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Mediating spaces: some considerations on the spaces of large-scale art exhibitions¹

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Abstract

Large-scale temporary art exhibitions such as biennials present special characteristics which in turn illuminate broader questions of art practice, curatorship and cultural management, as well as cultural and social affect. This article considers the third Berlin biennale for contemporary art, focusing its initial discussion on questions of exhibition space including ‘hub’ forms that attempt to break from conventional ‘art-viewing’ practices. The article further considers the relationship of specific exhibition sites with prior social, cultural and economic histories to the reception of art, inquiring what is at stake in the semiological management of ‘sites of representation’, with particular focus on three Berlin locations. Contrasting ‘neo-liberal’ approaches to large exhibitions structured as commodities in major sites such as the Palais de Tokyo in Paris or London’s Tate Modern, with less consumerist and more participative approaches, the analysis considers alternatives to current practice on the part of cultural managers and curators, and debates what is at stake for cultural politics in developing modes of art practice and exhibition.

Keywords

art biennials
exhibition space
sites of representation
temporary art venues
autonomous art zones
site-specificity

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Foreword

A large-scale exhibition, like a biennial or a triennial, seems nonetheless to be short-lived. One week after the opening it is already past, delivered to dusty archives. Debates included.

Despite certain critical/technical positions which praise the logic of ‘writing faster than editing’, ‘doing faster than thinking’, and so on, it is nonetheless useful to afford a time for reflection; to choose to leave a period of time between one’s own experience of an exhibition and the discussion about it, as a reflective tool for certain insights; that is, the nurturing of a necessary critical distance in order to achieve a worthwhile discussion. Art reviews and critiques are subject to an ever-faster death, with impressions and heated controversies about exhibitions and events forgotten after a few weeks, never to be considered again. In this sense, setting a longer time frame allows one to look back with a clear mind on these experiences, and thus propose a critique a posteriori, which can foreground a greater degree of reflection and debate about future directions.

We consider here as a starting point an archetypal exhibition of this kind, the third Berlin biennale for contemporary art (bb3, 14 February–18 April 2004). It is archetypal of the conceptual frame adopted by its artistic director, the German curator Ute Meta Bauer; an archetype, specifically, of the sites used as exhibition venues; of audience participation and reaction; and ultimately of the aggressive campaign (with only a few exceptions) carried out against it by the international press, both specialized and general.

The anticipated goal of the third Berlin biennale for contemporary art was to take local contexts and circumstances, and the art production resulting from them, and also their relations to similar structures elsewhere – in short, to adopt Berlin as a site of reference and a frame for discussion – and to condense all of these within a temporary arrangement as a ‘structure of interlocking discourses’² (namely the social, cultural, political and economic relations [re]presented in the biennale).

² So defined in the introductory essay of ‘complex berlin’, publication-catalogue of the third Berlin biennale of contemporary art.

The 50 works of the third Berlin biennale were selected on the basis of their potential to reflect on the situation of Berlin as a physical, social and political environment, and to mirror and further project these considerations onto other realities, in order to enhance discussions in other places and situations beyond Berlin. To realize this programme, three locations were chosen as spaces of mediation: the Martin Gropius Bau in Kreuzberg; the Arsenal cinema; and the KW Institute for Contemporary Art in Berlin-Mitte. These venues – as registered in the introduction to the catalogue – represent diverse epochs and neuralgic zones in the history of Berlin, and also varying degrees and levels of cultural and political establishment.

The aim of this paper is, first, to discuss the way in which the general concept of the third Berlin biennale has related to these spaces, particularly in relation to the proposed ‘interlocking’ and overlapping of discourses; and secondly, to initiate a discussion about the different approach to space required when considering exhibition venues. Permanent spaces for artistic productions and showcases like museums, and temporary arrangements for artistic activities like biennials and cyclic large-scale exhibitions, do require a different approach from other events when it comes to space. This article proposes to look at temporary and permanent exhibition venues not merely as physical sites, but in terms of a notion of places, non-places and other-places; and so trigger an understanding of the specific locality of the art venue by way of the investment in the value of social relations.

Art theory being the true domain of this essay, the focus here is not to analyse the practical, logistical and political reasons behind the choice of venues. The intention is rather to activate a nucleus of critical response and discussion on the nature of the locations that produce, display, and in general engage with artistic practices.

Hubs and venues: an introduction

The bb3 curator’s statement introduces the concept of *hubs*, which can be defined as specially designed spaces working as nodal points or areas, in or around which the artistic positions, demonstrated as a series of works, are presented. The works produced for the

exhibitions insisted on the relevance of the artistic statement for the wider perception of contexts; while calling on the public to participate autonomously. The incorporation of older works deliberately produced a connection between early-1990s Berlin cosmology with the 'here and now'. (Less creatively, older works were also integrated for budget reasons.) The hubs – basically 'thematic distributors' – were named: MIGRATION; URBAN CONDITIONS; SONIC SCAPES; FASHION AND SCENES; and OTHER CINEMA. They were produced by cultural workers, which can be read both as curators and artists. The metaphor of the *hub*, borrowed from the language of information technology, refers to a distributor of data within a computer network, and from that usage, to a centre for air traffic.

