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Glocal Affairs: Art Biennials in Context. Departments of History and Art History, University of Graz; Austrian Science Fund, 27.04.2015.

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Glocal Affairs: Art Biennials in Context

The symposium aimed to discuss post-Soviet art biennials in a comparative perspective. For the detailed program including abstracts and CVs of participants see:

(28.6.2015). Contemporary art biennials have sharply risen in number and importance since the 1990s. International research has attempted to analyze this exhibition model, in terms of its history, curatorial practice, the globalized context and its interplay with local specifics. The growing literature on the global biennial culture, however, has paid only marginal attention to biennials in the post-Soviet and former Eastern Bloc countries. âGlocal Affairsâ addressed this desideratum: It presented case studies from the Russian Federation, the Caucasus and Central Asia in comparison with authoritative international recurrent exhibitions which have exercised a persuasive influence on the post-Soviet space (as exemplified by *documenta* and the European biennial Manifesta). The empirical, site-specific approach was accompanied by a review on the expanding theoretical discourse.

In her introductory lecture, WALTRAUD M. BAYER (Graz) gave an overview of the contemporary art sphere in the Russian Federation which lagged behind the international development, but expanded and prospered with the millennium. For years, curators, artists and art institutions had demanded state support for contemporary art infrastructure. With Mikhail Shvydkoi, minister of culture (2000-2004), their requests were met progressively. Shvydkoi published a priority program, implemented reforms within the bureaucracy, commissioned experts, financed the preparatory work by leading Russian and foreign curators and founded the Moscow Art Biennial. From its start in 2005 to the acclaimed fifth edition of 2013, the biennial developed rapidly, both in organizational and curatorial-artistic terms. It exercised a transforming impact on the existing and emerging art institutions, on public acceptance and on the rising appreciation of Russian and global contemporary art. Backed by Russiaâs economic elite and young generation, the Moscow Art Biennial set standards. It helped establish an international contemporary art and curatorial professional canon. Other biennial formats were developed or remodeled, such as the Moscow Young Art Biennial and the locally significant biennials in the Volga region and the Urals. Bayer concluded on the political changes of President Putinâs third term and on the program of the current minister of culture Medinskii calling for a âpatriotic, orthodoxâ culture, in line with Russiaâs âunique roleâ, and defining contemporary art in a specific Russian context, beyond the âelitist, incomprehensibleâ globalized canon, beyond âabstract, cubist or defaced artâ.

HEDWIG FIJEN (Amsterdam) portrayed the tenth edition of Manifesta â M10 â held at the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg. M10 was controversially discussed, first as a result of censorship and repression in President Putinâs third term, of discriminatory laws against NGOs and the LGBT community in 2013, later amid the Ukrainian crisis, exceedingly after the crash of the Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 in 2014. Artists, curators and experts called for boycotting M10 in Russia. M10 integrated the protests into their program, inviting critical artists and curators to participate and artistic practices (such as the âMaidan Christmas treeâ positioned on

Palace Square). The venue had been negotiated to mark two anniversaries â the 250th anniversary of the Hermitage and the 20th of Manifesta. The jubilee biennial was to highlight the increasing significance of contemporary art in Russia. It was conceived to honor the tradition of the host country / host city as well as the needs of the Russian audience. Most of the art shown was exhibited in the Russian Federation for the first time. From June to October 2014, 56 collateral projects were shown â in addition to the main event at the newly opened General Staff Building, Hermitage. Given Manifestaâs profile as a learning institution educational and training programs as well as on audience development featured prominently. With the results of the Russian impact study still pending, Fijen ended on a personal assessment: For the first time, Manifesta acted in dual partnership (with the city administration and the Hermitage, an institution with no financial autonomy). Against this background, M10 faced political and institutional complexities and âdealt more with incredible bureaucratic decision-making structures and financial incapacities than with the immediate exposure to censorshipâ (Fijen).

ANASTASIA LESNIKOVA (Saint Petersburg) gave a detailed account of her experience as production coordinator of M10. She described the specifics of a contemporary art biennial format in the context of a classical museum with its main focus on research and preservation. M10 stood for a new phase in the development of contemporary art practices at the Hermitage and in St. Petersburg. Implementing this format posed a âmajor institutional challengeâ, a continual search for compromise between the city administration, the Hermitage and Manifesta. Lesnikova exemplified a range of practical issues â dealing with the coordination of venuesâ regulations, exhibition spaces and the local suppliersâ network, with the installation, maintenance and dismantling of the exhibition as well as with commissions and loan agreements following Russian law and customs regulations. She illustrated the significance of M10 for the Hermitage, particularly for the Contemporary Art Department created in 2012 and located in the General Staff building which hosted the main biennial event.

BERAL MADRA (Istanbul) portrayed the nascent biennial culture in the largely Islamic post-Soviet Caucasian and Central Asian states, both as part of the local art infrastructure and as represented in their respective national pavilions in the Venice Biennial. She also characterized exhibition formats in North Caucasus and the Crimea. During the Cold War, Turkish cultural policy did not maintain significant ties with the Caucasian and Central Asian Soviet republics (nor with the predominately Muslim areas of Yugoslavia). Soviet unofficial art of the post-war era became known in Turkey in the late 1980s. With the demise of the USSR, Ankaraâs cultural cooperation with these newly independent states started slowly, but progressed over the past years. Private Turkish foundations started to collect and support art from Central Asia, Caucasus and the Balkans in the late 1990s. After an overview of the overall regional specifics, Madra focused on Azerbaijan, on the âAluminiumâ Baku Biennial and on the Azerbaijan national pavilion in Venice, inaugurated in 2007. She addressed the growing state funding of art institutions and the rising impact of private capital on contemporary art in Azerbaijan, not least by President Alievâs family, extending to the censorship of biennial contributions abroad. Reviewing the Caucasian ethnic and religious heterogeneity, Madra noted its imprint on the regionâs current art world: on the European orientation of Georgia with its globally funded initiatives (Soros, IFA, Goethe-Institute) as opposed to the Russian orientation of Armenian culture and Azerbaijanâs relations with the Muslim world. Beyond diversity, she found parallels manifest in the region: an analogous departure from the Socialist Realist legacy to a belated, slow appreciation of the international contemporary canon with its emphasis on new media, gender positions, the post-Soviet and post-modern discourse â in contrast to the strengthening religious influence.

