

BIENNIALS IN FLUX

However, like in-depth research has been carried out on the biennialization process, because “the biennial” in itself is a relatively new phenomenon, but also due to the fact that a certain amount of complexity now surrounds the biennial’s primary custodian: the curator. Despite the lack of a clear frame of reference, there is growing concern towards the biennial’s legitimacy and its ability to instigate an autonomous form of critical discourse under new socio-economic conditions. Within this context, the question has been raised as to whether biennials are set of jobs or catalysts, or if they are in fact capable of giving rise to alternative perspectives.

In response thereto, this dissertation sought to examine the biennialization process, and to examine the current characteristics of curatorial practice within biennialization. To this effect, a case study approach was adopted for a comparative analysis of two of the oldest and most renowned biennials – Documenta and Skulptur Projekte – was conducted. Broadly translated, the findings indicated that Documenta reflects the trends towards biennialization, whereas Skulptur Projekte has specificities that make it an independent discourse in the more general circuit of biennials. The main conclusion is that temporality, curatorial consistency, and a flexible organizational framework can enable a biennial to set itself apart from biennialization. Looking forward, it is suggested that further research should focus on individual biennials and their historical development in order to establish the key proponents to autonomy of vision.

RETHINKING THE VALUE OF DOCUMENTA AND SKULPTUR PROJEKTE

**BIENNIALS IN FLUX:
RETHINKING THE VALUE OF DOCUMENTA
AND SKULPTUR PROJEKTE**

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ABSTRACT

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0.0 ABSTRACT

Since the 1990s, biennials have become a mainstay in the world of contemporary art.

However, little in-depth research has been carried out on the biennialization process, not only because “the biennial” in itself is a relatively new phenomenon, but also due to the fact that a certain amount of complexity now surrounds the biennial’s primary custodian: the curator. Despite the lack of

a clear frame of reference, there is growing concern towards the biennial’s legitimacy and its ability to instigate an autonomous form of critical discourse under new socio-economic conditions. Within this context, the question has been raised as to whether biennials are pet objects of capitalism, or if they are in fact capable of giving rise to alternative perspectives.

In response thereto, this dissertation sought to explore the biennialization process,

and to examine the current characteristics of curatorial practice within biennial culture. To this effect, a case study approach was adopted and a comparative analysis of two of the oldest and most renowned biennials – Documenta and Skulptur Projekte – was conducted. Broadly translated, the findings indicated that Documenta reflects the trends towards biennialization, whereas Skulptur Projekte has specificities that make it an independent discourse in

the more general circuit of biennials. The main conclusion is that temporality, curatorial consistency, and a flexible organizational framework can enable a biennial to set itself apart from biennialization. Looking forward, it is suggested that further research should focus on individual biennials and their historical development in order to establish the key proponents to autonomy of vision.

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INTRODUCTION

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0 INTRODUCTION

An important shift happened in the art world towards the end of the twentieth century: biennials became “one of the most popular – perhaps even dominant – formats for presenting and promoting culture today”¹. As the name suggests, biennials are an exhibition medium that is defined by a recurring time relationship and, as “temporary spaces of mediation”², they provide an alternative to the museum and other cultural institutions. The distinguishing feature of biennials is that they cater for a public that is “at once local and global, resident and nomadic, non-specialist and art-worldly”³. Even though biennial literally means “every two years”, the term has become all-encompassing shorthand for large-scale periodic exhibitions of international contemporary art, usually allocated to invited curators with support from a local socio-cultural network.⁴ Since the 1990s, the number of biennials has increased exponentially and there are now over 200 large-scale exhibition events that take place globally on a regular basis.⁵ The ‘biennial boom’ came as part of a wider transition period in the art world, involving a number of quantitative changes, such as a “rapidly expanding market for contemporary art, an upsurge of art fairs, and large group exhibitions, as well as the

construction of numerous new museums for contemporary art”⁶. Together with this change in size and frequency, there has been a concurrent qualitative change to biennials’ primary custodian. Indeed the position of the curator has undergone, almost in the same period of time as the biennial, a huge symbolic transformation, having essentially moved into the spotlight of the field of art. The ‘curator’s moment’, which the curator Paul O’Neill defines as the “transformation of the curator of contemporary art from behind-the-scenes aesthetic arbiter to central player in the broader stage of global cultural politics”⁷, has shaped new tendencies in all parameters of the art world, such as authorship and creative autonomy. However, while “an art fair wouldn’t be an art fair without a nod to the curatorial”⁸, biennials in particular have been dramatically influenced by the recent developments in curatorial practice because curators have immense power over the ways in which they are produced, mediated, and understood. For instance, in deciding to include almost no artworks at the 2008 São Paulo Biennial, artistic director Ivo Mesquita produced a self-reflective and radically dialogical exhibition that was conceived as a conceptual gesture in and of itself.⁹ Inspired by a recognition that there has been a fundamental redefinition of the structure and meaning of

biennials, critics have shown a growing awareness of the biennial phenomenon, and they frequently address the notable shifts in curatorial practices from the 1990s onwards. And yet, while “the biennial” as a topic is debated in and across diverse sites, including art journalism, academic publications, conferences and symposia, the art historian Marieke van Hal has pointed out that thorough investigation of the biennialization process has not yet taken place.¹⁰ The term biennialization primarily refers to the continuing, rapid expansion of biennials – “what, in capitalist terms, is understood as the experience economy”¹¹. However, according to the sociologist Oliver Marchart “biennialization cannot simply be read as an ideological reflex to economic globalization, but instead, at the very least, also as part of decolonization struggles”¹². This is because the biennial has been instrumental in decentralizing the traditional Western art-historical canon. With the recent worldwide spread of the biennial, however, it is little wonder that a critical assessment of this contemporary phenomenon is yet to be carried out in more detail. Not only is it true that “the mounting international importance of biennials and their historical study has opened up a research gap that scholars are just beginning to address”¹³, there is also great uncertainty about the

continued legitimacy of the biennial format because critics are caught up in defining what is valuable and worthy (see for example the article “The end of the biennial?” by the art critic J.J. Charlesworth¹⁴).

In response, this dissertation aims to shed light on how the currents of biennials have shifted, and it seeks to investigate the role of the curator in this new territory. It will address a question that is of relevance to many art professionals: Are [biennials] the artistic playgrounds of neoliberal capitalism or do they enable the forging and testing of alternative, critical, and even subtly subversive perspectives?¹⁵

Speaking from a personal point of view, it is somewhat reductive of the art historians Green and Gardner to see the biennial in black and white because “between most contradictory positions of either cynicism or critical embrace lie also questions about what a biennial can or should be”¹⁶. Therefore, this dissertation is interested in whether there is a possibility of a third scenario in which global capitalism does not corrupt the biennial’s ability to give rise to alternative possibilities.

In order to establish this, I will undertake a survey of the biennialization process and adopt a case study approach to analyze the trends that have emerged in biennials as the format has proliferated around the world. I have used

1 Charles Green and Anthony Gardner, *Biennials, Triennials, And Documenta* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2016), p. 4.

2 Paul O’Neill, “The Culture Of Curating And The Curating Of Culture(s): The Development Of Contemporary Curatorial Discourse In Europe And North America Since 1987” (PdD, Middlesex University, 2007).

3 Ibid

4 Judith Rugg and Michele Sedgwick, *Issues In Curating Contemporary Art And Performance* (Bristol, UK: Intellect Books (UK), 2012), p. 16.

5 Biennial Foundation (Anon.), “Directory Of Biennials - Biennial Foundation”, Biennial Foundation <<http://www.biennialfoundation.org/home/biennial-map/>> [Accessed 4 February 2019].

6 Heidi Bale Amundsen and others, *Curating And Politics: Beyond The Curator - Initial Reflections* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2015), p. 19.

7 Paul O’Neill, “The Culture Of Curating And The Curating Of Culture(s): The Development Of Contemporary Curatorial Discourse In Europe And North America Since 1987” (PdD, Middlesex University, 2007).

8 Artsy (Anon.), “Curators Vs Art Fairs”, Artsy, 2014 <<https://www.artsy.net/article/francesca-gavin-curators-vs-art-fairs>> [Accessed 22 January 2019].

9 Panos Kompatsiaris, *The Politics Of Contemporary Art Biennials: Spectacles Of Critique, Theory And Art*, 2017, p. 95.

10 Marieke van Hal, “Rethinking The Biennial” (MPhil, Royal College of Art, 2010).

11 Ben Cranfield, “Is It Time To Call An End To Biennials?” *Apollo Magazine*, Apollo magazine, 2018 <<https://www.apollo-magazine.com/is-it-time-to-call-an-end-to-biennials/>> [Accessed 4 February 2019].

12 Oliver Marchart, “The Globalization Of Art And The ‘Biennials Of Resistance’: A History Of The Biennials From The Periphery”, *World Art*, 4.2 (2014), 263-276 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/21500894.2014.961645>> [Accessed 10 January 2019].

13 Charles Green and Anthony Gardner, *Biennials, Triennials, And Documenta* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2016), p. 5.

14 J.J. Charlesworth, “The End Of The Biennial?”, *Artreview*, 2017 <https://artreview.com/opinion/opinion_online_jj_charlesworth_the_end_of_the_biennial/> [Accessed 7 February 2019].

15 Charles Green and Anthony Gardner, *Biennials, Triennials, And Documenta* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2016), p. 13.

Documenta and Skulptur Projekte for two reasons: Firstly, seeing that these long-established formats (since 1955 and 1977 respectively) emerged prior to the 'biennial boom', it will be interesting to see to what extent they have driven or resisted change; and, secondly, they provide the ideal ground for a juxtaposition because there are certain parallels between their founding narratives. Both emerged as spaces free from the instrumentality of the market because their historical emergence was "marked by bloc politics or undevelopmentalist reactions"¹⁷, meaning they originated without a direct function-benefit relationship. Considering that they were equal in their desire "to reconnect postwar Germany with the global art community"¹⁸, what also binds them together is a common curatorial intention. Besides the fact that "both exhibitions brought world fame to small, provincial towns"¹⁹, another argument for why it is worthwhile to compare Documenta and Skulptur Projekte is that they are arguably among the world's most respected and renowned contemporary art exhibitions. Together with the Venice Biennial and Art Basel, they are celebrated as "Europe's main perennial art events"²⁰ and the art world has capitalized on their once-a-decade confluence ever since

the 1990s, advertising it as the European Grand Tour and, more recently, Superkunstjahr ("Super Art Year").²¹ Keeping in mind the special status of Documenta and Skulptur Projekte, it is my intention to find out whether, as suggested by the prefix "super", these more-established institutions differentiate themselves from biennial culture and, if so, why. In doing so, I seek to contribute to the scholarship on the biennialization process by questioning in which form and under which auspices a unique biennial can be created, one that is not merely an "exhibition like any other"²², but instead a manifestation of originality. In considering the factors through which the 'biennial boom' came into being, the first chapter will attempt to track the development of the biennialization process and it will go on to consider how, since the 1990s, biennials have been affected by the 'curator's moment'. Through a review of some of the most pertinent aspects of the biennial debate, it will propose a theoretical framework for the discussion on the development of Documenta and Skulptur Projekte since the 1990s. Alongside the literature review undertaken in the first chapter, the second chapter will then try to read the developmental process of Documenta and Skulptur Projekte against the trends of biennialization in

order to establish whether they reflect the complexity of the shifting political economy of culture under conditions of advanced capitalism. Because any attempt at a chronology of Documenta could only afford a partial depiction of its evolution, it will take a more comparative approach and select those editions that coincided with Skulptur Projekte in 1997, 2007, and 2017.

