Beyond the *Giardini* of the Biennale: Some considerations on a supposed model¹ Sara Catenacci

THE "MOTHER" OF BIENNIALS

In the recent debate on the proliferation of large-scale, international exhibitions, mention is often made of the Venice International Art Exhibition, referring to it as the "mother" of this kind of event in order to explain how the format and characteristics of the successive exhibitions are shaped "in large part through their lineage to the Venice Biennale".²

Considered "the oldest, largest, and best attended of the regular international exhibitions", its name has been inextricably linked to this kind of event, such that the term "biennale" has become a category used to distinguish this type of exhibition from others, regardless of their frequency. Size and scale, the temporary nature of the event, its regular occurrence, its exclusive focus on contemporary art, the international scope of its content and profile, and its close links to the local area and promoters, are the distinguishing features of biennials; features which also contain some of the internal contradictions of the event.

Based on the model of 19th century exhibitions where nations were invited, the Venice Biennale belongs to that "family" of exhibitions whose roots and character are to be found in the dialectical relationship between the national and the international, the dual and parallel platforms of presentation which generate that transformational process from the particular (national) to the uniform, internationally approved, typical of the Modernism so well described by Miško Šuvakovič.⁴

This approach emerges in the traditional site of the exhibition, enclosed and set apart from everyday city life, a site which only comes to life during the exhibition and is so interlinked with it as to become known as the Biennale *Giardini*: a motley collection of national edifices built around a central pavilion.⁵

This was the core of the Venice Biennale at least up to the mid '90s. What happens, though, if a series of haphazard factors, old problems that will not go away, the changed global situation which shows an ever-increasing interest in this kind of event, gradually pushes the Biennale to modify its rigid format? What is referred to when speaking of the "mother" of the biennials? To the newly born Biennale at the turn of the 20th century; to the collection of national artistic representations exploited for political purposes by Fascism; to the exhibitions of the post-World War Two reconstruction era; to the decentralized and interdisciplinary events of the '70s; to the theme-based editions and the *Aperto* section of the '80s? Or to the event currently presented in the city of Venice?

These are not easy questions to answer but to do so we need to explain why it is important to ask them, and where to find possible answers.

Beginning with the timing of these events, a curious linguistic misunderstanding helps throw some light on the subject. Reading a description in English of the Venice Biennale as the "first perennial international salon of contemporary art", 6 it is fascinating to note the erroneous yet interesting shift in meaning which a superficial translation in Italian of the adjective "perennial" as "perenne" can cause. If, drawn by the phonetic affinity, the intention was to define it as the first "perenne" international salon of contemporary art, the Italian adjective would bestow it with an everlasting quality as well as a spirit independent of circumstantial will and events.

It is amusing to think that an exhibition founded by a well-defined group of people, with a formula and content which varies from edition to edition, can be considered "perennial". Yet this banal misunderstanding is thought provoking.

Considering the Venice Biennale over the whole of its long life implies reviewing historic moments, specific actions and decisions but also standard practices repeated over the years. These, over time, have led to the idea that the structure of the exhibition, despite its

constantly changing nature, remains unaltered. The Biennale appears to be an autonomous entity, independent of its surroundings and of the changes made in each edition. Whatever happens, it is remounted every two years and so on.⁷

The interests involved, clearly not only cultural ones, which guarantee the repetition of the event; the continuity of a practice not subject to change thanks to its powerful promotional and legitimizing presence, invest the regular replication of this presentational model with an air of inevitability. A standard which, on one hand, makes the Biennale easily recognizable and, on the other, endows it with a strong attractive force.

In this intricate overlapping of haphazard events and long-term processes, and bearing in mind the continual evolution of a lasting event, if we wish to determine when the exhibition significantly changed its *modus operandi*, we should not only consider the facts and declared intentions (managerial, institutional and curatorial) but also those factors which can shape a practice consolidated over time.

To see beyond the mere "spectacular" dimension, the field of study can be narrowed to focus on the internal workings of the event. Without pretending to be able give definitive answers, its scope is to provide the basis of study which hopefully is able to extend beyond its original boundaries.

