
RESEARCH REPORT

Edit Your Future

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Perspectives on biennials as civil society initiatives.

The morality of the citizen resides in the awareness that our collective security is more important than any survival whatsoever. If morality would be considered a mere individual pleasure then survival becomes questionable indeed. A society of spectators without any moral feedback is a frozen society devoided of any chance to progress further. The riot, the screaming voice, with or without immediate responses of authorities is necessary in the process of building up a democracy, a powerful community supported by the practice of solidarity. Similarly, what would the world we are living in be without academic frictions at a theoretical level because of different antagonistic conceptions of concepts?

Biennales should be seen as independent civil society initiatives, consciously distanced from the calculating powers of the global art scene. Many biennials have been realized through ongoing conflicts and crises that produced conceptual, visual, and functional knowledge providing us with many viewpoints in our quest for evocative and effectual biennales in any part of the world.

When deciding to make a biennale in the age of Post-truth – which is now the popular term for the description of the global crisis – there is no doubt that artists and curators believe that contemporary art productions and exhibition are the most crucial means of dealing with sociopolitical-cultural problems and concerns, and the most challenging way of communicating with the society of spectacle.

In the age of Post-truth, it is believed that truth is not only fabricated or manipulated, but also of minor importance. The purpose of political power and its networks seems to have become to create a untruthful view of the world, without the necessity to convince elites or voters, but rather to blur judgments, fortify prejudices, and provoke emotions. The news sources manipulated by political powers also create a confusing world of information where deceptions, false stories and gossip circulate with disturbing speed. Lies shared online within a network easily transform into truth manifestations. Consequently, as biennale curators or organizers we believe that contemporary art works, with their truth-seeking, inquisitive, cutting-edge quality have the power to enter into this Post-truth turmoil without any reservation and spoil the game.

For similar reasons, cities rather than capitals and megalopolis had the ambition of making biennales during the two recent decades. Setting aside the economic-touristic benefits, we should concentrate on the provocative meaning of “exhibition” i.e. submitting critical thinking through art works for inspection or examination by the public; putting a verbal, visual, or tangible production on the scene; challenging a confrontation with public opinion, and creating a complex agora to provoke the participation of the passive public into the debate. Exhibitions are willingly exposed to the gaze of the public and to the manipulating powers of the political or social order.

If art is the answer, the question is how capitalism can be made more beautiful. Yet, modern art is not just about beauty. It is also about function. What is the function of art in disastrous capitalism? Contemporary art feeds on the crumbs of the massive wealth redistribution “on a large scale from the poor to the wealthy, made through an ongoing downward battle between the classes” (David Harvey). The production of traditional art could serve as a model for the nouveau riche, a model designed by privatization, expropriation, and speculation. For sure there is exploitation within the art system, there are exploited workers (artists) as well. However, through its institutions, political art can focus on a new model of social order, since it has already generated an exploited and practised model (Boris Groys). As Hannah Arendt noted, we need not create a new class, but rather reject all classes. We should understand the artistic space as a political one instead of representing political situations from other areas. Art is not detached from politics; its politics reside in its production, its distribution, and its perception. If we consider this a fact, perhaps we will surpass the flatness of the representation policy and launch a new kind of policy that is already there, right in front of our eyes, ready to be embraced.



Take away sheets & exhibition view from Bucharest Biennale 8 curated by Beral Madra & Răzvan Ion. Courtesy of the artists and Bucharest Biennale 8. Photo: Cătălin Burcea. www.bucharestbiennale.org.

An exhibition is also a power in itself. It is this seduction of the power-game that makes biennales so desirable. The role of the artist and the curator in a biennale at a time of social polarization, political upheaval, ecological catastrophe and all kinds of pressure is to respond by introducing, through the selected artworks, multifarious ways able to provoke new possibilities of critical thinking.

I believe that the power of the exhibition is located in the collaborative and collective attitude and supervision of artists, curators and organizers, even when under tense working conditions there can be plausible disputes or conflicts between them. If the people are expecting to restore, heal and re-balance their appreciation, sensibility and knowledge through artworks, the updated collective and collaborative planning, the conceptual, sensible and functional unity of a biennale guarantees the longstanding influence of the exhibition into the subconscious of the people.

The transition of institutional critics from the academic environment to autonomous structures is more than welcome for the conversion that already began in critical artistic communication. There we find the necessary resources to overcome the moment of contemplating the situation, the possibility to construct situations and for functional public structures to bring their own critical input into play, which can function as an alternative institution for the classic forms of regulation. We have the resources to contemplate our future; we live in a time where the artistic act can legitimize best the kind of positioning a holistic, hegemonic entity needs.

When we acknowledge that a revolution is not a form of resistance, but rather a catalyst in the social process, then innocent victims will no longer be necessary, and neither will be collateral damage. As the hegemony assimilates all our means of expression, we could identify in its structure the possibility to relocate the multi-culturalism of governmental politics into civic communication, diverging the false globalisation focused on market economy and the generation of the virtual policentralised capital into a globalization of critical communication beneficial to all micro-societies.

The implications of art are unfathomable indeed and, up to a certain extent, art can be safeguarded in terms of other values, such as its utility, its sovereignty, its aesthetic, and its message. However, when art itself would conflict with such values, some of the most shattering questions will emerge.

What do we need today? A basic-state? A state-of-equalities? A post-state? How does the role and methodology of art intercede? Could art be a tool for struggle, progress, and debate?



Bogdan Rața exhibition view in public space from Bucharest Biennale 8 curated by Beral Madra & Răzvan Ion. Courtesy of the artist and Bucharest Biennale 8. Photo: Cătălin Burcea. www.bucharestbiennale.org.

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Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

Author Information

Răzvan Ion is a theoretician, curator and cultural manager. He was an associate professor at University of California, Berkeley; Lisbon University; Central University of New York; University of London; Sofia University; and University of Kiev. He has held conferences and lectures at different art institutions like Witte de With, Rotterdam; Kunsthalle Vienna; Art in General, New York; Calouste Gulbenkian, Lisbon; and Casa Encendida, Madrid. He is the co-founder of Bucharest Biennale, Pavilion Journal and Reforma. He edited several books and curated exhibitions. He is a professor at the University of Bucharest where he teaches Curatorial Studies and Critical Thinking. Recently he was the curator of Bucharest Biennale 8, together with Beral Madra. He is the coordinator of creat Gallery since 2017. He lives and works in Vienna.

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