The Venice Biennale and the structures of the art sector

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SIK-ISEA's Focus Project *"Kunstbetrieb"*, headed by Professorial Fellow Beat Wyss and devoted to the workings of the art sector, is planning a systematic historical study of the Venice Biennale. Like no other exhibition format, this event so rich in tradition actually allows us to track structural changes in the art business. Founded in 1895 as a sales fair, the "World Exhibition of the art nations" (Wyss) has institutionalised itself as an art platform where unfolding processes of commercial differentiation can be observed.
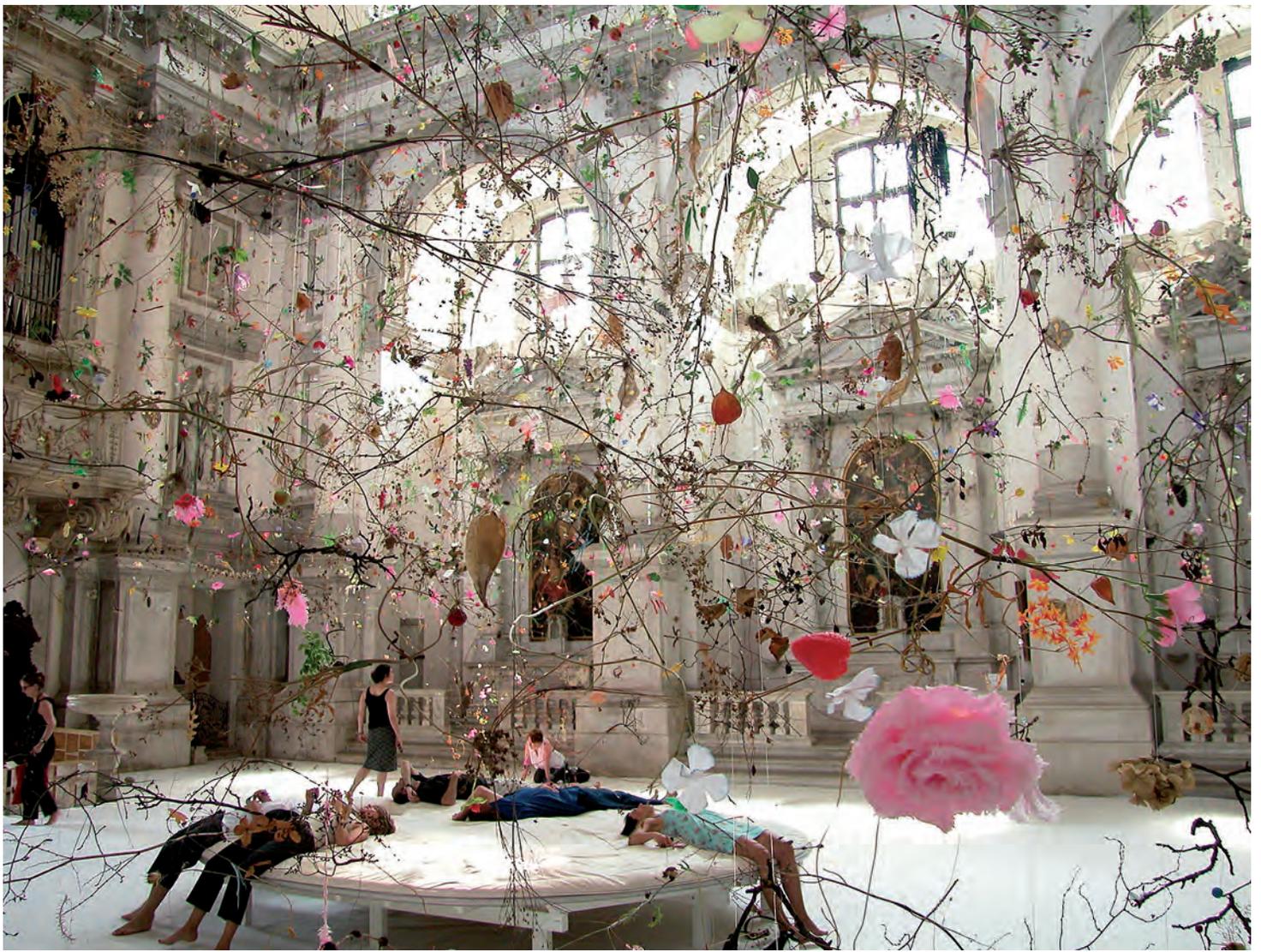
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Gerda Steiner & Jörg Lenzlinger
Giardino Calante, 2003
Church of San Staë by the Canal Grande
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The research project