The connection of the hubs to the artistic works produces a 'neighbourhood' that enables an audience from all walks of life to establish cross-references between the works exhibited, to raise questions, to see the contexts differently, and to discover their own links in the subject matter of the contributions.³

The hub metaphor was spatially presented and 'unfolded' in the three physical sites, each with its own topography and history.

We will not engage here with the endless highs and lows of the debate about 'what' has to be shown in an exhibition such as a biennial, nor, strictly speaking, with the question of mediation requirements between artistic positions and the audience (although this topic is not ignored). Nor do we address here in general terms the curatorial choice of the 'hub' concept (as distinct from specific thematic or narrative approaches); the former constituting a courageous position but one which can be acknowledged as in need of further 'tuning'.

This first part of the essay discusses the relation – and consequently the mediation that did or did not happen – between the bb3 concept and the space(s) or the 'lived places' where the concept was enacted. It also discusses how the configuration of the spaces (the

‘local contexts and circumstances’, translated here into the physical site of the city and its buildings) had affected or even prejudiced the (re)presentation and the nature of the artistic contributions as a ‘structure of interlocking discourses’ – and did not simply constitute the neutral terrain of reference for the latter.

In a city like Berlin or in any other city hosting an event like a biennial, the relation of the art event with the local area is the main key to reading broader international contexts, not only for the visiting audience, but also for the residents of the city itself. The bb3 attempted precisely to construct this dialogue, which was well worthwhile considering the different characteristics and aspects of Berlin, but partially failed to convert the concept into physical settings suitable for carrying such responsibility. Potential liabilities of the physical sites were not sufficiently evaluated in all their multi-faceted aspects: if, on the one hand, the historical symbolism of the venues was taken into account, then, on the other, the (predominant) contemporary specificity of the buildings used for the bb3 was somehow overlooked: thus the mistranslation of the concept.

It is arguable that especially large-scale international exhibitions have to deal with a variety of venues not intended to host such events, hence the need to negotiate new semiotic paradigms and political discordances when it comes to concretely organizing an exhibition. But what if the venues necessarily have to deal with the city itself hosting the event, as for the Berlin biennale? Is there anything wrong in accepting the architectural heritage of a building, discussing it openly through the artworks themselves, eventually subverting the original significance if necessary?

The bb3 team claimed a commitment to positioning the event according to these precepts, including sites of historical meaning, representation and debate. The KW Institute for Contemporary Art, the site of a former margarine factory, was meant to foreground questions of production; the museum architecture of the Martin-Gropius-Bau was intended to confront questions of representation and mechanisms of inclusion/exclusion; and the third venue, the cinema Arsenal, was meant to provide a forum for alternative and

³ From the introductory essay of ‘complex berlin’, *ibid.*

critical film production. ‘This Berlin biennial, with its non-linear and discursive nature and its wide variety of temporal and spatial presentation formats, is a transitory space of interlocking processes of communication’.⁴

As a matter of fact, the only work that addressed specifically the venue in which it was exhibited, and critically questioned it in relation to the bb3 ‘interlocking of discourses’, was strictly not an artwork, but one of the five hubs itself, namely the MIGRATION space, designed by the German film-maker Hito Steyerl. It specifically addressed the history and the political embodiment of the Martin-Gropius-Bau, and related it to international contexts, working more as an introduction space than a distributor of themes. Besides this exception, no other of the 50 works picked up this possibility of cross-reference, which would have been essential for the functioning of the third Berlin biennale as an overall frame of reference: despite the original claim, the exhibition as a whole could have taken place in any building of the German capital. And to some extent, even in any other city.

In Berlin there are far too few ‘prestige’ spaces being made available for contemporary art to make its mark, indeed few fully suitable: a shortage, that is, of spaces where a discourse ‘of’ (belonging to) contemporary art can be explored. Even the supposed plentiful availability of buildings within the urban texture of Berlin is a kind of myth, since everything is immediately claimed for another purpose. There are spaces ‘about’ contemporary art, where the issues are not explored and discussed, but simply presented for consumption. ‘Prestige’ art spaces in Berlin – for instance, Hamburger Bahnhof, Neue Nationale Galerie, and the same Martin-Gropius-Bau – are often labouring on frozen issues, on productions and collections of contemporary art works that are largely commodified, sometimes ‘bought’ as a package from some other institutions, in Germany or abroad. And this does not do any good for contemporary art discourse in Berlin. In an interview with M. Gisbourne,⁵ London-turned-Berlin art critic and curator, this issue of speaking ‘about’ a content, an exhibition, or a topic (be it the content of a show or an

⁴ *ibid.*

⁵ Conversation with M. Gisbourne and S. Goltz during an interview on 29 July 2004.

article in a newspaper) rather than speaking ‘of’ it, has been raised and discussed. In such a neuralgic zone for neo-liberalism like London, where everything produced has to make its way either on the news or on the market – or both – what is debated is not the content of an exhibition in the Tate Modern, South London Gallery, or ICA, but the exhibition event itself. And this is true even for underground and grassroots venues like Space Triangle or Dalston Underground Studios. Today’s commodifying and neo-liberal approach toward art in London is not only widely accepted, but fostered and sustained in other parts of the United Kingdom and Europe.

