(Dis)Rupture, (Re) Engage: Occupation and Protest at the Venice Biennale

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Abstract
The Venice Biennale serves as a major international art exhibition celebrating achievements in contemporary art, architecture, film, theater, and dance. Since the turn of the twentieth century, countries select artists to represent their nation and respond to a general theme developed by the Biennale curatorial staff. However, located outside the Biennale pavilions, artist-activists seek to disrupt the formal gallery and exhibition spaces. Though the tradition of protest and disrupture that dates to the 1960s, I examine two recent protest-performances at the 2015 Art Biennale and 2018 Architecture Biennale that respond to environmental, labor, and social issues affecting marginalized and vulnerable populations. Gulf Labor's collaboration on the #GuggOccupied protest (2015) and the women's protest at the 2018 Architecture Biennale each used the streets, sidewalks, and docks around/between the Biennale pavilions as platforms for critiquing these issues. These protest-interventions exemplify the greater socio-artistic effects produced against the backdrop of the Venice Biennale.

Keywords: Street Protests, Contemporary art, Venice Biennale, Urban Space, Protests

Introduction
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The Venice Biennale:
Founded in 1895, the Venice Biennale began as an event to exhibit artworks outside the formal structures of the museum or gallery (Venice Biennale). Translated to *every other year*, the biennale model is employed by other mega art shows like documenta, Art Basel, and Art Dubai. Staff and guest curators develop a general theme every two years, often incorporating current social, cultural, or political issues affecting the global contemporary art scene. The Art Biennale (odd years) and Architecture Biennale (even years) invite artists, architects, and collectives to exhibit their work within assigned venues based on nation of origin or regional/diasporic affiliation. The Giardini currently houses thirty permanent national pavilions funded by each nation and private donors (Venice Biennale). For nations that do not hold national pavilions, exhibition spaces are provided throughout Venice or in smaller pavilions located in the Arsenale.

Although Biennale curators attempt to diversify the show and fracture center- periphery tension, criticism about nation division, venue location, and elitism affect

Fig. 1-Protestor march during the 1968 Venice Biennale (image rights pending)

the reputation of the event. In many cases, artists find difficulty obtaining travel visas or monetary sponsorship afforded to other artists with national patronage. Critics David Neustein and Grace Mortlock reiterate this criticism, outlining the complex relationship between the local and the global, artist and audience:

> Marooned on its tourist island, the Biennale is an idealized world-in-miniature, free of the realities, confusions and conflicts of the world-at-large. The environment is timeless, picturesque, serene: hardly representative of the world's 'increasing complexity.' (Neustein and Mortlock 2016)

The Biennale is increasingly viewed as a space of privilege, marketed to art connoisseurs, collectors, and art enthusiasts afforded the opportunity to travel to the event. Concerning this "complexity," many artists from the diaspora(s) or nations in political turmoil find limited representation afforded to sovereign nations with sponsored pavilions at the Biennale. Instead, these artists may affiliate with other nations or regional pavilions (or not at all). Critic Philip Kennicott notes these issues by stating:

> It is not uncommon for a national pavilion to be at odds with the country's political leadership. In the pavilions of authoritarian countries, one often finds paeans to dissent and individualism, acts of conscience and even direct rebukes to power. Authoritarians may be canny and have sharp instincts for self-preservation, but they are often stupid men, with closed minds and no capacity for thinking about art (Kennicott 2019).

To exemplify this point, there is an oft-critiqued argument that the Biennale serves as space for nations to select "safe" artists that create "safe" pieces that do not irk the leadership or sponsoring organizations within each pavilion. However, regarding the 2019 Arte Biennale, the choice by the United

States to select sculptor Martin Puryear complicated the "safe" paradigm. Puryear created sculptures for the United States pavilion that recognized the violent legacy of slavery in America while lionizing canonical figures like Sally Hemings. Heming's abstracted sculptural form juxtaposed the Colonial-style architecture reminiscent of Thomas Jefferson's estate at Montecello. Puryear's pieces thus reflect a shift in how nation-based pavilions recognize their racist and violent legacies (Kennicott 2019).

