



MJ - Manifesta Journal
journal of contemporary curatorship

N°2, Winter 2003 / Spring 2004
Biennials



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Luchezar Boyadjiev

Off the Record

Luchezar Boyadjiev is an artist based in Sofia, Bulgaria. He has recently presented his work at the ICA in Sofia (2003), Knoll Gallery in Vienna (2001) and TV Gallery in Moscow (2000). He has also taken part in a number of group exhibitions, including *In the Gorges of the Balkans*, Kunsthalle Fridericianum, Kassel, Germany (2003); *Blood & Honey*, The Essl Collection, Klosterneuburg/Vienna (2003); *In Search of Balkania*, Neue Galerie, Graz, Austria (2002); *Manifesta 4*, Frankfurt (2002); *Reconstruction*, 4th Biennial of Cetinje, Montenegro (2002); *The Collective Unconsciousness*, MIGROS Museum, Zurich (2002); 1st Tirana Biennial (2001).

Do you know why, in the last World Cup football competition in 2002, Turkey came in third place but Korea was only in fourth? Do you know what I suspect is the motivation behind the organization of three large-scale exhibitions of contemporary art from the Balkans, all taking place in Europe within only a year of each other (*In Search of Balkania*, Graz, curated by Peter Weibel, Eda Čufer, and Roger Conover, in 2002; *Blood and Honey: Future's in the Balkans*, Klosterneuburg/Vienna, curated by Harald Szeemann, and *In the Gorges of the Balkans*, Kassel, curated by René Block, both in 2003)? Do you know why they decided to have the Documenta exhibition every five years instead of every four? Well, it's all rather obvious to me. . .

The answer to Question 1 is: because the Istanbul Biennial is older than the Gwangju Biennial and that means greater self-confidence. The answer to Question 2 is: because in the last three World Cup football competitions, a Balkan country always placed among the top four teams - in 1994, in the USA, it was Bulgaria (fourth place); in 1998, in France, it was Croatia (third place, I think); and in 2002, in South Korea/Japan, it was Turkey - all of which shows an escalation of energy that needs to be accounted for. The answer to Question 3 is: in this way, the D-show will not coincide with the Olympic Games, and thus organizers hope to avoid the danger of having people's attention diverted; it did not help one bit in June 2002, when there were not many visitors after the opening days of D-11, perhaps because World Cup football was going on at full speed. D-12 in 2007, or should we say, the "Double-O-Seven" Documenta, should be fine on this account.

Other parallels could be made between sports and art. For instance, at any world (or for that matter, European) championship in track and field, some records are usually broken - maybe the 800-meter hurdles for women or the 3,000-meter steeplechase for men, but it never happens that every single record is broken at every single event. World records are often broken in national or local championship games, provided there is supervision by world sports authorities to make sure all the rules are being followed. Similarly, at every biennial, every Documenta, Manifesta or ARCO, there are only a handful of really good and important works that remain

in one's memory over subsequent editions of the same or similar events. Or still better, there are only a handful of really good and important artists. Nevertheless, such art events seem to persist, which makes me think that the origin of all regularly scheduled events, whether sports, art, or trade events, goes back to the Olympic Games. Let's not forget the national pavilions, selections, participations, and so on, where it is not quite clear who is representing whom and for what reason. On the other hand, one might consider the competition between biennials. Somewhere here my old idea about a Grand Slam of artists' participation comes in - a Grand Slam would be, for instance, if in 2007, the same artist participates in all the major exhibitions: Documenta 11, the Venice Biennale, the Istanbul Biennial, the Münster Sculpture Project, etc.

Unlike sports, however, the selection process for large biennial events seems to be more conceptually subjective. It, too, is based on achievement, but the algorithm for selection is different. In art events, many of us are researched, but few are curated, while the selector/curator is concerned with have a unique event where there will be as many "records" broken as possible, including the overall "track record," or whatever term we may wish to use to indicate the stuff once referred to as Art History. Nonetheless, the sheer number of events, as well as the number of participating artists and presented works, makes this impossible. Still, hope springs eternal on the part of both curators and artists, and maybe audiences, too. . . As a consequence, the attitude of the artists, including myself, is that when you are invited to take part in a biennial (regardless of how many times you already have), it's better to do so than not. And that's another parallel with the Olympic Games, where the overriding motivation is that it is more important to participate than merely "to break a record" or win a gold medal. . . I am tempted to quote here Sean Snyder, who said, off the record, in a recent private conversation, that it was somehow better to be "in second place" most of the time because the one in first place seems to change with every new race. (A dialogue one might have: "Who's on first? No, Hou's on second. . .")

