

Contemporary Art Biennials in Europe

Nicolas
Whybrow

*The Work of Art
in the Complex City*



B L O O M S B U R Y

CONTEMPORARY ART BIENNIALS IN EUROPE

CONTEMPORARY ART BIENNIALS IN EUROPE: THE WORK OF ART IN THE COMPLEX CITY

Nicolas Whybrow

BLOOMSBURY VISUAL ARTS
LONDON • NEW YORK • OXFORD • NEW DELHI • SYDNEY

BLOOMSBURY VISUAL ARTS
Bloomsbury Publishing Plc
50 Bedford Square, London, WC1B 3DP, UK
1385 Broadway, New York, NY 10018, USA
29 Earlsfort Terrace, Dublin 2, Ireland

BLOOMSBURY, BLOOMSBURY VISUAL ARTS and the Diana logo
are trademarks of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

First published in Great Britain 2020
Paperback edition first published 2023

Copyright © Nicolas Whybrow, 2020

Nicolas Whybrow has asserted his right under the Copyright, Designs
and Patents Act, 1988, to be identified as Author of this work.

For legal purposes the Acknowledgements on p. ix constitute an extension of this copyright page.

Cover design by Ben Anslow
Cover image © Nicolas Whybrow

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or
by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or any information
storage or retrieval system, without prior permission in writing from the publishers.

Bloomsbury Publishing Plc does not have any control over, or responsibility for,
any third-party websites referred to or in this book. All internet addresses given
in this book were correct at the time of going to press. The author and publisher
regret any inconvenience caused if addresses have changed or sites have
ceased to exist, but can accept no responsibility for any such changes.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: Whybrow, Nicolas, author.

Title: Contemporary art biennials in Europe : the work of art in the
complex city / Nicolas Whybrow.

Description: London ; New York : Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2020. | Includes
bibliographical references and index. | Summary: "Contemporary Art Biennials in
Europe examines five urban situations in diverse parts of Europe. Roughly tracing
a central horizontal strip from the western to the eastern edges of the continent,
the events and cities covered are the Folkestone Triennial, UK, Münster Sculpture
Projects, Germany, the Venice Biennale, Italy, Belgrade's Mikser Festival, Serbia
and the Istanbul Biennial, Turkey. Whybrow establishes how public artworks
operate in these contexts as part of a complex prescribed by the format of the
biennial event. This means drawing out the extent to which biennial events seek to
engage with the complexity of the city in question, in a manner that takes
into account local socio-cultural ecologies, while also positioning the event
itself within a globalist art world perspective. The book also considers how sited
installations - which are very varied in form, as a reflection of a new, eclectic
urban aesthetic - tell a particular story of a city, while the regional diversity of
these selected cities and events in turn tells a composite story of European
difference at a moment of high tension, centring on matters of migration,
political populism and uncertainty around the future form of the European
Union" - Provided by publisher.

Identifiers: LCCN 2020011221 (print) | LCCN 2020011222 (ebook) | ISBN 9781350166974 (hardback) |
ISBN 9781350166981 (epub) | ISBN 9781350166998 (pdf)

Subjects: LCSH: Biennials (Art fairs)--Europe--History--21st century. | Art
and cities--Europe--History--21st century.

Classification: LCC N4396 .W49 2020 (print) | LCC N4396
(ebook) | DDC 700.74--dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2020011221>
LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2020011222>

ISBN: HB: 978-1-3501-6697-4
PB: 978-1-3503-7520-8
ePDF: 978-1-3501-6699-8
ePub: 978-1-3501-6698-1

Typeset by Integra Software Services Pvt. Ltd.

To find out more about our authors and books visit www.bloomsbury.com
and sign up for our newsletters.

CONTENTS

List of Figures vi

Acknowledgements ix

Introduction: European Biennials, Complex Cities
and the *Work* of Art 1

1 Folkestone Turned: Of Fault-Lines and Fairy-Tales 33

2 Sculpture Trials, Sculpture Tales: Münster's 'Rupture
Projects' and the Time of Art 71

3 *Viva, Venezia, Viva*: Treasures from the Wreck of the
'Unbelievable City' 101

4 Belgrade Conversations: *Mikser*, Its Festival and the City's
'Descent to its Rivers' *Marko Jobst with Nicolas Whybrow and
Marijana Cvetković* 139

5 Neighbourhood Watch: Building and Dwelling in
Istanbul 173

Conclusion 199

Bibliography 203

Index 213

FIGURES

All photographs have been taken by the author Nicolas Whybrow unless indicated otherwise.