And there are all the premises for this to happen in Berlin also: the latest confirmation of this trend is the Flick Collection saga, where a huge heritage accumulated with forced labour during the Nazi period has been turned – by its last heir – into a contemporary art collection, and is now represented as a positive cultural value in a public space, with the blessing of former Chancellor Schroeder and various state Ministers. It seems that what matters is the cultural event as a whole, and not what the event embodies, means, and represents in the context where it takes place. When it comes to contemporary art exhibition, the importance of speaking about it as ‘object’ (what and whom the practice and theory presented are dealing with, and why) and not as ‘subject’ (the event as a whole, regardless of the relation between producer, mediator and consumer) is underestimated if not entirely ignored. One must seek and respect critical distance as essential to produce and develop meaning, or else the whole experience of the cultural production is useless. On the Berlin scene, there are not many places where this critical distance is a value worth pursuing. Those where it is are not (with the intermittent exception of the Haus der Kulturen der Welt) the venues which are publicly funded.

A site of representation: Martin-Gropius-Bau

Originally a nineteenth century Renaissance-styled museum of arts and crafts, then a prehistoric and early history and East Asian art collection, the antecedent of the present building was severely damaged at the end of the Second World War and its reconstruction began as late as 1978. Re-opened as Martin-Gropius-Bau to honour the great-uncle of Walter Gropius, since the 1980s the building has established itself as an

exhibition space and hall, run by the Berliner Festspiele on behalf of the federal state. It functions as a classic presentation space for large-scale international blockbuster exhibitions. ‘Thematizing, from today’s perspective, the Martin-Gropius-Bau as a once-important site for exhibitions of contemporary art in West Berlin during the 1980s, and taking advantage of its quality as a museum space, are things I find important’.⁶

Berlin has been a site *par excellence* of political transformations and probably still is. The hubs were metaphors of places – ‘other places’ – able to thematize and work out these changes, creating ‘zones of the transitory through which we move as visitors, picking up and taking along information as we go’.⁷ Visitors were invited to cross-reference the artistic works and the hub-themes, in a non-linear structure, where neither the thematic nor chronological sequence (unlike many exhibition spaces) was determined. The (unrestrictive) intended experience for audiences visiting the venues of the bb3 was to enable them to create their own reference structure, a personal cosmology of interests necessarily resolved within gaps, ‘asystematic connections’ or complete disconnections. But the Martin-Gropius-Bau is not a space in which the sequence of non-linear discourses can be achieved. As soon as one entered the building, in order to get access to the spaces of the third Berlin biennale, one had to face a monumental staircase, reminiscent of magnificent classical times and elitist, exclusive access. The Berlin biennale was shown on the first floor, in a square-shaped space (with a ‘hole’ in the middle), that could be entered and exited only from one door, i.e. the ‘introduction’ space of the hub: MIGRATION mentioned above.

In Martin-Gropius-Bau the supposed ‘juxtaposition of works, which, as in urban constellations, often results from pragmatic necessities as well, [and] can result in many ruptures and asystematic connections’⁸ was in reality lined up in one way, and one only. Once inside, the viewer faced the MIGRATION hub presentation, and could then choose a clockwise or anti-clockwise path, offering a conventional succession of artworks. The

⁶ The curator U.M. Bauer in conversation with M. Babias in ‘complex berlin’, *ibid.*

⁷ *ibid.*

⁸ *ibid.*

visitors were channelled to circulate almost in a caged manner, more suggestive of the displacement and alienation of the exhibition in relation to the space than of the possible cross-references between the works; and between them and the hubs. The physical space inside the Martin-Gropius-Bau confronted and defeated the courageous curatorial concept.