#Gugg Occupied Protest (2015) and the 2018 Women's Protest

At the 34th Venice Biennale (1968) crowds assembled near the Giardini to protest unfair working conditions, the Vietnam War, and general distrust against the Establishment (Fig. 1). The protestors entered the galleries and turned artworks against the walls, obstructed access to the buildings, and plastered the pavilion exhibition spaces with anti-war signs (Di Stefano 2010, 133). The after-effects of the protests resulted in curators shifting their attention to "a stronger, more provocative curatorial agenda for subsequent Biennales, and established them as forums for cultural debate (Rawsthorn 2013)."

However, analogous to the 1968 protests, demonstrations at the 2015 and 2018 iterations also used the Biennale as a platform to criticize human rights violations, climate change, government corruption, dubious labor practices, and corporate interest. At the 2015 Arte Biennale, titled *All the Worlds Futures*, several artist-activist organizations descended on the Guggenheim Museum and Biennale pavilions. Since 1986, the Peggy Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation manages the United States pavilion (Guggenheim). The foundation organizes shows in conjunction with cultural agencies of the United States. The Guggenheim Foundation's relationship with organizations that support controversial drug manufacturers and permit labor violations provided fodder for several Italian-based collectives like GULF (Gulf Ultra Luxury Faction) and Gulf Labor, and Sale Docks and Macao (Vartanian 2015). The collectives met at the docks outside the museum and displayed banners and signs condemning the numerous labor violations used to construct the new Guggenheim and Louvre museums in Abu Dhabi. The museums, located on Abu Dhabi's Saadiyat Island, received criticism and condemnation by artists, activists, and critics stemming from accusations of slave labor and hostile working conditions (Fig. 2). Human Rights Watch claims that workers are subject to "prison-like conditions" on Saadiyat, noting that many are lured to museum construction jobs only to be denied pay, healthcare, and adequate housing (Human Rights Watch 2009).

The protests at the Guggenheim and Biennale grounds brought attention to various labor violations supported by Guggenheim's affiliates. Using a similar tactic at the 2018 Architecture Biennale, protestors descended on the Biennale grounds to support the women's protest. Organized by renowned female architects and scholars like Caroline James, Martha Thorne Odile Decq, and Farshid Moussavi, the protest recognized the absence of women and in particular Black, Indigenous, and Women of Color, within the national pavilions (Sayer 2018). Citing the #MeToo movement and the lack of female representation at the Biennale, over one hundred participants gathered in the Giardini section of the Venice Biennale. Waving fans in the air as a sign of solidarity, Thorne read the group's manifesto titled, "Be a fan of Voices of Women" (Voices of Women 2018). An excerpt from the manifesto reads:

> We as Voices of Women are building conversations and taking actions to raise awareness to combat pervasive prejudices and disrespectful behaviour that appears to be systemic in our culture and discipline. We are united in denouncing discrimination, harassment and aggression against any member of our community. We will not tolerate it. We will not stand silent…The Venice Biennale 2018 Freespace is a crucial moment of awakening to promote equitable and respectful treatment of all members of the architectural community irrespective of gender, race, nationality, sexuality and religion. We will join hands with co-workers, students, clients, collaborators, and our male colleagues to create a new path forward toward equitable work and educational environments that promote respectful discourse and open exchange of ideas. Be a fan of Voices of Women. Make a vow to uphold fairness, transparency, and collaboration in architecture NOW. (Voices of Women 2018)

Fig. 2-A group of protestors occupy the docks outside the Guggenheim in Venice, 2015 (image rights pending)

Operating outside the nation-based pavilions, the gathering magnified the lack of female representation at the Biennale and associated pavilions.

What is at stake concerning the legacy of the current Biennale model? With rapidly changing political, social, and geographical landscapes, how can the nation-state model endure? How do the protest-performance by GULF and Voices of Women embody the contemporary condition? Art historian and critic Terry Smith raises concerns about the future of the Biennale model, stating "how might we understand biennial exhibitions within contemporary conditions?" (Smith 2017). These protests serve to draw attention to major social and political crises that are often censored by nations operating within the formal Biennale pavilions. Artist-activists respond to these moments by bringing attention to environmental concerns, corporate greed, misogyny, and labor violations. Attempts to dissolve the current biennale model is gaining traction with organizers opting for location-based curators or artists to guide the show. Recent counter-shows, the Anti-Biennale and the Ghetto Biennale in Port-au-Prince seek to fracture the current model and create a more inclusive, diverse, space for exhibitions to comment on issues affecting marginalized and underrepresented communities.

Fig. 3-A flash-mob supports the Voices of Women during the 2018 Architecture Biennale (image rights pending)

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