- I.1** *FOLKESTONE* (2008), Patrick Tuttofuoco, 14th September 2017 28
- 1.1** *FOLKESTONE IS AN ART SCHOOL* (2017), Bob and Roberta Smith, 15th September 2017 34
- 1.2** *Folkestone Lightbulb* (2017), Michael Craig-Martin and *FOLKESTONE IS AN ART SCHOOL* (2017), Bob and Roberta Smith, 15th September 2017 36
- 1.3** *Weather Is a Third to Place and Time* (2014), Ian Hamilton Finlay, 14th September 2017 52
- 1.4** *Whithervanes: A Neurotic Early Worrying System* (2014), rooftoptwo (Marshall/Charles), 10th October 2014 54
- 1.5** *Pent House 1* (2014), Diane Dever and Jonathan Wright, 10th October 2014 56
- 1.6** *Holiday Home* (2017), Richard Woods, 14th September 2017 59
- 1.7** *The Wind Lift* (2014), Marjetica Potrč and Ooze (Pfannes/Hartenberg), 10th October 2014 61
- 1.8** *The Electrified Line (Cross-track Observation-deck)* (2014), Gabriel Lester, 10th October 2014 62
- 1.9** *Vigil* (2014), Alex Hartley, 10th October 2014 63
- 2.1** *5V* (2017), Aram Bartholl, 28th July 2017 84
- 2.2** *Versetzung des Denkmals 'Knecht mit Pferd' und 'Magd mit Stier'* (1987), Rémy Zaugg, 29th July 2017 85
- 2.3** *On Water* (2013), Ayşe Erkmen, 27th July 2017 91
- 2.4** *On Water* (2013), Ayşe Erkmen, 30th July 2017 91
- 2.5** *Privileged Points* (2017), Nairy Baghramian, 25th July 2017 94
- 2.6** *Momentary Monument – The Stone* (2017), Lara Favaretto, 25th July 2017 95

- 3.1** *The Fate of Banished Man* (2017), Palazzo Grassi, Damien Hirst, 1st September 2017 108
- 3.2** *The Collector with Friend* (2017), Punta della Dogana, Damien Hirst, 1st September 2017 110
- 3.3** *Anonymous Stateless Immigrants' Pavilion* pochoir (2011), 24th July 2011 123
- 3.4** *Venezia, Venezia* (2013), Alfredo Jaar, 2013 128
- 3.5** *Folly* (2017), Phillida Barlow, 29th August 2017 128
- 4.1** *Untitled, Interventions in Space* (2012), Irena Kelečević, 31st May 2012 141
- 4.2** Savamala, Belgrade during *Mikser Festival* 2012, 31st May 2012 142
- 4.3** *Beogradska Zadruga* (The Belgrade Co-operative), 10th April 2018. Photo: Marko Jobst 145
- 4.4** Belgrade Waterfront development projection, 10th April 2018. Photo: Marko Jobst 151
- 4.5** Belgrade Waterfront residential flats, 10th April 2018. Photo: Marko Jobst 163
- 5.1** *International Billboard Project* (2017), Lukas Wassmann, 25th September 2017 175
- 5.2** Atatürk Cultural Centre (AKM), Taksim Square, 25th September 2017 182
- 5.3** *Follower* (2017), Burçak Bingöl, 24th September 2017 192
- 5.4** *Follower* (2017), Burçak Bingöl, 24th September 2017 193

