The Biennial
A Post-Institution for Immaterial Labour

Pascal Gielen

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By means of an analysis, sociologist Pascal Gielen attempts to get a better handle on the problematic aspects of the art biennial as a global phenomenon. Only then can new strategies be developed for escaping the worldwide competition hysteria, with all its negatives characteristics. Neoliberal city marketing as the bogeyman is too facile an explanation.

The art biennial – once born as the promoter of the nation-state and its secularized faith, nationalism – has acquired a somewhat different guise today. The political agenda has been relegated to the background and replaced by a worldwide competition among cities and other places-to-be, with a profusion of biennials as a result. This success cannot be explained without the enthusiasm with which politicians, managers and other sponsors have embraced the event. And it is precisely this heterogeneous interest that makes the biennial suspect. After all, it fits easily in a neoliberal city marketing strategy of so-called creative cities. Anyone occasionally leafing through the catalogues of art events might be surprised by such self-observations. They show that the biennial frequently regards itself as a problematic hybrid monster. At the very least, it can be concluded that some of the participating artists, curators and critics are not lacking in the required self-reflection. Yet they continue to take part, cheerfully, full of ambition, but at times physically and mentally exhausted, in this amazing world. The motivations for this are probably as numerous as the number of artistic actors currently travelling the globe. The ambition of someday making it in the art world likely plays a part. But there is certainly as much genuine interest and sincere idealism. There is no denying, however, that even the honest curator constantly comes up against an all-encompassing neoliberalism. A certain amount of cynicism and opportunism seems necessary in order to continue operating within the global art system. Because we are dealing with two emotionally charged – usually negatively charged – concepts, a little explanation seems appropriate.

The Joyful Rider

Within common parlance, cynicism and opportunism are surrounded by a miasma of negative semantics. In addition, these are usually qualities ascribed to an individual. This or that person is labelled 'cynical' or 'opportunistic', by which a negative personality trait is immediately implied. Here, however, in line with the Italian thinker Paolo Virno, cynicism and opportunism are not used as part of an ethical assessment.[1] They can also be understood as amoral categories. Furthermore they define not so much the actions of an individual, but the general mood of a collective. Cynicism and opportunism are now a structural component of our globalized society. Or, as Virno argues, they colour the 'emotional tonality of the multitude' within a post-Fordian world economy. Applied to the contemporary art world, cynicism and opportunism have become necessary modes of operation. This deserves a more detailed explanation.

Cynicism, Virno argues, comes from the realization that rules and the reality they supposedly regulate are miles apart, even as people still operate according to these rules. Those who know the rules of the present-day art world, for example, go in for themed exhibitions, which today prefer to embrace social responsibility – witness the boom of new engagement, social activism, political or ecological criticism, etcetera. All of this is taking place against the backdrop of a neoliberal reality of commercial telephone providers and airlines with an excess of ecologically irresponsible flights, mass tourism and virtually inescapable global marketing strategies. If we observe the discourse presented by most globally operating curators and artists on the one hand, and their actual actions on the other, we repeatedly come up against a yawning gap between the two. As a result, operating cynically turns out to be functional within the global network of the biennials.

This conclusion allows critics to point out consequences with a certain amount of *schadenfreude*. Yet precisely because it ascribes the characteristic to the individual, this criticism often neglects to examine the institutional nature of the problem. It definitely denies the critical potential, at the very least the potentially manipulative or subversive quality, of the cynical operation. Selecting and using the marvellous resources that the neoliberal market economy puts at our disposal today also provides a chance to pervert them. All-encompassing neoliberalism already provides all the instruments with which to keep proclaiming ever-changing possibilities – if only purely discursively. The curator hopping all round the world perhaps shares the opinion of the critic we have just portrayed. The strategies to achieve their respective objectives, however, are fundamentally different. Whereas the latter, with a certain puritanical ascetism, abstains from the pleasures of capitalism (at least discursively), the former is instead a joyful rider who, with the required optimism, outlines escape routes in the heart of the neoliberal hegemony with a nice glass of wine in hand. Stoicism in one area does not preclude idealism in the other. This last attitude does indeed require a healthy dose of cynicism, something that Bertolt Brecht understood back in the 1960s. Which strategy is best, however, remains unclear. What is clear is that the second approach, in all its ambivalence, is more complex than the first. And perhaps this complexity provides a better answer, today, to an ever more complex world. It remains, however, a particularly difficult balancing act as well.