MOVING THE BOUNDARIES

One of the many possible ways to view the Venice Biennale – is through its spaces. Here we are referring not just to the architecture and the places occupied by works of art or used by the artists during the exhibition months but, above all, to the "areas" of attraction of the event, each different in their reciprocal relationships; in the ways the artistic projects are realized; of the way they relate to the city itself, and how they are the presented to the public.

In particular, investigating those processes which have forced the Biennale to move away from its conformation of modernist "expo", the occasions when it was forced to expand out of its traditional site at the *Giardini di Castello*, are important: its boundaries were blurred and tangibly merged with the city.

During the '90s this move became a pressing need as the *Giardini* were already at saturation point – the last pavilion was built in 1995⁸ – and could not allow the participation of new countries. The area was also no longer appropriate for an international exhibition having to compete from the end of the '80s with an ever increasing number of rivals.⁹

As with everything that happens in the Biennale, the expansion of the exhibition beyond its original site took place in the wake of problems and earlier attempts to solve them (the off-site exhibitions in the '70s;¹⁰ the opening of the *Corderie dell'Arsenale* with the 1st International Architecture Exhibition in 1980; the *Aperto* shows from 1986 to 1993). What happened was not only based on declared good intentions, but also, more discreetly, succumbing to more practical and inevitable needs.

The re-launch of the event, through institutional reforms in 1998 which gave it private legal autonomy, was marked by the grant of large-scale state funding and the concession of the south-east *Arsenale*, the *Corderie* and the warehouses of the *Tese delle Vergini*. ¹¹

Without causing a major stir as of 1995 those nations deprived of their own pavilion could officially participate by independently finding an alternative location in the city. This was officially recognized in the 1997 exhibition regulations and defined in the terms in force since 1999.¹²

If on one hand the Biennale acquired an important new venue in the *Arsenale* buildings, thus becoming one of the institutions actively supporting the project of redevelopment of this large urban area, ¹³ on the other hand the number of participating nations increased and just became part of the countless so-called "collateral" events spread across – and even beyond – the city. ¹⁴

The extension of the sites and the proposals, which Achille Bonito Oliva noted and expressed as the development of the "spirit of flight from the *Giardini*", ¹⁵ collocating the new structure of the exhibition with the experiences of *Aperto* '80 and his "mosaic" Biennale of 1993, for others emphasized the phenomenon as predominance of the alternative over the official:

dans tout Venise où une trentaine d'espaces accueillent des manifestations de pays dépourvus de pavillons, l'autre biennale, la biennale officielle se diluée. L'off recouvre l'in et le remplace. ¹⁶

The "in" Michel Nuridsany was referring to in 1999 were the *Giardini*, as opposed to the new venues which nonetheless could not be considered unofficial. Those events in Venice taking place during the exhibition months which presented themselves *a latere* or as explicit alternatives to the Biennale, ¹⁷ should not be confused with the national participations which have no historical pavilion. These became part of the exhibition through the same channels as the countries present in the *Giardini*; by formal invitation or by applying through their respective government bodies. ¹⁸

The concession granted by the Biennale to reduce the shortage of exhibition space had in fact transferred part of its original model of national invitation to an environment to which it did not belong.

This change and the related possibilities which reference is made, since the arrival of national representations throughout the city, repeatedly and exponentially increasing with each successive edition, ¹⁹ creates new challenges for the internal organization of the event, and becomes one of those "places" where the structure of the exhibition is susceptible to even minimal change.

THE NATIONS IN THE CITY

As exhibitions independent of their content, biennials are national status symbols. The Venice Biennale, born over a century ago, is a crossover between a salon and a universal expo. For years the national pavilions have seemed outdated. Now, new countries vie with each other to have national representation somewhere, anywhere, in Venice [...].²⁰

Thus concluded Anna Detheridge in her talk for the symposium Where art worlds meet: multiple modernities and the global salon (Venice, 2005). The phenomenon of the proliferation of participating nations outside the Biennale venues began to gain importance and become part of the debate on the exhibition itself.