However, it should be noted that certain other editions will be explored and discussed on the basis of their relevance. Through an examination of the most recent histories of Documenta and Skulptur Projekte, it is my aim to locate these institutions in relation to the biennialization process and to identify how, more recently, they have chosen to preserve their legacies. Finally in a conclusion, I will summarize my findings and propose a recommendation for further research.

16 Marieke van Hal, „Rethinking The Biennial“ (MPhil, Royal College of Art, 2010).

17 Jeannine Tang, „Of Biennials And Biennialists: Venice, Documenta, Münster“, *Theory, Culture & Society*, 24.7-8 (2007), 3. [Accessed 2 January 2019].

18 Laura Roulet, „Nov 2017 Sculpture Magazine - Reviews“, *Sculpture magazine*, 2019 <https://www.sculpture.org/documents/scmag17/nov_17/nov17_reviews.shtml> [Accessed 3 January 2019].

19 Walter Grasskamp, „To Be Continued: Periodic Exhibitions (Documenta, For Example): Landmark Exhibitions Issue – Tate Papers | Tate“, Tate, 2009 <<https://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/12/to-be-continued-periodic-exhibitions-documenta-for-example/>> [Accessed 2 February 2019].

20 Charles Green and Anthony Gardner, *Biennials, Triennials, And Documenta* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2016), p. 257.

21 The term 'Superkunstjahr' emerged in 2016 and circulated in newspapers such as the FAZ, Tagesspiegel, Süddeutsche Zeitung, and the dpa. Daniel Völzke, „Die Unglaubliche Karriere Des Superkunstwortes „Superkunstjahr“ | Monopol – Magazin Für Kunst Und Leben“, *Monopol magazine*, 2017 <<https://www.monopol-magazin.de/die-unglaubliche-karriere-des-superkunstwortes-superkunstjahr/>> [Accessed 22 January 2019].

22 Federica Martini and Vittoria Martini, *Just Another Exhibition Histories And Politics Of Biennials* (Milan: Postmedia Books, 2019), p. 3.

<https://www.researchgate.net/publication/276937194_Just_Another_Exhibition_Stories_and_Politics_of_Biennials> [Accessed 25 January 2019].

THE BIENNIALIZATION PROCESS

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Fig. 1

Harald Szeemann (seated)
on the last night of documenta 5:
Questioning Reality—Image Worlds Today
at Museum Fridericianum, 1972
(the Getty Research Institute,
photo by Balthasar Burkhard)

CHAPTER

**THE BIENNIALIZATION
PROCESS**

ER ONE

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Biennials In Flux: Rethinking the Value of Documenta and Skulptur Projekte

1.0 THE BIENNIALIZATION PROCESS

Without pretending to offer a comprehensive summary of the biennial's evolution into the 21st century, this chapter will note a number of significant developments through which the biennialization process unfolded, namely: (a) Challenging the hegemony of Western-based art; and (b) the rise of the symbolic economy.²³ Alongside these socio-economic paradigm shifts, it will look to (c) the 'curator's moment' because it likewise changed the course of biennials, in particular the ambition that their artistic directors have for them. As a point of departure, it will briefly touch upon Harald Szeemann's *documenta 5* (1972) because it "influenced and changed the world of art mediating in many ways and foreshadowed today's importance of the curator"²⁴, before moving on to discussing the above-mentioned points. Following the analysis of the key factors driving the biennialization process, it will provide insight into the biennial debate and review some of the central criticism facing the format today. In doing so, this chapter aims to put *Documenta* and *Skulptur Projekte* into perspective with biennialization and to provide the backdrop for the discussion on their trajectories since the 1990s. It is no coincidence that

the 'biennial boom' is generally linked to the 1990s because it was in this decade that art became part of a globalized marketplace. Propelled by the forces of globalization, the biennialization process gained momentum at the turn of the century, but the first steps towards the biennial's metamorphosis were taken in 1972, when Harald Szeemann was appointed artistic director of *documenta 5*. By dissolving the democratic-collective framework through which *Documenta*'s curatorial activities had been regulated, Szeemann adopted an autocratic managerial style and, in doing so, he introduced the phenomenon of "the independent curator": A figure who was no longer bound to an institutional context and freed of the bureaucratic structures tied to exhibition-making. Szeemann's *documenta 5* is credited with the invention of another new role: that of the *Ausstellungsmacher* ("a maker of exhibitions"), "who „signs“ an exhibition with a personal style and vision"²⁵. Instead of "selecting artworks according to their potential individual quality or novelty"²⁶, Szeemann allocated a theme to be applied to the exhibition, thereby emphasizing his own curatorial concept over the artworks on display. Although many artists "chose to boycott *documenta 5* in order to register a protest against the curator's power and his apparent

predilection to reframe or reform the artists intentions"²⁷, Szeemann's curatorial approach quickly established itself as the benchmark for exhibition-makers and it played a pioneering role for what Brenson identified as the 'curator's moment' in the 1990s.

1.1 DE-WESTERNIZING BIENNALES: A GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

During the mid-20th century, the biennial became part of an effort to decentralize the hegemony of Western-based art and, by removing the focus from traditional cultural hubs such as Europe and North America, it began to function as a kind of gate opener for the periphery. The São Paulo Biennial (1951) was arguably the first to introduce postcolonial tendencies and to inspire cultural internationalism.²⁸ However, the periphery only really moved into the spotlight with the establishment of the Havana Biennial in 1984 because the founder Gerardo Mosquera provided non-Western artists with a platform to showcase their works.²⁹ In doing so, he conceived a new model of biennial exhibition, which presented a "direct challenging of the metropolitan perspectives and colonial legacies of Western mainstream art institutions"³⁰. The Havana Biennial was instrumental in

developing a new conception of artistic modernity and, in a similar attempt to open up the canonical history of art, many other peripheral biennials soon started to sprout beyond the Western World. It is worth mentioning that the exhibition *Magiciens de la Terre* (1989) was also a key driving force in the internationalization of modern art, because by incorporating a global realm of artistic production, it "exposed a critical void of contemporary art practice by Africans"³¹ and opened up a Western-dominated art discourse to post-colonial concerns. Motivated by the socio-cultural aim of challenging the supremacy of Western-based art, the biennial began to function as a "platform for critical resistance"³². Thus it can be said that the expanding landscape of biennials came about partly as the result of an expanding interest in non-Euro-American positions.

1.2 CULTURE AS A CATALYST: TOWARD A SYMBOLIC ECONOMY OF PLACE

The advent of postmodernism signaled a shift in the perceived role of culture, and with the rise of the symbolic economy in the 1980s, cultural means gained recognition as valuable producers of marketable city spaces. With the democratization of travel, the competition for a share of

23 The term symbolic economy describes "the way in which symbolic practices of culture are also productive of a monetary economy". Chris Barker, „Symbolic Economy“, Sk.Sagepub, 2004 <<http://sk.sagepub.com/reference/the-sage-dictionary-of-cultural-studies/n236.xml>> [Accessed 14 October 2018].

24 Walter Grasskamp, „Becoming Global: From Eurocentrism To North-Atlantic Feedback— Documenta As An "International Exhibition" (1955 – 1972)“, The Documenta Issue, 2019 <http://www.on-curating.org/issue-33-reader/becoming-global-from-eurocentrism-to-north-atlantic-feedbackdocumenta-as-an-international-exhibition-1955-1972.html#.XFxl8_7SHp> [Accessed 2 February 2019].

25 Jens Hoffmann, Julian Myers and Liz Glass, The Exhibitionist, 2017, p. 227.

26 Artmap (Anon.), „Documenta 5“, Artmap <<https://artmap.com/documenta/exhibition/documenta-5-1972>> [Accessed 7 October 2018].

27 Jens Hoffmann, Julian Myers and Liz Glass, The Exhibitionist, 2017, p. 25.

28 Oliver Marchart, „The Globalization Of Art And The 'Biennials Of Resistance': A History Of The Biennials From The Periphery“, World Art, 4.2 (2014), 263-276 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/21500894.2014.961645>> [Accessed 10 January 2019].

29 Carla Lucini, „From The Center To The Periphery: Mapping The Global Shift In Biennials“ (M.A., Sotheby's Institute of Art, 2015).

30 Elena Filipovic, Marieke Van Hal and Solveig Øvstebo, The Biennial Reader: The Bergen Biennial Conference (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2010), p. 38-39.

31 Carolee Thea, On Curating II (New York: D.A.P./Distributed Art Publishers, 2016), p. 66.

32 Cristian Nae, „Transnational Circulations And The Emergence Of Contemporary Art: The Critical Challenges Of Art Biennials In A Global World“, Annals Of The University Of Bucharest Philosophy Series, LXVII.1 (2018), <<http://annals.ub-filosofie.ro/index.php/annals/article/view/268>> [Accessed 23 January 2019].

33 Jens Hoffmann, Julian Myers and Liz Glass, The Exhibitionist - Journal On Exhibition Making (Exhibitionist, 2017), p. 759.

34 Greg Richards, Cultural Tourism In Europe (Oxon: CAB International, 1997), p. 62.

the cultural tourism market intensified and the availability of cultural manifestations for public consumption gave way to “almost universal embrace of competition as an organizing principle”³³ within urban cultural policy. As cities began to look for ways to heighten their visibility, they became increasingly aware of the potential of culture-driven strategies to implement a range of strategic goals, such as the reconstruction of their internal and external image.³⁴ The positive impact of creative place-making was exemplified by cultural initiatives such as the European Capitals of Culture Program, which acted as a vehicle for urban regeneration, enabling cities to capitalize on their cultural life.³⁵ In order to present a ‘positive’ image of vibrant urban life, many second-tier cities tried to emulate what would later become known as the “Billbao effect”, whereby an investment in the arts and culture was perceived as a signal of urban quality, lending legitimacy to a city’s profile and therefore contributing to its appeal. With this shift from “culture as art and heritage to a view of culture as an economic asset”³⁶, the biennial became an integral part of tourism strategies and there was a market increase in the creation of new biennials from the mid-1990s onwards.³⁷ Therefore the increase in biennials can be seen as a

byproduct of the move towards a symbolic economy of place.

1.3 THE ‘CURATOR’S MOMENT’

Accompanying these broader developments in the cultural sphere was the emergence of the ‘curator’s moment’, which also played a pivotal role in reconfiguring our understanding of biennials because it gave rise to a particular model of discourse that is self-referential, curator-centered and curator-led.³⁸ By virtue of Szeemann, the profile of the curator had already gained in social status, but while the curator-auteur was not a new phenomenon, new was the increased visibility and recognition on an international level.

With the boom in new audiences for contemporary art in the 1990s, the overall necessity for information on art started to grow, and because “there was a new market and new-found field of study, centered upon the medium of the exhibition and those involved in its mediation”³⁹, curatorial practice was both popularized and professionalized. In line with the culture industry’s celebrity principle, curators made the leap into the “center of a new attention economics”⁴⁰ and with this newly attained prestige, they assumed a more central role in exhibition-making.