In sports, the sheer number of events and athletes does not automatically lead to



Luchezar Boyadjiev
*Schadenfreude Guided
Tours, In the Gorges
of the Balkans,*
Kunsthalle
Fridericianum,
Kassel, Germany
Sept. - Nov. 2003
Photo: Nils Klinger

avalanches of new records. But in sports, there is, by default, a high entertainment value to an event. So nobody is complaining. In art, entertainment is suspect, although I think there is, certainly such a trend - thank God! But the level of complaint about the number and quality of biennials has been growing in linear progression to the number of biennials that take place. But the complaints do not seem to come from the audiences of such events, which are scattered all over the world. The audience is disunited and can rarely revolt (unless it is located in a city or country with a high saturation of events and a dense art infrastructure). For instance, the audience in Gwangju does not complain about the Venice Biennale, nor does the Sydney Biennial audience complain about Documenta. The complaint comes mainly from the professional field, and that's quite surprising when we consider the status of the habitat we occupy as compared (how exactly?) to the big, real world and the masses of overexploited, overworked, underprivileged, isolated, marginalized art viewers who do not have the privilege of living in London, Berlin, Paris or Venice (New York now approaching marginality due to the lack of a major international art event, and with Moscow just about to emerge from this sorry status). In a word, can we afford to complain about the growing number of biennials? Isn't it better to concentrate on the "what, where, when, why, and who" of these events and, basically, on the "how and for whom" do they fit into the local context? The expectations of such large-scale events are often unrealistically high, plus, there is a hint of confusion: Do we want an entertaining event that can engage audiences as well as professionals? Or do we want events that, on top of all this, also "break records"? Or do we want both, and how is this to be achieved? By "record," I mean here "history."

As it stands now, one of the main functions served by large international biennial events seems, in my opinion, to be in crisis, hence the complaints from the professionals, or if you prefer, the debate. Biennials take place at least partly because they act as proof - to the art world itself, as well as to the world at large - that there is, in fact, such a thing as an international art world, that it does exist and is capable of providing a product that can engage the attention of the world at large. The preview and opening days of a Documenta, Venice, or Manifesta are the time



and place where the art world can be seen in action. The art world, there and then, is represented by those of us in the art profession, in its many guises, who happen to be present for whatever reason. That's a very important function, because there is no profession that can survive without a sense - and demonstration - of its public identity. Thus, it is strange that art professionals are complaining about biennials, for that would imply a challenge to the identity of the profession, cutting off the very branch we sit on, etc. - which I do not think is on the agenda. Another possibility is that this particular function of biennials is in crisis. The question is why?

The answer, perhaps, is that the art world is not quite sure of its own status and function within the globalized world. Not only that, but it is also not clear if there yet exists a discourse of biennials that would override each individual event. I suspect there is. Maybe the feeling of unease comes from the realization that all these biennials could turn out to be just a marginal side effect of globalization, a symptom or, worse, one of the main tools of globalization in the realm of culture. If there is an answer to be found, it has to do with thinking about space. I do not mean not any particular space; nor do I mean space as a philosophical construct. Rather, I am referring to the space between the art world and the rest of the world, or the space populated/occupied by the art world in the real world: the fittings, the linkages, the tensions and frictions, the mediators, the metaphors, and so on. That, however, is an area of thought where I am not so comfortable, so instead, I will concentrate on a kind of space that is more palpable for me. This kind of space can best be described through approximations, and it is precisely this space that needs to be reconsidered.

On first thought, I would say there is a distinct parallel between, on the one hand, the space between the various biennials and, on the other hand, the space between the art world and the world at large. But that is too generalized a concept to defend. On second thought, a better approximation would be the space between the artworks in a given biennial or any large international group exhibition of that sort. This is precisely the space where the art world (artists, curators, etc.) and the real world (visitors, audience) meet face to face. This is the concrete space shared by all