The nations which set up their exhibition in the city are nonetheless still seen as secondary to the *Arsenale* and the *Giardini* sites. Not just because they are off the established exhibition itinerary, scattered about and less easily located, but because they are outside the *Giardini*, they are seen as external to the official Biennale itself. Plus, as Marylène

Malbert points out, it is mostly the newcomer nations that exhibit in the city, countries outside the Europe – America axis, the historical protagonists of the international art scene presented in Venice.²¹

Considering the pavilions in the city as a whole rather than as discrete events, helps to identify noteworthy characteristics and to view them as an official part of the Biennale, in other words a third pole of attraction even if different and less evident than the other two.²²

Reflecting upon this internal map, on the ways the exhibition is structured within the city of Venice, from the outset it is possible to highlight how the internal/external rapport with the main sites should not be underestimated. One example was the reticence of the organization, before the amendments to the regulations, to accept as participants – and therefore as competitors for awards –works and artists who displayed outside their own pavilions. One episode stands out: the United States 1964 delegation was forced at the last moment to move some of Robert Rauschenberg's works to the pavilion in the *Giardini*, until then displayed in the ex-Consulate (*Casa Artom*), in order to gain official recognition for the artist's award.²³

From the mid '90s, the concession to countries to realize their own displays independently of the availability of space at the Biennale, has led to a new concept of participation at the exhibition. By admitting the presence of a larger number of countries, it has opened up the event to countries previously absent or less frequently represented.

The pavilions which proliferate in the city of Venice, arising from varied causes and needs, with a multiplicity of characteristics and almost chaotic development, all have one common element: they all share the same, peculiar condition of being "pavilions" devoid of the architectural edifice they owe the name to. Their presence, not being in a place set aside exclusively for an artistic event but hosted in buildings, churches, institutions, each with their own history, provides potential for change in terms of more contact and exchange with the surroundings and at the same time increases the margin of autonomy of the various countries with respect to the decisions of the Biennale.

Without going into the details of the complex situation created by the increase of these presences in the city and leaving aside a list of individual examples, some key points emerge which command our attention and which cannot but increase the ambiguities of these external pavilions. Above all it should be noted that these participations, not being the owners of the venue where they exhibit, can be defined as national pavilions by virtue of the entry process of the exhibition but are less well defined in their look and often in the content. Their precarious nature, the need to experiment and adapt, fuelled by the constant desire to be present, serve only to underline the difficulty they face in building an identity which seeks to emulate the architecture of the *Giardini*. These very same factors instead facilitate an external dialogue, thus destabilizing their "pavilion" nature, making them more fragile, less established and harder to manage but also more open to new prospects.

It is this propensity to openness, so powerfully present in the external pavilions, which differentiates them from their historical counterparts. A propensity deriving from the relative newness of the participants, not conditioned by agreements and practices dating back to the past of the countries and of the Biennale. It becomes perhaps easier and more immediate for the site-less countries to explore new ways of exhibiting, to attempt to rethink from within their role as "ambassadors", whether to accept it and, if so, on what terms. Something more difficult to put into practice in the *Giardini*, where it would be difficult to improve on the atmosphere of lightness and spectacle generated by the structure of the "park" and the exoticism of some of the buildings.²⁴

A second and nonetheless important consequence of not having a building to house an exhibition is the chance to search for and choose the most suitable place to hold it. A freedom not possessed by those countries owning pavilions which are buildings of historical value and so cannot be restructured, unless they choose to expand their participation outside the *Giardini*.

This opportunity however forces these national delegations to evaluate not only the buildings which host them, but also the social and urban aspects of Venice, creating a different rapport with visitors and simple passers-by, as the exhibitions organized in the city are free.

The countries with no fixed venue then have to make choices about where and how to position themselves in the "geography" of the Biennale; perhaps opting for a more favorable position in terms of visibility, as can be seen in the exhibitions along the main tourist routes: around St. Mark's Square, between there and the *Giardini di*

Castello, between the Ponte delle Accademie and Palazzo Grassi. Or they may decide to position themselves away from the tourist routes, in less famous buildings, more difficult to find but perhaps more appropriate for their events.

Another problem arising from the way countries arrange their exhibitions in historical buildings, churches, private and public institutions is linked to the relationship they establish with the unique and exceptional context of Venice. It is easy to exploit the backdrop of Venice for purposes of prestige, a scenario able to confer the same aura of the *Giardini*. We can argue, say, that a method of presentation is maintained in the other host buildings in Venice which isolates the events from the concrete world of the present and from the city's past, transforming these environments to the architectural equivalent of the white rooms of a modern pavilion.