One work attempted to challenge the symmetry and order of the display: the ‘revolving door’ of the art collective *__fabrics interseason*, one of the most enigmatic and puzzling pieces for audience, staff and critics alike (headlines like ‘Drehtür ins Nichts’⁹ were common at the time of the opening). This revolving door was an attempt to break up, both spatially and conceptually, the physicality and classical structure of the building. But it did not have the effect wished by artists and curators, and – amidst technical compromises and a minimalist outlook – the whole piece, and the questions posed by it, did indeed disappear. One of the reasons can perhaps be identified within the difficulty of adapting a conceptual, non-linear frame to a physical space where access, doors, partitions, and floors play a major part in the perception of that space. Unless everything else was free-standing too, the piece could not work. The problem is that the hub concept’s real ‘nature’ is inscribed in computer networks and air traffic control, both representations of flows of information, virtual channels concentrating and re-distributing knowledge. This abstract description of immaterial work proves to be extremely difficult to fit into a real spatial structure. Can there conceivably be an exhibition structure pursuing a presentation of such works in a heterogeneous and non-linear way, yet co-existent with the reality of the actual? Is the paradigm predicted in the catalogue of Documenta XI by C. Basualdo of a ‘continuity of communication’ despite a ‘distance of division’ realizable?

A site of production: KW Institute for Contemporary Art

Immediately after the Fall of the Wall, the original margarine factory (erected in the second half of the eighteenth century) was used as a temporary space for exhibitions by a

⁹ ‘Turning [door] into nothing’ was the caption of the bb3 opening’s photograph in *Der Tagesspiegel* newspaper.

group of young artists. In 1990 the initiative Kunst-Werke Berlin was founded, with studios, workshops and exhibitions. After the building complex was purchased with the support of a public foundation, restored and given to the KW Institute for Contemporary Art for cultural use, the location was reopened with a new exhibition hall, a café, and an international studio programme housed in the building's adjoining wings. The KW Institute for Contemporary Art houses no collection of its own, but sees itself as a laboratory that fosters exhibitions and events expressing national and international contemporary art. 'Certainly a work in Martin-Gropius-Bau will be read differently from one in KW; the works are deliberately placed in their particular locations, as far as possible. In doing so, it was important to me that viewers also address the connections between the various subjects'.¹⁰

By purposely designing an open structure (i.e. in KW) and not prescribing a reading, visitors were 'stimulated' to participate, experiencing 'a place that should not be static but rather one which people move through. It is only through this movement that the connections between the different positions are produced'.¹¹ At the opposite extreme of the regularity of Martin-Gropius-Bau architecture, the works in KW seemed to be placed as if they were interchangeable with any other. Scattered on five floors of exhibition, a miscellany of practices and styles, topics and discourses, were almost impossible to connect, though supposedly 'driven' by the thematic anchors of the hubs. This 'potential flexibility' of the building was properly exploited only by two spatial arrangements: the KW hall by B. Neumann – presenting stage constructions made for the theatre productions of the Volksbühne, as elements to be used by the audience – and a ceiling-less video installation by E. Cavusoglu. Both of these enabled the visitor-spectator to engage with the work on two different floors and therefore two different levels of sensorial experience; that is to say, making use of the potential of the venue itself. But the labyrinthine pattern of walls, corners, stairs, ramps, windows, and ceilings, and the difficulty of getting around them, was a substantial reason for missing works and thereby some of the (potential) related cross-references, or at least for overlooking the artistic

¹⁰ The curator U.M. Bauer in conversation with M. Babias in 'complex berlin', *ibid.*

¹¹ *ibid.*

‘interlocking of discourses’. Another problem was something not peculiar to the third Berlin biennale, but common to the two previous events, and also one shared with all the exhibitions produced, presented and (rarely) mediated in KW: the site-specificity of the place. (This notion was discussed in the same conversation with M. Gisbourne and S. Goltz quoted above.)

Site-specific locations for contemporary art projects carry with them something that is imprinted on the site, and this is something that must be taken on board. Be it the former site of power production (London), an industrial complex (Gateshead), a storage place (New York), the former dictator’s residency (Bucharest), or a commercial pavilion (Paris), site-specificity challenges the modernist assumption of the traditional Kunsthalle, and likewise of the contemporary white cube, in which the art-presentation space was ‘segregated from everyday space and which was intended as a white cell of subjective betterment or of aesthetizing ideal’.¹² On a practical level, site-specificity challenges the fundamental aim of creating a neutral space in which to show collections of art works produced by a number of artists. It does so in two ways: by re-assessing and inserting within the art exhibitions the site peculiarities, or (much more ‘trendy’ these days) producing a space which, following neo-liberal premises, is no longer dialectically divided into public and private, or outside and inside. Here, ‘art is never perceived as art without previous (medial) information; and projects are increasingly designed as to the (medial) participation of the recipient’.¹³ (In other words, relational art practice, accompanied by relational aesthetic theory.)

The issue here can be addressed adequately through reference to the KW Institute for Contemporary Art in Berlin: an old building, a factory space, which on the outside has the characteristic factory features (the entrance, the wings, the backyard); and then – as soon as one goes in – everything in the space denies the history of the space itself. There is very little in KW that reveals the social palimpsest of the history of that building, despite it’s being a site with a presumed history, a site that was supposed to highlight the

¹² The line is taken from the writings of artist and author S. Roemer, who has extensively covered in recent times the notion of artistic space and public sphere.

