The Art Biennial as a Global Phenomenon
Strategies in Neo-Political Times

Jorinde Seijdel

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This extra issue of *Open* is published in honour of the cahier's fifth anniversary and has come about in close collaboration with guest editor Pascal Gielen. At the time of the first Brussels Biennial, Gielen organized a programme of lectures and debates in Brussels on 19 October 2008, focussing on the art biennial as a global phenomenon. The programme was put together in cooperation with the Flemish-Dutch House deBuren in Brussels, the Flemish institute for visual, audiovisual and media art (BAM) and Gielen's own Lectorate in Arts in Society at the Fontys College for the Arts. The debates looked at the boom in international art biennials – at the moment there are hundreds of biennials active all over the world. They also considered how the art biennial, which was originally an instrument within a politics of nation-states, is increasingly deployed for developing and marketing cities and regions. In order to compensate for this, biennials often put political issues onto their artistic agenda. The recurring question is Brussels was: can biennials really represent an alternative political voice in these neo-political times?

The philosophers Chantal Mouffe, Michael Hardt and Boris Groys and the curators Molly Nesbit, Charles Esche and Maria Hlavajova talked about the biennial as model, concept and instrument, and about the geopolitical, sociocultural and economic space in which it manifests itself. Some of the lectures formed the basis for this special edition of *Open* which this time is appearing without its regular features. Supplemented with an introductory essay by Pascal Gielen, new essays by Brian Holmes, Irit Rogoff and Simon Sheikh and with the republication of an exemplary text by Thierry De Duve, a 'reader' has been created in which the art biennial as a global phenomenon is analysed and approached not only in terms of an art theoretical discourse or curatorial practice, but also on the basis of more sociological and political-philosophical discourses. Some essays deal directly with the biennial, while other essays, such as those of Hardt and Mouffe, reveal different conditions and relationships within the social and political reality that the biennial is part of, putting forward proposals and posing questions that could be addressed by art and its scene. The result of the reflections and propositions in *Open* 16 is by no means unequivocal, but all the 'strategies in neo-political times' that are articulated express the urgency of not taking the biennial as a global phenomenon for granted. There are also signs of a shared awareness that it cannot be regarded separately from the logic of neoliberal markets.

In the context of *Open* as a series of anthologies in which the changing conditions of the public domain are examined from a cultural perspective, the subject of the biennial represents a possibility to look at the way in which this phenomenon and its legitimizing discourses relate to ideas about the city and urban politics, to new notions of publicness and to the implications of processes such as globalization and mediatization. The editors of *Open* are grateful to Pascal Gielen for his generous commitment as guest editor. Our great thanks are also extended to the co-producers of *Open* 16: Dorian van der Brempt, director of deBuren; Dirk de Wit at BAM; and Fontys College of Fine and Performing Arts. Last but not least, we are grateful to SKOR for allowing us the editorial freedom to develop

Open as a series.

Jorinde Seijdel is an independent writer, editor and lecturer on subjects concerning art and media in our changing society and the public sphere. She is editor-in-chief of *Open! Platform for Art, Culture & the Public Domain* (formerly known as *Open. Cahier on Art & the Public Domain*). In 2010 she published *De waarde van de amateur* [The Value of the Amateur] (Fonds BKVB, Amsterdam), about the rise of the amateur in digital culture and the notion of amateurism in contemporary art and culture. Currently, she is theory tutor at the Gerrit Rietveld Academie and Head of the Studium Generale Rietveld Academie in Amsterdam. With Open!, she is a partner of the Dutch Art Institute MA Art Praxis in Arnhem.

Tags

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