The internationally operating curator – but in fact every globally operating artistic actor – thus benefits from the pleasures afforded by today's widespread neoliberal market economy. He or she grabs every opportunity, if desired, to tell a critical, engaged or unique story. The globally functioning curator, in other words, is always a big opportunist. Let us treat this observation with the necessary amoral circumspection, however. We must understand opportunism, says Virno, literally and neutrally, as 'the ability to grab opportunities'. It therefore includes the dexterity to allude in a non-routine fashion to a constantly changing work context. It is the art of living with chronic instability, with unexpected turns and permanent innovation. There are constantly different possibilities and always new opportunities that present themselves. Well, internationally operating curators always finds themselves in different geographic, social and political contexts, to which they must continually respond in a more or less meaningful way. They must make use of every opportunity that presents itself, convert it into a win-win situation. This presupposes, at the very least, a significant capacity for translation along with a generous dose of mental flexibility. Every time, new circumstances and always different ideas have to be transformed into a preferably controversial end product: the exhibition. Perhaps the travelling Manifesta exhibition is the best example of an organization that has incorporated this opportunistic tonality down to the meso-level. Time and time again, after every move, after all, it feels out the local economic, political and social opportunities. The travelling curator is constantly confronted by different working conditions in local, merely temporary stations that are often called biennials.

A Good Idea

Yet what does this curator have to offer the station at which he or she alights for a while? Or conversely, why is this particular curator engaged to do his or her 'thing' in this particular spot in the world? Is it to do with his or her organizational capacities? Or it is simply about fame and a name? These things probably play a role, but the core of the transaction is even more ephemeral and yet more risky than that. Those who shop in the curator market and do so with integrity, therefore without ulterior economic or political motives, are, after all, primarily looking for a good and appropriate idea. Yet what is a good idea? A good idea, in today's art world, should still be understood, according to the adage of modernity, as a new or innovative thought. Even the veteran curator, well-established in the world with his or her concept, can hardly afford to become repetitive. That might have been permissible, to a certain extent, for the 'first crop' of independent curators whose names were frequently linked to a monolithic concept (although even here a certain malleability was desired). Today this rigid attitude works far less effectively. This is why the adjective 'appropriate' is of equal importance for the idea produced. A good idea, after all, constantly renews itself, and that can mean, among other things, that it responds to the geographic or social context, the client, the artistic setting, etcetera. Simply copying an exhibition concept from New York to Istanbul would miss the ball completely. Just like the artist who repeats himself, the recidivist curator would soon be taken to task for his mouldy ideas.

It should therefore come as no surprise that young curators are frequently hired. There is a lesser likelihood, after all, that sclerosis would have set in among this category, but that is not the point. The point is that today a good idea has to be primarily appropriate as well as innovative. The executed idea, in the context of the preceding argument, takes into account the local artistic, economic and / or political circumstances that present themselves. A good idea, in other words, is an opportunistic idea, whereby 'opportunistic' should thus be interpreted in the neutral sense of the word, and therefore without moralistic connotations. The smart curator, in other words, delivers his or her idea with the necessary adaptability and flexibility. It should therefore come as no surprise either that the interview, or at least the dialogue, has cropped up multiple times over the last decade as the favourite working method of the exhibition organizer. It is precisely this format, after all, that offers the opportunity to test the potential exhibition concept against the new context.

But how does one know that the engaged curator will deliver a good idea? Well, the answer is as simple as it is disturbing. It simply cannot be predicted. Investing in a hoped-for good idea, a show that works or an exhibition concept that functions within the given context, is always a risky undertaking. When the curator is engaged, the good idea or the interesting, appropriate concept is only potentially present. It still belongs to the unreal world of the promise. Of course there are means of assessing the risk of the investment as well as possible. As in the oeuvre of an artist, the 'retro-prospective principle' also applies to the exhibition career of the curator. [2] Previously produced work is used as a touchstone to gauge the quality of work yet to be produced. Yet this hoped-for realization remains largely speculative. The organizer of a biennial, in the contract or the agreement with the curator, therefore, is not capitalizing on a finished product, but on a potential or a promise. This, says Virno, is precisely the core of the post-Fordian work environment, or – to paraphrase – the crux of immaterial labour.