¹³ *ibid.*

localization of ‘questions pertinent and particularly relevant to Berlin’¹⁴ (which, along with some political pressure to include it, was very much why it was selected as one of the sites of bb3).

This central issue has been little considered. In the conceptual, and more importantly, in the practical arrangements made to present the exhibitions in KW, the space has been neutralized, sanitized, even ‘white-cubized’ to some extent. And when this was not the case – for instance, in the setting of the SONIC SCAPES hub, or in the final ‘Performance Jam’ event – the ‘relational aesthetic approach’ did the rest by way of reasserting conventional values. The potential of the space to connect and deal with the Berlin context is thereby substantially limited.

As mentioned above, there is a need to re-think this way of promoting and de-contextualizing places which otherwise offer enormous potential for suggesting, mediating and re-proposing in imaginative ways a web of possible paths, which the audience can navigate, re-experiencing in their own ways that which is seen and lived out in the city. These paths can be historical or personal, economical or social, paths of enjoyment and also of aesthetization, paths of affinity, interests and shared worldviews; but certainly not paths of hyped consumerism (à la Palais de Tokyo in Paris) and planned exploitation of capital-culture (à la Tate Modern in London). Making visible the past of the buildings and locations hosting cultural events, particularly in visual art practice, presents the opportunity to reflect on our past and envision a future. It does on the other hand limit the space’s utility as exhibition space, and in some extreme cases it does present the difficulty of living with an uncomfortable past (the emblems and signs of past totalitarian regimes in Berlin and Bucharest, for instance). However, removing every trace of what has been lived and (on a semiotic level) transferred to the society in those locations does nothing to facilitate a full engagement for either the people living in, or those visiting, the city hosting the event.

¹⁴ From the introductory essay of ‘complex berlin’, *ibid.*

It is highly debatable whether the managers of institutions, artists and cultural producers ought to shy away from such visible marks of history, presenting their work in a 'clean' environment. What if those same intellectual workers, these immaterial producers and creative people were to engage directly with the semiotic elements present in the venues, the locations, the situations given to them, as the historical, cultural and social heritage of each place? Would the engagement and reaction of the audience be different if the managements of the institutions dared to leave fully visible the traces of doubtful politics, industrial booms and collapses, social exploitations? Might that generate a continuous stream of attention on both the space and the works that relate to it?

A site of imagination: Kino Arsenal

In 1970, the association Freunde der Deutschen Kinemathek (founded in 1963 in order to make publicly accessible the holdings of the Deutsche Kinemathek) inaugurated its own movie theatre, Arsenal, Germany's first non-commercial cinema, modelled after the Parisian Cinémathèque Française. The Arsenal has a mediator's function for film culture, with retrospectives, themed film series, lectures, and discussions, and it offers a platform for film history and new assessments in the area of film. Since the beginning of 2000 the Arsenal's new location in Berlin (together with the Berlinale, the Filmmuseum Berlin and the German Film and Television Academy) has been Potsdamer Platz.

The third venue of the Berlin biennale raised the notion of a cinema as 'exhibition' space – or better, performative space. The Kino Arsenal site was chosen to display the film programme, as a site of imagination, a proper representational space for 2D moving images. And to some extent it has played its own role. U.M. Bauer, the artistic curator of the bb3, backed the choice of the Kino Arsenal as the proper choice for the cinematic experience in an appropriate venue. We can nonetheless debate the validity of showing films which are part of an artistic exhibition, and which specifically highlight social and political positions – far more than the 'parallel' artworks in the other two venues, in fact – in such a traditional cinema space. In this context, the space is experienced not as dialogic, but as one-directional, with the audience on one side and the 'product', or representation, on the other. There is no particular engagement for the viewer, or the

possibility of creating simultaneous cross-references, as the cinema space itself is a fictitious and perfect system of exclusion/inclusion (Foucault called it a modern heterotopia).

Would it have made sense to show the film programme – centred around the large areas of ‘third cinema’, ex-GDR cinematographic productions and gender cinema – in different locations, thereby scattering the imaginative space produced by the film across the very places where the contexts were experienced first-hand? Could Berlin have been a ‘living framed’ for discourses and not only a cinematographic reference to look at? If presented in various and less established venues (a local ballroom, a bunker, a former GDR site, a gay/lesbian meeting point, and so on), would the visiting audience and the inhabitants of Berlin have cross-referenced what was seen on the screen with their own knowledge of places, people, situations?

These are open questions that will remain open, but this kind of roadmap-approach for curator, artist and viewer, which might allow people to look at familiar places in a different way, or synthesize the unfamiliar, was not on the bb3 agenda. And indeed we take into consideration at this point some issues not specifically related to the bb3, but present in most of the large international artistic events of its kind. The discussion here is not about contents, but rather examines some conceptual frameworks.