Nicolas Whybrow is Professor of Urban Performance Studies in the School of Creative Arts, Performance and Visual Cultures at the University of Warwick, UK. A former Head of School, he was also Principal Investigator of the Arts and Humanities Research Council-funded research project *Sensing the City* (2017–2020). A book entitled *Urban Sensographies*, arising from this project and edited by him, is forthcoming (Routledge 2021). Other books include *Art and the City* (I.B. Tauris 2011) and, as editor, *Performing Cities* (Palgrave Macmillan 2014).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to express my gratitude to Dr Marko Jobst and Marijana Cvetković (of the arts organization *Magacin*), who co-authored the chapter on Belgrade with me. I became acquainted with Marko when he invited me, while he was teaching in the Department of Architecture and Landscape at the University of Greenwich, London, to be part of a delegation of academics and architects visiting and contributing to the *Mikser Festival* in the Savamala area of the city in 2012. The conversations begun on this occasion, which included Marijana to some extent, turned out to be the point of departure for the chapter on Belgrade in this volume. It would also be appropriate to recognize the contributions of other main interlocutors that feature in Chapter 4, not least Maja Lalić and Tatjana Gostiljac who have both been key figures in the *Mikser* set-up that forms the central focus of this chapter. In addition to their immediate involvement here, Marko and Marijana respectively curated and produced an exhibition in Belgrade in July 2017 entitled 'Great War Island: Desert Fictions' to which I was invited to make a contribution. This turned out to be an installation based on artist's pages produced previously for *Performance Research* journal's 'On Ruins and Ruination' issue (see below) and represented a response to the *Venice Biennale*. Some of this material features in Chapter 3.

I would also like to thank Dr Nese Ceren Tosun for the time and energy she dedicated to acting as my guide and interlocutor during the fieldwork for the *Istanbul Biennial* in September 2017. It was a very intense period and her contributions were invaluable. On that occasion Nese also arranged a meeting with Dr Rana Öztürk of Istanbul Bigli Üniversitesi, who provided us with insights into previous *Istanbul Biennials* and pointed me in the direction of certain useful publications by her. A brief encounter with Dr Emine Fişek of Istanbul's Boğaziçi Üniversitesi during her short stay at Warwick as visiting scholar in 2019 also yielded useful tips relating to Istanbul literature. Meanwhile, my old friends Donald Forbes and Anthony Haddon spent a weekend navigating the *Folkestone Triennial* with me on foot in September 2017, which also proved to be an illuminating exercise in conducting 'ambulant dialogues about art and place' and entirely in keeping with the fieldwork methodology that underpins this book. I am also grateful to

Jo Cowdrey of Folkestone's Creative Foundation (renamed Creative Folkestone in 2019) for supplying important information about the *Triennial* and Folkestone Artworks.

Aspects of the material published here have appeared in various guises in journal articles and as a chapter in a book about public art, as well as keynotes and conference papers delivered in a range of forums. Early in 2012 I was invited by Professor of Art History Altti Kuusamo to deliver a keynote at the University of Turku in Finland to mark the culmination of Turku's stint as the 2011 European Capital of Culture (alongside Tallinn, Estonia). The topic of the keynote was the *Venice Biennale* and this later appeared in adapted form as a chapter in a publication as follows: 'Venezia, Italia, Fare Mondi: Doing and Undoing (the Myth of) Venice', ed. Johanna Ruohonen and Asta Kihlman, *The Machinery of Public Art: from Durable to Transient, Site-Bound to Mobile*, Turku: Utukirjat (University of Turku), 2013, pp.29–49. In similar vein, I was invited in 2012 to give a keynote in Linz, Austria, at a symposium sponsored by the *Architekturforum Oberösterreich* and *Kulturdezernat Stadt Linz*. The city had also been European Capital of Culture recently (2009) and was looking for ways to capitalize on the legacy of that honour. The title of my talk, which referenced the *Folkestone Triennial*, was 'Statt Kunst, Linz: The Integrated Work of Art in an Urban Age'. My thanks to the architect and urban planner Clemens Bauder for the invitation and Professor Elke Krasny of the Technical University and Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna for chairing the subsequent discussion. Closer to home, the History of Art Department at Warwick asked me to give a keynote at the University's Institute for Advanced Study in July 2016 addressing the conference title of *Artists' Critical Interventions into Architecture and Urbanism, 1960–2016*. Again my paper drew on material relating to the *Folkestone Triennial* and was entitled 'Complex-cities: The Architecture of Art in Urban Situations'. My thanks to Dr Bill Roberts and Dr David Hodge for the invitation and organization of this event. Meanwhile, on the occasion of the inauguration of the *Coventry Biennial of Contemporary Art* in October 2017 I gave a keynote entitled 'Contemporary Art Biennials in Europe' at the symposium *The Biennial Effect: Biennials and Place-making*, The Box, Fargo Village, Coventry. My thanks to the Biennial's Director Ryan Hughes for this invitation, to Craig Ashley, Director of New Midlands Arts, for the introduction and to the curator Jonathon Hughes for chairing the discussion afterwards.