The idea behind the research is to centre on the Biennale as a window onto cultural politics. Their evolution, in an interplay between regionalist cultural identities and the strong pressures towards industrial and economic homogenisation unleashed by globalisation, will be examined from a perspective of cultural comparison, an approach which has so far remained rudimentary in art studies. Picking up and expanding on Niklas Luhmann's system-based cultural theory, this work will also hone in on fine art as a commodity.

Doctoral fellows and research associates will spend three years studying the pavilions of specific countries. Their research will follow a standard structure and methodology in order to underscore the comparative approach and ensure that findings do ultimately lend themselves to comparison. The focus will be on Central Europe, notably on countries that gave rise to an "émigré culture" in Switzerland following World War II. Accordingly, research associates Karolina Jeftic and Veronika Wolf will be examining the Serbian (Jeftic) and the Czechoslovak pavilion (Wolf). Scholarship holder Kinga Bodi from Budapest has agreed to conduct a historical analysis of Hungary's contributions, while a chronicler for the Romanian pavilion remains to be named. Jörg Scheller, assistant to Beat Wyss, will be tracking the Polish pavilion and Annika Hossain, who is writing her doctoral dissertation under Wyss, will explore the history of American input.

The interface with SIK-ISEA

As a Confederacy of regions with idiosyncrasies of their own, Switzerland – as a model for Europe – deserves particular attention in the overall context of this project. A well-grounded academic investigation into the cultural foreign policy of the *Eidgenossenschaft*, as articulated in its offerings to the Biennale, promises to provide exemplary insights into the relationship between local identity and national self-image. The research will address practices of inclusion and exclusion and the justifications given for them, as well as the factors behind shifting power relations, with a special focus on those Swiss regions that have played a significant role in cultural policy and against the general backdrop of international developments in politics and economics.

Also planned is a comprehensive documentation of Swiss participation in the Biennale, to be compiled by permanent staff at SIK-ISEA and published in the winter of 2011/2012 as a collection of essays. The Institute's documentation, inventorisation and SIKART departments, who are developing new Biennale datasets, will make a significant contribution to the project. The objectives here are to build SIK-ISEA's role as a centre of national research and to place this work within a broader horizon of international and cross-border issues.

Historical background to the research

The Biennale has been taking place in the Venice Giardini since 1895, and today 28 nations set up their pavilions there. In the recent past, the Biennale's institutional success has prompted many countries that do not have their own exhibition hall to rent space in town so that they too can present their artists. The Focus Project has set its sights on the Giardini, the "real home of the international art world" (Philip Ursprung 2006). As Laszlo Glozer observed at the centenary celebrations in 1995, it is there that "European history is paradoxically portrayed". Throughout the stages of its cultural settlement, with the creation, rededication and demolition of exhibition buildings, we can follow the trail of more than a hundred years of world history, which have turned the Biennale grounds into a kind of political world map. The miniature political globe of the Giardini will also be scrutinised for empty spaces. This does not only mean the half hundred or so national contributions that have no pavilion,

but also countries that never participate at all. It is not only the poorest regions of the world that are under-represented, but Islamic countries as well.

From a genealogical perspective, the Biennale draws on two traditions: on the one hand the salon, which emerged in 18th-century Paris as a cyclically recurring institution for the public discussion of art and critique. Its second, more recent ancestors are the world fairs, which have anchored arts and crafts firmly in their programme ever since the international exhibition in Paris in 1855.