This shift in the primary role of the curator was further accelerated by what Paul O’Neill has dubbed the “curatorial turn”; a “transition from practice to theory”⁴¹ that changed the overall perception of curating from a method of mediation towards one of curating as part of a much broader process of meaning-making. Since the arrival of the education turn in the 1990s, when “pedagogical models became the medium through which certain kinds of intellectual projects could be developed”⁴², there has been a growing tendency among curators to adopt a discursive approach to biennial-making that prioritizes informal modes of discourse. In the midst of these developments the biennial underwent fundamental changes not only because a heightened degree of importance was placed on the curatorial gesture, but also due to the fact that curators began to conceive “the exhibition as a site of dialogue, conversation, exchange, education, pedagogy and open-ended encounters”⁴³. Seeing that “curating has become one of the dominant forces in the contemporary art world”⁴⁴, curatorial practice has become a major subject for discussion and in tandem with the ‘biennial boom’, commentators have been quick to voice their opinions on a number of issues.

1.4 THE BIENNIAL DEBATE

A lively debate has begun because “since 2000, the biennial has been widely seen as being in a crisis of overproduction”⁴⁵ so, while critics grapple with different issues surrounding the biennialization process, there appear to be few overriding concerns. The biennial debate can generally be divided into two parts: The first concentrating on the impacts of contemporary curatorial practice, and the second exploring the biennial’s newly-found economic role. With regard to the former, the main worry is that “the activity of curation made manifest through [biennials] is articulated as being identity-driven”⁴⁶ because it implies that curators tend to impose their own picture of the world upon the exhibition, rather than accompanying the artists in their own choices. One of the most recurrent criticisms posits that “art has become a subgenre of ‘the Curatorial’”⁴⁷ because it has come to be understood as defined by the curatorial endeavor. With regard to the “discursive biennial”, another point of critique suggests that curators frequently employ “tactics for evoking an idea of art beyond what today’s artists can express through their works”⁴⁸ because the

35 In the case of Glasgow (1990), arts-led regeneration “helped to change the city’s image from a decaying industrial backwater to a dynamic growth area [attractive to tourists].”

The ‘Glasgow model’ of focusing on ‘culture’ rather than ‘Europeanness’ was appropriated by many following editions of the ECOC Program in what came to be known as the ‘regeneration’ phase.

John Urry, *The Tourist Gaze* (London: Sage Publications, 2002), p. 108.

36 Beatriz García, ‘Cultural Policy And Urban Regeneration In Western European Cities: Lessons From Experience, Prospects For The Future’, *Local Economy: The Journal Of The Local Economy Policy Unit*, 19.4 (2004), 312-326 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/0269094042000286828>> [Accessed 12 November 2018].

37 Many biennials started to appear in the Global South, such as Dak’Art in Dakar (1990), Sharjah Biennial (1993), Shanghai Biennial (1994), and Gwangju Biennial (1995).

Shweta A. Patel, Sunil Manghani and Robert E. D’Souza, ‘Extracts From How To Biennale! (The Manual)’, *OnCurating*, 2018

<http://www.on-curating.org/issue-39-reader/introduction.html#.XEiws_7SHp> [Accessed 23 January 2019].

38 Paul O’Neill, ‘The Culture Of Curating And The Curating Of Culture(s): The Development Of Contemporary Curatorial Discourse In Europe And North America Since 1987’ (PdD, Middlesex University, 2007).

39 Ibid

40 Maria Lind and Olav Velthuis, *Contemporary Art And Its Commercial Markets* (Berlin: Stenberg Press, 2012), p. 163.

41 Marie Fraser, Alice Ming and Wai Jim, ‘What Is Critical Curating?’, *Revue d’art canadienne* (2018), p. 5. <https://www.racarracar.com/uploads/5/7/7/4/57749791/fraser_jim_introduction.pdf> [Accessed 28 January 2019].

42 Terry E. Smith, *Talking Contemporary Curating* (Independent Curators Inc., 2015), p. 97.

43 Panos Kompatsiaris, *The Politics Of Contemporary Art Biennials: Spectacles Of Critique, Theory And Art*, 2017, p. 86.

44 Georgina Adams, *Big Bucks: The Explosion Of The Art Market In The 21st Century* (Lund Humphries Publishers Ltd, 2014), p. 91.

45 Terry E. Smith, *Thinking Contemporary Curating* (New York: Independent Curators International, 2012), p. 92.

exhibition's demands exceed what is being produced by the artists. As such, there is a growing concern that our conception of art has become conflated with other discursive accompaniments. Moreover, it is seen as problematic that curators have felt the need to overhaul existing concepts by tending to what the curator Tommy Olsson has called "Newology" – "the lust for and, hopefully, shock of the "New"⁴⁹ – because this desire for novelty is permeated by the logic of the spectacle. According to the curator Carolyn-Christov Bakargiev, the outcome of this constant renewal of biennial narratives has caused a loss of curatorial credibility because "if one curator says something this time, another will say something else in two years time, so not to worry, we can take his or her statement with a grain of salt"⁵⁰. A last remark concerns the fact that curatorial practice "has been occurring on an increasingly international, trans-national and multinational scale"⁵¹ because, as was shown in the first subchapter, social mobilization during the 1980s saw the amplification of the biennial as a counter-hegemonic platform. However progressive the intentions behind curating art in an international context, curators still struggle with conceiving projects that articulate a 'glocal' position because this type of curating, "a method of gathering cultures together, runs the risk of possible fetishization of otherness"⁵². This emerging curatorial agenda has affected, in varying degrees, the ways in which biennials are perceived. While optimists talk of an opportunity for imagining the world differently, pessimists are of the opinion that biennials have become "the global art world's own instrument of cultural homogenization"⁵³. Regarding the biennial's economic context, it seems that the blurring of boundaries between culture and the economy is a change which has led many critics to suggest that the biennial has become "just another node in the neoliberal networks of leisure and conspicuous consumerism"⁵⁴. The impact of biennials on a region's genuine identity is a particularly sensitive subject because studies tend to be carried out by organizers or funding bodies, hence they are focused on short-term economic benefits, rather than long-term socio-cultural factors. Instead of celebrating biennials as the outcome of vibrant local development, the strategy behind biennialization is perceived by many as an effort to compensate for shortcomings in city attractiveness and "over the last decade biennials have been swelling by following the logic that "bigger is better"⁵⁵. It is for this reason that the curators

Elena Filipovic, Marieke van Hal and Solveig Øvestbø have stated that:

*The word biennial has come to signify nothing more than an overblown symptom of spectacular event culture, the result of some of the most specious transformations of the world in the age of late capitalism – in short a Western typology whose proliferation has infiltrated even the most far-reaching parts of the world, where such events are little more than entertaining or commercially driven showcases designed to feed an ever-expanding tourist industry*⁵⁶.

Their statement suggests that the biennial now seems to lie somewhere between notions of opportunity for economic development and what the art critic Peter Schjeldahl has called "festivalism"⁵⁷. In other words, biennials appear to be conducted by the logic of capital, and the lure of both financial gain and international recognition serves as a basic motivation for establishing these events.

46 Judith Rugg and Michele Sedgwick, *Issues In Curating Contemporary Art And Performance* (Bristol, UK: Intellect Books (UK), 2012), p. 16.

47 Anton Vidokle, „Art Without Artists?“, *E-Flux Magazine*, 2010 <<https://www.e-flux.com/journal/16/61285/art-without-artists/>> [Accessed 7 November 2018].

48 Barry Schwabsky, „Wandering Through Documenta“, *The Nation*, 2017 <<https://www.thenation.com/article/wandering-through-documenta-14/>> [Accessed 8 November 2018].

49 Elena Filipovic, Marieke Van Hal and Solveig Øvestbø, *The Biennial Reader: The Bergen Biennial Conference* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2010), p. 35.

50 Carolyn-Christov Bakargiev, *L'edicola Digitale Delle Riviste Italiane Di Arte E Cultura Contemporanea*, 8.22 (2007) <<https://1995-2015.undo.net/it/magazines/1201013037/>> [Accessed 14 December 2018].

51 Paul O'Neill, „The Culture Of Curating And The Curating Of Culture(s): The Development Of Contemporary Curatorial Discourse In Europe And North America Since 1987“ (P.D, Middlesex University, 2007).

52 Ibid

53 Elena Filipovic, Marieke Van Hal and Solveig Øvestbø, *The Biennial Reader: The Bergen Biennial Conference* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2010), p. 24.

54 Ibid, p. 39.

55 Elena Filipovic, Marieke Van Hal and Solveig Øvestbø, *The Biennial Reader: The Bergen Biennial Conference* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2010), p. 20.

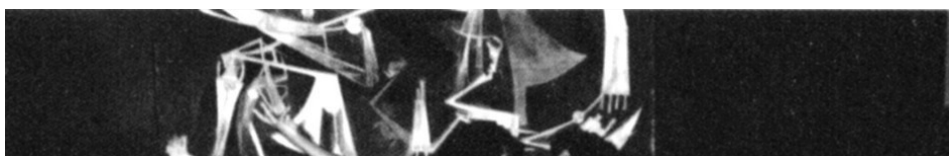
56 Marieke van Hal, „Rethinking The Biennial“ (MPhil, Royal College of Art, 2010).

57 Peter Schjeldahl, „Festivalism“, *The New Yorker*, 1999 <<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1999/07/05/festivalism>> [Accessed 28 January 2019].



Fig. 2

Performance in front of *The Third World* by Wifredo Lam (1965) at the Museo Nacional De Bellas Artes during the first Havana Biennial (1984).



**A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF DOCUMENTA AND
SKULPTUR PROJEKTE SINCE THE 1990S**

02



Fig. 8

Installation view of Giant Pool Balls by Claes Oldenburg, covered with graffiti, at Skulptur Projekte (1997)

CHAPTER

**A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF DOCUMENTA AND
SKULPTUR PROJEKTE SINCE THE 1990S**

ER TWO

Merit Zimmermann
London, United Kingdom, 2019
Biennials In Flux: Rethinking the Value of Documenta and Skulptur Projekte

2.0 A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF DOCUMENTA AND SKULPTUR PROJEKTE SINCE THE 1990S

As outlined in the first chapter, the biennialization process unfolded through a number of socio-economic paradigm shifts and in conjunction with the ‘curator’s moment’, we have witnessed significant changes in biennials: their missions have altered, commercialization has become more important, and new ways of curating have emerged. It has also become apparent that within this period of transformation, the biennial has been subjected to critical scrutiny because it is felt that, “given this complex, global phenomenon and its impact and influence on taste and culture more broadly, a closer empirical analysis of international biennials is both urgent and timely”⁵⁸. To this effect, this chapter will compare and contrast the trajectories of Documenta and Skulptur Projekte since the 1990s by looking at their concurrent editions in 1997, 2007, and 2017. Against the backdrop of the second chapter, it will investigate how they have positioned themselves in relation to the biennialization process and whether their practice is linked to the logic that dominates biennial culture.

2.1 DE-WESTERNIZING BIENNIALS: A GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

In their last iterations before the transition to the new millennium, both Documenta and Skulptur Projekte made amendments to their traditional spectrums, albeit in different ways and to differing degrees. As will be shown in the following analysis, Documenta radically shifted its direction and focus, whereas Skulptur Projekte suggested some relatively minor changes to its exhibition program.