Another practice which tends to consolidate the "national pavilion" model in the city context is to enter into long term hire agreements with public and private institutions to ensure better continuity over time and above all to gain recognition of the host building as its exhibition venue.²⁵ This in contrast to the exhibitors who through artistic or curatorial choice, seek a more direct rapport with their environment, based on creating institutional relationships, the direct involvement of local inhabitants, the urban context of Venice, etc. Or they exploit the international nature of the event and the greater flexibility of a context outside the historic sites in order to become one of the many points of reference in a wider net of intercultural dialogue.²⁶

Although only one aspect in the overall complexity of the Biennale system, the singular situation of the countries outside the *Giardini*, divided between a desire for visibility and new design opportunities, provides an interesting mutation, extension and destabilization of the "national pavilion" structure (both physical and conceptual). It highlights the marked capillary dimension of the exhibition and it can use this "porous" nature to become a space of exchange and experimentation or remain in a position of stalemate and repetition of a standard unchanged over the years.

To identify and show how numerous these "ambiguous places" are in both the Biennale's past and present can help overcome the perception of a defined and definitive model. If "biennials" can still be a format for an artistic, cultural, political and social event which has not yet exhausted its resources and potential, it can only serve to better understand what is reputed to be their "mother" and to question again the parameters which normally define it.

- ¹ Text from master's degree dissertation: Oltre i Giardini. L'Esposizione Internazionale di Venezia e i suoi nuovi spazi, 1998-2004. L'Arsenale, i padiglioni in città. Ca' Foscari University of Venice, Ac. Yr. 2008-2009.
- ² Filipovic, E. (2006). The global white cube. In Vanderlinden, B. & Filipovic, E. (Eds.), The Manifesta decade: Debates on contemporary art exhibition and Biennials in post-wall Europe (p. 65). Cambridge-Brussels: Roomade-MIT Press. For reflections on this text: Greenberg, R., Ferguson, B. W. & Nairne, S. (1996). Thinking about exhibitions. London-New York: Routledge; MJ-Manifesta Journal. Journal of contemporary curatorship, 2 (winter 2003-spring 2004); Pastor Roces, M. (2004). Crystal Palace Exhibitions. In Mosquera, G. & Fisher, J. (Eds.), Over here: International perspectives on art and culture (pp. 234-245). New York-Cambridge: New Museum of Modern Art-MIT Press.
- ³ Greenberg, R., Ferguson, B. W. & Nairne, S. (2006). Mapping International Exhibitions. In Vanderlinden, B. & Filipovic, E. (Eds.) (2006) (p. 47).
- ⁴ Šuvakovič, M. (2002, January). The ideology of exhibition: On the ideologies of Manifesta. In *PlatformaSCCA*, 3. Ljubljana: Center for Contemporary Arts. Or: http://www.ljudmila.org/scca/platforma3/suvakoviceng.htm
- ⁵ See Romanelli, G. D. (1975). *Le sedi della Biennale*. Venezia: La Biennale di Venezia-Archivio storico delle arti contemporanee; Mulazzani, M. (2004). *I padiglioni della Biennale di Venezia*. Milano: Electa.
- ⁶ Vanderlinden, B & Filipovic, E. (Eds.) (2006) (p. 65).
- ⁷ The International Art Exhibition in Venice did not take place during the two World Wars (1918; 1944-1946). In 1910 the exhibition changed its recurrence to every even year, while in 1993 this was changed again to odds years in order to match the centenary of its foundation: 1895-1995.
- ⁸ For the pressures applied by Korea to build its own pavilion in an area which was declared unsuitable for building see: Malbert, M. (2006). Biennale de Venise: art et géostrategie. In Vanci-Perahim, M. (Ed.), Atlas et les territoires du regard. Le géographie de l'histoire de l'art (XIX-XX^e siècles). Actes du colloque international organisé par le CIRHAC (université Paris I) les 25-27 mars 2004 (pp. 301-315). Paris: Publication de la Sorbonne.
- ⁹ "Dominated by politics and commissions, the International exhibition in Venice gradually lost ground to its great rival, documenta at Kassel [...]. Since several year, many biennials have shown on the world stage, [...], and faster in reacting than the Italian *mamma* at the Giardini." Szeemann, H. (1999). Mano libera. In *Art e Dossier*, 147, 8-13. For a cronology of the proliferation of biennials between 1989 and 2006, see: Vanderlinden, B. & Filipovic, E. (2006). One day every wall will fall: selected chronology of art and politics after 1989. In Vanderlinden, B. & Filipovic, E. (Eds.) (2006) (pp. 20-44).
- ¹⁰ A good example was the exhibition curated by Harald Szeemann, *Le macchine celibi/Juggesellenmaschinen*, September 7-October 30, 1975, held at the *Magazzini del Sale* alle *Zattere* in the in-between years of the Venice Biennale. See also: (1974, September-December) Arte architettura e città. L'esperienza della Biennale di Venezia. Atti del convegno

