second bailout package and the implementation of new and harder austerity measures. From May to June 2011, the movement of *Aganaktismenoi* (The Indignant Ones) occupied central squares of many Greek cities demanding an end to austerity. The emergence of this movement and its impact on Greek politics were key for the establishment of a committed radicalism against Troika and the memorandum agreements. In November 2011, after the failed announcement of a referendum from the then PM George Papandreou, and while the Biennale was ongoing, the socialist government resigned and a new coalition government was formed with a non-elected appointed technocrat, Lucas Papademos, as the new Prime Minister within a largely heated atmosphere. Briefly put, shortly before, as well as during the course of AB3, a generalised climate of intense uncertainty, insecurity, anger, but also an emerging radicalism in both left- and right-wing politics dominated the face-to-face discussions and public debates in Athens. Within this framework of extreme events, AB3 decided to directly contextualise its curatorial agenda around the local, troublesome condition.

The show significantly differed from its predecessors, having fewer resources and a more explicitly political orientation. The main presupposition behind the curatorial idea was that Greece was a failed country, and as such, certain axiomatic ideas that structured its national narrative had to be questioned and reflected upon. While this preposition was justified through the work of Walter Benjamin (and thus with allusions to the Marxist theory), in reality, it perfectly coincided with the neoliberal and conservative understanding of the crisis in Greece and the EU at the time that equated a crisis of capital with deep-rooted cultural deficiencies. The engagement with Benjamin then, apart from being noticeably selective, seemed more as a way to gain the consent of domestic or international left-wing audiences. It was in this sense that AB3, as we shall see, seemed to use the apparatus of the critical theory for diverting public attention from the essentially entrepreneurial (and at times openly neoliberal) practices and discourses it produced.

Rendering the figure of Benjamin key in their attempt to rearticulate the Greek national identity, the curators suggested that this questioning should take place amidst what they called the 'ruins' of Greece. Among these ruins, Benjamin, who was labelled by AB3 as a defeated intellectual

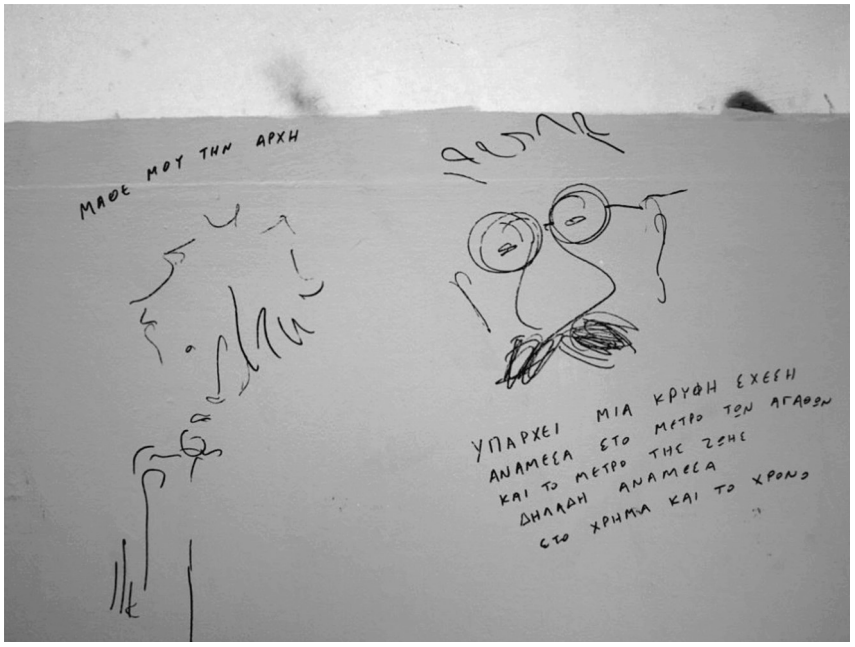

Figure 6.3 Walter Benjamin and Little Prince. The dialogue reads: Little Prince: 'Teach me the start' – Walter Benjamin: 'a secret connection exists between the measure of goods and the measure of life – which is to say, between money and time'.

for committing suicide in 1940 right after the beginning of WWII, engaged in imaginary conversations with the Little Prince, the main character of Antoine de Saint-Exupery's popular book of the same title. This imaginary dialogue materialised on several of the walls of Diplareios in the form of sketches. These sketches portrayed the Little Prince, equipped with childish innocence (as it was put by PY in the press conference), to ask slightly naive questions to the philosopher while Benjamin replies were direct quotations found in his work.

The intellectual and symbolic imprint of Nicolas Bourriaud, who along with PY and XK was one of the co-curators of *MONODROME*, was present in several of the AB3's manifestations. Bourriaud is commonly regarded as one of the key figures of the post-modern curatorial theory of the late 1990s and early 2000s, and as we saw, is renowned for his conceptualisation of relational aesthetics. His book *Relational Aesthetics*, published in 1998 in French and in 2002 in English, was ground-breaking for the development of a curatorial as well as artistic language advancing the idea that the contemporary artists within a post-modern universe should focus more on the construction of situations, that is, the relations

enabled between objects, environments and spectators, than supposedly autonomous art works. Bourriaud, already an active curator in France at the time he wrote his book, framed his approach within a typical post-Marxist framework, according to which, art in the context of a post-Soviet and globalised world could no longer focus on the grand-narratives of class, communism and the like, but on the construction of micro-situations, encounters and exchanges that could somehow challenge the economic rationality of capitalism, most usually through the active involvement of the spectator, now branded as 'participant'. The artwork, according to this approach, would be a kind of 'social interstice' (2002: 16) that opens up spaces of new sociabilities and 'momentary groupings' (17) within urban frameworks of mobility, nomadism and translation. Garnished with theoretical references to the situationists, Felix Guattari and Karl Marx, and celebrations of the recycling practices of collage, DJing and remixing, Bourriaud's account proved particularly influential for 2000's contemporary art curating, theory and practice worldwide.

Given the budget restrictions and the fact that all AB3's workers were getting no financial compensation in return, it seemed surprising that this superstar-curator agreed to provide his curatorial services to the show. PK and XK informed me that they already had a personal relationship with Bourriaud and as a person 'starting on his own', he was positively predisposed to independent initiatives with precarious support and experimental format. This established relationship as well as the critical situation in Athens, which proved challenging for Bourriaud, were enough to convince this renowned figure to participate in the curatorial team. The announcement of Bourriaud on 30 October 2010, as the co-curator of the show soon caught some attention across the international art circuit. Many art sites announced him as *the* curator of the forthcoming AB3, something that gave publicity to the event and allowed its effective promotion across art circuits. Because of his increased international visibility, Bourriaud was often presented as the sole author of the exhibition. It is telling, for instance, that even today the Wikipedia entry on Bourriaud states him as the single curator of AB3.

The show involved some of the classic relational aesthetics artists, mentioned in Bourriaud's book, such as the Jens Hennings and Liam Gillick. The inclusion of these artists strongly referenced Bourriaud's past curatorial practice. As, however, most of the art shown in the Biennale had explicitly to do with aspects of modern Greek history, issues impossible for Bourriaud to know well enough so as to seriously reflect upon, it was clear that the curatorship was disproportionally led by XK and PY. Also, it was clear that the overwhelming majority of the events, co-ordinated in Greek language or concerning Greek subjects, could not be easily conceived by Bourriaud himself. Bourriaud's most principal contribution was expected to be the direction of a feature film, planned to be shot during the days of the opening. In this film, the main character, according to

Bourriaud, would be 'a reincarnated Walter Benjamin, who will have to deal with the current Greek crisis and deal with ghosts from History'.[15] This film was meant to be one of the central points of the exhibition and was advertised in the original AB3's newsletter. Bourriaud's high expectations of the film were revealed in an interview he gave some months before the opening of AB3, where he declared that through the film he was 'trying to propose an alternative to the "big exhibition": more collective, and also more articulated', developing 'a scenario within the city', in which 'the whole biennial will be cut into pieces all over Athens'.[16] Furthermore, in the press conference of the AB3, Bourriaud announced that the exhibition will be prolonged by a complex filmic project, namely the production of a feature film based on the exhibition with footage and documents on the Greek situation today. Wishing to merge exhibitionary and cinematic practice, Bourriaud declared that the AB3 will be the first exhibition that will be a feature film, and inversely, the first feature film as an exhibition.

This grand plan was somehow forgotten in the course of the show, and up to date, there has been no official announcement about its fate either by the Biennale or by Bourriaud himself. Different participants during the exhibition speculated that the film was to be cancelled for financial reasons. The cancellation of the film due to the lack of funding as a result of the 'situation in Greece' was also confirmed to me in a personal communication I had with the French production company *Kino* in April 2014, which was initially advertised as the producer. Thus, Bourriaud's hands-on contribution to the exhibition was lesser than officially stated, and his place in the curatorial team principally functioned as a magnet for audiences, sponsors and stakeholders. Apart from his presence on the day of the press conference and the opening, Bourriaud, to my knowledge, remained largely absent through the course of the Biennale.

Despite of his seemingly secondary role, Bourriaud seemed to be the one responsible for conceptualising the curatorial rationale in the press conference, where it became evident that the link between Benjamin and the Athens in crisis was an idea mostly elaborated by him (this hypothesis is further supported by the fact that Bourriaud curated a show in 2013 in Paris called *The Angel of History*). During the press conference, Bourriaud referred to the economic crisis and the political instability in Greece both as the conceptual and material backdrops of show. The crisis was linked to Walter Benjamin's idea of 'rescue', that is to say, with the possibility of revisiting the past in order to rescue visions of the world that were defeated or left out of official historical narratives. Following Benjamin, Bourriaud imagined his role as a kind of cultural historian who would unveil, and thus rescue defeated parts of Greek history in the context of an unstable social situation. The fragments of history, or 'ruins', were the main material for this revision, and for Bourriaud, their symbolic relocation could mobilise a reversal of dominant neoliberal hierarchies.

Amidst this grand historical questioning appears the figure of the Little Prince who encounters Benjamin, materially on the walls of Diplareios as well as conceptually in the thread of the curatorial narrative. In this narrative, the Little Prince asks Benjamin to draw a sheep, a question that, as Bourriaud put it, somehow represents the conundrum in attempts to describe Capital and the economic crisis. The 'draw me a sheep' gesture was, according to him, the main visible gesture in the exhibition, expressing metonymically aspects of the larger political situation in Greece at the time. For Bourriaud, this gesture (as well as the exhibition as a whole) was meant to be a radical reading of the current affairs that should nonetheless retain its simplicity; a radicality equipped with the virtue of innocence that could render its act all the more legible. This strategy recalls Bourriaud's past curatorial work, where he regularly counterpoises ideas related to abstractions such as 'capitalism' or 'history' with the efficacy of little and localised gestures. These gestures are meant to stimulate fresh conceptual arrangements that can somehow challenge dominant relations. In addition, Bourriaud's curatorial narrative foregrounded a variation of the agonistic approach and the 'curator's perspective' having to do with the appointment of himself in the position of a progressive critical agent, whose role is to intervene and enable counter-dominant discourses. Indeed, Bourriaud identified himself a few months before the opening of the show as a 'partisan of "radical democracy" ' in the way, 'Chantal Mouffe puts it'.[17] Putting this theory into practice, Bourriaud, via Walter Benjamin, announced himself as taking up the historian's militant task to rescue fragments of the past that remain obscured in official historical narratives. While referencing a politically charged text such as the *Ten Theses on the Philosophy of History*, however, Bourriaud avoided commenting on how central ideas in Benjamin's conception of history, such as notions of class struggle and the tradition of the oppressed, converse with his narrative. One was led to wonder who are defined as the oppressed in Bourriaud's account regarding Athens and how do these oppressed relate to the exhibition in any possible way?[18] One could get the sense that references to the notion of the oppressed could trigger uneasy and unwanted questions regarding the Biennale's role in Athens and its presumed middle-class aesthetics.