Catherine David was the first woman to curate Documenta in 1997. In an attempt to revitalize the institution’s commitment to its own history, she made it her task to critically reflect on “everything from this now-vanished age that remains in ferment within contemporary art and culture: memory, historical reflection, decolonization and what Wolfgang Iser calls the ‘de-Europeanization’ of the world”⁵⁹. The inspiration for Documenta X came from the idea of “looking back into the future”⁶⁰, conceived as a retrospective comprising more than 700 works by 120 artists, the exhibition traced the history of culture through the prism of moments of political and artistic realization.

However, David’s curatorial ambition went far beyond the limits of a survey of art, and as part of an effort to assess the issues of our contemporary

world, she brought together a variety of guests from non-European cultures within the framework of a lecture program entitled “100 days – 100 guests”. In addition, Documenta X was accompanied by a film program and the theoretical material underpinning the exhibition appeared in an 830-page volume titled “Politics and Poetics”, which featured contributions by authors of diverse scholarly, social and cultural backgrounds. In light of this highly interdisciplinary character, it can be said that “Documenta X discursively constituted itself as a “cultural event”⁶¹ rather than as a mere exhibition of art, making it key to establishing art as a vehicle for discussion. By devoting herself to defining “a more horizontal set of parameters for the encounter between Western and non-Western cultural expressions”⁶², David also laid claim to setting an international agenda for Documenta, foreshadowing the emerging importance of the curator, as Brenson’s statement from 1998 illustrates:

*For the foreseeable future, the ambitions, methodologies, and personal styles of the curators responsible for major international contemporary art exhibitions will be as essential to their content as any artist’s work.*⁶³

As such, Documenta X marked a decisive moment in the

history of curatorial practice not only because it ushered in the ‘curator’s moment’, but also because David’s ambitious motives were “effective in spreading the model of the discursive exhibition”⁶⁴ as well as in triggering a process of politicization. Considering the above-mentioned aspects, it can be said that the objectives of Documenta X were consistent with the trends that shape the biennialization process.

1997 was a pivotal year for Skulptur Projekte because it attained the status of a “major international event”, and within the context of Superkunstjahr, it was first “mentioned in the same breath as Kassel Documenta and the Venice Biennial”⁶⁵. In contrast to its predecessors, Skulptur Projekte received belated recognition; its first edition was not only “totally ignored”⁶⁶ in the international sphere, but also met with a hostile reaction by the public.

Despite furious initial controversy, the second edition took place in 1987 and the public’s suspicion slowly gave way to increased acceptance. With its “festival of art”⁶⁷, Skulptur Projekte ended its struggle for recognition in 1997, drawing in half a million international visitors. The third edition was also meaningful in the sense that Skulptur Projekte parted with the idea of sculpture as a discipline primarily concerned with medium and form by including

58 TShweta A. Patel, Sunil Manghani and Robert E. D’Souza, „Extracts From How To Biennale! (The Manual) - ONCURATING”, OnCurating, 2018

<http://www.on-curating.org/issue-39-reader/introduction.html#.XEnxkc_7SHo> [Accessed 28 January 2019].

59 Anthony Downey, „The Spectacular Difference Of Documenta XI”, 2010, 85-92 <<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09528820309654>> [Accessed 28 January 2019].

60 Artmap (Anon.), “Documenta 10 At Documenta Kassel - Artmap.Com”, Artmap, <<https://artmap.com/documenta/exhibition/documenta-10-1997>> [Accessed 28 January 2019].

61 Panos Kompatsiaris, „Curating Resistances: Crisis And The Limits Of The Political Turn In Contemporary Art Biennials” (PhD, The University of Edinburgh, 2015).

62 Jens Hoffmann, Julian Myers and Liz Glass, The Exhibitionist - Journal On Exhibition Making (Exhibitionist, 2017), p. 713.

63 Michael Brenson, „The Curator’s Moment”, Art Journal, 57.4 (1998), 16-27

<<https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1080/00043249.1998.10791901>> [Accessed 11 December 2018].

64 Panos Kompatsiaris, The Politics Of Contemporary Art Biennials: Spectacles Of Critique, Theory And Art, 2017, p. 42.

<https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=7jklDwAAQBAJ&pg=PA42&lpg=PA42&dq=documenta+1+1+discursive&source=bl&ots=YJ5ZpXnJgd&sig=ACU3U2gFhaDib-5CA8gyDLeao6w2MaFbw&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKE-witrLXJgZHgAhX1URUIHQv_BoI4ChDoATAlegQIABAB#v=onepage&q=paradigmatic&f=false> [Accessed 28 January 2019].

65 Kaspar König and others, Skulptur Projekte Munster 2017 (Münster: Spector Books, 2017), p. 101.

66 Translated from German: “Beim ersten Mal, 1977, hat man es total ignoriert”. Ulrich Stock, „Skulptur Projekte: Kunst Am Rad”, Zeit Online, 2017

<<https://www.zeit.de/2017/17/skulptur-projekte-muenster-kunst-oeffentlicher-raum>> [Accessed 9 December 2018].

67 The third edition featured over 50 works by more than 70 artists from 25 countries. Claudia Miklis, „Kunst Erleben, Wo Sie Entsteht”, Skulptur Projekte Münster 07, 2007, p. 4.

<<http://www.skulptur-projekte.de/archiv/07/www.skulptur-projekte.de/skulptur-projekte-download/pdf/Magazin1.pdf>> [Accessed 28 January 2019].

“ephemeral actions, complex installations, and process-based or team-oriented working methods”⁶⁸ into its program. This reconceptualization was not initiated by the long-term curators Bussmann and König because neither their mission, nor their methodology, had changed since the exhibition’s inception in 1977. In order to examine the interdependence between the arts and the public sphere, Bussmann and König invited artists to explore the cityscape of Münster and their visits formed the point of departure for the exhibition. As such, the change came about in response to the interventionist work of a new generation of artists, who preferred to address urban spaces in a more communicative and exploratory way, rather than seeking to enrich it simply through sculptural work.⁶⁹ This means that, because Bussmann and König allowed for the context of the exhibition to be fleshed out as the artworks took shape, Skulptur Projekte began to act as “large-scale experiment” that tackled “the question of what ontologically diverse directions sculpture might develop in”⁷⁰.

In order to ensure sufficient developmental space for the artworks, 1997 also saw König reject the City and state associations’ proposal to align Skulptur Projekte’s periodicity with that of Documenta, stating that “to shorten the exhibition-

interval is to devalue the original concept”⁷¹. For König, the 10-year rhythm is of vital importance for the sustainability of Skulptur Projekte not only because it provides an opportunity to take stock of the development of sculpture, but also for the reason that it serves as an analytical framework for thinking about the future. By partnering with the Pumpenhaus theatre, Skulptur Projekte widened the scope of its program, but the dance and theatre program ran independently of the exhibition and it was very much in line with the curators’ aim of “creating a public not just with art, but also for art”⁷². Undoubtedly, there is quite a difference between the discursive elements of Documenta and Skulptur Projekte because, while “100 days – 100 guests” established itself as a space of knowledge production, the dance and theatre program was not an attempt to place the exhibition within a conceptual framework. The tentative re-orientation of Skulptur Projekte at the turn of the century does not reflect the endeavors that could be glimpsed in Documenta X and, therefore, its third edition represents a counter-discourse to the biennialization process.

2.2 CULTURE AS A CATALYST: TOWARD A SYMBOLIC ECONOMY OF PLACE

As already outlined in the subchapter above, Documenta underwent considerable modifications at both the curatorial and organizational level during its edition in 1997, while, by contrast, Skulptur Projekte only made slight adjustments to its purview. Taking into account these various restructurings, the following passages will show that the two successive artistic directors of Documenta built on the curatorial premise inflicted by David either through discursive or geopolitical strategies, whereas Skulptur Projekte continued to act on its own initiative.

To understand how the artistic director of Documenta 12, Roger Buerger, “continued down the path that Catherine David and Okwui Enwezor had created”⁷³, it is helpful to take a look back at Documenta 11 because it illustrates the consistent continuation of the strategic course adopted within the framework of Documenta X. Indeed David’s aim of displacing Documenta’s Eurocentrism was clearly reflected in Enwezor’s Documenta 11, which gave special attention to under-represented cultures, particularly Africa, Latin America and India. By dividing the exhibition into a set of five platforms, Enwezor created a series of deterritorializations through which he wished to allow for “intellectual reflection

on the possibilities of rethinking the historical procedures that are part of [Documenta’s] contradictory heritage of grand conclusions”⁷⁴. Apart from ‘Platform 5’, which was the actual exhibition in Kassel, the platforms were envisaged to serve as discursive spaces in which, over the course of eighteen months, topics like globalization and multiculturalism were discussed. In veering away from the mere representation of artworks, Enwezor carried on with the discursive trend adopted by David and he further expanded Documenta in both spatial and temporal terms. Considering that Enwezor is “recognized for [his] postcolonial, geographic dispersion of art”⁷⁵, it is reasonable to say that Documenta 11 acted as a vehicle through which the biennialization process unfolded.

In a similar attempt to expand the radius of modernity, artistic director of Documenta 12, Roger M. Buerger, increased the percentage of non-Western artists from 43% to 56%.⁷⁶ While it is true that a politically engaged artist selection formed the statistical backbone of Documenta 12, the exhibition, Buerger expressed, did not concern itself very much with the idea of individual artistic practices because it was to “be thought of as a medium in and of itself”⁷⁷. For Buerger,

68 Kaspar König and others, *Skulptur Projekte Münster 2017* (Munster: Spector Books, 2017), p. 119.

69 Frieze (Anon.), “Sculpture Projects In Münster”, *Frieze*, 1997 <<https://frieze.com/article/sculpture-projects-m%C3%BCnster>> [Accessed 2 January 2019].

70 Kaspar König and others, *Skulptur Projekte Münster 2017* (Munster: Spector Books, 2017), p. 103.

71 Klaus Baumeister, „Der Mythos Wirkt: 1997 Erleben Die Skulptur-Projekte Ihren Durchbruch“, *Müsterschezeitung*, 2018

<<https://www.muensterschezeitung.de/Lokales/Staedte/Muenster/3415483-Serie-zur-Entwicklung-Muensters-Der-Mythos-wirkt-1997-erleben-die-Skulptur-Projekte-ihren-Durchbruch>> [Accessed 9 November 2018].

72 Kulturstiftung des Bundes (Anon.), *Skulptur Projekte Münster* (Kulturstiftung des Bundes), p. 1.

<https://www.kulturstiftung-des-bundes.de/fileadmin/user_upload/download/img/ap_januar_2017/Skulptur-Projekte-2017_Konzept.pdf> [Accessed 30 January 2019].

73 Documenta (Anon.), *60 Years Documenta* (documenta Archiv, 2019), p. 27. <https://www.stadt-kassel.de/imperia/md/images/cms04-miniwebs/documenta-archiv/60_jahre_documenta_en.pdf> [Accessed 28 January 2019].

74 Okwui Enwezor, *Documenta 11 Platform5 Exhibition*: Catalogue (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz, 2002), p. 43.

75 Anthony Gardner, „Post North? Documenta 11 And The Challenges Of The „Global Exhibition““, *Academia*

<http://www.academia.edu/34564321/Post_North_Documenta_11_and_the_Challenges_of_the_Global_Exhibition_> [Accessed 31 January 2019].

76 Anne Ring Petersen, *Migration Into Art: Transcultural Identities And Art-Making In A Globalised World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), p. 67.

77 Frieze (Anon.), „Documenta 12 2007“, *Frieze*, 2007 <<https://frieze.com/article/documenta-12-2007>> [Accessed 28 January 2019].

