

4

Visual Arts Festivals and Globalisation: The rise of biennials¹

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Biennials or *biennales* are periodic, independent and international art exhibitions surveying trends in contemporary art; since the 1990s they have proliferated across the globe. Biennials are much more than curated displays, they constitute ‘festival-exhibitions’ working as “a public model and a shifting backdrop against which the meanings of contemporary art are constructed, maintained and sometimes irrevocably altered” (Ferguson et al., 2005: 48). Whilst most contemporary post-traditional festivals (Giorgi and Sassatelli, 2011) have ancient roots, it is only in recent years that they have become an almost ubiquitous fixture of cultural calendars in cities around the world. This current proliferation is even more striking for art biennials. They arguably originate from the *Venice Biennale*, held for the first time in 1895, but have long exceeded their European, Western origin to establish a global format. Up to the 1980s they were only reproduced in a handful of examples; today biennials and derivatives (triennials and others) have become key institutional nodes linking production, consumption and distribution of contemporary art. With now over 150 biennials around the world, we are increasingly likely to encounter contemporary art through their mediation, directly as visitors or more indirectly via the nebula of critical discourse and more generally the media coverage they generate. The phenomenon attracting attention has become not just the biennials but more specifically the *biennialisation* of the art world.

The term *biennialisation* is used within the art world itself as shorthand to refer to the proliferation and standardisation of biennial exhibitions under a common (if rather loose) format. Sociologically, biennialisation can thematise the shifting set of cultural classifications, practices and values that differentiate the contemporary art world, affecting both its content (now sometimes referred to as *biennial art*) and the type of rationale and experience it crystallises. As phenomena that increasingly represent themselves “on a global scale” (Vogel 2010), biennials offer a unique vantage point to access what is often termed ‘global culture’. However, they remain rarely empirically studied in clearly defined contexts, especially beyond affirmation or negations of their measurable impact (Buchholz and Wuggenig, 2005). Reprising within the art world unsolved dilemmas in the analysis of cultural globalisation, alleged optimists see in biennials the “embracing of