A likewise narrative, similarly decorated with some grandiose notions and statements was expressed by PY. In his talk in the press conference, PY attempted to historicise AB3 in the context of Athens Biennale's past editions, assigning, even more dramatically than Bourriaud, a privileged position to the curators, and creators in general, whom he compared to 'prophets'. PK proclaimed that in 2007, when the exhibition Destroy Athens was organised, they (together with XK & AZ) could sense the high tension that was growing in the Athens and what was about to happen (i.e., the December 2008 riots). Curators, and generally creators, according to PY's account, have the capacity to sense aspects of the future, they

possess a certain premonition concerning future events. Despite this premonition, the creators of MONODROME stated via PY that they were unable to untangle the context of the serious events taking place in Athens; their prophetic capacity was halted by the intensity of the crisis. For PY, during such emergency situations, art can only struggle to understand the acceleration of history, and it may eventually do so only at some point in the future. It was along these lines that PY announced that 'this is not exactly a biennial', perceiving failure to be everywhere even within the show and institution itself.

By means of the idea of failure, the exhibition became a self-proclaimed allegory of the history of modern Greece. The building, for instance, what the curators termed as the 'Greek Bauhaus', carried the legacy of an abandoned arts and crafts school in a country that, according to them, failed to be an industrial country. This omnipresent failure was also contextualised within the current socio-political climate in Athens and that of mid-war Berlin. Continuing his talk in the press conference, PY compared contemporary Greece to the pre-Nazi Germany, as both countries suffered from a serious economic crisis and in both societies racist political discourses grew as a result of it. For PY, insofar as in the mid-war era, the financial crisis led to totalitarian ideas, this era was the show's tone of voice. The inclusion of Benjamin then could not only be contextualised in theoretical terms, but also through his actual lifetime experience; a defeated intellectual, a left-wing Jew, that was prosecuted and committed suicide in the borders of Spain. Seemingly identifying with the tragic fate of Benjamin, PY proposed that intellectuals, including artists, are now all defeated in the context of Greece.

The idea to perceive everything, from Greece to the Biennale itself, as failed and defeated could save the organisers from a number of troubles. As the biennial incapacitated itself in advance, potentially problematic areas, such as its reliance on unpaid labour or its problematic role in a highly charged neighbourhood (as we shall see below), could be more easily encountered by passing as natural causes of this self-proclaimed incapacity. Both the (deradicalised) inclusion of Benjamin and the spectularisation of 'failure' in the AB3's narrative served as a shield protecting the biennial from external left-wing criticism while making it appealing to liberal commentators who would see the crisis as a result of national pathologies. Despite then the growing anti-neoliberal and anti-austerity climate prevailing in the streets of Athens, *MONODROME* compared with *Forget Fear* was less activist and less open to social movements (although it borrowed and used some of their language and iconography in the framework of archival display). The rather exclusive and middle-class socially engaged community formed within its premises seemed to encapsulate the typical ideological affinities of biennial activism; the subtextual territorialisation of entrepreneurial value-systems blended with a touch of political radicalism.

Artworks: Reflective Indeterminacy

Over 100 participating artists took part in *MONODROME*. The Diplareios main venue hosted the majority of these works that were exhibited inside the building, from the basement to the ground floor and its three upper floors. At times, the navigation in the space purposefully recalled a maze, with arrows pointing to hidden spots and semi-ruined rooms and spaces. Many of the works displayed were not artworks in the strict sense, which is to say works crafted by named, professional artists with the purpose to appear in an art exhibition, but archival material that had been collected and repurposed so as to fit the theme of the show, as well as 'environments' found in the interior of the Diplareios building. Again, in this respect, *MONODROME* did not align itself so much with the objectives of the social movements, activism and social change, creating rather a space of representation, interpretation and reflection on the crisis, its causes and effects.

Many parts of the building, for instance, in a state of ruin due to a socio-natural process of abandonment and decay, were framed in the context of the curatorial statement and approached so as to point to the larger ideas of abandonment and decay prevalent in Greek society. Within the long-time sealed-off building, these environments exist with little or no 'creative' human intervention. The several dead pigeons, for instance, that were purposefully left lying on the floor during the exhibition, capped by special glass bowls, were found when the long sealed-off venue was opened by the curators. On the one hand, these dead pigeons acted as a reminder that the Greek state left such an impressive building to decay, certifying, therefore, that 'Athens is in crisis'. On the other hand, by evoking the state of death as an index of the negative social condition, *MONODROME* called for a reflection upon the crisis. Similar feelings were induced on other occasions, such as the various graffitied slogans that existed on the walls and other parts of Diplareios. These were again left untouched both as a historical 'trace', something that has taken place in past, and as a reminder of the present desertion that could possibly bring about some future renewal. It is worth remembering here that the decision to leave such traces, pointing to a state of ruination, was largely an effect of the budget constraints rather than merely of aesthetic concerns.

The idea of performing the archive, the practice of re-contextualising historical documents in the present in order to facilitate the enabling of differentiated meanings, was predominant in *MONODROME*. An array of heterogeneous found objects was made to be expressive of the general situation of the crisis, which was a determining signifier of all the artefacts that appeared within AB3. The amount and diversity of the artefacts put on display by the curators shows their enhanced desire for artistic intervention, who rather than merely selecting works, displayed their own. Among such documents one could find casted busts representing ancient

Figure 6.4 A 'Squalid Environment' inside Diplareios.

Greek figures placed alongside TV screens showing recent Greek victories in sports competitions, as well as scattered debris of broken cast sculptures representing figures from ancient Greek history that were found in a cast workshop and moved to one of the exhibition rooms. These curatorial placements, referencing the ways that Greek antiquity has contributed to the constitution of modern Greek identity, wished to draw connections between the nationalistic rhetoric of the Greek state and the current economic crisis.

The desire to highlight this connection (between the economic crisis and a national identity based on antiquity), often veered toward the rhetoric of nation-branding (PY as we said was also a brand strategist), according to which Greece has failed because it has not communicated the right image. This was represented, for example, in Greek touristic posters of the 1960s and 1970s that mixed antique forms with images of Greek island landscapes that were framed by the curators as kitsch.[19] Other found objects, included furniture samples constructed in Diplareios when the building used to be a craft school, expressed a sense of appreciation and nostalgia for the long-gone Greek manufacturing sector. In this sense, and despite the curatorial emphasis on understanding the crisis as related to global economy, one of the main statements of *MONODROME* was that there is a strong linkage between Greek national identity and economic failure.

Figure 6.5 Ruins. Top left: Slogans on the walls and on a blackboard. Top right: Dead pigeons (Courtesy Spyros Staveris). Bottom left: Busts representing ancient Greek figures placed alongside TV screens. Bottom right: scattered debris of broken cast sculptures representing ancient figures).

The tendency to foreground elements of Greek culture, popular and otherwise, and arrange them among physical and symbolic ruins, e.g. the ruins of Diplareios, the manufacturing sector, ancient ruins or the ruined economy, was also reflected in the selection of other works, initially not created to appear within the gallery circuit. For instance, on the top floor of the exhibition, the curators included the documents of a project made by the architect Christos Papoulias twenty years ago as response to the architectural competition organised by the Greek state for the materialisation of the New Acropolis Museum. In this unrealised project, Papoulias argued against the creation of a tourist-driven museum that would intervene in the area and make claims to 'stolen' antiquities, suggesting instead the development of a cryptic, difficult-to-access and invisible cave within the bowels of the rock of Acropolis. This will to highlight how claims to antiquity became organising principles of modern Greek identity and its value systems, was also evident in works, such as the 1982 film, 'The Bleeding Statues' by the Greek director Tony Lyckouresis. This film starts with the depiction of celebrations associated with the opening of an Archaeological Museum in a small Greek town. Three juvenile delinquents

who escape from a nearby reform school find refuge inside this museum after being chased by the police. When they realise that the archaeological artefacts displayed in the museum are enormously valuable they decide to take the statues hostage. In this regard, the film purports to expose the dominant hierarchies of the modern Greek culture and the key role antiquities play in its constitution.

AB3's references to Greek social and political life, however, did not only engage with official discourses concerning classical antiquity, but also with a set of different periods and histories. Among them, for instance, we find a series of comic strips from the late nineteenth century satirical Greek magazine called *New Acropolis* that sarcastically account for a similar period of bankruptcy in the history of the Greek nation-state. In another example, a Vlachian shepherd's hut, part of the durational project 'Carnival Pause' by the artist Nikos Charalambidis, was placed on the ground floor of AB3, intended to serve as a material index of a past era related to Greek minority cultures. There were other, more recent and direct references to Greek history, including the documentary film 'Songs of Fire' by the filmmaker Nikos Koundouros, which was filmed immediately after the fall of the Greek military junta (1967–1974). This iconic film mainly focuses on two concerts held by Greek left-wing composers, whose songs were illegal during the junta period, documenting the celebrations of the students and the youth during the restoration of democracy. The post-junta period in Greece, known as *metapolitefsi* (a word translated as 'regime change'), is associated with the ascension of the social democratic government of PASOK to power[20] and the incorporation and diffusion of left-wing elements in the state apparatus that had remained violently supressed during the previous decades. In the light of the economic crisis, however, the *metapolitefsi* era was seen by liberals and resistant movements alike, as a corrupted regime that through its excessive borrowing led the country to bankruptcy. *MONODROME* in this sense repurposed the film, re-contextualising a 'heroic' moment of the Greek democratic and left-wing tradition and its cultural forms within a strained climate of historical questioning and restructuring.[21]

Right beside this film, on the first floor of Diplareios, the curators hung on the wall a placard they randomly found somewhere in Athens, that read: 'Wake Up Banana Republic!' This piece was one of the few directly indexing the anti-austerity protests and the *Aganaktismenoi* movement. However, this piece again, functioned more as a document of a certain era, a material trace that pointed to an emergent structure of feeling in Greek society, rather than a call to action, pro or against the movement. Similarly, the inclusion of the work of the Greek photographer Spyros Staveris, who in a slideshow chronicled the culture developed around *Aganaktismenoi* in Syntagma square, served as a photo-journalistic document of visualising resistant cultures.[22] Perhaps the only work in the exhibition that took a clear position (in fact a critical one) in relation to

Figure 6.6 'Wake-Up Banana Republic'.

the protest culture expressed by the *Aganaktismenoi* movement was the short film 'Threnodies: Reflections on the Merchant, the Geographer and the Snake in Antoine de Saint Exupery's "Little Prince' by the artistic duo *Kavecs*. In this film, *Kavecs* developed a multi-layered symbolic language of references to Josef Beuys, Walter Benjamin and anti-Semitic Greek popular songs to warn against what they saw as the messianic and ethno-populist elements of the resistant movement of *Aganaktismenoi*.

The Diplareios School also provided the backdrop for some few site-specific works. An exemplary work of AB3 approach, attracting some relative visibility, was an installation called 'Photocopies' by the Greek artist Rena Papaspyrou. Papaspyrou copied and photocopied onto small paper slips, some telephone numbers of unidentified people that she randomly found on the venue's wall. The numbers were put there years before the opening of the show probably by office workers who used to work there. This installation was thus meant to foreground the building's former use as office (prior to its conversion to an art venue), questioning the boundaries between the private and the public through the bureaucracy of the public sector. Something similar was attempted by the artistic group 'Under Construction' that placed old, wobbly office desks in one of the Diplareios' rooms, invoking images of state bureaucracy in relation to a symbolic or forthcoming collapse.

It is worth noting that relatively few of the displayed artefacts were commissioned or created by artists in response to the curatorial concepts. Several displays were just ordinary objects, elevated to documents or archives of artistic merit by the curators themselves.[23] This kind of 'aesthetic journalism', as the theorist Alfredo Cramerotti would put it (2009), was an effect of the tight budget that empowered the curatorial authority to select and nominate an unusually large amount of objects as worthy of aesthetic appreciation. Furthermore, the selection of these works, which along with similar others made up more than half of the displays in AB3, was chosen solely by the Greek curators (XY). Not only would it have been impossible for Bourriaud to have such an advanced knowledge of Greek politics and history, but nowhere in the exhibition was his name mentioned in connection to these works. In addition, the rather limited desire to communicate *MONODROME* to an international audience was enhanced by the absence of any sort of interpretative material that could possibly facilitate their decoding for non-Greek visitors. In this sense, the budget restrictions came to affect the cosmopolitanism of the biennial event and its circulation across contemporary art circuits.[24] To be fair, there were quite a few international artists participating in the exhibition. The great majority of these works, however, had little to do with the Greek crisis and its relation to national identity. In fact, most of them seemed to have little to do with *MONODROME*'s curatorial statement in the first place, seeming to be mainly included for raising the cosmopolitan profile of the show.

