

In Light of Crisis

*The Fraught Significations of
Contemporary Biennials*

Symposium 19-20 May 2022, Zurich

University of Zurich, Rämistrasse 59
Building RAA, Hall G01

Organizers

Julie Ren
Charlotte Matter
Ifigenia Dimitrakou
Rosa Sancarlo
Virginia Marano

Keynote speaker

Varsha Nair, Womanifesto

Presenters (in alphabetical order)

Maria Bremer
Ilaria Conti
Adam Jasper
Adam Kaasa
Panos Kompatsiaris
Adrian Lahoud
Julie Ren
Jeannine Tang
Divya Tolia-Kelly

The symposium “In Light of Crisis: The Fraught Significations of Contemporary Biennials” proposes an intensive exchange about how to understand art and architecture biennials through the lens of crisis. Rather than operating in the shadow of assumptions about what crisis might represent, we seek to scrutinize crisis more productively, in terms of the biennial in crisis, its crisis of meaning and the crises of representation (Cf. Verhagen, 2012; Oguibe, 2004; Dimitrakaki, 2012) as well as the context of crises, the distances that crisis creates in terms of the translation of reality in creative production (Cramerotti and Mele, 2021) or the normalization of crisis as an unending precariousness haunting everyday life (Berlant, 2011; Battacharyya, 2015; Hall, 2019). As a field-configuring event, proliferating in cities around the world from Kampala to Kobe, the biennial offers a particular lens through which to analyze these different senses of crisis. Biennials often represent a cultural frontier, featuring work not yet acquired by any museum, often specially commissioned and curated for each setting with intensive scrutiny. At times, they champion socio-political issues like indigenous rights, climate change, and economic and political crises, and they are increasingly redressing problems of cultural representation (Filipovic, Ovstebo and Van Hal, 2010; Ren, 2021). Nonetheless, the attempt to inspire public debate is coupled with the struggle to reconcile critical aims of these events with the political economy of elite circuits of curators, artists/architects, and writers that in turn breed the creative and financial capital necessary to sustain their cultural value. These events inspire anticipation, speculation and disdain, and new actors must constantly pursue questions of their own relevance (Wah, 2021). The inflation of capital involved in these markets is also coupled with exploitative practices employing precarious labor, and often form convenient alliances with tourism and real estate industries.

Against this background, the symposium invites experts and researchers to reflect on the following questions: What does the biennial do (Lind and Rujoio, 2019), to whom and at what cost? What does this contribute to our understanding of the biennial format in crisis or the context of crises, and how are these entwined?

This symposium is possible with support from the UZH Graduate Research Campus, Chair for Modern and Contemporary Art, Institute of Art History and Social and Cultural Geography Unit, Department of Geography

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*The Fraught Significations of
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Thursday, 19 May 2022

9:30-9:45

Welcome from the Organizing Team

Ifigeneia Dimitrakou, Virginia Marano, Charlotte Matter, Julie Ren, Rosa Sancarlo

9:45-12:15

Session 1| In Quest of a Thrill: Spectacles and the Speculative

Taking the biennial as a field-configuring kind of spectacle, and seeing it through the lense of crises of meaning and context, what is the role of fluidity (going with the flow) and powerful actors (setting new courses)?

Speakers: Jeannine Tang, Adrian Lahoud and Adam Jasper

12:15-13:15

Lunch

13:15-15:45

Session 2| Discomforted, the Biennial and its (Dis)affective Turns

What is exposed or revealed about biennials in a context of crisis if concepts like emotion and affect are seen as instruments of investigation vs. objects of investigation?

Speakers: Divya Tolia-Kelly, Adam Kaasa and Ilaria Conti

15:45-16:15

Coffee

16:15-17:30

Varsha Nair “Of Key: Notes on Womanifesto’s Fluidity”

18:00

Apéro

Friday, 20 May 2022

10:00-12:30

Session 3| The Perpetuity of Crisis, Precarity and Exploitation: Mutations and Manifestations

What significations can be discerned in biennials’ stubbornness, their (potential) qualities of resisting, enduring and persevering, particularly when crises call into question their relevance?

Speakers: Julie Ren, Maria Bremer and Panos Kompatsiaris

12:30-13:30

Lunch

13:30-14:00

Moderators’ report: Key themes, Issues, Questions

14:00-16:30

Workshop

16:30-17:30

Final Plenary: Quo Vadis? Biennials in Uncertain Times

biographies

Maria Bremer is a postdoctoral researcher specializing in contemporary art and exhibition history. She received her PhD from Freie Universität Berlin with a dissertation on the art of the 1970s showcased at documenta, titled *Individuelle Mythologien – Kunst jenseits der Kritik* (Edition Metzler, 2019). Currently, she works at the Art History Department of the Ruhr-University Bochum; previous affiliations include the Bibliotheca Hertziana – Max Planck Institute for Art History in Rome, the Center for Italian Modern Art in New York, and the Centre allemand d'histoire de l'art (DFK) in Paris.

Ilaria Conti's work as a curator focuses on research-based artistic practices engaging with decolonial epistemologies and the relationship between institutional infrastructures, social justice, and civic agency. Curated projects include: *Rethinking Nature*, Madre Museum (2021); *Pensiero Plurale*, Magazzino Italian Art (2021); *Lo Sa La Ter Ruz*, Fondation H (2021); *Proximities*, Istituto Svizzero (2021); *Prove di R(i)esistenza*, Fondazione Baruchello (2020); *ALT(ering)+SHIFT(ing)+COMM(uning)*, Call for Curators (2020–); *Cosmopolis*, Centre Pompidou (2017–2019); *6th Marrakech Biennial: Not New Now* (2016).