According to many labour sociologists and political philosophers, this post-Fordism – with its individualization, de-routinization, flexible working hours, mental labour, and so forth – underwent a general expansion with the student revolts of 1968 and the Fiat strikes of the 1970s. Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt even argue that immaterial labour began to constitute the hegemony for all forms of production, even for material labour and agricultural labour. [3] This does not mean, of course, that material labour or routine factory labour simply vanished. It usually moved, after all, to low-wage countries. Even this labour,

however, became coded within the social logic of post-Fordism. The 1970s are often identified as the period in which this process of immaterialization took place. It is probably not a coincidence that it is also the period in which one of the first internationally operating curators began to attract attention. Harald Szeemann, after all, escaped the museum in the same period with his material artefacts. An object history was replaced by a conceptual approach. Or, with the preceding in mind, the emphasis on displaying material works shifted towards immaterial labour. As in other work environments, this does not mean that the material – in this case the work of art – simply vanished, but it became staged within a performance of ideas. Even the ins and outs of the art world, in other words, cannot escape the new machinery of post-Fordism.

Intermezzo: The White Cube or Neoliberal Denial

We have just briefly reflected on the ambivalent operation of the curator within an omnipresent post-Fordism. This requires, among other things, an opportunistic attitude, which succeeds in responding to ever-changing artistic, economic and political working conditions. At the same time, art historian and curator Elena Filipovic points out that the majority of biennials, paradoxically, still make use of their historical antipode, namely the museum. [4] This is even true of the previously mentioned nomadic Manifesta. This mainly involves the repeated use of the classic white cube, which Alfred Baar turned into the hallmark of the MOMA back in the late 1920s. Filipovic acutely remarks that the Nazis opted for the same interior, less than ten years later, for the Haus der Kunst in Munich, whereupon she openly wonders what makes this white space appealing to these two totally divergent ideological worlds. The answer is somewhat predictable: 'order', 'rationality', 'universality' and '(Western) modernity'. Two other ascribed qualities, however, deserve particular attention within this narrative, namely 'neutrality' and particularly 'disconnection from the context'. The white cube cherished by biennials and curators thus cuts itself off from the variable environment in which it finds itself. This sometimes results in rather hallucinating displays, as Filipovic writes, among other things, about Okwui Enwezor's Documenta 11: 'The exhibition brought, as one critic noted, "issues of genocide, poverty, political incarceration, industrial pollution, earthquake wreckage, strip-mine devastation, and news of fresh disasters *into the inviolable white cube".*' [5]

The white cube is so widespread as an institution around the world because its staging of autonomy denies any political, economic or religious entanglement. The integration of these spheres in the museum also threatens to neutralize any problem or social conflict within the safe zone of fiction. Perhaps that is what makes the white cube so beloved, and very exceptionally even by totalitarian regimes. Within an all-encompassing neoliberalism, the ideological silence of the white space is a godsend. Every dominant paradigm of faith, after all, is served by the denial of its own ideological character. That way it can easily masquerade as an insurmountable realism.

The Post-Institution and Flirting with Deleuze

'Rhizomes', 'networks', 'nomadism', 'escape routes', 'non-hierarchical forms of organization', etcetera – these are the words with which biennials have increasingly presented their own operations over the last ten years. Documenta 12 may have represented the saturation point of this Deleuzian discourse. Who can say? The question, however, is whether today's biennials genuinely incorporate these characteristics. The intermezzo above suggests otherwise. The equivocal relationship between biennial and white cube, event and museum demonstrates at the very least a certain ambivalence. The classical museum, in particular, is one of the institutionalized entities that is facing increasing pressure. Yet the institution has not yet vanished beyond the horizon. That is probably what frequently makes it the black sheep, certainly where large institutions are concerned. [6] But what is it about this institution that supposedly hinders the biennial or is such a problem for the nomadic curator?

The institution is probably one of the most examined subjects in sociology.[7] What is relevant to this argument is that this science interprets the notion in two ways. On the one hand the institution refers to concrete organizations of people, buildings and things. On the other hand the concept of the institution is extended to the whole system of values, norms and customs considered significant in a society. This is why they are institutionalized, set down in a more or less rigid fashion, watched over and sanctioned. The most well-known institution is probably the family, which regulates procreation within a specific cultural context. Yet in this context the institution of the 'church' is perhaps a more relevant example. Within the sociology of religion, a distinction is made between the Church with a capital C and the church with a small c. The first refers to the whole system of norms and values it installs and continues, the second to the 'organizational infrastructure' of people, buildings, relics, and so forth that materialize the institution and keep it alive. Well, the art institution also represents this dual meaning. On the one hand, after all, it consists of galleries, biennials, art centres, museums, and the people and artworks that populate them; on the other hand it also represents the whole system of artistic and cultural values (for instance authenticity, creativity, idiosyncrasy) it expresses within a society – in the past usually the nation-state. In essence, all artistic organizations are part of the art institution, but major institutions like museums occupy a special place in this. More than the others, after all, they are expected to be well-oiled organizations and to simultaneously take on the role of the 'guardian' and 'facilitator' of specific artistic values and practices. This might sound pompous, but it is an accepted idea in sociology that cultural practices keep in step with a powerful societal hierarchization of values and norms. The institution, according to classical sociology, features a number of essential characteristics, a few of which are highlighted here as a reminder. Such an exercise, it is hoped, will help to clarify what the problem is for biennials and for nomadic curators.