One of the international participations was titled 'Inside Now, we Walked into a Room with Coca-Cola Coloured Walls' by Liam Gillick, a canonical relational aesthetics work from a celebrated relational aesthetics artist.[25] For the work, which was first conceived in 1998, Gillick instructed the assistants and volunteers of *MONODROME* to draw stripes with paint on one of the exhibition's walls. The rules instructed that the stripes be in the hue of Coca-Cola colours and that the executors should not have consumed the beverage for the past 48 hours. The work was performed by exhibition volunteers thirteen years after its original conception in a different context than that originally produced. Potentially it can be reproduced in a similar manner in almost any time and space coordinate provided that there is a wall, paint and a loosely defined social group to perform it. The above process of production makes the piece interesting in relation to debates having to do with labour, value, authenticity and copyright in the realm of contemporary art but can hardly justify its inclusion in an exhibition that is framed in the context of the Greek economic crisis, the revisiting of History and 'rescue' of past fragments.[26]

Another internationally acclaimed artist taking part in the exhibition was the Australian artist Tracey Moffat, well-known for her socially engaged practice. In *MONODROME* the curators chose to show some excerpts from Moffat's 2001 photographic series 'Fourth', which focuses on the depiction of Olympic Games athletes taking the fourth position

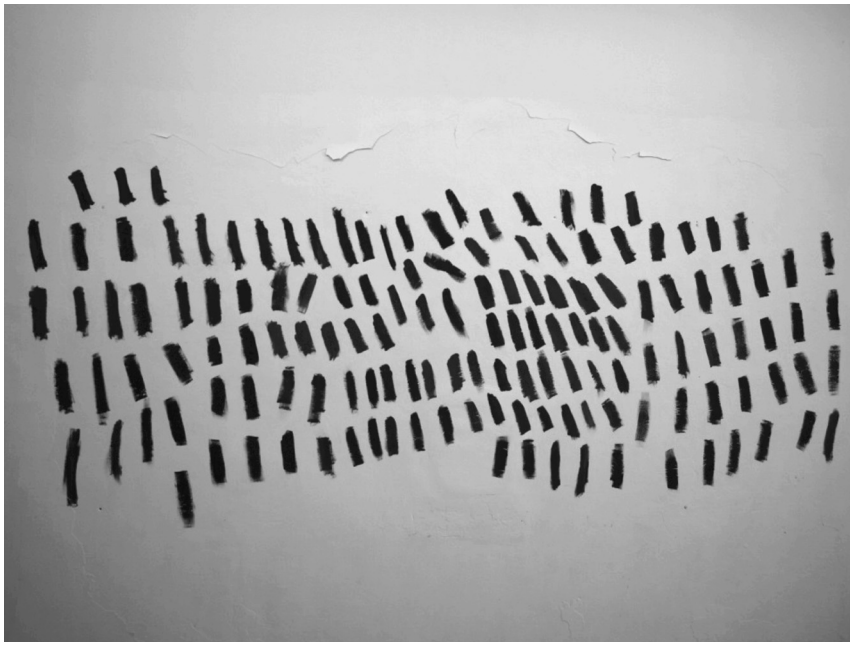

Figure 6.7 'Inside Now, We Walked into a Room with Coca-Cola Coloured Walls' by Gillick.

and thus did not winning a medal. This series seemed to relate to the exhibition's theme through the idea of failure, since both the athletes and country of Greece have failed to achieve their aims, a medal in the first case and economic prosperity in the second. However, this interpretation can be invoked only if one accepts the naïve, if not entirely problematic, identification of an individual athlete competing in the Olympics with a nation-state running in the context of geopolitics and world economy.[27] The selection of this work again, seemed to have less to do with its associations to the subject matter than with raising the biennial's international profile. A similar dissonance was invoked with the inclusion of the 1994 work 'Turkish Jokes' by the artist Jens Haaning. For this work Haaning, another widely acclaimed relational artist, recorded jokes in Turkish language and then played them back through a loudspeaker in an Oslo central square. Haaning wished to comment on the fractured character of national space in the rise of multi-national societies, as well as to create a temporal community of the Turkish-speaking citizens of Oslo. Similarly to the cases above, this work could be understood as relevant in an extremely loose way in relation to the stated aims of *MONODROME*. The above cases manifest how within *MONODROME* two different exhibitions co-existed, a national and an international one, with little or no relation to each other.

Projects and Events

Apart from the several lectures, conferences and performances organised by the curators, *MONODROME* also included two permanent projects in its premises with an almost daily presence in the space. These projects retained some relative autonomy from the curatorial team and were crucial for turning the Biennale to a more inclusive space, in the sense that their participants were not always affiliated with the art world.[28] The first of these projects was called 'We Never Closed', set up by the collective by the same name and located in a room of the first floor of Diplareios. The title 'We Never Closed' referred to the motto of the Windmill Theatre in London, which during the WWII remained open despite the war. In this sense, the project, by drawing a connection between two states of emergency, the economic crisis in Greece and London of the WWII, wished to foreground the need to keep the theatrical stage open under emergency conditions. The stage of We Never Closed hosted tens of works in the course of *MONODROME*, in their overwhelming majority by Greek artists, varying from stand-up comedies and theatrical pieces to lecture-performances. Operating by loose criteria of selection, We Never Closed attempted to create an inclusive space, where scholars, artists and performers would have the opportunity to share their work and attract some visibility.

The other permanent project was titled 'World of Mouth' and was organised by the curatorial and artistic trio of KERNEL. World of Mouth was essentially a show within a show, as KERNEL curated a mini-exhibition of five different projects in which they invited artists and art collectives to take part. The project, consisting of a combination of installations, live performances, presentations and actions, explored the ways in which a new oral culture, born through the network age, could enable modes of cultural and social action.

The members of KERNEL (Pegy Zali, Petros Moris and Theodoros Giannakis) referred in a personal talk how they tried from the beginning to be cautious and reflective on their participation in AB3. While not wholeheartedly approving the curatorial tactic, they participated in *MONODROME* to make their work known to wider audiences and possible transform the discourse of AB3 from within. This idea of occupying the institution, rather than opting-out, related to a performed criticality and the smuggling of radical ideas, was constantly evoked during my research so as to justify participation in these shows. Among others, the Athens Biennale organisers claimed that they participated in the biennial circuit so to undermine it from within and Żmijewski participated in BB7 so as to shift institutional power balance. From the five projects presented in the World of Mouth, the project that mostly performed this idea of internal subversion, was the 'Public School of Athens'. This project operated for the whole duration of the exhibition and shared some of the ethos

of the Autonomous University as described in the previous chapter. The project was part of the 'Public School', a self-organised school founded in 2007 in Los Angeles by a group of artists and architects, whose function is to materialise series of classes on philosophical, critical and socially transformative issues. There are no financial transactions related with the school, no curriculum and no degrees awarded, while the main idea behind it is the open distribution of knowledge and experimentation with co-operative methods of learning beyond official channels. The Public School essentially operates through a web-forum, where anyone can propose a course which, if there is a demand, can be actualised by those who run the school. KERNEL contacted the founders of the Public School and suggested to include a local variation as part of the World of Mouth. The idea was that during AB3 possible tutors would suggest different classes to KERNEL that would be hosted in the ground floor of Diplareios.

Despite some formal similarities with the Autonomous University, the Public School, a local manifestation of an international practice, as presented in AB3, was much more centralised, in the sense that it was set-up by a closed group of (three) people who were in charge of selecting the classes. In this sense, it also mainly addressed individuals already familiar with the rituals of the art system, as the organisers were named artists and not an activist anonymous collective. Another difference was that in the Autonomous University, the organising team was mainly responsible for inviting speakers, whereas in the Public School of Athens it was the participants who proposed classes. In any case, the Public School managed to enable certain discussions that were not necessarily bound to the art world and its publics, as the subjects of the thematic classes varied from alternative exchange systems to open source architectures and currencies.

There, among several others, an interesting for our discussion class was one organised by the economist and philosopher GP. The course, delivered in Greek language and called 'Alternative Exchange Systems and Initiatives of Social Economy', aimed to introduce and possibly actualise models of social economy based on alternative currencies (Local Exchange Trading Systems – LETS). Examples of such models were explored both as possible viable alternatives for locally distributing goods and services as well as political initiatives standing against the logic of pure commercial exchange. The circle of four seminars was well-attended, and by being framed within the mobilising of action in the context of the current economic model, raised debates regarding the feasibility of such attempts. In a private talk, GP, who at the time was reading for a PhD in economics and psychoanalysis, explained how for him the art circuit, and in extension the biennial, provided a shelter for hosting both his work and political aspirations:

> In the academic context I usually find it hard to present, just to get some feedback. For me it is a little difficult in traditional academic

Figure 6.8 'The Café of Monodrome'. This was also the place where the Public School held its classes.

> institutions, because the subject that I work in, the issues I use and the techniques or methodologies, if you want, that I employ are not so 'scientific,' in the strict sense, especially since I left economics and started being more into cultural studies. And I never liked being in a very specific community, anyway, with which to share the same research paradigm, trying to wrestle with the same questions, and having a little portion of this field. This I did not like from the beginning and now I found this resort to art . . . And anyway the use of theory cannot touch the affective and desiring aspects of the subject. Many people who would earlier be preoccupied with politics in the context of social movements, now find resort to artistic spaces, and not only as art producers but also as theory producers.[29]

The above account points to how the art biennial becomes a desirable alternative outlet for the circulation of both scholarly and activist production, as a space that allows, on the one hand, freer circulation of forms of knowledge other than the academia, and on the other, aesthetic forms of engagement not regularly met in traditional activist politics. The seminar of GP displayed, in this sense, a conscious desire to escape from more traditional systems of knowledge and action. AB3, in this

regard, through its experimental format became a more inclusive space, enabling the discourse of social movements and resistant cultures. The 'extitution', which is to say the formless outside that institutions try to domesticate so as to expand their activity, may consist in fact of an already formed desire that comes to organically assume a place within the institutional structure.

Other seminars in the Public School shared a similar interdisciplinary character, as the art platform was becoming the means, or often the excuse, for the circulation of different types of knowledge with a socially interventionist character. Such examples include the seminar given by Ben Vickers, member of the London-based collective Luck PDF, on 27 October titled 'A Very Brief Introduction to State Management Failure' which dealt with the question of alternative management systems, as well as that of a member of the collective Phrixos, titled 'Poster Engineering: A Brief Introduction to the Propaganda Valves', that examined the visualscape of Athens in relation to the iconography of street posters.

While the above lectures in the Public School touched on issues related to the commons and the means of production, in most of the projects and events organised by the curatorial team such references were largely absent. This omission was in stark contrast to the fourth edition of the Athens Biennale, titled *AGORA* that took place from October to December 2013. In *AGORA*, which was organised collectively by group of more than 40 curators, theorists and artists, an attempt that already touched upon questions of authorship and forms of production, such references were central to the development of the exhibition. Indicatively, apart from the gesture of selecting the former stock market building as a venue, a direct reference to a form of production now in crisis, the catalogue of *AGORA* included an interview by Daniel Spaulding on art and the value-form, plus texts by typical Marxist and activist writers on contemporary art such as, among others, Brian Holmes, John Roberts, Dave Beech and Nato Thompson. While *AGORA* did not reach the actionism and immediacy of *Forget Fear*, it was clearly influenced by the vocabularies of the Occupy movement in a way that *MONODROME* was not. *MONODROME* started in a rather depressive political climate in Greece. Yet by 2013 new hopes for a broad left-wing movement were ascending. As we shall see, when the Occupy movement gained wide publicity in the USA, globally as well as in Greece, the limitations of *MONODROME* to involve such activist voices became obvious.