78 documenta Veranstaltungs-GmbH (Anon.), „Documenta 12: That Was Documenta12“, *Documenta12*

<<https://www.documenta12.de/en/100-tage/100-tage-archiv/allgemein/that-was-documenta-12.html>> [Accessed 28 January 2019].

79 Anthony Spira, „Infancy, History And Rehabilitation At Documenta 12“, *Journal Of Visual Culture*, 7.2, 228-239 <<https://doi.org/10.1177/14704129080070020505>> [Accessed 2 January 2019].

aspects other than the artworks' agency were much more important to the context of Documenta 12, namely two discursive elements that were embedded in the exhibition: A magazine project and an educational outreach program. The former was initiated in the run-up to Documenta 12, when Buergel invited "over 4,390 professionals and 15,537 journalists from 52 countries" to enter into dialogue on the leitmotifs of exhibition, which were expressed in the form of three questions: "Is modernity our antiquity? What is bare life? What is to be done?"⁷⁸ The result, a complex web of theoretical discourse, was published in over 80 periodicals and distributed as a means of creating the necessary background knowledge for the curatorial threads underpinning the exhibition. Just as fundamental to the conception of Documenta 12 was the educational outreach program, which sought to explore the relationship between the arts and social reality by combining pedagogical ways of working with local interventions. More specifically, it was an attempt to give impulses within educational discourse aimed at formulating a new 'educator-educated' relationship.⁷⁹ Considering that Documenta 12 was understood as being defined by the activation of a network of people, Buergel's approach can be seen as a

further impetus for discursive curatorial practice, and even though his mission was rather apolitical, he contributed to the political potential of art by making a conscious effort to emphasize non-Western artists in the exhibition program. In this regard, Buergel's curatorial tactics can also be regarded as a catalyst through which the biennialization process played out.

As in the previous edition, Skulptur Projekte 2007 stuck with the curatorial principle developed in 1977 and, with a smaller selection of projects, it concentrated more strongly on new media practice and performance-based work.⁸⁰ Despite this gradual shift from Site-specific art to Relational Aesthetics-based art, all projects were realized in the context of or through an engagement with a specific place because the invited artists continued to use the public not only as the audience for art, but also as the body of ideas that they chose to concentrate on. The pioneering approach of Skulptur Projekte was appropriated by other enterprises during the early 2000s, such as the Liverpool Biennial (2004), which invited artists to explore the city as a context for the exhibition. However, it was developed by a group of four non-local "researchers" and due to their unfamiliarity with Liverpool, the exhibition program lacked any real depth,

hence why the curator Yarden Abukasis has argued that the Liverpool Biennial (2004) "embodies the unsuccessful results of a non-existent curatorial framework"⁸¹. By contrast, Skulptur Projekte is "what Hans Ulrich Obrist [described] at the Bergen conference, 'To Biennial or Not to Biennial', as the 'right' type of event for site-specificity"⁸² perhaps because it has always been in the hands of regional curators, who, by virtue of their personal relationship with Münster, are more suitable for the selection of artists.⁸³ By including its own archive into the exhibition, Skulptur Projekte 2007 showed a heightened sense of historical self-consciousness. However, the exhibition 77/87/97/07 archive, which took place at the LWL-Museum, was not an attempt to redefine Skulptur Projekte according to a decolonized model of art. On the contrary, the impression conveyed was of an introspective nature, with the press release stating that "the exhibition will document the fascinating history of Skulptur Projekte"⁸⁴ through a presentation of original sketches, personal correspondences, film footage and models. In order "to encourage visitors to talk about the role of art in the public sphere"⁸⁵, a greater emphasis was placed on Skulptur Projekte's arts outreach

program in 2007 and in addition to the guided tours, a wider range of activities was made available to the public. For example, beginning in the summer of 2006, the Academy of Fine Arts Münster hosted a series of lectures and workshops under the title Vorspann ("Prelude"), during which it provided a venue for holiday classes and family activities. What distinguishes the discursive elements of Skulptur Projekte from those of Documenta is that they were all explicitly focused on the exhibition's themes (the arts and the public sphere), meaning they were complementary to, rather than in competition with, the exhibition. In other words, Skulptur Projekte 2007 made little claim to operate beyond its original boundaries, and because it made a distinction between art and political action, one cannot draw a connection between this exhibition and the biennialization process.

2.3 DOCUMENTA 14 AND SKULPTUR PROJEKTE 2017

After having studied several key transformative moments in the most recent histories of Documenta and Skulptur Projekte, the following section will present an analysis of their most recent editions in the Superkunstjahr 2017. Beginning with Documenta

⁸⁰ The fourth edition featured a total of 34 projects by 36 artists.

⁸¹ Yarden Abukasis, "The Graying State Of Site-Specific Art And Practice: Globalization, Biennialization And The Curatorial Turn" (M.A., University of Gothenburg, 2019).

⁸² Ibid

⁸³ Following the retirement of Bussmann in 2004, König implemented a rotating set of curators. For the fourth edition of Skulptur Projekte, he teamed up with the curator for contemporary art at the LWL-Museum, Brigitte Franzen, and the Münster-native curator Carina Plath.

⁸⁴ Skulptur Projekte (Anon.), Skulptur Projekte Münster 07 (Münster, 2007), p. 5. <https://www.lwl.org/skulptur-projekte-download/pdf/Pressemappe_E.pdf> [Accessed 29 January 2019].

⁸⁵ Ibid, p. 40.

⁸⁶ Stephan Köhler, "Documenta 14: Learning From Athens", *African Arts*, 51.4 (2018), 86-88 <https://doi.org/10.1162/afar_r_00435> [Accessed 17 December 2018].

⁸⁷ Elpida Rikou and Eleana Yalouri, "Learning From Documenta: A Research Project Between Art And Anthropology", *The Documenta Issue*, 2019

<http://www.on-curating.org/issue-33-reader/learning-from-documenta-a-research-project-between-art-and-anthropology.html#.XFW9g8_7SHq> [Accessed 2 February 2019].

⁸⁸ Quinn Latimer and Adam Szymczyk, *The Documenta 14 Reader* (Prestel, 2017), p. 29.

⁸⁹ Ibid, p. 27.

⁹⁰ Marina Fokidis, "Documenta 14. An Interview With Marina Fokidis | My Art Guides", *Myartguides*, 2019 <<http://myartguides.com/posts/interviews/documenta-14-an-interview-with-marina-fokidis/>> [Accessed 12 January 2019].

14 and going on to consider *Skulptur Projekte 2017*, it will compare and contrast the reasons underpinning their dual exhibition strategies, before moving on to how they resonated with the greater public. Inspired by the question raised by Green and Gardner (see introduction), it will ask to what extent Documenta and *Skulptur Projekte* currently partake in biennial culture; have they morphed into standardized and commercialized formats, or are they still positive examples of critical practice today?

Documenta 14 was the first to be divided between two locations – Kassel and Athens – and it was conceived as one exhibition comprising two partially overlapping timelines (April – September 2017). Artistic director Adam Szymczyk unveiled his plans for the bi-located exhibition in the midst of the Greek economic crisis in 2014, and in describing the country as “a victim of neocolonial and neoliberal attitudes and humiliating stigmatization”⁸⁶, he hinted at Germany’s initial opposition to the financial rescue package for Greece. As such, the choice of Athens as a venue was clearly derived from a strong political message because it alluded to Greece’s debt burden, whilst also making a comment about Europe’s socio-political dilemmas. However, “the debt” made its symbolic meaning to expand

beyond the current financial situation into a more general negotiation of who owes what to whom historically⁸⁷, meaning Documenta 14 was additionally motivated by the North-and-South Divide, as the exhibition’s working title “Learning from Athens” indicated.

Similar to the ways in which previous editions drew on decentralization as a method for reformulating art historical discourses, Szymczyk used Athens as a vantage point “to learn how to see the world again in an unprejudiced way, unlearning and abandoning the predominant cultural conditioning that, silently or explicitly, presupposes the supremacy of the West”⁸⁸.

With its inherent aspirations for ceasing the cultural supremacy of the West, Documenta 14 can be seen as a direct successor to the more recent iterations of Documenta, but there are two notable differences. Firstly, Szymczyk displaced the exhibition from its birthplace, whereas the previous issues remained strongly rooted in Kassel.⁸⁹ Even the Fridericianum in Kassel, normally the primary venue for Documenta, was given over to the public collection of Greek and international contemporary art of the National Museum of Contemporary Art, Athens (EMST). Secondly, Szymczyk blatantly used a crisis-ridden city as a metaphor for “that

“rest” of the world that has not become (and could not yet become) a part of Documenta in a proper sense”⁹⁰. By contrast, his predecessors studied the concept of “otherness” through a more conceptual lens by drawing upon postcolonial theory, or by giving voice to Women artists.⁹¹ In other words, there was a significant degree of subjectivity involved in the conceptualization of the Athens leg of Documenta 14 because it was based on Szymczyk’s judgment on the city as “a figure of a larger situation that Europe has to confront”⁹². On closer inspection, one also notices that Szymczyk made several contradictory statements. Most notably, his open stance “against interpretation”⁹³ begs the question of whether or not labeling a place as being in a crisis is in itself an act of interpretation.

A key illustration of the discursive trend in curatorial practice can be found in the title “Learning From Athens” because it implies that “art has a process of knowledge”⁹⁴. Indeed Documenta 14 was broader in scope than ever before: The process began in 2014, when Szymczyk moved his extensive team of fifteen curators to Athens, and the “exhibition” started in September 2016 with a comprehensive public program. This included: A quarterly journal entitled *South* as a State of Mind, a regular slot

on Greece’s national television broadcaster, a school hosting regular debates, assemblies and lectures, collaborations with local institutions, music concerts, and innumerable other offshoots.⁹⁵ To avoid “putting on a show of luxury or excessive ambition in the manner of some large artistic events that have taken place in Greece from time to time”⁹⁶, Szymczyk aimed to situate Documenta 14 between a discursive event, and with regard to “Learning from Athens”, a political commentary. Although it appears as though Szymczyk tried his hardest to avoid ‘festivalism’, the exhibition was still large in scale, featuring 160 artists, who were showcased in 70 indoor and open-air spaces throughout Athens and Kassel. And yet, Documenta 14 was conceived to be less-formalized because, in order “to challenge preconceptions about what the major exhibition could be”⁹⁷, Szymczyk took an entirely different approach, one that turned the fundamental structure of the exhibition upside down.

Whether “Learning from Athens” represented ‘Newology’ or a genuine revolutionary act is a question that will be addressed when reviewing how Documenta 14 resonated with the greater public.

In the run-up to *Skulptur Projekte 2017*, a radical change was revealed when Kaspar

91 Roger M. Buergel’s Documenta 12 was special from a feminist perspective because the representation of female artists was on par with that of their male counterparts.

Rachel Esner, *The Ties That Bind: Women Artists At Documenta 12*, p. 1.

<<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/14704129080070020506>> [Accessed 2 February 2019].

92 Zoë Lescaze, „Documenta 14 Will Be Held In Athens And Kassel -“, *Artnews*, 2014 <<http://www.artnews.com/2014/10/06/documenta-14-will-be-held-in-athens-and-kassel/>> [Accessed 3 January 2019].

93 Tess Thackara, „Documenta 14 Struggles To Make A Statement About Our Uncertain Times“, *Artsy*, 2017

<<https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-documenta-14-struggles-statement-uncertain-times>> [Accessed 2 February 2019].