The institution is primarily experienced as an external reality and objectivity. This means that it stands above individual manufacturability, which is moreover considered relatively evident. We therefore immediately come up against an important point of criticism in the art world. Within it, the individual regime of values is after all the central principle around which everything revolves, at least according to the French art sociologist Nathalie Heinich. [8] It is a fact that both the artist and the curator jealously defends his or her individuality, his or her authenticity. He or she probably shudders at the idea of a supra-individual machine.

What is more significant within this argument, however, is that the institution incorporates historicity. This characteristic alludes to two things. First, the institution has its own history and often relies on this history to preserve or even to legitimize its existence and activities within contemporary society. But the institution also constantly, actively engages with the past, by selecting from it, by activating and perhaps re-articulating some historical issues.

Or, as American anthropologist Mary Douglas once put it, 'institutions remember and forget'. [9] We immediately come up against the important heritage function of the art institution. It is, after all, responsible for what is remembered and forgotten. In the case of museums, we can hardly ignore this conservation function. Even their current artistic activities take place, preferably, not in a historical vacuum, but instead with a strong awareness of what used to be. At its best, this produces an interesting tension between innovation and conservation. Ideally, as crucial platforms of the art institution, institutions represent its historical conscience. In the process they also generate the necessary 'inertia' to which everything experimental or innovative should, or at least can, relate. Museums, therefore, in part control the temporal logic or artistic conjuncture of the whole art institution. When they let in innovation, they immediately proclaim a new era for the whole local, national or international art world. Large institutions usually do this only sparsely. It is, after all, their societal task to constantly weigh the present against the past. This admittedly also entails the risk that they might become too sluggish and hold back innovation for too long, losing their 'grandeur' in the process. It is precisely biennials and internationally operating curators who have fought against this 'grandeur' over the last 30 years (and certainly in the initial phase), among other things because it was felt that the museum hindered innovation. As previously stated, a good idea in today's art world is still, according to modernist doctrine, a new idea. Such an ethos constantly wrestles with the past and the cultural heritage. This is not only because of the braking effect of art traditions, but also because history might well suggest that a new idea is not so new after all.

The characteristics of the art institution listed above, however, are aspects at a macrosociological level with which both the biennial and the nomadic curator struggle. It is his or her fight against 'the institution' as a societal phenomenon. At the mesosociological level, but at the level of the organization as well, other factors come into play. The classically institutionalized organization, after all, stands for a rigid hierarchy with fixed positions in a not very flexible work environment. This highly simplified picture perhaps reflects an outdated cliché. In observing the majority of art museums (certainly in Europe), however, one still comes across ingredients that confirm this picture. To name only four: fixed working hours (and opening hours), fixed appointments, a rigid differentiation between functional units (artistic staff, educational department, public relations, maintenance and management) and a strong focus on the material (the collection or at least artworks). The second characteristic certainly impedes the post-Fordian requirement of flexibility within a globally operating art world. It is precisely the biennial that partly fulfils these immaterial working conditions. On that level the biennial certainly displays the hallmarks of a post-institution. Its periodic and event-based character in itself makes it easy to work with temporary contracts. This is a basic observation of labour sociology, which in today's art world is rather romantically translated into an uncritical cultivation of a nomadic existence within constantly moving networks. However, this Deleuzian flirting with the post-institution (not that Deleuze, incidentally, ever pointed in this direction; what is at issue here is rather the way the art world uses the jargon) – with the contemporary biennial as protagonist – significantly suppresses the wealth of the classical art institution. Occasional visitors to biennials are regularly confronted, for example, by structural amnesia, the negation of the local context and superficiality, usually with a lack of concentration. The biennial, or to put it a better way, the excessive boom in biennials, offers little room anymore for historicity; even less does it generate the necessary time for thorough research, and furthermore it often ignores the locality – see the previously outlined story of the white cube. These are precisely the things that a museum, as a classical art institution, did stand for. That museum, however, has also been significantly transformed in recent decades, with, among other things, an increase in temporary exhibitions and an inversely proportional decrease in research into and attention to the collection. Even the museum – certainly if it is a contemporary art museum – has been infected by the biennial virus. Even the museum is displaying post-institutional characteristics, for it too has become a post-Fordian enterprise.