Ifigeneia Dimitrakou is an architect and urban planner, postdoctoral researcher at the Social and Cultural Geography Unit, Department of Geography, University of Zurich. Her research focuses on housing and inhabitation struggles, with a particular interest on matters of vacancy and dispossession, urban temporariness, material culture and everyday life.

Adam Jasper is a researcher at the Institute for the History and Theory of Architecture (gta) at the ETH Zurich. He is editor of the journal *gta papers*, and a regular contributor to *Artforum*.

Adam Kaasa's work moves between space, facilitation and performance. As an interdisciplinary scholar at the Royal College of Art, Adam specialises in the intersection of feelings, culture, and inequality in the city, guided by feminist and queer thinking.

Panos Kompatsiaris has a Ph.D. in art theory from the University of Edinburgh (2015) and is the author of “The Politics of Contemporary Art Biennials” (2017). He teaches culture and media theory at HSE University in Moscow and is a research associate at IULM in Milan. He is the author of several articles, special issues, and collections on art, cultural production, and politics.

Adrian Lahoud is Dean of the School of Architecture at the Royal College of Art, London. Prior to his current role at the RCA, he was director of the MA programme at the Centre for Research Architecture, Goldsmiths and a research fellow in the Forensic Architecture ERC-funded project; studio master in the Projective Cities MPhil in Architecture and Urban Design at the Architectural Association; and director of the MArch Urban Design at the Bartlett, University College London. He was the inaugural curator of the Sharjah Architecture Triennial (2019).

Virginia Marano is a doctoral candidate in Art History at the University of Zurich. Her thesis focuses on the aesthetic of dislocation in the works of Jewish women sculptors in Post-war New York, previously assimilated to feminism but not yet connected to the question of exile. She is currently a SNSF Doc. Mobility fellow and a visiting scholar at Hunter College/CUNY. She is part of the research project “Rethinking Art History through Disability” at the University of Zurich.

Charlotte Matter is an art historian. She is a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Zurich, where she coordinates the specialized Master's program Art History in a Global Context. Her doctoral thesis explored feminist approaches to plastics in art of the 1960s and 1970s. She is currently working on the notion of collectivity from a decolonial perspective.

Varsha Nair studied at Faculty of Fine Arts, Maharaja Sayaji Rao University, Baroda, India. Inviting multidisciplinary collaborations, her work encompasses various approaches and genres, including bringing people together. She has exhibited internationally and is co organizer of *Womanifesto* – an international art exchange in Thailand. Her texts have been published in various journals such as *n paradoxa*, *Southeast of Now: Directions in Contemporary and Modern Art in Asia*, *Art AsiaPacific*, and *Ctrl+P Journal of Contemporary Art* of which she is Editorial Board member. She is currently a mentor with the Masters of Arts Program at HSLU Lucerne, Lucerne University of Applied Sciences and Arts. Nair lived in Bangkok from 1995 to 2019 and now resides in Baroda, India.

Julie Ren is an urban researcher with the Social and Cultural Geography Unit at the Department of Geography, University of Zurich investigating comparative methods, the politics of aspiration and positions of complicity. Her work on art events has addressed questions of cultural representation, public space, social proximity. Her most recent book is *Engaging Comparative Urbanism: Art Spaces in Beijing and Berlin* (Bristol University Press, 2020).

Rosa Sancarlo is a doctoral candidate in Art History and research and teaching assistant at the Chair for Modern and Contemporary Art of the Art Historical Institute of the University of Zurich. Her research and teaching focuses on the interactions between African Diasporic and Western art and visual culture and her dissertation project examines the silhouette as an ambiguous mode of representation within African American modern art.

Jeannine Tang is an art historian, currently active as Assistant Professor of Modern/Contemporary Art History & Visual Studies; Director & Dept. Faculty Advisor for Visual Studies at the New School, New York City. With a Master and PhD in Art History from the Courtauld Institute of Art, her research and writing focuses on contemporary art, queer and trans aesthetics and visual culture, curatorial and exhibition history. She taught art and curatorial history between 2010–2019 at the graduate program of the Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College. She has published widely in such venues as *Artforum*, *Art Journal*, *GLQ*, *Journal of Visual Culture*, *Theory, Culture & Society*, and *Art India*. In 2018, with Lia Gangitano and Ann Butler, she co-curated the exhibition “The Conditions of Being Art: Pat Hearn Gallery and American Fine Arts, Co. (1983–2004)” at the Hessel Museum of Art, and is co-editor of the accompanying book.

Divya Tolia-Kelly is Professor of Geography & Heritage Studies at the University of Sussex. Her research centres on postcolonial and anti-racist approaches to cultural geography. She has extensively published on postcolonial and affective politics of heritage and art institutions, as well as on questions of memory, visual and material culture within these fields. Divya is currently Series Co-Editor of the Routledge Book Series *Critical Studies in Heritage, Emotion and Affect*. Her forthcoming research monograph is entitled “An Archaeology of Race at the Museum” (contracted with Routledge).

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