The world fairs of the 19th century symbolise an early form of supranational power structures with imperial ambitions of a political and economic nature. They are early globalisation processes in miniature, and hence their paradox: the forward march of technological homogenisation side by side with the claim to cultural identity. Technological internationalism and cultural regionalism were articulated here as two sides of the same coin.

The interplay of hegemonic aspirations and regional identity

The Biennale offers us a multitude of case studies for this. First established in an effort to boost local tourism, the "Esposizione Internazionale d'Arte della Città di Venezia" was, in its early days, no more than a provincial arts spectacle for the Serenissima, unable to offer much in the way of vibrant culture to its well-heeled and mollycoddled guests beyond a few picturesque stone façades. An initial phase of internationalisation after 1907 shows that cultural identity starts out as a claim to command Europe's cultural canon. Not all cultural regions, countries and classes are entitled to inscribe their traditions within the dominant canon of old European culture. Hegemonic identity is the branding of success. The Biennale is a cultural echo of the closed-door politics practised by the old Entente monarchies, preserving colonial sovereignty in art matters through a style fluctuating somewhere between academic traditions, Impressionism and *Jugendstil* while avant-gardes were resisted or ignored. It was not until 1920 that artists from post-Impressionism to *Brücke* won the respect of curators and found themselves exhibited. This was the year when Switzerland first attended, treading the line of "moderate" modernism, very much like the Biennale itself. In the central pavilion it presented forty artists, among them Cuno Amiet, Augusto Giacometti, Hermann Haller, Ferdinand Hodler and Albert Welti.

From 1922 to 1930, under the aegis of the *Duce's* mistress Margherita Sarfatti, the Biennale showed the first coy signs of opening up to the present. In 1930, a royal decree transferred control of the Biennale away from the city of Venice to the fascist state, which took up its baton of hegemonic identity. Similar hegemonic claims were made by the modernists, whose aesthetic and political message was read as the universal model of progress.

After an "era of retrospectives" (Peter Joch 1995/2007) from 1948 to 1962, when the European avant-garde and international movements in contemporary art were granted very particular attention, apparently seeking to make up for past failings, there followed years of crisis and upheaval. In 1964 pop artist Robert Rauschenberg was the first American to be awarded a European art prize, clinching American dominance in the cultural life of the Old World. Later, the '68 movement would turn, among other things, against the Biennale's "market bondage" as a sales event, and that led, in 1970, to a cessation of all sales activities. With the establishment of art fairs, in Cologne in 1967 and Basel in 1970, the art system underwent some institutional differentiation, with exhibiting at one end and trading at the other.

Decolonisation from the sixties onwards generated an understanding of cultural processes that can be described as both post-colonial and post-modern. Modernistic internationalism became a target for criticism, while regional particularity and resilience, oppressed by those

modern ideologies, gained in stature. Today, then, the art system is determined by fragmented identities, competing not so much for dominance as for being the most noticeably different. The powerless, the exotic, the "other" have been adopted in one form or another. In this way, a pattern of cultural identity has reappeared which sits comfortably with modern notions of style: since Vasari, styles have been the formal peculiarities of regions, of interest to both the collector and the artist as a conscious formal quotation or an expression of cultural dominion.

Questions and hypotheses

This development cannot be simply filed away under a linear definition of cultural progress, as the multiculturalism of the early 1990s attempted. Questions remain, to which answers will be sought in the framework of the overall project. One discussion will be about whether the globalised art system is creating a new "world art" or whether it merely globalises the rules of Western art? We must also ask whether the worldwide "globalisation" of art is the calculated marketing of hybrid folklore amidst cycles of fashion and entertainment, or whether it can indeed contribute to understanding between peoples in the way football does. Perhaps there will be confirmation of the optimistic notion that this spectacle of regionalism in art provides an opportunity to visualise national, regional, religious, ethnic differences while simultaneously locating them, without prejudice, within the space of aesthetic communication.

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Swiss Pavilion, constructed in 1951
Architect: Bruno Giacometti
Photo by: Foto Ferruzzi, Venice, 1952