Schizophrenic Longing

The structural amnesia mentioned above, the lack of concentration and the development of a globally floating art world are gradually eliciting questions about the direction in which the art biennial has evolved over the past decade. Indeed we are seeing early attempts toward rearticulation and even reorganization within the art world. The curator, for example, is once again seeking out the locality, or to put it a better way, tries to link international flows with local artistic and cultural practices at a 'glocal' level (witness for instance the Gwangju Biennale of 2002, but also the effect of the MACBA in Barcelona). At the very least we can observe today a schizophrenic longing, in which on the one hand the mobility, horizontal openness, curiosity and innovative drive of the post-institution are endorsed, but in which, on the other hand, a predilection is emerging for the local imbedding, for the collective memory and for the durability once offered by the institution. This schizophrenia between the post-institution and the 'classical' modern art institution can now also be linked back to the internal tension within a good idea previously outlined.

We have said that a good idea, in the contemporary art world, is still a new idea. That also means that it is authentic and that it is defended and established with the required resolve. Furthermore, a new idea is only a good idea if it can be weighed against history, and the art institution, with the classic museum, used to provide an answer for this. Within today's network world embraced by the nomadic curator, however, the emphasis is being placed instead on the appropriate idea. Loyalty to an originally authentic concept can quickly come to be interpreted as inflexibility and a lack of openness. The authentic idea, in other words, lacks the infinite variability and adaptability required within networks that are always unstable. Or as Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello argue: 'In a network world, the question of authenticity can no longer be formally posed.' **10**

The internal tension of an authentic artistic idea or a new and appropriate exhibition concept, in other words, is in step with the fluctuating relationship between the classical art institution and the post-institution. Even the design of the last Brussels biennial, for example, was marked by the same schizophrenic longing. This can be deduced, among other things, by the endeavour to rearticulate the locality of the biennial. The focus is no longer on the nation-state; the worldwide promotion of the city was at the very least parried with attention paid to the 'Eurocore' – if only by allowing art organizations from Flanders (and thus not just from Brussels), Germany and the Netherlands to play a part in setting the programme. In addition, there was an attempt to counter the historical deficit of the hectic global flow by working closely with institutions that should still have a memory, especially museums. Authenticity defended with rigidity can thus be balanced with the infinite variability and diversity demanded by the global neoliberal network system. Such undertakings are probably a sign of still early and therefore fragile practice runs for new strategies with which well-intentioned biennials and curators will experiment in the future. It is to be hoped that they will someday generate the necessary 'inertia' and 'glocality' as a counterpoint to the all-encompassing global competition hysteria in which today's biennials increasingly find themselves.

Pascal Gielen is full Professor of Sociology of Art and Politics at the Antwerp Research Institute for the Arts, University of Antwerp where he leads the Culture Commons Quest Office (CCQO). Gielen is editor-in-chief of the international book series *Arts in Society*. In 2016, he became laureate of the Odysseus grant for excellent international scientific research of the Fund for Scientific Research Flanders in Belgium. His research focuses on creative labour, the institutional context of the arts and cultural politics. Gielen has published many books translated in English, Korean, Polish, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish and Turkish.

Footnotes

1. Pablo Virno, *Grammar of the Multitude* (Los Angeles: Colombia University, 2004).
2. Pascal Gielen, 'Art and Social Value Regimes', *Current Sociology*, 53 (5) (2005), 789-806; and Pascal Gielen, *Kunst in netwerken. Artistieke selecties in de hedendaagse dans en de beeldende kunst* (Leuven: LannooCampus, 2004).
3. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (London:Penguin Books, 2004).
4. Elena Filipovic, 'The Global White Cube', in: Barbara Vanderlinden and Elena Filipovic (eds.), *The Manifesta Decade: Debates on Contemporary Art Exhibitions and Biennials in Post-Wall Europe* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005).
5. Ibid.
6. See for instance Nina Möntmann, 'Playing the Wild Child: Art Institutions in a New Public Sphere', *Open* 14 (Rotterdam / Amsterdam: NAi Publishers / SKOR, 2008), 16-27.
7. Pascal Gielen, *De Kunstinstitutie. De Artistieke Identiteit en de Maatschappelijke Positie van de Instellingen van de Vlaamse Gemeenschap* (Antwerp: OIV, 2007).
8. Nathalie Heinich, *La Gloire de Van Gogh. Essai d'anthropologie de l'admiration* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1991).
9. Mary Douglas, *How Institutions Think* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1986).
10. Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (London / New York: Verso, 2006).

Tags

Art Discourse, Labour, Urban Space

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