of us. So far, this space has been made "visible" through curatorial concepts, catalogues and publications, artists' statements, and so on. It is a space similar to the kind of space located between various art events, whether biennials or not. And it is the art world's (art profession's) articulation of this space that seems to be in crisis, maybe because the art world's sense of identity is in crisis. I do not mean the physical aspects of this space, but rather aspects I would call "cross-referencing" - the dialogues between works, between works and visitors, between a particular combination of works in a particular place in the world and all other possible combinations and places, and so on. Art events, big or small, are usually characterized by the fact that, after the opening, the audience rarely has the chance to meet either the curators or the artists. Apart from formal press conferences, a lecture or two, and occasional interviews in the local press, there are few chances for visitors to encounter the curator. As for meeting the artists, well, I have noticed that, for instance, if I hang around the office the day after the opening in order to check my e-mail before leaving, I tend to get a lot of startled "double-takes" telling me, "Oh, you're still here!" The organizers of an event usually feel uncomfortable with artists who have not left by the "morning after." The audience is a different matter. In place of the missing curator and artists, the audience has at their disposal, for example, a press release, which is too short and cursory in nature, and a catalogue, which is either too demanding to actually read or has too many pictures without a proper context. Thus, after the opening, the space between the works in a show becomes void, and local audiences might not always be able to fill it up on their own.

At this point, there is a break in the pattern of space continuity, and the art world's alienation from the real world becomes manifest. The professionals go home or go to the next site of action, whereas the local audience is, most likely, left with a frustrating feeling that the globalized (art) world was here, to be sure, but has just left in order to manifest itself elsewhere. A desire for concrete globalization (to have the world at home) is triggered but never actually consumed (home as part of the world), and the educated local art consumer keeps on guessing (while musing on the mobility of curators and artists as opposed to his or her own static situation)



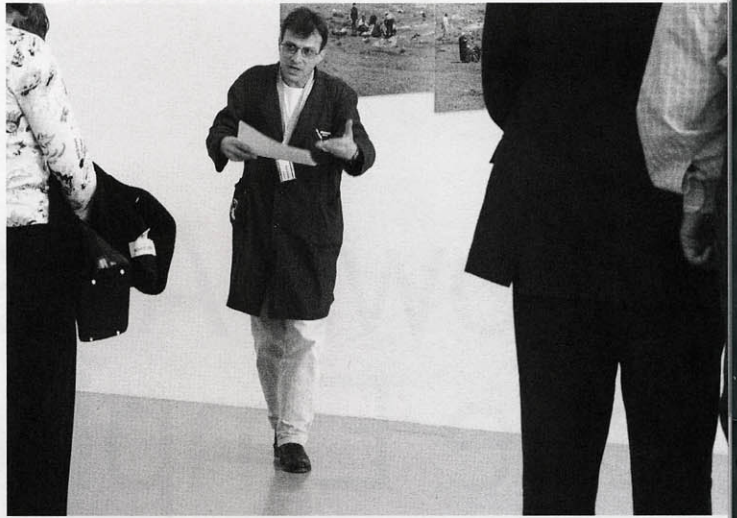
where the next global appearance will take place (the penis envy of globalization). Globalization is performed as symbolic exchange and, in this perspective, a biennial functions as a tool for insemination, culture vs. nature, male vs. female, etc. At the same time, it is also possible, although I cannot provide evidence at this point, that an identical feeling of frustration overcomes the art professionals, who rarely have the chance to enjoy the benefits of a locally successful art manifestation - I sometimes get press clippings, but most of the time, I have no idea who actually goes to see my work, what they think of it, how it relates to them, how it fits in with the whole show for them, and ultimately, how it fits in (or does not) with their own perception of the world. This is particularly true when the artist, as in my case, comes from a smaller art scene, which is itself a playground of globalization effects. This feeling of frustration is reinforced because what I do away from home is not known here and I am not sure if it is understood there, while what I do at home is always suspect because the local audience suspects that the work is part of a much larger discourse on the global scene and there is no way for them to know anything about it. This problem is, I think, one of "global art production vs. local art consumption."