promosso dall'IN/ARCH di Lombardia, Milano, October 1974 – papers and seminars by Luigi Venegoni, Roberto Guiducci, Giulio Carlo Argan, Renato Barilli, Vittorio Gregotti, Alik Cavaliere. Andrea Villani. Città e società.

¹¹ The law 19 of 29/01/1998 (GU no. 34, 11/02/1998), transformed the Venice Biennale from a quango into a cultural company. This changed its administrational orientation and gave the exhibition a standing as a private entity. The company had significant financial support thanks to a particular law for the protection of Venice and from a law concerning buildings for theatre and other cultural events; these laws allowed the exhibition to open to the public the areas of the *Arsenale*, given in concession by the Italian Navy on the 08/31/1998. For accounts regarding the re-launch of the exhibition: Panzeri, L. (1999). Il pluriministro della Biennale. *Il giornale della Biennale*, supplement to *Il giornale dell'arte*, 17 (178); Vagheggi, P. (1998, July 19). Ma la Cina è sempre più vicina. In *La Repubblica*; Storr, R. (1999). Prince of Tides. In *Artforum International*, 37 (8), 160-165.

¹² XVLII Esposizione Internazionale d'Arte, 15 giugno-9 novembre 1997. Regolamento (1997). Capo II, Art. 5. 48° Esposizione Internazionale d'Arte. Regolamento (1999). Artt. 2 and 5.

¹³ Thanks to a ministerial grant of funds (PRUSST), in 1998 the city of Venice started the *Progetto Arsenale* (Arsenale project); its aim was to functionally reorganize the area together with the collaboration of all the adherent organisations. In 2001 the *Documento Direttore*, a document which gave the details of the new functions of the area was then approved. In 2002, for the *Progetto Arsenale*, a committee *Comitato dIntesa per il Progetto Arsenale (Agenzia del Demanio, Comune di Venezia, Marina Militare, Ministero per i beni e le attività culturali*) was constitued and a company, the "società Arsenale di Venezia spa (Agenzia del Demanio 51%, Comune di Venezia 49%)" devoted to the improvement of that urban area, was founded.

¹⁴ In 2001 the *Istituto Italo Latino Americano* (IILA) installed its own pavilion at the Center for

Culture and Visual Arts "Le Venezie" in Treviso. This decentralizing choice saw as a consequence a lower number of visitors and protests from the 31 exhibiting artists. Pouchard, E. (2001, July 4). Biennale a Treviso: artisti sudamericani snobbati. In *Il gazzettino*.

¹⁵ Bonito Oliva, A. (1999, June 14). La Biennale delle distanze. In *La Repubblica*.

¹⁶ Nuridsany, M. (1999, June 22). La biennale officielle submergée. In *La vie des arts*. See also: Vetrocq, M. E. (1999). The Venice Biennale. Reformed, Renewed, Redeemed. In *Art in America*, 87 (9), 82-93.

¹⁷ Considering the great attraction of the Biennale, many cultural institutions and private citizens organize exhibitions during those months during which there are events in Venice. These collateral events can be included in the Biennale catalogue and, for payment, use its logo. Otherwise it is possible to be independent from the Biennale, as an alternative to its events.