94 Elpida Rikou and Eleana Yalouri, „Learning From Documenta: A Research Project Between Art And Anthropology“, *The Documenta Issue*, 2019 <http://www.on-curating.org/issue-33-reader/learning-from-documenta-a-research-project-between-art-and-anthropology.html#.XFW9g8_7SHq> [Accessed 2 February 2019].

95 Robert Assaye, „Learning From Athens’ - The White Review“, *The White Review*, 2017 <<http://www.thewhitereview.org/feature/learning-from-athens/>> [Accessed 8 November 2018].

96 Maria Katsounaki, „The Athens Of Adam Szymczyk, Curator Of Documenta 14 - Greece Is“, *GreeceIs*, 2017 <<http://www.greece-is.com/news/the-athens-of-adam-szymczyk-curator-of-documenta-14/>> [Accessed 2 February 2019].

97 *Artreview* (Anon.), „Adam Szymczyk / Power 100 / Artreview“, *Artreview* <https://artreview.com/power_100/adam_szymczyk/> [Accessed 2 February 2019].

98 *Skulpturenmuseumglaskasten* (Anon.), *The Hot Wire*, 2017, p. 2. <http://www.skulpturenmuseum-glaskasten-marl.de/files/press_kitfinal.pdf> [Accessed 28 January 2019].

99 *Artviewer* (Anon.), „SPECIAL FEATURE: Skulptur Projekte Münster 2017 (Part 1) – Art Viewer“, *Artviewer*, 2017 <<http://artviewer.org/special-feature-skulptur-projekte-munster-2017-part-1/>> [Accessed 28 January 2019].

König announced his plans for a dual-exhibition strategy in partnership with Münster's less-well known neighboring city Marl. At first glance, it appears as though "The Hot Wire" bears a similarity to "Learning from Athens" because Marl also grapples with issues like "high unemployment, a large amount of abandoned property and a multitude of social problems"⁹⁸. However, Marl was neither meant to serve as a kind of double mirror with which we could see the relation between the center and the periphery, nor was it supposed to be representative of the social and geopolitical concerns of contemporary society. Instead, emphasis was put on Marl because it "has a tradition of its own in the realm of art in the public space"⁹⁹. König, who believes that "it would seem anachronistic to insist on Münster as a sole benchmark"¹⁰⁰ put Marl into the spotlight of the international art world, because it lead the way in the field of public art, hosting two exhibitions, in 1970 and 1972, called Kunst und Skulptur ("Art and Sculpture"). On one hand the cooperation project "The Hot Wire" aimed to provide "recognition of the high-quality collection and [...] the courage with which Marl has been exhibiting contemporary sculpture since the beginning of the 70s"¹⁰¹. On the other hand, it sought to create a bi-lateral engagement

between two completely different cities that are linked by a common thread of public art. Indeed the city of Marl represented an interesting counterpoint to the city of Münster not only because "the identities chosen by the two cities after World War II – reconstruction and continuity in Münster, radical new beginning Marl – could hardly be more different"¹⁰², but also by reason of their divergent developments. The once-prosperous and forward-thinking Marl fell into oblivion in the 1970s, whereas the conservative city of Münster slowly began to flourish. To this effect, the critical juxtaposition of Marl and Münster also provided a vehicle to further examine the relationship between art and the public sphere "under totally different social and urban conditions"¹⁰³. This engagement with the specificities of Marl is what sets "The Hot Wire" apart from "Learning from Athens", which, in terms of site location, was merely a matter of subjective judgment. "The Hot Wire" was primarily symbolized through an exchange of sculptures, but it also included works by artists who were active in both cities, an exhibition of models from the archives of Skulptur Projekte at the Skulpturenmuseum Glaskasten Marl, and visits by authors from the writing project KUR UND

KÜR ("Cure and Freestyle").¹⁰⁴ While it is true that these project components expanded Skulptur Projekte both physically and conceptually, they did not interfere with the original curatorial agenda because their focus remained on the linkage between art and the public sphere. In other words, "The Hot Wire" added another dimension to the program of Skulptur Projekte, and it opened up a new outlook for Marl by placing the city on an equal footing with Münster. However, it did not uproot Skulptur Projekte or change the exhibition's *raison d'être*. Accordingly, the conceptual direction of Skulptur Projekte's fifth edition did not follow a fixed rubric, but instead it developed its thematic coherence through the projects proposed by the invited artists.¹⁰⁵ Opting for quality over quantity, the fifth edition of Skulptur Projekte featured 35 projects that were located within a 5km radius from Münster's city center. Apart from the satellite presentations housed in the LWL-Museum, "almost all of the commissioned pieces [were] located outside of typical art spaces: an Asian corner store, an abandoned ice rink, the public library, a garden shed"¹⁰⁶ and other non-traditional venues. While some visitors participated in a kind of scavenger hunt, exploring the city and learning about its 50-year-old history

of sculpture, others used a specially-designed GPS-enabled navigation app to get their bearings. In a similar manner to Documenta 14, a series of magazines were published prior to the opening of Skulptur Projekte, but each edition – respectively titled *Out of Body* (spring 2016), *Out of Time* (autumn 2016) and *Out of Place* (spring 2017) – took up a term that had proven to have a meaningful relationship with the concept of sculpture, whereas *South as a State of Mind* focused on an array of different topics, including "Tradition, Trickster, Shout, Everyday, Landscape and Mysticism"¹⁰⁷. By drawing attention to the ways in which our experiences of "figure and ground" have been altered by "digitality and capital", the *Out of* magazine series indicated that themes related to our global present would be as much an integral part of the exhibition program as artistic reflections on the terms of art and the public sphere.¹⁰⁸ Despite the diversity of conceptual threads, the relationship between public art and urban dynamics represented the overarching and unifying theme of the exhibition. The artists sustained engagement with the founding narrative of Skulptur Projekte make the exhibition "an ideal testing ground for the observation of synchronic and diachronic developments"¹⁰⁹.

100 Kaspar König and others, *Skulptur Projekte Münster 2017* (Münster: Spector Books, 2017), p. 117.

101 Skulpturenmuseumglaskasten (Anon.), *The Hot Wire*, 2017, p. 2. <http://www.skulpturenmuseum-glaskasten-marl.de/files/press_kitfinal.pdf> [Accessed 28 January 2019].

102 *Ibid.*, p. 10.

103 Skulpturenmuseumglaskasten (Anon.), *The Hot Wire*, 2017, p. 7. <http://www.skulpturenmuseum-glaskasten-marl.de/files/press_kitfinal.pdf> [Accessed 28 January 2019].

104 The German artist Thomas Schütte created a counterpart to his *Kirschensäule* ("Cherry Pillar") (1987) in Münster for Marl and titled it *Melonensäule* ("Melon Pillar"). The installation *Angst* ("Fear") (1989) by the German artist German Ludger Gerdes was removed from the façade of the Rathaus in Marl and re-installed on the façade of a shopping center in Münster. *Ibid.*, p. 2.

105 Kaspar König and others, *Skulptur Projekte Münster 2017* (Münster: Spector Books, 2017), p. 101

106 Juan José Santos, "The Strangeness Of The Everyday: Skulptur Projekte Münster's Deep Grey - Momus", Momus, 2017 <<http://momus.ca/strangeness-everyday-skulptur-projekte-munsters-deep-grey/>> [Accessed 11 December 2018].

107 *South as a State of Mind* (Anon.), *South As A State Of Mind* Press Release Issue 1, p. 2. <<http://southasastateofmind.com/wp-content/uploads/South-as-a-State-of-Mind-newsletter-issue-11.pdf>> [Accessed 2 February 2019].

108 Louisa Elderton, "Out Of Body, Time And Place / Skulptur Projekte Münster", *Flash Art*, 2017 <<https://www.flashartonline.com/2017/04/out-of-body-time-and-place-skulptur-projekte-munster/>> [Accessed 28 January 2019].

109 Kaspar König and others, *Skulptur Projekte Münster 2017* (Münster: Spector Books, 2017), p. 116.

110 Kaspar König and others, *Skulptur Projekte Münster 2017* (Münster: Spector Books, 2017), p. 121.

111 Beatriz García, "Cultural Policy And Urban Regeneration In Western European Cities: Lessons From Experience, Prospects For The Future", *Local Economy: The Journal Of The Local Economy Policy Unit*, 19.4 (2004), 103 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/0269094042000286828>> [Accessed 12 November 2018].

On one hand, it makes contemporaneity visible, and on the other hand it carries out a retrospective assessment of sculpture as a medium.

In order to safeguard the long-term viability of Skulptur Projekte, König ended his statement in the exhibition catalogue with appeal for the exhibition's structural autonomy, stating that: Interplay between the city, region and state – that is broad institutional backing of the exhibition by Münster, the Landschaftsverband Westfalen-Lippe, and North-Rhine Westphalia, respectively – would create the ideal conditions for the exhibition as an independent entity.¹¹⁰

The thrust of this argument is that, if the funding scheme shifts from primarily public to private, the integrity of Skulptur Projekte is compromised because the exhibition will become subordinated to economic interests. To avoid a top-down approach, as has often been the case in biennial culture, the emphasis must lie in providing simple funding mechanisms and in giving curators free reign to manage the decision-making process. Only by retaining 'local control' can an enterprise forge a 'local identity' and a 'sense of place'.¹¹¹ Within a sustainable development context, it is equally as important to pursue a practice of actively engaging the local community

because grass roots-communal elements contribute to the process of creating essential values and beliefs. Regarding Skulptur Projekte, community development is not just recognized as a core element in the curatorial strategy, but the public also has a direct impact on the progression of the exhibition's impacts because it is given the chance to build a public collection of sculpture. Although Skulptur Projekte has kept true to its name by remaining temporary in nature, a number of works have collectively been purchased or placed on a permanent loan ever since the first edition in 1977. This goes to show that public art "can reverberate throughout the community, thereby encouraging a sense of shared ownership and collective affiliation"¹¹². By giving the public an outlook for the future, Skulptur Projekte is actively creating a legacy. A less obvious, but equally important fact, is that while most "biennial memory is restricted to the archiving of catalogues and other documentary material"¹¹³, the public collection of sculpture plays a key role in the formation, preservation and reproduction of social memory because it serves as a vivid memento of the past. Simply put, Skulptur Projekte is inevitably rooted in its past, and it provides a platform for its future; from this it derives its unique character.

When looking at how Superkunjstjahr resonated with the greater public, it becomes apparent that "the warmest response of critics and visitors was reserved for Kaspar König's decennial event in Münster"¹¹⁴. More specifically, it can be said that Skulptur Projekte got off practically scott-free, whereas Documenta 14 received a fair share of criticism.