I am not sure there is an effective way to fill in these gaps and voids. However, recent experience tells me that a catalogue, or any sort of publication, is not enough to fill, for the sake of visitors, the voids that exist between the works in a show. Even less can any sort of publication fill the void between the many biennials, whatever and wherever they might be, let alone the void between the art world and the real world. What I tried to do recently was to stay within a show, for as long as possible, as a "living, talking and walking sculpture" providing "guided tours." The show was *In the Gorges of the Balkans* in the Kunsthalle Fridericianum in Kassel, and of the twelve weeks of its run, I was there for five or more. I was there every day between 11 a.m. and 6 p.m., the working hours of the museum, and anybody who wanted to could get a free tour, of a kind (my kind), around the more than one hundred and twenty works by eighty-eight artists in the show. I have to admit that my tours were not easy on the visitors. A full (more or less, for I could never presume to "know it all") *Schadenfreude Guided Tour* (as the project was called) lasted about four and



a half hours or more. Part of the reason for this was that, since the other artists were not there to speak on their own behalf, I was free to say anything I wanted. For obvious reasons, the curator of the show could not be there most of the time, either. I worked with the entire physical space of the show, the building and its exterior, jumping from work to work, artist to artist, and country to country, connecting them all within layers of reference to the Balkan context that only an informed insider could provide. I think of this project as one huge performance, lasting day after day, which depended as much on an insider's knowledge and penetration as on the flow of adrenalin and the eyes of the visitors shining with enthusiasm and interest - and sometimes, with exhaustion. I worked with the inner space and logic of the show, trying to make it visible and almost physically palpable for visitors, to give flesh and blood to the lived reality, culture, history, concepts, visual language, and so on, ingrained in the works. Of course, the curator staged it all, but I think that, without me, it would have been a less interactive staging. The visitors seemed to like it, and a good number of them were people from Kassel who may not have a Documenta in their front yard every day but who do have a distinct sense of audience pride. Imagine talking about a complete unknown youngster from Kosovo to somebody who is quick to remind you, "Yes, we debated such issues with Beuys at the Sixth Documenta, or was it the Seventh?"

In theory, the artwork speaks for itself, right? In practice, it does not really work this way, even when it is a sound piece made up of talking - at least not for visitors. And even if it does work, it is never fully satisfactory, for visitors want to see who is behind the work and experience all the things that might come out of such an encounter. In theory, a biennial should speak for itself. This does happen, but only to a point. In sports, things are much clearer - athletes run faster or jump higher because they are testing the limits of human capabilities. There are many other reasons, of course, including economics and entertainment. In sports, spectators also get to see just who is running or jumping. But in art? In a biennial? How is it possible to reconcile mobility with an enduring presence? To put the record straight, in my view, the white cube is no longer a seemingly neutral container of artworks. Now it is, instead, the voided space between the works in a show, or the voided



space between art events. It is of critical importance for the future to reconsider this void, and here, sports, or maybe even fashion, could serve as a useful example. Imagine having something like the Fashion TV cable channel. With so many art events all over the world and nothing to connect them in the eyes of the viewer, maybe it would not be so outrageous to think of an ART TV cable channel that would show footage of openings and shows from all over the world around the clock. Or better still, a cross between Fashion TV and CNN dedicated to contemporary art with such top-of-the-hour stories as "The New Line of Venice," "Spring Art in Beijing," "The Post-Documenta Diary of a Curator," "Youngsters on the Move in Pristina," "A Fundraising Party in Moscow," "Curators' Fight for Viewers in Paris," "Artists the Day before the Opening of. . .," and on and on.

MJ

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journal of contemporary curatorship

Published by:

Moderna galerija (Museum of Modern Art) Ljubljana
Ljubljana, Slovenia
and

International Foundation Manifesta
Amsterdam, The Netherlands

Editors:

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Igor Zabel

Managing editor:

Marieke van Hal

English language editor:

Rawley Grau

Design:

Arnold+Vuga design studio; Nataša Vuga

Printed by:

Božnar & Partner

© the authors and the publishers

Distribution and subscriptions:

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Subscription price: 60 EURO incl. shipment
(6 x MJ, including back issues) MJ appears 2 x per
year and is a project in a series of 6 issues in total

The International Foundation Manifesta (IFM), with
offices in Amsterdam, The Netherlands organizes and
co-ordinates the New Network Program, which is a
multi-faceted resource and research program,
encompassing the Manifesta Biennial, the Manifesta
Archives and a program of publications, discussions
and related activities, focusing on contemporary art
and its role in society. The public accessible archives
of Manifesta are located at the Manifesta at Home
space in Amsterdam.

MJ - Manifesta Journal is part of the Manifesta
Network Programme and is co-funded by the Culture
2000 Framework of the European Commission.

ISBN 90-75380-95-X

ISSN 1572-5154



Education and Culture

Culture 2000



Mandriana Stichting
(Mondriaan Foundation)

Allianz
Kulturstiftung 

ISBN 90-75380-95-X



9 789075 380958 >



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