Perhaps the closest bond created between *MONODROME* and the language and actions of the social movements of the time came rather inadvertently through an incident that gained widespread publicity shortly after the opening of the Biennale. While *MONODROME*'s TV spot, directed by the filmmaker Giorgos Zois, was scheduled to be screened on Greek State television (ERT) it was eventually turned-down. The spot was a 25 second clip that staged short stereotypical scenes from the everyday

reality in Athens that ranged from a soup kitchen to an attack against a special force policeman with red paint. The official explanation of ERT for its decision not to screen the spot was not officially announced but explained verbally to the organisers of the Biennale. The reason was that the spot made calls to violence, especially through a short scene in which a young man throws a Molotov bomb in front of a neo-classical building. Images of protestors throwing Molotov bombs against the police or government buildings were very common in Greece at the time, being often the main image of Greece communicated internationally. The state television, however, considered this image inappropriate. Later ERT announced that the 'legal framework does not permit, among others, the transmission of messages that include elements of violence or encourage behaviours that can harm health and safety or insult human dignity'.[30] This was widely perceived as an act of censorship and as a reaction, numerous blogs, mainly with a liberal and left-wing orientation, embedded the video on their pages. The spot gained hundreds of thousands of views, reaching an audience that the Biennale could have never imagined. In turn, the Biennale made an official statement, saying that Zois' images 'born out of everyday iconography, are not provocative, and certainly do not insult human dignity, freedom or even public order any more than the countless news reports and the majority of TV shows that are screened daily by all TV stations'.[31] By being regularly referred to in the press as the Biennale's censored or prohibited spot, it offered *MONODROME*, and as an extension the Athens Biennale as an institution, the symbolic capital of an anti-establishment endeavour whose actions are repressed by a repressive and corrupt state.

For instance, among other liberal and left-wing newspapers, the official newspaper of the (then) Radical Left Party of Syriza, that rose to power in Greece in 2015, published on October 26 a short article in its webpage titled 'ERT censors a film for Athens Biennale!'. In this article the newspaper ironically comments that the Greek public broadcasting channel, addressing it as the 'big sponsor' of the Biennale, 'decided to censor . . . [the spot] so as to 'protect' the viewers.' Furthermore, the incident gained such widespread publicity that a Syriza MP, Dimitris Papadimoulis, brought it to the parliament, where he questioned the Minister of State about the reason that 'an advertising spot designed for an artistic event censored, through vulnerable legal pretexts?' and why was 'the government annoyed by the visualization of the current situation.'[32] In these ways, the Athens Biennale partially repaired its broken image among left-wing and activist circles. Later in this chapter we shall see how the ambivalences and tensions between art and politics in the context of the crisis, led to the withdrawal from the Biennale of one of its three organisers, AZ, and how this also helped the Biennale to gain some symbolic currency as a potentially resistant endeavour.

Reception from the Press

Apart from the above incident that hit the news, the Biennale did not spark any other significant debates in the press, or at least it did not do so for its content. In contrast to *Forget Fear*, which sparked controversy and awkwardness in the art world and beyond, *MONODROME* was received in rather positive terms both from the Greek as well as the international press. Despite Bourriaud's participation in the curatorial team, however, the publicity that the show received in the international press was not anywhere close to that of BB7. Short reviews written about the exhibition appeared in the international press, and in particular in the *ArtForum*, *Frieze* and *Art Monthly*, explicitly framing the exhibition within the context of the harsh economic conditions in Greece. In fact, it is not an exaggeration to claim that every single one of these reviews of the exhibition, plus most of the others,[33] with very few diversions, brought forth the following schema of interpretation: 'Greece is in a huge economic crisis and as a result the funds for art are scarce. Surprisingly enough, the curators of AB3 managed to organise a very special show despite the budget constraints and general turbulence.' Furthermore, all reviews shared an admiration for the building, hailing its significance for emphasising the harsh economic reality. This shows how the crisis was not only an overdetermining factor for materialising the exhibition, in the sense of dictating some curatorial choices, but also for its reception, with all reviewers describing it through its perspective. The interpretation of the show through the lens of the crisis came about partly as a result of the insistence of the curators to frame the show in these terms. Here, the general financial conditions, or their scarcity, assemble the 'contemporary', the background against which the event can be conceptualized as a critical-aesthetic endeavor.

Let us look, however, a little closer how *MONODROME* was internationally debated. In her short article, called 'Crisis Management' the *ARTFORUM* reporter Cathryn Drake asserts that the events leading up to *MONODROME*, such as the riots in Greece and the Arab Spring, brought forth 'biblical allusions',[34] in which the exhibition should respond. Primarily stressing the shoestring budget of the event, the demonstrations and strikes, including that her 'flight from London was delayed by a day' and Bourriaud's by three, Drake saw that that is it was 'something of a miracle that the exhibition even happened'. The curatorial approach or the works themselves in her account were secondary, and, when discussed, they were largely subordinated to the context set by the economic conditions. For instance, Drake notes in her review that 'neither the artists nor the curators are being paid for their work' and that 'day-to-day running of the biennale is managed by volunteers'. Quoting Bourriaud, she added that the budget for the whole exhibition was 'basically equivalent to the salary of a curator from Montmartre'. This insistence on the stark economic climate, and its elevation to an axiomatic

standard against which the exhibition is comprehended was shared by most other reviews. For example, in her article simply titled 3rd 'Athens Biennale' in *Frieze*, Despina Zefkili begins by noting how *MONODROME*, 'was produced in a state of emergency: with no private sponsors or state support', only through the contribution of 'a large group of volunteers, including the biennial's curators'.[35] Zefkili continues by stating that the show took place in the 'dodgy downtown area of Plateia Theatrou, a hang-out for prostitutes and drug dealers'. The description of the surrounding area as one of destitution matches with that of most other reviews. In another review for the website 'PressEurop', simply titled 'Athens Biennale, the Crisis as Art', Karin Olsson points out how Monodrome 'is contiguous with urban destitution to the point where the exhibition is perhaps, of all the shows I have visited, the one that is most in tune with its era, and the one that most reflects a sense of urgency'.[36] Here she describes the borderline situation:

> Hundreds of Athenians huddling together against the autumnal cold while waiting for their turn in the soup kitchen. I stand there observing this poverty probably a bit longer than someone who is well brought-up, until a man hurling abuse indicates that I should get lost. The Biennale has been set up in a symbolic location: an abandoned school in one of the city's must rundown neighbourhoods. It is an imposing 1930s building that has been left to go to seed. Paint is peeling off the walls, which are still covered with graffiti scrawled by students.

The art historian Anna Deuzeuze similarly refers extensively on *MONO-DROME*'s crisis-driven situation. While Deuzeuze comments on some aspects of the works exhibited, such as that 'everywhere we turn ancient history seems inescapable' (Deuzeuze, 2011: 29), she also performs a reading determined by the idea that the Biennale takes place in a state of emergency. Deuzeuze also adds some of her personal experience as a speaker in the organisation:

> The privately funded Athens exhibition, for its part the last instalment in a trilogy started in 2007, offers a lesson in how to put on a biennale on a shoestring: choose very few venues, use found objects and archival documents creatively, do not publish a catalogue, rely almost entirely on volunteers and gifts in kind, and focus on a programme of performances and talks, to be arranged as you go along (I was invited to give a lecture at less than four weeks' notice when the team found out I was going to be visiting the Biennale).
>
> (2011: 28).

The reviews in the Greek press were very similar to the ones above and, again, there were very few accounts on the actual art show in the

exhibition or some sort of theoretical elaboration or international contextualisation of the curatorial tactics.[37] In fact, there is only one review of the exhibition that differentiates itself from the rest, discussing *MONODROME* critically and looking at the larger spatial and cultural politics of the area it inhabited. This is the text 'The Biennalist in Athens – Emergencies in the Midst of Unfulfilled Promises' written by the author Vassilios Oikonomopoulos in November 2011 and published in the webpage of 'Emergency Rooms', a project of the fictional character 'Biennalist' performed by the artist Thierry Geoffroy (the artist with the safari hat mentioned in the beginning of this book). The Biennalist came to Athens for *MONODROME*, where he conducted an array of impromptu short interviews with different individuals, mainly highlighting how the biennial's original stated aims to create an activist place relate with the immigrants living around the area as well as the protests against austerity. The Biennialist claimed that he found that the biennial was a vehicle of gentrification and a kind of 'vacuum cleaner', in his words, for the undocumented migrants of the area.[38]

Similarly to all other reviews Oikonomopoulos, a collaborator of the Biennialist, stressed upon the strained economic climate of Greece, the derelict building of Diplareios, the destitution around it as well as the initial will of the organisers to construct an anti-biennial model. Contrary to all other reviews, however, Oikonomopoulos foregrounded the two unreconciled realities existing in the area, between, on the one hand, the codes and the value system that the Biennale operates and, on the other, the undocumented migrants that populated the district. As he notes:

> At the site of the Biennale, a literal 10-minute walk from the spectacle of destruction, time moves in a different pace. It is less than two days before the opening night and the Biennalist is intrigued to find out about the area in the immediate proximity of the Biennale. People mention that this is a dangerous territory, especially at night. As soon as the sun sets, the area around the former school becomes frequented with African prostitutes, junkies and drug dealers. An underground population emerges in the streets of the forgotten quarter. Pedestrians rather than vehicles occupy the roads. There is the occasional trading from small shops that sell Chinese and Asian products, and where other commercial exchange takes place over transitory stalls and makeshift shop windows [. . .] Its background would not satisfy the new consumers. This is a rough territory, part wasteland, part slum, a compound constructed by immigration, rejects, overcrowding and inadequate sanitation.[39]

What Oikonomopoulos, similarly to the Biennalist, claims in his text is that *MONODROME* was responsible for the police terrorisation of the inhabitants of the area. Oikonomopoulos claims that 'miraculously

though, on the run-up to the Biennale, images of degeneration have disappeared' and, 'prostitutes and junkies have been removed, possible by a police operation' as 'policemen are "sweeping" the streets of the area clean of the unwanted, the marginalised, the "dangerous" elements that frequent it'. There is no real evidence however presented by Oikonomopoulos for these serious charges, because, as he claims 'people are reluctant to talk about it'. Despite this lack of evidence, he suggests, somehow provocatively, that the presence of the Biennale effected the regulation of the social and physical space around it:

> This is another forceful construction, to satisfy the insatiable thirst of the art crowd, fuelled by the persistent drive to rationalise, homogenise and regulate with the controllable power of police, what used to be a diverse, fluid space. As the official institutionalised qualities of art are progressing to taking up this space, the evacuation of a local population is deemed necessary. Another spectacle is progressing here, the new social and aesthetic structure that competes for the site, with the promises for offering the possibility for a new society, a new form of experience and a new power construction where the old will be eliminated.

Another aspect that is interesting in Oikonomopoulos' long piece on *MONODROME*, in fact by far the longest that has been written for the exhibition, is the way that he treats the original statement released by the biennial, claiming that the site will function for the gathering of collectives interested in social change, at face value. Calling AB3 to task, Oikonomopoulos perceives the radical statement as a challenge, a promise that permeates the expectation one has from the show. In this sense, the reality of gentrification or of police raids is gauged against the proclaimed desire of the curators to transform AB3 into a political space:

> It is a big surprise that no collectives or sit-ins are to be seen. Political groups and activists are nowhere to be found either. The experience is a collection of two-dimensional and three-dimensional works, from international or Greek artists and a collection of historical material that represents the 'good, old days' when Greece was great. Although some material is interesting, the disappointment is clear. There are no intentions for exploring the current political and social situation. The show, although sympathetic, cannot be considered a breakthrough. It has certainly failed in grasping the situation, and it has failed in showing and expressing the current and contemporary moment which Athens experiences. This is another art show. Its agenda for new forms of collectivities and new conceptual frameworks from those that are involved in transforming the society, are non-existent [. . .] And what about the local communities? The people that live and work in the

> area, mostly from different backgrounds and not related to art, they are however people that live and breathe a few streets from the Biennale. Is the exhibition addressed to them? PY objected, that the Biennale does not have any intention of being politically correct. However, does it have an intention of being socially exclusive? How much of that is in their program? Where does change they hope for come from?

The questions that Oikonomopoulos poses in the text, are significant to highlight as they manifest the questioning of the truthful intentions of the biennial. Interestingly, despite their wish to reconcile words and practice, both the Athens and the Berlin Biennale were questioned for their incapacity to be sincere in relation to their surrounding area, for their lack of parrhesia, though for opposite reasons. BB7 was criticised because its actions did not reflect the reality around the gentrified area of Mitte, while AB3 was deemed hypocritical as it purported to involve collectives interested in the transformation of society or re-write the history of the oppressed. Here, as in most biennials, the political role of the exhibition, its contemporariness, is invoked and measured against a context, or a place, whether this refers to the physical materiality of the country, the city or the district in which it takes place, or the symbolic tensions taking place around them.

