

# VENICE BIENNALE: HISTORY AND IMPACT



Saffron Blaze: Rialto Gondoliers, Image sourced from wiki commons

## WHAT IS A BIENNALE?

*Biennale* is an Italian word meaning 'every other year'. The term was originally used for the Venice International Art Exhibition, first held in 1895. Today, it commonly refers to the many large scale international contemporary art exhibitions held in various cities around the world.

Biennales feature contemporary art by artists from various countries that are usually linked by a common curatorial theme, providing a framework for exploring contemporary social, economic and political ideas in an international context. With so many different artists involved, audiences are able to experience and engage with a wide variety of contemporary art practices to come to their own unique understanding of the curatorial theme.

A biennale is different to a regular exhibition because of its large scale and use of multiple venues. It is also different to an art fair because the artworks are not for sale.



## VENICE BIENNALE: HISTORY AND IMPACT



Roy Lichtenstein exhibition at 1964 Venice Biennale  
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# THE ORIGINAL BIENNALE

The Venice Biennale<sup>1</sup> has been through significant changes in format, scale and art forms throughout its 120 year history.

## THE BEGINNING

In 1893, the Mayor of Venice, Riccardo Selvatico, proposed a major art exhibition to coincide with the silver wedding anniversary of Italy's King Umberto and Queen Margherita. The first exhibition was held in 1895 at the Palazzo dell' Esposizione, located in a public garden known as the Giardini on the Riva degli Schiavoni. The exhibition featured a mix of Italian and European artists, attracting over 224 000 visitors.

## EARLY YEARS

At first, the Biennales displayed only one or two artworks by each artist, hung together in the 19th century Salon presentation style, with no overarching theme or concept linking the works. Over time, this changed to presenting solo exhibitions of an artist's work, and multiple artists in thematic displays.<sup>2</sup>



# THE ORIGINAL BIENNALE

## A European Display

In the early decades of the 20th century, the Biennales became larger and more international. By 1914, many European countries built national pavilions on the Giardini: Belgium (1907), Hungary (1909), Germany (1909), Great Britain (1909), France (1912) and Russia (1914).

## WORLD WAR 1 TO WORLD WAR 2

The Biennale was cancelled during the war years 1914-18 but reopened in 1920. Many more European countries built their own national pavilions in the Giardini. During the next few decades the Italian government took control from the Venice city council, expanding the display to include other artforms. In 1930, a music festival was added, followed by the world's first international film festival in 1932 and a theatre festival in 1934. From 1938, Grand Prizes were awarded to artists in the exhibition sections.

The outbreak of World War 2 (1939-45) again halted the Biennale, which reopened in 1948 with only 15 countries participating. The empty national pavilions displayed special exhibitions, such as a French Impressionist display, a Picasso retrospective and the Peggy Guggenheim Collection.



# THE ORIGINAL BIENNALE

## 1950s AND 1960s

The exhibitions of the late 1950s and early '60s moved away from solo exhibitions towards thematic displays that focussed on art movements, styles and techniques. This shift was influenced by emerging art practices in the international art scene, particularly the new dominance of American post-war art movements such as Abstract Expressionism and, later, Pop Art.

## 1960s PROTESTS AND THE RISE OF POLITICAL ART

The late 1960s was marked by a global wave of student protests about issues such as the Vietnam War, civil rights, gender equality and economic ideologies. In Italy, students called for a boycott of the Venice Biennale, labelling it an elitist commodification of art practice. As a result, the Biennale abolished the Grand Prizes and prohibited art sales. These changes began a large-scale reform of the Biennale in response to the increasingly political nature of art practice.

In 1974, the president of the Venice Biennale, Carlo Ripa di Meana, curated an exhibition called Freedom for Chile in response to a military coup there. In 1977, at the height of the Cold War, the Biennale presented an unofficial selection of dissident art from the USSR, a move that created an international diplomatic crisis for the Biennale and led to later changes for the organisation.