Spaces, places and zones: a discussion

*‘Orte prägen intellektuelle Debatten’*¹⁵

The other places of biennials

The term ‘Platform Formalism’, coined by art critic P. Albrethsen, depicts the tendency of art environments to invite the public to join in, interact or just constitute a ‘presence’, and to stress how this attitude of the artist or curator has recently developed into a

¹⁵ ‘Places shape intellectual debates’, U. M. Bauer on a podium discussion in Berlin, 21 November 2003.

structure and a concept, creating a situation where ‘artists and viewers somehow come to function on equal terms. So rather than being an inspiring way of creating or displaying art, the platform format has begun to function as a conventional practice, one that is often used without much consideration’.¹⁶

These approaches were exemplified in bb3 in the URBAN CONDITIONS hub (an analysis of the post-’89 building speculation in Berlin); the ‘Temporary Utopia’ installation room by I. Book and K. Heden (a retrospective of the garden as realizable utopia in/outside the urban context), the latter both in Martin-Gropius-Bau; and also the SONIC SCAPES hub (an overview of Berlin’s female electro-punk scene) in KW. They provide the audience with a massive amount of information, which is widely understood as part of the work, so creating the feeling of not doing justice to an artwork or a situation if not ‘consumed’ with all the attachments. This is clearly not the ultimate intention of the artist or curator – or it would be against the aim of creating a non-linear process.

Nevertheless it is almost omnipresent in international exhibitions and very frequent even in small solo and group shows. As regards the bb3 examples, the art historian H. Bretton-Meyer writes ‘I do not think it is sufficient to make information available by simply placing a pile of books and catalogues on a table and then think the audience will be fine. I even think it is a bit irresponsible’,¹⁷ and the reviewer of the journal *NZZ Online* wrote about how the hubs create veritable ‘Stauzonen der Theorie’.¹⁸

Undeniably, if there’s no explanation why the material is there and how it was selected, the whole experience becomes counterproductive, and ‘ultimately this strategy will limit the experience of the project instead of actually contextualising it’.¹⁹ Out of his experience as ‘mediator’ in *Schadenfreude Guided Tours* (an art project in which the artwork was to mediate other artists’ works, developed for *In the Gorges of the Balkans*, Kunsthalle Fridericianum Kassel, 2003) the artist L. Boyadjiev pointed out how documentation, exhibition catalogues, or any other publications are not enough to fill the

¹⁶ ‘Platform Formalism’ is also the title of an article by H. Bretton-Meyer and P. Albrethsen appeared on *Neue Review* magazine, from which the quotation is taken.

¹⁷ *ibid.*

¹⁸ ‘Theory tailbacks’.

¹⁹ From the article ‘Platform Formalism’, *ibid.*

‘space’ that exists between the works in a show, and even less to fill the ‘void’ between the many biennials, let alone to fill the void between the art world and the real world.²⁰

It is clear how an earnest critique and a new constructive approach towards information material, and mediation tools in general – including the consideration of the physical sites of the exhibitions – is of the utmost importance. From what point of view should we approach this issue of ‘overwhelming’ information in art exhibition contexts, and of the possibilities of mediation?

Information, whether visual, written or aural, must play an important part in engaging the audience in a discursive space, in communication, in expansion and extension of one’s own worldview, while at the same time it must not be a deterrent for ‘entering’ the discursive space itself. The issue at stake is huge and present: artist, curator and art manager have yet to find a mechanism of ‘tuning’ (as mentioned above) this aspect of contemporary art exhibitions, going from one extreme of purely representational and self-referential art display to the opposite position of presenting artworks requiring a week’s reading time to get through them.

How could an international large-scale exhibition offer not an image but an experience for the visitor? And how could this experience be realized in the space of the exhibition?

One way is to rethink the relationship between the museums’ setting and function, and the goal of art biennials; the fine line between ‘permanent’ contemporary art venues, such as art institutions and galleries with exhibition programmes running throughout the year, and ‘temporary’ ones, such as biennials, triennials and so on. Sometimes the physical space is the same in both cases, not least for budget reasons, as the implementation in museum spaces of biennials and triennials increases visitors and regains press attention. The relational space, however, is very different, and indeed there is a semiotic discourse embedded in the choice of the venue.

²⁰ After participating in the event, L. Boyadjiev wrote an article for the *Manifesta Journal* in which he exposed his experience.

Let's consider at this juncture the permanent locations devoted to representation (and sometimes to process-based practices) in terms of 'places' and 'non-places', as defined by the anthropologist M. Augé in his famous book of 1995. According to him, non-places are those spaces dealing only with individuals, but not with societal form. When individuals come together, they engender the social and organize places in which identities, relations and history are embodied; and if, on the one hand, places such as museums and art venues create very many relations, on the other hand these relations are not organically social. They are 'constructed', instilled from the very moment in which visitors enter the building, 'expecting' to engage in discourses and so 'setting' their senses, language, and bodies in order to receive the 'message' (borrowing McLuhan's terminology).