Disturbing Contexts: Anti-participation, Volunteerism and an Art Ghetto

The Withdrawal

One of the most debated topics among members of the local art scene during the course of *MONODROME*, was the withdrawal from the curatorial team and eventually the Athens Biennale as an institution, of one its initial three organisers, the art critic and journalist Augustine AZ. AZ, PY and XK initially set up the Biennale, as the curatorial trio XYZ, curating the 1st edition and responsible for selecting curators for the second. AZ's decision to leave the team so as to devote to activist journalism was explained in a talk he gave within the framework of AB3. In this talk, he argued that it was not possible for art biennials under the situation of crisis to produce political interventions that could shake in any way the foundations of the current political and economic establishment. AZ's performance of his decision to withdraw is, as we shall see, expressive of tensions arising within the context of Greece, the contemporary art circuit and European society in general, with the advent of the economic crisis and the social resistance against it.

I met AZ in November 2011, while *MONODROME* was still running, asking him about his will to leave the institution. It is useful to present

long excerpts from this interview as he narrates in detail the ideological reasons for withdrawing from a biennial, emphasising its inability to intervene within the context of the crisis. His explanation for doing so, advocated as an activist, immediate and insurrectionary move, also functions as comparison to the approach of Żmijewski who advocated his political engagement through participation. The difference between the two approaches, however, also has to do with the different dynamic of the two biennials. Berlin Biennale in contrast to its Athens counterpart is much better funded, has a broad international appeal and occurs in a city that strongly supports contemporary art. Therefore, from an activist perspective, by participating in Berlin Biennale one has bettet potential of making certain resistances visible than doing so in the Athens one. After comparing the Berlin and Athens Biennale in terms of their organizational structure and their funding sources, AZ complicates the situation further:

> The biennials are a result of a very specific ideology in the Marxist sense of the word: the cluster of beliefs that legitimises a series of functional operations. What is this ideology? It is the ideology of the end of history, the ideology of the fall of ideologies, the ideology that we have reached a state that may not be perfect, but it is the best possible one and we now only have to solve technical problems. The Western world proceeded through this ideology from 1990 onwards, with the sense that okay, we are now done with the major battles, we may have problems, but we can grow, move etc. Germany was, and still is to a degree, quite within this ideology. Greece when we started, in November 2005, was too. We had the Olympics, we had passed 8 years of modernization with the Simitis government,[40] where we got into the Euro, we saw streets, airports, development, raising living standards for the people and so on. You know there was a sense that okay, we have an inefficient state, a bad bureaucracy, but we go well, you know problems of a technical nature. Therefore you take steps to go to fix it. Your problem is e.g. there is interesting art in Greece but it does not communicate with the art happening abroad. What could I do so as to fix it so that it can be displayed alongside foreign artists? Such is the nature of your problem. What was concealed in that kind of institutional behaviour was that this ideology was not solid enough. That was then revealed by the crisis. It will be revealed for everyone else too, but for us it came quickly. So when you arrive at this point, you realise that such structures are founded within a prosperous society, or in any case within the narrative of a prosperous society with a sense of progress, development etc. When this thing bursts it ceases to be an issue of subject-matter. Let us turn to the political now. My belief and part of the reason for which I am not involved in curating this year, is because I think that when you get to

> this point in which it becomes increasingly clear that there is a fault in this ideology, the issue of what you put in your exhibition is irrelevant. Yes, you can make some kind of interesting narrative, no doubt, you can, and I think that *MONODROME* is a very interesting narrative, but from the point of view of the 'political impact' it means absolutely nothing.[41]

Musing on the question of whether art can have an actual effect in the current state of emergency, AZ's narrative positions the 'crisis' as turning point in realising that biennials are, in this respect, impotent institutions. Striving to improve liberal democracy and its institutions, according to him, is a valid 'activist' strategy insofar as the prospect of a more progressive future is alive. The crisis then, as a symbolic moment of a breakdown of this horizon, manifesting through the austerity measures and an increasing police suppression, reveal, always according to AZ, the cracks behind this seemingly seamless ideology. AZ's narrative then is not, strictly speaking, 'anti-establishment', as being so would mean recognising, even retrospectively, the falsehood of seeking technical solutions, as he puts it, in the context of the neoliberal post-1990s consensus. The biennial is here seen as a valid political strategy within relatively stable social conditions, in which pacts between the state, the private sector and the art institution can be justified, while it becomes ineffective when this condition breaks down, or is in the process of doing so. One could claim that, for AZ, as far as there are some available resources, like in the first and second editions, the Biennale can be an effective activist means.

In any case, the rejection of cooperating with the institutions and agents that are in power in extreme contexts becomes, for AZ, a principle that leads to non-participation, an opting-out that could lead to an engagement with different modalities and formations. When I asked AZ from what aspect is the political understood in the context of the crisis the above framework of interpretation became clearer:

> From the aspect that when there is crack in the ruling ideology, politics is not anymore a narrative, a story, it can only be perceived through terms of conflict, and an exhibition never creates conditions of conflict as far as the model is given, as far as the outline is given. I can give examples. You are in an area like the one around Diplareios. This area is overrun by a great amount of social problems. The Biennale is co-operating with the City of Athens, because as an institution you have to do so. The City of Athens is an embarrassment as regards to its social policy. You co-operate with them at an institutional level, you are under its aegis, the mayor of Athens comes to the press preview etc. What the City of Athens does is that it sends the Municipal Police to beat the snot out of the vendors around the area, to jug them and often steal their merchandise, for which in turn they

> have to bribe so as to take back. This is the policy of the City of Athens. The Biennale essentially gives an alibi to the City of Athens – I do not mean personally to the current mayor. It comes and decorates the facade and from inside its all rotten. Athens' public does not need a Biennale. There is a wonderful comic strip by Olaf Westphalen, where in the back it shows some ashes, in the front a villager, of whom the village has been just burned down and as there is an international TV crew interviewing him he says: 'what our village needs now is a biennial'. It is like this. And we readily played this game because coming from the ideology that I describe this was our rhetoric. What we always used to say in order to ask for funding was that we activate some sort of development, a secondary service economy; when an event happens you are going to sell for example sandwiches, taxis and so on, this was our argument for culture. Always. So necessarily, we are mobilised by the authorities, exactly through this rhetoric. And we are willingly playing this game. And for me the question is reasonable: what kind of political impact to have in conditions which are war-like. You have to choose a side when you have a political power that will leave three hundred immigrants for fifty days almost to die, discussing every second day to send the Police Special Forces in the building so as to remove starving people, it takes them out of the Law School with an unprecedented mission in which they block the whole centre of Athens with police vans, it mobilises 5,000 policemen, you try to pass with your journalist ID, I am a journalist too, and you hear that there is an order from Central Police Department that prohibits to pass.[42] My journalist identity writes that every authority is obliged to help me in the accomplishment of my work, that is what a journalist is supposed to do, and the police does not only not help but has a special order to prohibit me reaching the Law School so as to see what they do to the immigrants. So, you are faced with this situation. And you make an exhibition that writes on the top 'under the Aegis of the Ministry of Culture' or 'the City of Athens'. Could you please let me know what kind of politics do you perform?

Claiming that the totalitarian face of the Greek state has only become visible after the crisis, AZ draws a dividing line between functioning liberal democracies and non-functioning ones. In the non-functioning ones, AZ suggests that art, as a privileged and separate sphere of reality, cannot have a role. The only effective role for activist cultural producers in such contexts, for AZ, is to abandon art and engage themselves with social struggles in other areas of social life.[43] Here, we see how the tension between the different values that a biennial enables is pushed to its limits. In the current political situation, the cultural-political values it enables, for AZ, are not enough to wipe-off the guilt for collaborating with the state and similar established institutions (and thus providing them with

an alibi). As the biennial necessarily becomes a façade, endowing the city and its institutions with a sense of normality, the participation in this 'façade' serves to legitimise a pseudo-image of a country that flourishes by supporting art and culture. For someone speaking from an activist perspective, this legitimisation is enough to hinder any effective political content that the biennial may include. Interestingly, toward the end of our talk, AZ suggested that the next edition of Athens Biennale should be financed through crowdfunding techniques so as to be accountable only to the people and not to any official institutions.

Here, the international discourse of the 1990s that sees contemporary art and curating as political acts in and of themselves (Chapter 3), is performed within a local setting and becomes subject to place-bound frictions. It is hard to imagine that AZ would enable this type of narrative (also in public) if he was the director of other kinds of art institutions i.e. a film festival or an opera house for instance. Yet, the biennial, through its politically and activist engaged modalities, allows for the conceptualisation of the curator's role as a deeply political one, bound up with issues related to political effectiveness, capitalism and social inequality.

Playing the Volunteer

During the show, such issues resulted in tensions arising from the ubiquity of volunteerism and free labour. Most, if not all, of the participants in *MONODROME* took part in the exhibition voluntarily, meaning without any financial compensation. It was repeatedly stated by the curators, but also by most participants I had the chance to speak to, that AB3 could not have been made possible without the contribution of the numerous volunteers. As the Head of Communication of AB3 asserted in our interview, 'the concept of volunteerism exists horizontally, vertically, everywhere'. In the context of a politically-engaged exhibition, however, wishing to instigate counter-hegemonic structures, the omnipresence of unpaid labour is a rather problematic condition. As we saw, discussions on labour exploitation structured critical debates around contemporary art since the early 2000s and strongly re-surfaced with the emergence of Occupy cultures (Chapters 1 and 4). In a Facebook conversation that took place on 3 October, 2011, shortly before the opening of *MONODROME*, in a comment under a post from the Athens Biennale's official Facebook account that made a call for volunteers, a user named 'Irene Electra Theodorakos' addressed this problematic condition:

> No more free labour guys, resist to slavery that uses as a pretext volunteering and training. Do not believe in stories, nobody will remember you after your work . . . Respect to your knowledge and self-determination! [. . .] Unfortunately here in our country volunteering (volunteers are still paying their transportation, lunches etc.) means

> short-term free labour for long hours, under difficult conditions, intolerable pressure and tension. Out of the 50 volunteers who are 'used' only one or two will have a career.[44]

In its response, the Biennale took a very clear, and somewhat patronising, position, suggesting seeing volunteerism in personal terms, as a consensual agreement between free individuals, without tackling larger systemic questions of social inequality:

> Dear Irene, volunteering is a decision of adults who cheerfully participate in something they consider as fulfilling and professionally rewarding [. . .] Volunteering, as the name itself indicates, is a voluntary contribution to a common project which obviously concerns the people involved. The description 'short-term free labour' is therefore not only an (incomplete) tautology, but one in which what is lacking is the will and the great interest of all those people whom you unsolicitedly 'defend'. Each organization, depending on its features, proposes a framework for cooperation to people who wish to participate in its activities and thus a consensual agreement comes about.[45]

Notions such as 'framework of cooperation', 'participation in its activities' and 'consensual agreement' purport to give another name to working for free. By not tackling greater systemic issues related to this phenomenon, unpaid labour is here presented as a pragmatic, natural state of things. From this response we can assume that the organisers of Athens Biennale were either not aware of the emerging discourses on artistic labour and exploitation, that increasingly came to occupy a prominent place in discussions on art and politics at the time, or preferred to distance themselves from them. However, it is not possible to completely escape from the tensions between a highly politicised statement wishing to invite activist collectives and a practice that undermines the meaning of this statement by maintaining free labour and hierarchical work relations. In this effort to reconcile the condition of unpaid labour with an exhibition that mobilises Benjamin and the history of the oppressed, there is a remainder threatening the sincerity of this discourse.

