

BIENNIAL FOUNDATION

AN INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATION FOR THE PROMOTION OF SYSTEMATIC DEBATE ABOUT ART BIENNAIS

BY TEREZA DE ARRUDA

THERE ARE TODAY SOME ONE HUNDRED AND FIFTY BIENNAIS spread through five continents. However, due to a lack of systematic communication between these institutions, in 2009 the Biennial Foundation was created in Berlin with the purpose of organizing workshops and establishing a professional connection between the events. **ARTE!Brasileiros** spoke to the entity's president Marieke van Hal and is also contributing towards the dissemination of the *World Biennials Forum*, to be held in November, São Paulo.

ARTE!Brasileiros – How was it to create a Biennial Foundation? What issues led you to do it? Who are your partners in this project?

MARIEKE VAN HAL – Biennial Foundation is an independent non-profit arts organization that was founded in 2009 to create a spirit of solidarity, friendship and equality among contemporary art biennials worldwide and to facilitate a diversity of platforms for the exchange of information and expertise.

Biennials are vital and visible sites for the production, distribution, and public discourse around contemporary art. Biennial Foundation's work stands as pioneering: over one hundred fifty contemporary art biennials currently exist and Biennial Foundation has been the first initiative to stimulate a professional connection among them. Biennial Foundation initiates, moderates and informs people about activities and discussions in the field of international biennial making.

Our most important activity to date is the World Biennial Forum. Geared towards biennial institutions, curators and their collaborators, the World Biennial Forum enables practitioners from various biennial initiatives in the world to meet and exchange ideas on common practices, as well as to discuss the foremost topics and concerns in the field.

World Biennial Forum N° 1 took place in 2012 in Gwangju, South Korea, co-directed by Ute Meta Bauer and Hou Hanru. It was organized in close collaboration with the Gwangju Biennale, Asia's oldest and most prominent biennial of contemporary art, and ifa, Institute for Foreign Cultural Relations, based in Germany.

World Biennial Forum N° 2 is now being prepared in close collaboration with the Bienal de São Paulo and ICCo - Institute of Contemporary Culture.

The next Biennial Forum plans to discuss and bring together biennials from the Southern Hemisphere. Do you believe that despite globalization and the permanent exchange between the various artistic contexts, the art world remains divided into segments?

The World Biennial Forum N. 1 was titled 'Shifting Gravity' and focused on Asia as a continent and context in which the Forum took place. For the World Biennial Forum N. 2, 'How to Make Biennials in Contemporary Times' our artistic directors have decided to look at the biennial from the point of view of the southern hemisphere.

You may rightly ask us what we mean by 'South'. A critical Australian scholar also wrote to us and



BIENAL DE SÃO PAULO. BELOW, VENICE BIENNALE AND THE LYON BIENNIAL, IN FRANCE



posed the question to what extent discourse about the South engages in dialogue with those that are actually located there. I believe we shouldn't only read and define the 'South' geographically. Charles Esche wrote in an internal discussion on this matter: "The issue is one of exclusion and marginalization based on a Eurocentric form of colonialism. Just as Dakar is North of the equator but is part of the Global South in terms of its political history, so Australia is a Northern outpost in the South." Working in the global biennial field for quite a long time now, to me the terms 'North, South, East, West' don't mean that much anymore. One of our partners for World Biennial Forum N. 2 is the Greek journal 'South', that gives form to the concept of the South as a state of mind, rather than a set of fixed places on the map. This very much relates to our Forum I believe, where people from different literal or metaphorical 'Souths' may renegotiate what the term implies.

What do you think is the importance of the São Paulo Biennial among the international biennials that were created in the last decade?

Historically, the importance of the Bienal de São Paulo is undeniable being the second oldest and most prominent biennial of contemporary art after Venice, a position it has well maintained throughout the years.

The relationship and connectivity of a certain biennial with its specific site is an essential formula for successful biennials, as this relationship gives



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the biennial its unique meaning and value. To act and remain distinct, to reach out internationally but to operate in a locally specific manner, are important ingredients for interesting biennials, and the Bienal de São Paulo fits in this picture.

The Bienal de São Paulo stands out internationally for the large proportion of both human and financial resources that are invested in education, which is a distinctive feature of this biennial if one compares it with others in the world. One of its greatest characteristics, and this counts also for the Bienal do Mercosul, is the fact that its potential and major audience is the local community rather than the art public and specialists.

Access to culture is widely seen as a public good and a biennial can play an important role in this. The aspect of education and pedagogy, typical for the Brazilian biennial, I dare to state, can serve as an example and inspiration for other biennials of contemporary art in the world.

The question is with whom does the biennial want to speak and how is this is successfully done? Can biennials be regarded as visible sites of informal education? If so, in which tools of cultural mediation does one need to invest and what can be the results? These are questions that might interest many international colleagues coming to our World Biennial Forum N° 2.

What are the foundation's goals? What strategies have you adopted to achieve them?

Biennial Foundation was founded to contribute to a long-standing need for those working in the international arena of biennials. From the start we have regarded all contemporary art biennials, both well-known and

upcoming ones as equally important, and we aimed to address the biennial as a whole, looking at biennials as art institutions as opposed to one-dimensional exhibition platforms.

After the World Biennial Forum N. 1 in Gwangju, it has become clear that ongoing exchange, dialogue and alliance among biennials, is needed and essential. Biennial Foundation is proud to have acted as a catalyst for the establishment of the International Biennial Association (IBA), which we are actively helping with our knowledge, network and resources to develop and build its road.

Biennial Foundation's initial goal of creating an ongoing alliance among biennial organizations has been fulfilled and we are now looking at new necessities and needs within the field. We have just appointed Dr. Rafal Niemojwesi as Deputy Director and are currently formulating new projects and activities in the framework of research.

With the World Biennial Forum we will continue, and for the next edition we are having initial talks with biennials in both Africa and Europe. The next World Biennial Forum might differ again and accentuate the fact that we are independent, not tied to any specific interest, and can be critical. I'd also like to focus more on the artists' voice.

Biennial Foundation is a typical twenty-first century organization. We have a virtual office and are functioning as an international network of colleagues rather than as a traditional art institution. Our team members are based in different countries and continents, mirroring a flexible, experimental and non-national identity. We are open to change as we grow.