Although the organizers of Documenta 14 had predicted record visitor numbers, the attendance figures in Kassel slightly decreased from 2012 (905.000) to 2017 (891.500), with the accompanying section in Athens attracting an additional 339.000 visitors.¹¹⁵ This lower than expected rate of attendance came as a surprise because Documenta 14 had been allocated significantly more funds, operating with a budget of 37 million euros.¹¹⁶ After the run of Documenta 14, the Documenta GmbH almost went into insolvency because the cost of operating the venue in Athens contributed to a deficit of more than 7 million euros, but the imminent bankruptcy was prevented on the basis of a state guarantee provided by the proprietors of the exhibition, the state Hesse and the city Kassel.¹¹⁷ In response to the report by the independent auditor PricewaterhouseCooper (PwC), which concluded that "had it not been for Athens, Documenta would have ended

the year with a profit"¹¹⁸, the curatorial team of Documenta 14 and the CEO of Documenta GmbH, Annette Kulenkampff, published an open letter. It stated that Szymczyk's "concept of two venues, in Athens and Kassel, was clearly communicated to all responsible parties at the time", and therefore it was argued that the budget deficit "was caused by a lack of managerial capacity and a failure of financial oversight on the part of the team of Documenta GmbH", rather than through a lack of curatorial responsibility.¹¹⁹ The letter ended with a clear call to the Documenta GmbH to put a stop to the excessive burden placed on both the artistic directors and the organizers of the exhibition:

In a spirit of collective reflection, we believe it is time to question the value production regime of mega-exhibitions such as documenta. We would like to denounce the exploitative model under which the stakeholders of documenta wish the "most important exhibition of the world" to be produced. The expectations of ever-increasing success and economic growth not only generate exploitative working conditions but also jeopardize the possibility of the exhibition remaining a site of critical action and artistic experimentation. How can the value production of documenta be measured?¹²⁰

112 There are 39 sculptures permanently located in the urban environment of Münster. Americans for the Arts (Anon.), Why Public Art Matters (Washington, 2018), p. 2. <https://www.americansforthearts.org/sites/default/files/PublicArtNetwork_GreenPaper.pdf> [Accessed 9 November 2018].

113 Elena Filipovic, Marieke Van Hal and Solveig Øvstebo, The Biennial Reader: The Bergen Biennial Conference (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2010), p. 26.

114 Javier Pes, The Art Newspaper Sculpture 2017 (Inna Bazhenova, 2017), p. 4. <https://www.momart.com/uploads/download/Momart_TAN_Sculpture%202017%20Magazine.pdf> [Accessed 3 February 2019].

115 Andrew Russeth, „Documenta 14 Reports Record Attendance [Updated]“, Artnews, 2017 <<http://www.artnews.com/2017/09/19/documenta-14-reports-record-attendance/>> [Accessed 10 November 2018].

116 This sum stands in a stark contrast to the budget of Skulptur Projekte 2017 (6.5 million euros) and even to that of the 57th Venice Biennial: "Viva Arte Viva" (13 million euros).

117 Catherine Hickley, „Why A World-Famous Art Exhibition Needed A Government

Bailout“, Nytimes, 2017 <<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/20/arts/design/documenta-germany-contemporary-art.html>> [Accessed 10 November 2018].

118 E-Flux magazine (Anon.), „Statement By The Artistic Director And Curatorial Team Of Documenta 14“, E-Flux Conversations, 2017

<<https://conversations.e-flux.com/t/statement-by-the-artistic-director-and-curatorial-team-of-documenta-14/7013>> [Accessed 8 January 2019].

119 Ibid

120 E-Flux magazine (Anon.), „Statement By The Artistic Director And Curatorial Team Of Documenta 14“, E-Flux Conversations, 2017 <<https://conversations.e-flux.com/t/statement-by-the-artistic-director-and-curatorial-team-of-documenta-14/7013>> [Accessed 8 January 2019].

121 Penny Rafferty, „Activism // Documenta 14: An Interview With Artists Against Evictions | Berlin Art Link“, Berlin Art Link, 2017

<<https://www.berlinartlink.com/2017/06/09/activism-documenta-14-an-interview-with-artists-against- eviction/>> [Accessed 4 January 2019].

Indeed Documenta 14 received “some very serious allegations into the docking of pay to below minimum wage, local exclusion and the exploitation of minority groups as hot spectacles”¹²¹. However, blaming the Supervisory Board of Documenta GmbH for the event’s failure seems to be a rather questionable decision considering that Szymczyk and his curatorial team made many of the exhibition’s budgetary decisions. Nevertheless, the statement illustrates the objection that is often used by critics against biennials – namely that, as capitalist vehicles, biennials cannot generate meanings beyond what can be seen or understood as the spectacle. In addition to the lack of revenue, commentators also found fault with the number of venues across Athens and Kassel, describing Documenta 14 as being “overwhelming but not in a good way”¹²². In her exhibition review for *Sleek* magazine, the writer Jeni Fulton stated that “very little could be established as a fact, very little ascertained about art or artists, [with] the curators eschewing such banal things as artists’ biographies”¹²³ or art historical research material. While the information on art and artists was sparse, the curatorial statement was significant. Commenting on Documenta 14’s authorial autonomy, the art critic Barry Schwabsky echoed

a point of criticism leveled by many art professionals, namely that the artwork “becomes a perfunctory affair, since the objects function more as clues to a curatorial intention than as polyvalent, self-justifying creations”¹²⁴. What this implies is that Documenta 14 did not support a process of individual meaning making because the artworks were weighed down by curatorially-imposed narrative.

In Athens, Documenta 14 received far more negative critique than it did positive responses because it showed no consideration towards the city’s infrastructure and its lack of resources for coping with mass tourism. Similarly to the former Greek finance minister, Janis Varoufakis, who labeled Documenta 14 as “crisis tourism”¹²⁵, the Artists Against Evictions group (AAE) condemned the exhibition’s attempt to provide “some sort of rescuing” for Greece, stating that: “This is not the ‘others’ problem, it is ‘our’ problem, a product of global forces and actions”¹²⁶. Throughout the course of the show, the slogan “Crapumenta 14” became the rallying cry for the Greek art scene because Szymczyk, who “had the audacity to say out loud that he is not interested in the local art scene but only interested in Athens”¹²⁷, did not develop a local approach to community engagement. This in turn leads us to question the

protested benefits of “Learning from Athens”, as by excluding Greek artists, Szymczyk failed to embrace the cultural identity of his intended audience.

Apart from the mayor of Kassel, Betram Hilgen, who believed that “the fact that Documenta 14 will take place in Athens will move Kassel into the focus of global attention”¹²⁸, the majority of the public in Kassel was likewise skeptical about the exhibition’s bi-located structure. Although Documenta has always been esteemed for its progressive nature, many did not appreciate the fact that the event was stripped of its integral components – the inauguration and the Fridericianum. They felt “appalled and shocked at how the legacy of Documenta founder Arnold Bode [was] being violated”¹²⁹. Therefore it can be said that in taking this course, Szymczyk failed to realize that he should have been careful to preserve the semblance when changing the substance of this cherished institution. The implication of this is that the full potential of Documenta remained underexploited, because by neglecting regional characteristics, Szymczyk reduced both social cohesion and social inclusion.

In contrast to Documenta 14, *Skulptur Projekte 2017* was very well received by the public. In addition to drawing a record number of over 600.000

visitors, it was met with critical acclaim from reviewers.¹³⁰ For those art aficionados attending the fifth edition of *Skulptur Projekte* as part of the European Grand Tour, its comparatively compact scale felt like “a breath of fresh air”¹³¹ in comparison to the spectacles of Venice and Documenta.

Perhaps its manageable size and the unconventional site selection led the art critic Andrew Russeth to describe *Skulptur Projekte* as “enthraling” in comparison to the “exhausting” Documenta 14, because it allowed for easy access whilst also having the advantage of stimulating a sense of engagement among locals and visitors alike.¹³² Indeed many commentators felt that “there is a different relationship to the art”, not only “because the works are not set to a distinct curatorial agenda”, but also because *Skulptur Projekte* is free of charge.¹³³ Even though the exhibition program was more diversified than ever, there was evidence of a coherent whole, when the art historian Claire Bishop stated: The small city of Münster offers a more focused lens through which to take bearings: the *Skulptur Projekte* event operating as part reunion, part *déjà vu*, marking the unfolding of time.¹³⁴ As “each edition of the exhibition ‘inscribes’ itself into an existing situation”¹³⁵, one filters into the other,

122 Martin Herbert, „Documenta 14: Kassel“, *Artreview*, 2017 <https://artreview.com/reviews/ar_sep_2017_review_documenta_14_kassel/> [Accessed 9 November 2018].

123 Jeni Fulton, „How Documenta 14 Failed Everyone But Its Curators“, *Sleek* magazine, 2017 <<https://www.sleek-mag.com/article/documenta-14-kassel/>> [Accessed 5 January 2019].

124 Barry Schwabsky, „Wandering Through Documenta“, *The Nation*, 2017 <<https://www.thenation.com/article/wandering-through-documenta-14/>> [Accessed 8 November 2018].

125 *Ibid*

126 Penny Rafferty, „Activism // Documenta 14: An Interview With Artists Against Evictions | Berlin Art Link“, *Berlin Art Link*, 2017 <<https://www.berlinartlink.com/2017/06/09/activism-documenta-14-an-interview-with-artists-against-eviction/>> [Accessed 4 January 2019].

127 E-Flux magazine (Anon.), „We Come Bearing Gifts” —Iliana Fokianaki And Yanis Varoufakis On Documenta 14 Athens“, *E-Flux Conversations*, 2017 <<https://conversations.e-flux.com/t/we-come-bearing-gifts-iliana-fokianaki-and-yanis-varoufakis-on-documenta-14-athens/6666>> [Accessed 3 February 2019].

128 Henri Neuendorf, „Germans Enraged By Documenta Relocation | Artnet News“, *Artnet News*, 2014 <<https://news.artnet.com/exhibitions/germans-enraged-by-documenta-relocation-130822>> [Accessed 8 November 2018].

129 *Ibid*

130 „Skulptur Projekte Gehen Mit Besucherrekord Zu Ende | Monopol – Magazin Für Kunst Und Leben“, *Monopol* magazine, 2017 <<https://www.monopol-magazin.de/skulptur-projekte-gehen-mit-besucherrekord-zu-ende>> [Accessed 16 January 2019].

131 Sarah Douglas and Andrew Russeth, „Münster Notebook: An Annotated Tour Of Skulptur Projekte 2017“, *Artnews*, 2017 <<http://www.artnews.com/2017/06/11/munster-notebook-an-annotated-tour-of-skulptur-projekte-2017/>> [Accessed 2 February 2019].

creating a dialogue between the present and the past, and allowing the new narrative to produce friction with the old. An engagement with the intersection of art and urban history has always been part of both the function and the ethos of Skulptur Projekte; it provides a clear understanding of what an art exhibition, and what art itself, might actually be for.

- 132 Andrew Russeth, „What Happens On Tour Stays On Tour: At An Exhausting Documenta, An Underwhelming Venice Biennale, An Enthralling Skulptur Projekte“, Artnews, 2017 <<http://www.artnews.com/2017/09/25/what-happens-on-tour-stays-on-tour-at-an-exhausting-documenta-an-underwhelming-venice-biennale-an-enthralling-skulpture-projekte-092517/>> [Accessed 28 January 2019].
- 133 Alex Fialho, „Five And Dime“, Artforum, 2017 <<https://www.artforum.com/diary/alex-fialho-at-the-5th-skulptur-projekte-muenster-68952>> [Accessed 8 November 2018].
- 134 Gabrielle Schwarz, „Münster Turns Its Public Spaces Over To Sculpture | Apollo Magazine“, Apollo magazine, 2017 <<https://www.apollo-magazine.com/munster-turns-its-public-spaces-over-to-sculpture/>> [Accessed 4 February 2019].
- 135 Kaspar König and others, Skulptur Projekte Münster 2017 (Münster: Spector Books, 2017), p. 188.