The recognition of the problematic condition of working without being paid was shared by all the volunteers that I spoke with in the Biennale. In this sense, to quote Ong and Collier again, these actors were 'reflexive' about their participation (2005: 7–9), questioning their possible exploitation and coming up with justifications in relation to this questioning. One of the most popular justifications was that the biennial lacked resources and it therefore was unable to pay them. In this regard, most volunteers were ready to accept that since the curators themselves were working for free, it was not possible that they will receive a salary. This rationalisation, however, can be easily countered by the enormous difference in social

capital gained by a curator and a volunteer. Another, more stable, justification was framed by a discourse of necessity (in the sense that doing free labour was something obligatory so as to advance one's career), and thus the 'payment' took the form of contacts and work experience.[46] For instance, one of the most active volunteers in the Biennale, Maro, 22, told me that, 'of course I would prefer to be paid' but, 'I feel that I gain so many things professionally with the tour guides, and now I write some texts for the artworks which may end up in an electronic catalogue' and, 'it is certain that I am going to take a reference letter afterwards, these people are going to speak for me'. More interestingly, volunteering was also justified through a parallel discourse of contribution to a 'good cause', which is to say AB3's critical stance towards the economic crisis. This was apparent in the following excerpts from a conversation I had with Niki, 23, a volunteer with a background in architecture:

> *Can you see a social role in contemporary art and Biennale in particular? I say that because this year's Biennale is politicised and tries to intervene . . .*
>
> Yes we send messages . . . There is a revolution going on (laughs), we try to get people on our side.
>
> *Do you identify yourself with this?*
>
> I like it . . . Especially with this situation, everything can help. Even contemporary art can motivate people . . . From the censored TV spot to discussions, everything can be something . . .
>
> *So, was the fact that the exhibition is 'political' a motivation for you to participate?*
>
> Yes, my generation has the biggest problem, so we can contribute wherever we can.[47]

Niki's case was not isolated, as overall it was quite common among volunteers to justify their participation in terms of the exhibition's usefulness in the context of a 'broken Greece'. In this sense, the politicised nature of the exhibition, even the censored spot, gave to many volunteers the feeling of participating in something bigger than simply an art exhibition, something that could potentially be socially transformative and vocalise resistance.

Of course, this kind of justification was not shared by all. Certain volunteers blamed the organisers for their lack of support and assistance, often regretting their participation in the exhibition. For instance, another volunteer, Myrto, 21, stated that:

> The Biennale did not help me in what I wanted to pursue. I do not feel an involvement on the side of the organisers. I was expecting to

> participate in a more active way. I was expecting to meet more people, but it does not matter. The whole situation here is a bit rough, there is no infrastructure.[48]

Other volunteers felt the need to vocalise the unfairness of volunteerism, but were too afraid to make it a big issue.[49] For instance, Nicole, 25 years old, one of the first volunteers that joined *MONODROME*, stressed how the antagonistic work climate and individualism led to an absence of a collective workplace identity:

> I have been to discussions with other volunteers, telling them that if you show your availability anytime they are going to exploit it [the organisers] and because we are all in this, please do not take off your underwear. But you cannot get on with them, because this is what they are used to, they look only at themselves. There isn't anything collective in this. You cannot speak freely. There is a big fear basically. When I speak to the other volunteers about these matters I am afraid.[50]

Labour in a biennial, or better volunteering (a way of making oneself visible through working for an institution with a certain brand name), was primarily seen as a means to advance one's career. Within this framework, the strong contradiction between the proclaimed activist position of AB3 and its exploitation of free labour was something that did not go unnoticed:

> For me art is something that should be paid . . . you do a Biennale, called *MONODROME*, it takes a critical stance on the crisis and on the other hand you have so many workers that you do not pay. And you are based on the fact that they come as volunteers. But as we all know volunteerism is fake. Everyone came here for the same reason [making contacts]. So? What kind of political act is that?

Here, it is useful to note that it is not volunteerism per se that it is conceptualised as negative by the participants, but volunteerism within a structure that is organised hierarchically, so that those on the top (artistic directors and curators) receive disproportionally larger cultural and symbolic capital than a mere volunteer. Apart from other justifications, such as the necessity to advance one's career, the politicised direction of AB3, as we saw with the examples of Niki and Nicole, plays an ambivalent role. On the one hand, it hails the volunteers as practitioners of socially useful labour (and thus beautifies their unpaid participation), and on the other it creates expectations for more equal treatment in the workplace. One could argue that in a way the volunteers in AB3 played the role of the Occupiers in BB7. Both groups were key for the development of the shows and both were hailed by the respective biennials as participants whose activity has a larger social utility. Also in members of both groups, there

was an intense questioning of whether their free labour was exploited by the institution. This questioning led to practices and conceptualisations that are 'reflexive', in the sense of expressing a sense of discomfort with the institution that they are part of. In another sense, the volunteers of AB3 and the Occupiers of BB7 provided an unremunerated support mechanism, a kind of 'extitution' that these biennials came to colonise and upon which they build their activist narratives.

Out of Context

Apart from the issue of volunteering, another recurring matter of contestation (which we saw in relation to Oikonomopoulos' text) was how AB3 did not make efforts to interact with its extremely sensitive surrounding area. This was something noted by most of the visitors I spoke with, putting in possible jeopardy the pronounced political role of AB3. As the exhibition evolved, it became clear that the local populations living in the district, mostly migrants, drug users, sex workers and *sans-papiers*, did not interact with the exhibition in any possible way. In some cases, in its attempt to explore the identity of ruins and decadence, AB3 used the scenes around the area as its 'raw material', the decorative backdrop against which crisis could be contextualised. It was rather obvious that the biennial stood as a foreign body and seemed to represent something hostile for this population. This was also related to the extremity of the surrounding environment, which, as the scene with which this book begins reveals, mainly consists of people radically indifferent and irrelevant to the social scripts of contemporary art.

As expected, however, this condition became an issue in more than one ways. Several volunteers stated that they were afraid to walk alone in the evening in the area, and one of them stated that her car was robbed. When I asked Niki whether there was any interaction with the local residents she started giggling, saying that, 'no, never, this could not be possible in any way'. Another volunteer said that the only interaction she had with the locals was when one of them asked her whether the venue of the exhibition was the town hall. Another stated that there was not any effort on the Biennale's part for co-operation and communication of the artists with their surroundings. The latter also mentioned how some journalists from Sweden coming to see the Biennale were so shocked with the location that they eventually avoided visiting the exhibition, being too afraid to walk around in the district.

AB3 wished to keep this issue intentionally invisible, as it was neither publicly addressed by the curators themselves nor mentioned in any of the public events organised by the Biennale. Despite attempts to conceal it, or at least not mention in public, it was clear that most of the participants or visitors were clearly concerned about it. For instance, a volunteer mentioned that she was initially planning to organise a guided tour

only for the local residents. In the end, as she saw that this was far too paradoxical and could not be made possible under the given conditions, she abandoned the plan. A personal friend from Berlin, visiting Athens at the time, similarly could not understand how it was possible that a biennial takes place in such a location without anyone noticing the contradiction in public.

However, as the Head of Communication of AB3 noted in our interview, discussions on how to engage with the surrounding community actually did happen within the curatorial team, but were quickly dropped due to the limitations in budget and resources. To the question of whether there were any thoughts about engaging with the citizens of the area she replied:

> Engaging with the area was something that interested us a lot, but this needs a special group of people to deal with it properly . . . I think these are terribly sensitive and complicated things and I think that one needs to have a group of people that will deal very seriously with this and see exactly what should be done and how . . . We were discussing in the past when we thought that things would be rosier to hold some outdoor activities, but eventually the Biennale was made with essentially no budget, and the whole team had to exceed themselves. But to do something sloppy just to say that we engaged with the district? We were not able to do it seriously . . . The area is too difficult . . .[51]

The Head of the Communication carried on by explaining how the biennial failed to change the vibe of the area despite her expectations for the opposite, blaming mostly the state for not taking the appropriate initiatives:

> I was very curious to see how our presence was going to change the chemistry of the region . . . but I do not see any change. But you see how even in these areas that we thought as unreachable, people come, things can happen if we show some interest. And in this building many things could happen but there is no money and maybe not the intention . . . that is if this building was becoming an academy or something similar, I think it would help the area. Not gentrification and all that, but I believe that things can be done . . . perhaps an art school for migrants.

In this sense, while the issue of engagement with the surrounding area was part of the curatorial agenda, it was swept under the carpet as AB3 lacked the adequate resources and was afraid to open up such a sensitive debate. The fact that AB3 found resources for the exhibition and other daily events shows that in reality it is more a matter of priorities than

resources. Due to the need to maintain its status as a brand (an art exhibition with a certain international appeal) the engagement with such sensitive and risky matters can be sidestepped. Again here, we can ask, for whom is the biennial political?

All these contested issues, namely the antinomy between cultural and economic values, expressed by AZ's withdrawal, the issue of volunteerism and unpaid labour and the lack of substantial engagement with the migrants of the area, were treated much more effectively in another festival taking place close to AB3's venue. On 11 November, and while the Biennale was still running, an occupation occurred in an abandoned theatre, called *Empros*, located a five minute walk from the building of the Biennale. The occupation was instigated by a group of artists that call themselves the 'Mavili Collective'. On the day the occupation started, Mavili Collective announced the initiation of a 10-day festival in this theatre. This self-organised festival attracted a wide range of visitors, participants, artists and collectives from different social strata and became a vibrant space that activated residents of the surrounding and other areas. It was non-ticketed, it included performances by migrants and in general, without making any grand statements, effectively managed to be as inclusive as possible. After the festival ended, the occupation of the theatre remained and it is still active as these lines are written. A very high number of people volunteered to help keep the space open, deal with practicalities and generally participate in the community-run endeavour.

The comparison of this event with the Biennale was inevitable, as they were both art events in the same area and context, aspiring to be socially relevant and politically active. In a way, some of the tensions and contradictions that haunted the Biennale, as described above, were addressed with greater sensitivity in *Empros*. Regarding the volunteers, while in *Empros* there were much less possibilities of professional advancement compared to the Biennale, the participants who volunteered were mostly doing so on their own terms. As there was no predetermined hierarchy, between the curator, the organiser, the artist and the volunteer, the decisions could be taken in a more open and collective way. This issue pointed to how the biennial as an organisation is not effectively accustomed to resolve these tensions in the context of crisis and lack of funding. Furthermore, the festival included migrant performances that were organically incorporated in its programme and were attended by numerous visitors. Instead, the institutional character of the biennial that needs to maintain its social recognition and capital is weak when confronted with real issues, 'dangerous' for its reputation (note how many times artists and art institutions have been accused of 'romanticising communities').

In this sense, it is interesting to see how the 10-day self-organised festival in an occupied space, without any budget and under more harsh conditions, managed to accomplish what AB3 could not. The more effective handling of these tensions that occupied AB3 in the context of a self-run

theatre, exhibits how the treatment of these issues is mainly a matter of institutional politics. This inability of AB3 comes precisely because a biennial is not only an event, but an event knit to a particular organization with its structures and hierarchies, as well as an institution that has to cultivate its image as a brand and be attractive to sponsors, artists, critics, magazines and so on. This condition of the biennial necessarily shrinks the possibilities of either paying the contributors or engaging with more sensitive social issues.

In short, the development of AB3 was conditioned by a series of tensions and controversies activated through its relations with the place it unfolded and its operation as a global form. While the protests and social movements in Athens were more emphatically pro-activist and anti-neoliberal than in Berlin, AB3 ended up being less activist-oriented despite its initial declarations. AB3 did not manage to keep most of its stated aims. As it developed, it consciously presented itself as a failed experiment, mobilising (what they claimed to be) a failed philosopher and taking place in a failed country. While it was perceived mostly positively by the press, all debates about it framed it within the context of the crisis and its ruins. Seemingly emerging as an alternative, courageous initiative from these ruins, AB3's most important political intervention, for the international press, was that it *did* manage to take place. As the expectations for transforming its space into an activist one eventually proved illusionary, the rhetorical device of ruins and failure served as a way to frame this impossibility. Here, we see another interesting paradox in development: the biennial is expected to mobilise some sort of action against the crisis, but as gradually it becomes clear that this is impossible to achieve, the event is eventually debated and framed as an art show in terms of this impossibility. In other words, the failure of AB3 to keep its original statements becomes the backdrop, the general context, against which its intervention is (mostly positively) evaluated.