On this basis, permanent museums and art venues are closer to non-places than places, in the same way as airports, tollbooths, motorway structures, and supermarkets also are, i.e. where visitors/passengers/customers enter the building, expecting to 'set' a level of relations pertinent to the space, then consume or trade what is on offer, and leave again.

This question of place and non-place is arguable from many points of view; nonetheless we advance here this thesis in an attempt to define the different mental frames at work when talking about art exhibitions. On the basis of the definition of 'fixed' spaces for art dialogues as 'non-places', we could then define the 'temporary' spaces of interaction created by time-bound art exhibitions (biennials, triennials, quinquennials, and so on) as other-spaces, making use of the term coined by Foucault.²¹ Large-scale international exhibitions never completely belong to the system of the 'art industry', as the range and diversity of practices to which they give rise (at least theoretically) often turns out to be subversive: for instance in de-centring both canon and 'artistic modernity', itself the embodiment of a challenge.²²

²¹ The manuscript 'Of other spaces' was the basis for a lecture given by Foucault in March 1967. Although not reviewed for publication by the author, the text was first released into the public domain for an exhibition in Berlin shortly before Michel Foucault's death in 1984.

²² C. Basualdo provides this thesis in the context of a recent article for *Manifesta Journal*.

The time-bounded international art exhibitions can be seen as the ultimate heterotopias: real phenomena where no social structure is implemented, because of their impermanent nature. The very fact of the visitors' relation with these spaces being heavily mediated through written information and non-visual language formats, as the critiques above pointed out, supplements a lack of first-hand 'real-experiences' data, which the visitor cannot otherwise have except inside the structure. It is a further confirmation about the character of these spaces. It is the 'heterotopian' ship of Foucaultian memory. Relations – as in the 'fixed' art venues – are constructed and presented, but also generated by the temporary and precarious character of the exhibition (or symposium, or workshop), as if the space/time frame was temporarily occupied with issues not at stake in other times and places.

These kinds of temporary arrangements are both a mythical and real contestation of the 'normal' spaces in which we live, and they seem to fulfil a precise function within contemporary society: that of presentation of conflicts, controversy, injustice, but as somehow unachievable dreams; thus absorbing and perhaps neutralizing the counter-power they might generate. These events function namely as heterotopias of compensation, dissimilar to the 'places outside time' as Foucault himself described (fixed) museums and libraries.²³ Contemporary art biennials are scenes of cultural translation and transnational encounters, and simultaneously agoras of spectacle, resembling those 'marvellous empty zones outside the city limits, that fill up twice a year ... with booths, showcases, miscellaneous objects, wrestlers ... optimistic fortune-tellers etc.'²⁴

The illusionary character of these temporary arrangements is reinforced by 'autonomy' not only on a spatial level but also on a temporal level, for through the very fact of entering the building, and being there in that precise moment, a mechanism of inclusion/exclusion is established in relation to, first, the space outside the venue/museum/art institution and, second, the previous and future time arrangements of

²³ M. Foucault in a passage of the same text 'Of other spaces' cited in note 21.

²⁴ *ibid.*

that location, which can be very different and totally unconnected to what is revealed at the time of entering. Think, for instance, of biennials arranged in former squatter locations (Berlin), industrial and storage buildings (Istanbul), unused locations under heritage protection (Venice, Istanbul), churches and mosques (Istanbul, Venice) and so on.

All these locations perform the very task of creating a space of illusion (revealing, by contrast, how illusory is the real space), but they also form another space, where better/more real/fairer relations between humans somehow compensate for the lack of all of those. And this is why biennials are heterotopias of compensation, like ‘conceptual colonies’ (Foucault) living by themselves within the controlled society. The question of spectacle is never detached from, and is always mediated by, extra-spectacular issues (social and cultural codes), and art spaces have somehow a duty to be different from the public space of consumption. They should, therefore, suggest the idea of a society of thinking citizens as a possible reality, if only for a particular moment and in a certain place: that is to say, during a biennial art exhibition. Such a compensatory phenomenon cannot effectively realize what it is pursuing, but for this very reason it could possibly inject a process of awareness. This is the potential worth pursuing.

The autonomous zones of biennials

The description of these ‘entities’ existing only for a certain amount of time and space, reminds one – in one respect – of the Temporary Autonomous Zone (TAZ), the visionary manifesto for a ‘high consciousness living’ written in the 1990 by the author under the pseudonym Hakim Bey.