Apart from the post-Soviet geographical focus, the symposium included two exemplary German cases â the authoritative recurrent Kassel-based exhibition *documenta* and the research focus *Global Studies* at ZKM Î Centre for Art and Media Karlsruhe. Both have long served as empirical and theoretical reference for the young biennials in the former USSR.

In joint authorship, SABINE FLACH and MIRA FLIESCHER (Graz) presented an overview of âthe biennial dinosaur *documenta*â, from its low-budget origins as an annex to the federal garden exhibition in 1955 to its recent edition of 2012. What had been conceived as a one-time event to rehabilitate modern and avant-garde art (termed âdegenerateâ art from 1933 to 1945), soon lost its retrospective character and shaped the global discourse. It was instrumental in establishing abstract art as a global idiom (as an alternative to the totalitarian art canon) and in enlarging the concept of art, popularizing kinetic art, minimalism, Fluxus, performance art, photography, film and new media, art brut, land art, post-colonialism, ethnicity and gender. From its initial emphasis on European art, *documenta* opened up to American, Asian

and African art. It smoothed the path for strong curatorial teams and concepts, for demanding theoretical-intellectual formats, and for a novel exhibition discourse. It promoted and communicated contemporary art. It drew large audiences, setting a record with each edition, from the initial 130,000 visitors in 1955 to 860,000 in 2012. It established itself as the leading international perennial forum for contemporary art â with venues in Germany, and from 2009 on also abroad.

ANDREA BUDDENSIEG (Karlsruhe) reviewed the history of ZKM. From its start in 1989, the art and research institution focused on various genres in a global perspective, notably on electronics, acoustics, digital and visual media, and on music. Initially without a permanent base, it moved to a listed remodeled World War I ammunition factory in 1997. ZKM runs two museums and 20 exhibitions annually. It operates residencies, institutes and laboratories for scientific research and artistic production. The presentation centered on the ZKM research programs GAM (Global Art + Museum) and Global Studies. In cooperation with international partners, GAM provided a forum on the transformation of contemporary art, its institutions, audiences and markets, on curatorial and theoretical issues, spanning five continents, from 2006 to 2012. It published collective findings widely. The results were exhibited at ZKM (âThe Global Contemporary: Art Worlds After 1989â). Global Studies replaced GAM: It interprets biennials as a âmirror of the transformation triggered by globalizationâ. Their proliferation has âdeveloped many different discoursesâ and led to the âinstitutionalization of the formatâ. ZKM created a data visualization scheme. It documents the spread of the biennial system which has produced âa network of institutions and curators who seek cultural identity in regional art and its position in a global exchange of artists and art conceptsâ (Buddensieg). Findings were presented at an international conference at ZKM in 2014, held in cooperation with the newly founded International Biennial Association (IBA). Much of the expertise benefits GLOBALE, the major ZKM show to run for 300 days from June 2015 on.

The joint empirical and theoretical expertise accumulated by ZKM research since 2006 is rare. For the post-Soviet context, analogous primary and secondary reference data material is lacking. In a synthesis of the symposium, Buddensieg referred to biennials as a major transformative force in art, museums and the market as well as an engine of institutional and social change. Biennials were started for a variety of reasons: In the late nineteenth century, Venice Biennale was founded by artists as a marketing format; *documenta* was inaugurated as a post-war educational program in the wake of *denazification*. Biennials are increasingly discussed in economic sectors, as in tourism and urban branding (Buddensieg). The European Biennial Manifesta was conceived as âa learning institutionâ (with educational, training, publishing programs, and internships) in response to the epochal changes of 1989 (Fijen). The Moscow Art Biennial was to integrate Russian art and the emerging civil society after decades of isolation into the global discourse (Bayer). Istanbul Biennale developed as a progressive format in the 1980s (Madra). In regard to the Muslim world, Madra stressed the relevance of biennials in (semi)authoritarian regimes. Biennials function as experimental platforms, showcasing an alternative discourse and a reflective approach. In the long run, they challenge the established art and museum canon and the sociopolitical discourse.

Conference overview:

Session I: Russia and Europe: Reflecting on a Challenging Discourse

Chaired by Alexandra Wachter (Vienna)

Sabine Flach (Graz), Welcoming address

Waltraud M. Bayer (Graz), Art Biennials in the Russian Federation

Hedwig Fijen (Amsterdam), Manifesta 10: The European Biennial in St. Petersburg

Anastasia Lesnikova (St. Petersburg), Daily Operations of Manifesta 10 at the State Hermitage, St. Petersburg

Session II: Biennials as a Global Format: Expanding the Artistic Geographical Map

Chaired by Mira Fliescher (Graz)

Beral Madra (Istanbul), An Unfinished Mosaic: Two Decades of Contemporary Art Scenes in Turkey, Caucasus and Central Asia

Sabine Flach (Graz), The documenta in Kassel â an Overview

Andrea Buddensieg (Karlsruhe), The Role of Biennials in Global Art

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