Notes

1 This statement comes from the first press release of the 3rd Athens Biennale on 3 May, 2011 and can be found at the following address: www.athensbiennial.org/cgi-bin/biennial-list/mail.cgi/archive/athensbiennial/20110503220018/.
2 Ibid.
3 All quotes rendered to PY and XK (not their real names are used) unless stated otherwise, come from an interview I had with them on 9 August, 2011 in the office of the Athens Biennale located in central in Athens. The interview was in Greek and the translation is mine.
4 In a recorded panel discussion on Greek biennials that took place after AB3 on 23 January, 2012 in Athens PY stated: 'Many people ask why the organisers also curate the exhibition. I will tell you a practical thing, a very practical reason, when you do not have budget and you do not have anything sure, you cannot bring anyone to collaborate with.'

5 In fact, in the first Biennale all three curators were Greek, in the second one two out of five, in the third one two out of three and in the fourth one the overwhelming majority of the around 40 curators were Greeks.
6 'Live Your Myth in Greece' was a 2005 branding campaign set up by the *Greek* National Tourism Organisation, presenting, as the name indicates, Greece in 'mythical' terms in terms of its food, ancestry, sea, food and parties.
7 This was stated by PY in an interview he gave in 2007 to the journalist Giannis Gigas that can be found in full at the following address: www.ardin.gr/?q=node/2378 (translation mine).
8 The response that was written as a comment under blog posts related to the issue can be found, among other places, at the following link http://futura-blog.blogspot.de/2007/09/remap-km.html (translation mine).
9 The text is called 'The Multiple Signifying Dead-End' (Το Πολλαπλά Σημαίνον «Αδιέξοδο») and can be found at the following address (in Greek): https://athens.indymedia.org/front.php3?lang=en&article_id=869496.
10 A very central theme in reviews about *Heaven* was the choice of the venue, which seems always to be a significant issue for the Athens Biennale due to its unstable condition. For instance, Adam Jasper in his text '2nd Athens Biennial' for *Frieze* describes the venue as follows: 'The central exhibition space – a multi-storey structure built into the undercarriage of a bridge that ends before it reaches the water – was particularly disconcerting. The structure appears to be – to borrow Robert Smithson's term – a "ruin in reverse", desolate before it ever achieved completion, as if it envied the crumbling marble of the Acropolis that dominates every visitor's impression of Athens.' The full text can be found at the following address: www.frieze.com/issue/review/2nd_athens_biennial/.
11 On 11 November 2011 the technocrat economist Lucas Papademos was appointed as the Prime Minister of Greece taking the place of the leader of the PASOK party George Papandreou whose decision to announce a referendum has been seen by European officials as scandalous.
12 When I asked AB3's Head of Communication whether AB3 has received any financial support she emphatically replied: 'Nothing. Naught. Zero.' Regarding the possibility of receiving state-funding she stressed the messiness of the situation: 'The 2st and 3nd Biennales have received an amount from the Ministry of Culture which was, let's say, the 1/8 or the 1/10 of the budget . . . The funding applications for events that are happening in the second half of 2011, like us, were open until the 30 September. For events that take place now . . . We obviously applied, but the way things are in the country there is no chance.' Our interview took place on 15 November 2011 in Athens.
13 In this first announcement AB3 stated that it was going to take place in the Athens School of Fine Arts, something that eventually did not happen due to tensions and disagreements.
14 This phrase of Papandreou is taken from the article 'Papandreou unveils radical reforms to salvage Greece's public finances' written by Helena Smith on 14 December 2009 for *The Guardian*. The full article can be found at the following address: www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/dec/14/greece-unveils-reforms-to-public-finances.
15 The excerpts are from the interview '8 questions for Nicolas Bourriaud' that was released at the independent magazine SALZINSEL. The full text can be found at the following address: http://salzinselmagazine.blogspot.de/2011/03/8-questions-for-nicolas-bourriaud.html.

16 Ibid.
17 Ibid.
18 In fact, if one social group could be identified as the 'oppressed' in the context of MONODROME, it is the undocumented migrants living in large numbers in the area, who, as we will see later, seemed to be a foreign body to the social scripts of the show.
19 Other characteristic examples included the costumes of Olympic Airlines, designed by Yves-Saint Laurent, displayed on the third floor of Diplareios on mannequins.
20 PASOK (Panhellenic Socialist Movement) is a socialist democratic party that was in power in Greece from 1981 to 1989, from 1993 to 2004 and from 2009 to 2012 that is to say almost throughout the whole *metapolitefsi* period.
21 Another work that interrogated the PASOK and Greece's social democratic period was the *Elounda Summit* in which the artist Vaggelis Vlahos simply displayed photographs that showed the ex-PASOK leader Andreas Papandreou in the '70s and '80s together with figures such as the Libyan leader Mouamar Kaddafi and the Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat in a period when Papandreou was seeking alternatives allies for Greece beyond European partners.
22 This work was placed opposite a 1823 painting by the folk Greek painter Theofilos that represented Greek war of independence from the Ottomans. Again, it was not clear whether the associations between the Syntagma protests and the Greek war of Independence were meant to be ironical or real.
23 I use the term art objects here in a descriptive sense. For example, the dead pigeons 'became' art objects, that is to say special objects separated from the rest of the environment, insofar as the tour guides stood above them and explained the reasons for including them in the exhibition.
24 For instance, when I asked the Head of Communication of the Biennale half-way the show whether a catalogue will eventually accompany the exhibition, as it was initially announced, which could communicate the exhibition to a more international audience, she replied: 'I do not think so. We will only publish a catalogue if we win the lottery! It is a shame because we gathered a very good material . . . but it is not possible . . . There is no spare time, but more crucially there is no money. If we could upload in a website all the videos and the interviews as we planned and all this come together it could become like an online catalogue. We tried to open up the exhibition as much as we could. But there are limitations.' Eventually there was a website that included several videos documenting some interviews with participants, lectures, presentations and performances, but all these were not translated to English something that immediately significantly shrunk the range of the gesture.
25 More than a decade earlier, Bourriaud in his book *Post-production* (2001) praised Liam Gillick for fabricating 'tools of exploration that target the intelligibility of our era' (28).
26 In any case, if the curators thought that the work was somehow connected to their listed themes they did not communicated their idea in any possible way to the public. In a couple of guided tours that I followed the work was merely described as a 'fascinating work of conceptual art'.
27 This explanation was surprisingly given by some of the tour guides that I followed.
28 Here, we should mention however that MONODROME never reached the degree of inclusivity of 'Forget Fear' that, although similarly predominantly

white, managed to draw in its premises a heterogeneous mix of social groups ranging, as we saw, from local ethnic minorities to representatives of outlawed political organisations.

29 This is an excerpt from a recorded discussion I had with GP on 15 November 2011.

30 The excerpt from ERT's response is takes from an article from the Greek newspaper *Eleftheropytia* titled 'What ERT responds for Biennale's spot'. The full text can be found at the following address: www.enet.gr/?i=news.el.article &id=321067 (translation mine).

31 The excerpt from Biennale's response to ERT is taken from the article 'The Biennale supports Zois' "censored" film' published in the newspaper *Avgi*. The full text can be found at the following address: www.enet.gr/?i=news.el.article &id=321067.

32 These questions are taken from the official page of Synaspimos, the then most populous tendency of Syriza party, titled 'The censorship of the 3rd Athens Biennale's advertising spot by ERT'. The whole text can be found at the following address: www.syn.gr/gr/keimeno.php?id=25140.

33 The only exception as we will see was the review that appeared in the website of the Biennialist.

34 The full text of the article 'Crisis Management' by Cathryn Drake can be found at the *ArtForum*'s website at following address: http://artforum.com/diary/id=29269.

35 The full text of '3rd Athens Biennale' by Despina Zefkili can be found at the *Frieze*'s website following address: www.frieze.com/issue/review/3rd-athens-biennale/.

36 The full text of 'Athens Biennale, the crisis as art' by Karin Olsson can be found at the website 'PressEurop' at the following address: www.presseurop.eu/en/content/article/1224511-athens-biennale-crisis-art.

37 The most interesting of them was a text titled 'In the Prefix of the Crisis' by Kostas Christopoulos published in the newspaper *Avgi* on November 2011, which again enabled the 'crisis' as the determining framework of gauging the show.

38 'Are artists used as vacuum cleaners?' https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bxJMBJOXOZ4.

39 This excerpt, as well as the excerpts that follow, are taken from the text 'The Biennalist in Athens – Emergencies in the midst of unfulfilled by Vassilios Oikonomopoulos for 'Emergency Rooms', the webpage of the Biennialist. The full text can be found at the following address: www.emergencyrooms.org/ATHENS_BIENNALE.html.

40 Kostas Simitis was the president of PASOK and the prime minister of Greece from the period 1996–2004.

41 This excerpt, as well as the excerpts that follow, are taken from a recorded an interview I had with AZ on 10 November 2011 in Athens (the translation is mine).

42 AZ here refers to the hunger strike of 300 migrants that started in January 2011 and ended in March 2011, demanding the improvement of migrant working conditions living in Greece. Initially camped inside the Law School of Athens, they were later moved to a private building known as 'Megaro Ypatia'.

43 AZ in fact did so as editor of the monthly critical journalistic magazine UNFOLLOW.

44 This excerpt is taken from a Facebook post in the official account of Athens Biennale on 3 October 2011 titled 'Athens Biennale needs qualified and willing volunteers and interns to contribute to its 3rd edition MONODROME' (the translation is mine).
45 Ibid.
46 Here, it should be noted that all the volunteers I talked to and the overwhelming majority of the volunteers overall, were women usually in their early 20's, which also manifests the gendered aspect of precarious work.
47 This excerpt, as well as all other excerpts attributed to the same person, are taken from a recorded interview I had with Niki on 28 October 2011 in Athens (the translation is mine).
48 This excerpt, as well as all other excerpts attributed to the same person, are taken from a recorded interview I had with Mirto on 19 November 2011 in Athens (the translation is mine).
49 The issue of systemic fault was mentioned in passing by the Biennale's Head of Communication: There is enormous interest and too many people coming and telling for example 'I do not have a job or I was fired' and instead of sitting around I prefer to come here . . . this is very sad.
50 This excerpt, as well as all other excerpts attributed to the same person, are taken from a recorded interview I had with Nicole on 7 November 2011 in Athens (the translation is mine).
51 This excerpt, as well as all other excerpts attributed to the same person, are taken from a recorded interview I had with the Head of Communication of AB3 on 21 November 2011 in Athens (the translation is mine).

7 Conclusion
On Being Contemporary

This study explores the in-built tensions between art and politics in the context of spectacular displays attempting to operate as immediate activist sites. It turns attention to exhibitions that represent a radical instance of biennial-making in Europe, gesturing to an effort to respond to an overwhelming situation of crisis and protest. As they gesture to this effort, they perform excessive statements and practices bordering with landscapes of indistinguishability between art and activism. They endeavour to stage, in other words, an intervention to the sensible and practical fabric of the *contemporary* world and the issues inhabiting it. Here, the term 'contemporary' has little to do with that which is produced during a 'particular present', during the spatiotemporal coordinates of a here and now (Osborne, 2013: 2). Far from it, as the philosopher Peter Osborne argues, to name something as 'contemporary' in the context of contemporary art is 'to make a claim for its significance in participating in the actuality of the present' (2013). It is, in other words, to recollect the specificity of a gesture that both grasps the particularity of the moment and (re)produces this moment in an interrogating fashion. The 'contemporary' then expresses a style and poetics of doing clustering around qualities of critique, reflexivity and self-consciousness as well as an urge to dissect and question the current moment. The biennial is then 'contemporary' to the extent that it inhabits this style and poetics and reproduces it varyingly across social landscapes.

For Osborne, the critical implications of the term 'contemporary' provide a criterion to judge and separate the art that belongs to the realm of contemporaneity from that which does not. While the validity of this act of judgement is to be debated, what is important to keep for our purposes is the configuration of a particular practice as being both contemporary and art. Contemporary art composes an ethos and a culture; it is an assemblage that interpellates actors in its codes, forms and vocabularies formulating a general 'discourse of the contemporary'. In the case of biennials, this discourse is founded, as we saw throughout this study, upon the interweaving of the spheres of theory, critique and art and the employment of a countercultural, yet glossy and cutting-edge form

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of enunciation. The Athens and Berlin Biennales then can be understood as 'contemporary' not so much because they decide to talk about the present, but because they take up the challenge of the discourse of the contemporary, the challenge to actualise a critical moment in the name of the present.