CONCLUSION

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Merit Zimmermann
London, United Kingdom, 2019
Biennials In Flux: Rethinking the Value of Documenta and Skulptur Projekte

CONCLUSION

This dissertation set out to ascertain how the biennialization process has transformed the biennial from its traditional model, while also aiming to establish the role of the contemporary curator within this new construct. The primary motivation for undertaking a study of the biennialization process arose from the desire to contribute to an understanding of the principles and values that biennials now wish to project. As indicated early on this dissertation, there is sufficient evidence to suggest that biennialization has yet to be thoroughly assessed, because in the span of just a few decades, we have seen that biennials have converted themselves into highly publicized global events, designed to fulfill a multitude of conflicting interests and desires. Rather than attempting to fill a gap in the literature on biennialization, the intention of this dissertation was to establish whether biennials can maintain their institutional legitimacy and social relevancy within a capitalist framework, and if so, how. To this effect, the adopted approach was to conduct a comparative analysis of two of the most well-renowned biennials that emerged prior to the 'biennial boom', Documenta and Skulptur Projekte. It was found that Documenta

and Skulptur Projekte have charted a different course of development since the 1990s, and that the legacy of these institutions has been handled in divergent ways. As was shown, Catherine David's Documenta X (1997) represented a catalytic moment in Documenta's trajectory, because with its foregrounding of non-Western cultures and highlighting the discursive exhibition model, it ushered in many infrastructural changes. The fact that more or less each successive artistic director has built on David's new style of exhibition-making clearly indicated that certain trends of the biennialization process are themselves captured in Documenta, meaning the institution has been part of driving change forward. Furthermore, it was ascertained that Documenta is reflective of the developments in curatorial practice, because virtually every artistic director has made grandiose claims about the production of knowledge. This in turn means that Documenta has become a medium of expression in its own right. With regard to Documenta 14, what also became apparent were the conflicts of interest exposed by the organizational and financial structure of Documenta. Not only does this testify to the profound impact of economic imperatives on biennials, it also indicates that Documenta's close intertwining with financial and

managerial control jeopardized Szymczyk's ability to stage an exhibition without becoming a capitalist-funded spectacle. Considering that a revisionist curatorial agenda has been at the heart of Documenta, it can be said that the institution is increasingly perceived as a matter of 'becoming' rather than 'being'. The findings on Documenta suggest that, in using the exhibition for their own purposes of social transformation, artistic directors have essentially rejected the legacy that has been built by the institution over a long period of time. In other words, the founding principle of Documenta has fundamentally changed because its cultural mission is no longer played out a national level, but rather on a more global playing field.

A critical reflection on the trajectory of Skulptur Projekte demonstrated that the institution has resisted the clutches of biennialization not only because it has established a degree of continuity and stability, but also in light of the fact that it has maintained structural autonomy. With regard to the former, it was established that Skulptur Projekte distinguishes itself from biennial culture by virtue of its extraordinary temporal character and its long-term curatorial strategy. A conclusion that can be drawn from this is that a prolonged time interval and a

consistent curatorial narrative can contribute significantly to the development of innovative exhibition-making practices. Regarding the independent nature of Skulptur Projekte, it was ascertained that the institution's legitimacy is reliant on the freedom granted by public sponsorship. This is an important finding because it indicates that a biennial can achieve a synthesis in which it can be both critical and commercially viable, if the decision-making process is not constrained by rules and regulations concerning the interests of private stakeholders. A final observation is that Skulptur Projekte represents a curatorial counter-pole to the endeavors of Documenta, thanks partly to a lack of statement about the artworks on view, but also because Kaspar König has refrained from discursively attempting to harness the political potential of art. Skulptur Projekte is characterized by a refusal of geopolitics because it continues to localize the international art world, whereas Documenta internationalizes the local art world.

For the abovementioned reasons, the conclusion of this dissertation is that Skulptur Projekte offers a welcome diversion to the normative vision that permeates biennialization. Without losing focus of its core aim, Skulptur Projekte has continued to

enrich the life of the urban community, and by ensuring the transfer of cultural heritage across generations, it has kept its legacy intact.

Having begun this dissertation as a way of generating new material on how biennials can project a self-pronounced identity whilst being intrinsically linked to the ebb and flow of capital, I hope to have assembled useful information about possible methods for limiting both capitalist appropriation and standardization. Future studies could fruitfully explore this issue further by analyzing individual 'biennial formats' and different 'biennial discourses'.

Questioning how biennialization can be analyzed through specific cases is only the beginning of a process of understanding how biennials have been thrown into a state of flux.

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

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ILLUSTR

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FIG. 1

HARALD SZEEMANN (SEATED) ON THE LAST NIGHT OF DOCUMENTA 5 (1972)

PHOTO: <[HTTPS://HYPERALLERGIC.COM/441392/HARALD-SZEEMANN-MUSEUM-OF- OBSSESSIONS-GETTY/](https://hyperallergic.com/441392/harald-szeemann-museum-of-obsessions-getty/)> [ACCESSED 8 FEBRUARY 2019].

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FIG. 2

PERFORMANCE IN FRONT OF THE THIRD WORLD BY WIFREDO LAM (1965) AT THE MUSEO NACIONAL DE BELLAS ARTES DURING THE FIRST HAVANA BIENNIAL (1984)

PHOTO: <[HTTPS://WWW.CONTEMPORARYAND.COM/MAGAZINES/FROM-DAKAR-TO-THE- WORLD-FROM-THE-WORLD-TO-HAVANA/](https://www.contemporaryand.com/magazines/from-dakar-to-the-world-from-the-world-to-havana/)> [ACCESSED 8 FEBRUARY 2019].

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FIG. 3

INSTALLATION VIEW OF GIANT POOL BALLS BY CLAES OLDENBURG, COVERED WITH GRAFFITI, AT SKULPTUR PROJEKTE (1997)

PHOTO: <[HTTP://WWW.ARTNEWS.COM/2017/06/06/POSTCARDS-FROM-THE-EDGE-FOR-40-YEARS-KASPER-KONIG-HAS-BEEN-BRINGING-THE-AVANT-GARDE-TO-MUNSTER/](http://www.artnews.com/2017/06/06/postcards-from-the-edge-for-40-years-kasper-konig-has-been-bringing-the-avant-garde-to-munster/)> [ACCESSED 9 FEBRUARY 2019].

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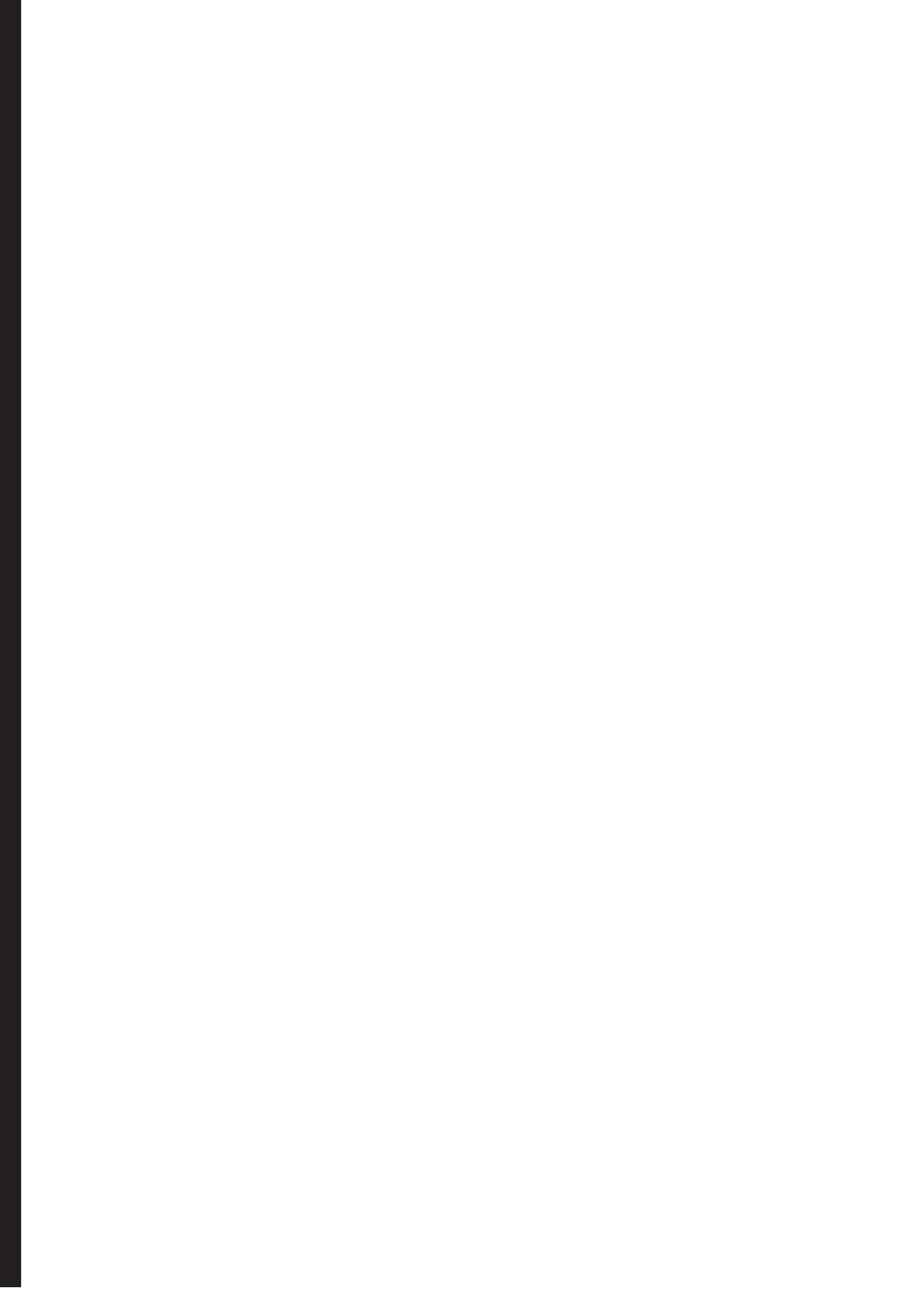
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**BIENNIALS IN FLUX:
RETHINKING THE VALUE OF DOCUMENTA
AND SKULPTUR PROJEKTE**



However, little in-depth research has been carried out on the biennialization process, not only because “the biennial” in itself is a relatively new phenomenon, but also due to the fact that a certain amount of complexity now surrounds the biennial’s primary custodian: the curator. Despite the lack of a clear frame of reference, there is growing concern towards the biennial’s legitimacy and its ability to instigate an autonomous form of critical discourse under new socio-economic conditions. Within this context, the question has been raised as to whether biennials are yet objects of capitalism, if they are in fact still functioning as a critical practice. In response thereto, this dissertation sought to explore the biennialization process, and to examine the current characteristics of curatorial practice within biennial culture. To this effect, a case study approach was adopted and a comparative analysis of two of the oldest and most renowned biennials – Documenta and Skulptur Projekte – was conducted. Broadly translated, the findings indicated that Documenta reflects the trends towards biennialization, whereas Skulptur Projekte has specificities that mark it as an independent discourse in the more general circuit of biennials. The main conclusion is that temporality, curatorial consistency, and a flexible organizational framework can enable a biennial to set itself apart from biennialization. Looking forward, it is suggested that further research should focus on individual biennials and their historical development in order to establish the key parameters to contemporary criticism.