¹⁸ To be recognized by the Italian Government is a condition for participating countries at the Biennale. For this reason there are under the label of "collateral events" pavilions of nations not recognized by the Government (i.e. Taiwan) or of regional and ethnic groups, as: "Venice Hong Kong. Magic at street level", Ex Musicanti, Santa Apollonia, Castello, 2001, "Further artists from Wales", Ex Birrerie, Giudecca, 2003, "The nature of things. Artists fron Northen Ireland", Istituto provinciale per l'Infanzia, Santa Maria della Pietà, Castello, 2005, "Scotland and Venice 2005: selective memory", San Polo 3053, campo San Rocco, Sant'Elena, parco delle Rimembranze, Castello, 2005.

¹⁹ In 1995 there were 14 exhibiting nations, both with or without their own pavilion, which decided to exhibit in Venice. In 2001 there were 21, in 2007 they become 33.

²⁰ Detheridge, A. (2007). Cultural infrastructure as a form of art. In Storr R. (Ed.), Where

art worlds meet: Multiple modernities and the global salon. International symposium (p. 75). Venezia: Marsilio.

- ²¹ Malbert (2006) (pp. 301-302).
- ²² The considerations briefly listed here referring to participants with spaces external to the *Giardini* were preceded by chronological and locational mapping (1986-2007).
- ²³ Rylands, P. & Di Martino, E. (1991). Flying the flag for art. The United States and the Venice Biennale 1895-1991 (pp. 139-150). Richmond, Virginia: Wyldbore & Wolferstan Ldt. The Biennale always preferred that all the recognized partecipating countries would exhibit in their own areas; this meant installing in the Central Pavilion or in provisional buildings (such as the Dardi and Cellini pavilions) the exhibitions of countries without a pavilion. This approach explains the continuous rethinking of the Giardini area in order to respond to new requests; examples are the many projects designed for the Central Pavilion and the whole area: the national competition in 1957, the projects designed by the municipal urban planning office in collaboration with Carlo Scarpa (1963, 1964), the commission to Louis Kahn from the Azienda autonoma di soggiorno e turismo through Giuseppe Mazzariol (1968), the competition organized by the Architecture Section in 1988. None of these have ever been realized.
- ²⁴ There have been many artistic projects inside the pavilions at the *Giardini* which have tackled its structure: Antoni Muntadas, "On Translations. I Giardini. Padiglione Spagnolo. 51^a Esposizione Internazionale d'Arte", 2005. "Santiago Sierra. Pabellón de España. 50^a Bienal de Venecia/Spanish Pavilion. 50th Venice Biennale", 2003. Hans Haacke's project "Germania" for the German Pavilion and Ilya Kabakov's "Red Pavilion" (1993). See also the projects of artists invited directly by the curator: Alessandro Petti, Sandi Hilal, "Stateless Nation", 2003; Rirkrit Tiravanija, "The First Royal Thai Pavilion", 1999.
- ²⁵ The first cases of national exhibitions outside the *Giardini* relate to those countries who own a pavilion but doubled, some times even tripled, their exhibition presence. A policy followed mostly during the mid '80s. (France: 1986-1995); Holland 1988, 2001; Switzerland: 1988-1997, 2001-today; Belgium; 1990, 1995; etc.).
- ²⁶ Among the many we think it appropriate to mention: "Argentina. Leandro Erlich/ Graciela Sacco. 49ª Esposizione Internazionale d'Arte La Biennale di Venezia", Fondaco dei Tedeschi, San Marco 5554, 2001; "Laboratorio della Vigna. Ireland at the 50th Venice Biennale", Scuola di San Pasquale, Campo della Confraternita, Castello 2786, 2003; "Pavilion of Bosnia and Herzegovina. 50th International Exhibition La Biennale di Venezia", Palazzo Zorzi, UNESCO Office in Venice ROSTE (Regional Bureau for Science in Europe), Castello 4930, 2003; "Villa Lituania. Nomeda & Gediminas Urbonas. Lithuanian Pavilion: 52nd International Art Exhibition La Biennale di Venezia", Ludoteca S. Maria Ausiliatrice, Castello 450, 2007.

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