# THE ORIGINAL BIENNALE

## 1980s AND 1990s

The Venice Biennale continued to explore the role of art and artists through exhibition themes such as Art and Science (1986) and The Place of Artists (1988). The 45th edition of the Biennale was held back a year to coincide with the 100th-year anniversary of the exhibition in 1995. The centenary saw increased participation by more countries than ever in every sector of its activity: theatre, film, art and music.

## RECENT YEARS

Since 1998, the Venice Biennale has been structured into two main components: an exhibition comprised of national pavilions, each with its own curator and project; and an international exhibition organised by the Biennale's curator with artworks linked by a theme. In an age where many cities have adopted a biennale, Venice continues to be the best-known and most-respected international art event, with more than 450,000 visitors attending over a six-month period.



# BIENNALES AROUND THE WORLD

The Venice Biennale was the only international exhibition of its kind until the inaugural São Paulo Art Biennial in 1951. The now defunct Paris Biennale opened in 1959, followed by the Biennale of Sydney in 1973.

More cities launched biennales in the 1980s and 1990s and, ever since, the number of biennales held around the world has increased dramatically. The Biennial Foundation, an international network of biennale organisations, lists over 150 events worldwide. Some of these are major exhibitions, such as the Moscow or Istanbul Biennales; others are smaller and less well known.

Australia hosts several biennales:

- Biennale of Sydney
- Adelaide Biennial
- TarraWarra Biennial
- Australian Design Biennale
- Asia Pacific Triennial

See the variety of biennales: <http://www.biennialfoundation.org/>



# THE IMPACT OF THE BIENNALE MODEL

Key aspects of the international biennale model can be traced back to the original Venice Biennale of 1895. The City of Venice used the exhibition of contemporary Italian and European art to attract tourism to a disused part of the city, the Giardini, to help revitalise the area.

Since then, many biennales have shared similar key features:

- **Surveying global contemporary art practice** – allowing the local population and visitors to encounter diverse art practices from international artists.
- **Diplomatic relations** – improving relations through cultural dialogue and exchange of ideas.
- **Urban renewal** – reinvigorating under-used public and private spaces.
- **Cultural tourism** – celebrating the cultural life of a city, attracting domestic and international visitors.

According to the editors of the Biennale Reader, the dominance of biennales in the international art calendar has made these exhibitions:

*“the medium through which most contemporary art comes to be known... Indeed, biennials have become, in the span of just a few decades, one of the most vital and visible sites for the production, distribution, and generation of public discourse around contemporary art.”*<sup>3</sup>



# CRITICISM

However, the popularity of biennales has also been criticised as “an overblown symptom of spectacular event culture... little more than entertaining or commercially driven showcases designed to feed an ever-expanding tourist industry”.<sup>4</sup>

The New Yorker art critic Peter Schjeldahl condemned biennales as ‘festivalism’ producing a bland and predictable international style of art.<sup>5</sup>

The director of the Museum of Modern Art, Glen Lowry, states that “they often seem more like major sporting events than exhibitions”, adding that it is becoming increasingly difficult for biennales to find “new themes and new artists to shape their shows and differentiate them from previous editions and each other”.<sup>6</sup>

Other criticisms of biennales include post-colonial critiques, pointing to the ongoing Western cultural dominance of American and European curators who select well known Western artists at the expense of lesser known local artists. In his article *In Defense of Biennials*, Massimiliano Gioni says while the criticism is sometimes justified biennales are still the most innovative and ambitious displays of contemporary art and remain enormously popular around the world.

Gioni states that due to the sheer proliferation of biennales held internationally, “there is no such thing as a Biennial Model”. Rather, biennales are more like “a tool that can be used to build very different shows and obtain very different results”.<sup>7</sup>



# ACTIVITIES



## DISCUSS

What are the differences between an exhibition in a private gallery, an art fair and a biennale?

How does the use of an overarching theme affect the way audiences experience different artworks in an exhibition?

Why do you think so many cities have embraced biennales?

How do biennales contribute to a dialogue about global contemporary art practice?



## CREATE

Curate your own biennale.

Devise a theme that deals with an issue significant to you and then research artists and their artworks that explore your theme.



## REFERENCES

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