Yet, despite the fact that the contemporary biennial is founded upon such different junctions, it materialises itself in the name of art. While it is an assemblage of multiple and conflicting desires, interests and modes of expression, it is also one that redresses the category of art, mutating it and refashioning its rationale within changing circumstances. The flexibility and adaptability of the biennial, as shown by the cases of Athens and Berlin, allow precisely for such risky endeavours that can re-imagine hierarchies and modes of being. The moment of 'irritation' brought about the possibility of reconstructing its making, whether in terms of new audiences, curatorial devices or modes of display. The pressing demand to turn biennials into political agents during the crisis is then an outcome of a larger struggle for maintaining institutional legitimacy and social relevancy. If, to cite Adorno's famous phrase, 'it is self-evident that that nothing concerning art is self-evident anymore' (1969: 1), then the evidence of art's social usefulness needs to be constantly re-framed not only in dialogue with its (supposedly) constitutive disinterestedness and non-usefulness, but also according to the moving substratum of social values that can offer validity to art's critical function. The 'contemporary', promising a critical actualisation of the present, is built exactly upon an anticipation of polemically restructuring the current moment by reshuffling dominant social values and agendas. The 'contemporary' then refers to the triggering of social values that are perceived as redistributing and expanding the coordinates of general social antagonism towards more equal relationalities.

The 7th Berlin Biennale was conceived as a break with all past models, a hyper-activist space emphatically focusing on the generation of practical social effects. This space could only precariously be labelled as an art space. It assumed the modalities of art, exploiting its institutional status, but at the same time, blurred the boundary between art and protest to such a degree that it denounced its role as an art exhibition. The excesses it performed are part of a modality of enunciation that is in-built in the category of the 'contemporary', this historically contingent category of practice that evades criteria of aesthetic excellence in favour of critically actualising the present moment. It is in this sense that BB7 attempted to be contemporary in the full sense of the term, in the sense of assuming a critical position against neoliberalism and aligning itself with the signifier of the people in the context of a troublesome crisis. Moreover, what BB7 certainly achieved through its controversies was to perform how the dominant ways of looking at an art space are bound up with expectations of an aesthetic nature. Although Żmijewski used the institution so as to

produce radical results, his approach was very different from that of criticality and New Institutionalism. In fact, if criticality occupies the institution from within, Żmijewski attempted (through the Occupy Berlin) not only to occupy, but to convert the institution itself, its institutional and organisational agendas into a radical agent. Despite its uneasy setting within an art biennial, Occupy Berlin did not wish to establish some long-term alliance with the institution so as to achieve social hegemony, but to convert it into a radical agent in the here and now. In this regard, Żmijewski's activist approach, doomed to long-term failure as it was, brought to the surface the strained relationship between art and activism (a relationship that is always a major site of tension within Rancière's aesthetic regime). In turn, the unique case of BB7 demonstrates how the condition of curatorial autonomy, running through the scripts of contemporary art, can bring about results that may prove unconventional or disruptive in relation to the usual functioning of the art institution. Still, the radicality in the context of a biennial is destined to take shape within the boundaries of durational and predetermined events that usually cannot affect or radicalise the structure of the institution in any lasting way.

Since BB7, KW, the institution of Berlin Biennale, has returned to organising art-oriented shows. In May 2014, it opened its gates to the 8th Berlin Biennale, a show curated by Juan A. Gaitán, that engaged with more traditional museum tactics. Interestingly, when asked about BB7, Gaitán stated the following: 'I am thankful to Artur for having made it because otherwise I would have had to make the same Biennale . . . it is a Biennale that saved the Biennale, [taking place] in a total state of crisis . . . it proved to the world that we have total curatorial autonomy'.[1] The excesses of BB7, according to Gaitán, not only did not threaten the functioning of the institution, but instead affirmed its relevance by re-asserting its capacity to enable current social and cultural values, to re-legitimise its supposed autonomy from corporate mandates and re-elevate the curator to an author. At the same time, the official funding body of Berlin Biennale challenged Żmijewski's model. In the opening text of BB8's publication, Professor Monika Grütters, German Minister of State for Culture and the Media, indirectly alludes to BB7 when she writes that contemporary art is 'under no circumstances responsible for providing easy answers' (2014: 10). As an informant working for BB8 commented in a private talk, the aesthetic and non-political orientation of Gaitán's curatorial mission was an indispensable strategy for institutional survival: washing-off the stigma of the last edition's disaster so as to continue securing state funding and significant art world connections. The following 9th edition of Berlin Biennale (2016), curated by the New York-based collective DIS, displayed an even more vocal distance from practices of immediate action, most notably by embracing an entrepreneurial ethos mixed with theories on technological abstraction, post–humanism and accelerationism as well as an emphasis to cynically rather than polemically interrogate the contemporary.

In turn, the 3rd Athens Biennale announced a similar break with previous biennial models, questioning their morality and poignancy by attempting to transform itself into a space of action. It similarly attempted to rise to the occasion of the contemporary, to become a vehicle of constructing a critical present. Caught amidst the tensions brought about by the selection of a 'deprived' area, the lack of financial means, the withdrawal of one of the organisers and the strained social conditions, AB3 was unable to see through most of its programmatic statements. This also included its transformation to a space for actualising AB3's Walter Benjamin's conception of history of the oppressed as curatorial reference point. This failure displayed and circumscribed similar boundaries. Having to abide by a set of rules informed by its in-built spectacular nature, involving the maintenance of its brand status and profile across local and international circuits, its organisational hierarchies based on curatorial and artistic expertise as well as its vital connections with sponsors, collectors and surrounding institutions, the biennial was less able to actualise issues pertaining to social inclusion or remunerated labour. On the one hand, the 4th Athens Biennale that followed created more successfully what the previous one had set out to do, (which is to say, a relatively open space that involved different collectives and groups interested in social transformation). On the other hand, again, it mainly involved a mostly local middle-class public and was based on the voluntary labour of participants. The better funding that AGORA received, including that from the Hellenic Ministry of Culture and European funding programmes, resulted in more pluralistic explorations than those of its predecessor. In this sense, AB4, rather than denouncing its previous edition, as BB8 directly or indirectly did, conceived itself as its continuation, one that occurred within a more pluralistic condition for the institution, as well as in the already established countercultural and collective experiments in Athens upon which AB4 could model its practice. An example is the Empros theatre discussed earlier, from which AB4 heavily drew its mode of collective organisation. Even the pertinent question that it set, 'Now what?', strongly resembled the title of the 10-day festival 'Where are we now?' that took place in Empros some months before AB4's opening. In this light, the boundaries of AB3's MONODROME as an activist site lie in the tensions generated between the desire to be socially relevant within a strained financial climate, and the imperative of the biennial to preserve its institutional legitimacy and organisational model. The 5th and 6th editions of Athens Biennale were merged, lasting from 2015–17 and leading up to documenta 14, which will equally take place in Athens and Kassel. This merging has been producing a series of events of discursive and educational character. The move was meant less to respond to some of the debates that documenta, as a presumed project of 'cultural colonialism', raised in the artistic and activist scene of Athens than to reaffirm its status within the local and international artistic scene by attempting to align itself with a major European institution.

To go back to AB3, again here, the first reaction of AB3 to the strained situation of the crisis (and the possible crisis of de-legitimation of the biennial model) was to denounce in moral terms the way that biennials were hitherto organised. The lack of adequate funding and infrastructure, however, as well as the insurrectionary, rather extreme, situation in Greece made it very difficult to materialise an activist relationality. Despite its more classic form than its Berlin counterpart, or perhaps precisely because of it, AB3 managed to pass as a rather critical show across international biennial landscapes. Through a string of incidences and performances (some of which were unplanned), such as the censored spot, the Public School of Athens, AZ's abandonment of and public framing of biennial-making in explicitly political terms, and the questioning of nationalist articulations of Greek identity, the biennial managed to perform the image of the critical social agent. AB3, however, wished to distance itself from the discursive model, in that, it deemed it as an inefficient mode of institutional engagement in the current times. Interestingly, one of the main proponents of criticality and architects of the discursive model, Charles Esche, in a talk he gave in AB3 on 11 and 19 November 2011, noted that critical curators must combine criticality with action, as otherwise the imbalances between the economic and cultural values that a biennial mobilises will remain intact.

Apart from being a result of the differences in each respective biennial's institutional power, Żmijewski's extremity and Bourriaud's and XY's eventual conventionality were also a reflection of the different positions these curators held in the hierarchal division of labour in contemporary art. Żmijewski is not a curator, and in this sense, he is able to carry a different and more experimental mentality than that of professional curators, while he seemed absolutely indifferent to maintaining a curatorial profile that could help him later on with his career. On the contrary, Bourriaud and XY maintain professional stakes in the field of curating and organising, and were thus prepared to undertake lesser risks. In all the above senses, by seeing AB3 in its development, we can say that as its radical activist ambitions gradually retracted, the exhibition came to adopt a safer and stable format that could maintain its institutional status, without risking its social legitimacy. The priority here (partly an effect of its centralised structure that controls more than enables curatorial autonomy) was the preservation of institutional legitimacy, rather than initiating an activist space of dissent and radical socialities.

Attempts to restructure a field of practice may encounter the mundane realities of actors and the rise of new dominant players. The anti-globalisation ethos that was incorporated into the critical art of the 1990s and the biennial circuit, for instance, gave rise to a new class of travelling curators-superstars who found professional legitimisation and self-affirmation in their claims of occupying the institution for the purpose of social transformation. This is a recurring problem around the performance of Gramscian hegemonic politics, namely the fact that the alleged

occupation of institutions of the liberal state and civil society happens in most cases by actors who hold professional positions and stakes in them. The issue here may be that the presumed potential for radical transformation through institutional occupations may conflict with the necessities of breadwinning and livelihood. Yet, this process is always marked by disturbances as the institution itself is not immovable. It does not stand still during this process of 'occupation', and as such, there can never be a straightforward incorporation or neutralisation of resistant practices, insofar as institutions and critical actors are bridged through relations. In this sense, both poles are open to transformation, rather than processes of direct appropriation and incorporation. As a case in point, one result of incorporating the lessons of New Institutionalism and *documenta X* was that the art biennial (and the mega-art exhibition in general) came to be transformed from a site of visual display to an interdisciplinary site of knowledge production, education and social engagement. The question that remains open here is, whether this transformation generates institutional encounters that are more inclusive, anti-establishment and even revolutionary (as Gramsci himself had hoped). Or, again, for whom can these encounters be all of the above things? In what ways do the self-proclaimed socially engaged scripts of a biennial hail publics that do not conform to the standards of the educated middle-class, such as working-class subjects, the poor, undocumented migrants, or to cite Benjamin, the 'oppressed'? And, in this sense, to what degree is there always already an implicit crypto-colonialism in this hailing, in the interpellation of the 'other' within the circumscribed, refined and 'higher' codes, languages and practices that infuse such events? In both cases examined in this thesis, this crypto-colonial attitude reared its head either by the barring of undocumented migrants living around AB3 or the calling on state and police intervention to protect BB7 from the 'wild' working class Brazilian kids of Pixadores and Spanish anarchists.

The rise of ideas of affect, object-oriented-ontologies and accelerationism and their subsequent incorporation in biennial cultures show how the dominant socially constructionist ethos that organised its practice since the mid-1990s gives way to different epistemological lines of departure. Osborne's recent claim that the epistemological premises of visual culture are not any more adequate to describe the contemporariness of art reflects a larger dissatisfaction with the constructionist moment upon which the new biennial based its rationale. The change in discourses is always something to be expected, as contemporary art and biennials largely live off from external change, crises and the appropriation of counter-cultural elements. As an assemblage that inextricably and recurrently absorbs and re-mediates its externality (whether this refers to sponsors, socialities or discourses), the biennial is a mode of being that essentially seeks to survive by re-purposing its environments. There is, however, a certain logic of estrangement and under which these events engulf heterogeneity. The act

of repurposing externality is also as an act of splitting, an act that estranges ordinariness and revitalises the concept of art within contemporary social landscapes.

Note

1 This excerpt is taken from a talk that Gaitán gave in the 2013 Art-Athina. His full talk can be found at the following address: www.youtube.com/watch?v=xZJcM1rSpWM.

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