Bey describes the TAZ as an effort to liberate an area (of land, of time, of imagination) and then dissolve itself to reform elsewhere/elsewhen. It does so, and is able to do so, because it occupies the layer of substance and not of simulation (where the ‘system’ acts, and here he refers to the French philosopher Baudrillard). That means, when the TAZ is named, represented, mediated, it must vanish before the ‘state’ can crash it. This is, of course, not the case of biennials, triennials, and so on, for all those events lack the fundamental condition of ‘invisibility’, which is probably the most important feature of the TAZ. The private and public funding mechanisms, advertising, and mediation

structures represent the opposite of the ‘tactic of disappearance’ predicated by Bey. Despite this obvious fact, some characteristics of the TAZ can be envisioned, or even recognized, in a temporary art context: the ‘hit and run’ attitude (‘nomadic war machine’), the idea of the ‘band’ as affinity group (and where more than in artistic temporary exhibition networks?), the concept of the ‘festival’ as a way of dealing with life-matter.

Perhaps in this similarity between temporary art events and temporary autonomous zones there is even an exchange of attributes: explicitly, with the aesthetic perspective as a starting point. It seems that so-called engaged art exhibitions have quite a ‘representation problem’ to solve; for instance, community-based art practices, uncertainly adopting both post-representational and representational ways of working; or the documentary format, still trapped in the contradiction of criticism about existing representational forms and the use of the same mechanisms. An insidious feeling of discomfort in the dialogue between aesthetic pleasure and social and political commitment is sneaking, unspoken, into the art world. Why should it? Why not embrace an aesthetic approach to culture, if even the TAZ – probably the most anti-everything and insurrectional theory of the last few decades – seized the possibility? In an article published in 2004 by the magazine of the Bundeskulturstiftungs,²⁵ the historian P. Nolte suggests that art (and culture in general) has become more and more essential in countering the confusion of society, permitting one to ‘lift the fog’ and to make visible possible development and future horizons. Modern sciences alone being no longer sufficient to understand this world, the latter being more and more driven and ‘dependent’ on culture, it seems that society needs to be re-thought on a cultural basis. A large proportion of the heated debates and clashes in social development issues concern the realm of cultural identity and cultural sociology, and we no longer consider them strictly in terms of political economy (as was the case until recently). If (for example) globalization and migration issues were addressed through cultural and artistic events with a more consistent kind of knowledge, which could also be an aesthetic knowledge, evoking logics of dissemination and a reception of otherness, that might in time produce and structure a collective knowledge, giving

²⁵ The German Foundation for Art and Culture.

individuals more self-consistency, which in turn might have consequences within the formation of the culture itself.

The possible paths of biennials

There is no ‘one way’ to act in the task of activating meanings in the contemporary art world. Biennials and their derivatives represent a possibility of fostering new worldviews, and perhaps – further on – of actually managing to change something. Not directly through these events, but through discourses, in the contexts generated, which become actions and later references for future generations. Using a metaphor, it’s not completely true that the map – and the mapping process – is not the territory. To some extent it contributes to the formation of the territory itself, and so to the formation of living experiences, which are ultimately our history. If these temporary events can create a social sharing of compensatory forms, or of new autonomous forms, only time will tell. We must hope so.

All that seems to have been achieved so far is something that deprives temporary exhibitions of the need for an autonomous zone – and even of a need for compensation. This mirrors processes outside the art world, with real/simulated life transfers in the media-spectacle industry and, inside artistic practice, a whole approach developed through relational modes (spectator/mediator/artist). Influential ‘permanent’ art exhibition venues dedicate their programme and resources to relational art practice, where the concept of ‘relation’ itself is elevated, and turned into hyped commodity, transforming the tools of communication, imagination, relation, commitment, into empty words, substantial only for the evening of the opening. In this regard, it is important that art venues, and particularly spaces of biennial events and similar exhibitions, do not become a kind of privileged ghetto for a simulacrum of a show, without any true connection to the reality of the context (city, inhabitants, politics).²⁶ As the writer and theorist B. Holmes stated in a recent paper published online, economical, political and

²⁶ On this aspect are informing the writings of E. Muka, former curator of the first Tirana Biennial, published – amongst others – in *Manifesta Journal*.

informational power having shifted to the realm of transnational exchanges, the art now shown in museums has little more political influence than any other of the ‘universal products’ we are offered, none of which includes any connection to an effective democratic institution. In this respect, art exists in an institutional vacuum.²⁷

It’s time to consider temporary and permanent spaces of art – any space of art, small and big, private and public, publicly funded and grassroots – not only as compensation-model, which *per se* cannot change a single thing, but also as a proper semi-autonomous zone, and as a mediation tool to transfer and activate ideas that will thrive in life. It is time to understand artistic production in its relation to the ways people live out their lives, in its connection with their lived spaces, in its association with the creation and the experience of their desires and their imagination. The real task in front of cultural workers is to produce and propose alternatives in the general sphere of aesthetic production that, in turn, can lead to a reaction, and a diffusion of ideas, of struggle, of creation.

²⁷ I draw here on the work of B. Holmes, cultural and political theorist, interested primarily in the intersections of artistic and political practice. His writings are available on various websites like www.nettime.org, www.16beavergroup.org, and <http://ut.yt.t0.or.at/site/index.html>. Accessed 20 January 2006.

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