I have also given conference papers covering various aspects of the material in this book as follows:

'Whither the Weather: An Urban Ecology of Ebb and Flow', *Overflow*, 23rd Performance Studies International conference, University of Hamburg and Kampnagel, Hamburg, Germany, 8th–11th June 2017; 'High Tide, High Time: Alfredo Jaar's *Venezia Venezia*', *Sustainable Futures: Survival of the City* symposium, Palazzo Pesaro-Papafava, University of Warwick in Venice, Venice, Italy, 23rd–24th October 2015; 'Folkestone Perennial: The Enduring Work of Art in the

Reconstitution of Place', Scenography working group, Theatre and Performance Research Association annual conference, University of Worcester, 8th–10th September 2015; 'Folkestone Turned: Of Fault-lines and Fairy-tales', *International Cultural Policy: Production, Engagement and Memory* (a joint Paris Seine and Warwick Universities Interdisciplinary Workshop), University of Warwick, 12th–14th November 2019.

Journal items containing ideas and material that appear in the book are as follows: 'Folkestone Perennial: The Enduring Work of Art in the Reconstitution of Place', *Cultural Geographies*, 23 (4), October, 2016, pp.671–92; 'Folkestone Futures: An Elevated Excursion', *Studies in Theatre and Performance*, 36 (1), January 2016, pp.58–74; 'Watermarked: "Venice Really Lives Up to Its Postcard Beauty"', 'On Ruins and Ruinations' issue, *Performance Research*, 20 (3), June 2015, pp.50–7.

At Warwick, I wish to acknowledge all my colleagues in the Department of Theatre and Performance Studies for their moral support (above all in recent times of ill health and high uncertainty for me personally). In particular, I wish to thank Dr Silvija Jestrović for permitting me mercilessly to pick her brains on the city of Belgrade, and my doctoral student Carolyn Deby for kindly alerting me to the Urban Salon event on 'Art Festivals and the City', taking place at the London School of Economics in May 2018. I have also benefited enormously from many modest amounts of Warwick funding support, which helped facilitate fieldwork in all the cities covered in this book and attendance at key events. My gratitude in this regard to the Humanities Research Centre, my own Department, and three of the University's Global Research Priority programmes – *Connecting Cultures*, *Sustainable Cities* and *International Development*.

Finally, I wish to extend my sincere thanks to Bloomsbury staff, in particular to the book's editor Rebecca Barden and her editorial assistants Claire Collins and Libby Davies for their sense of urgency and sensitivity in seeing it through its various production stages.

Introduction

European Biennials, Complex Cities and the *Work of Art*

In 2011 the contemporary art world's global biennial industry, such as it is, was able to welcome at least one further addition to its ever-growing corpus. While doubtless not the only such event to be inaugurated that year in the headlong rush of cities worldwide to jump on the biennial bandwagon, the *Balsall Heath Biennale (BHB)* in Birmingham, UK, marked itself out in several ways. Its distinctiveness, insofar as anybody beyond England's West Midlands noticed, would at least give pause for thought, if not propose a radical new direction for the biennial as a (plat)form for the curation and presentation of contemporary art. First, notwithstanding its insistence on calling itself a *biennale* so as to invoke the legacy and prestige of the continuing 'mother of all biennials' in Venice, *BHB's* take on the concept of a 'biennial' subscribed to that term's 'other definition': not an event occurring every two years but *lasting* two years and, as such, taking place with no ambition to repeat itself. Second, while supposedly aligning itself via its name with the *biennale* culture of the European continent (otherwise known as 'not-Britain'), which would include being largely defined by an association with the profile of a particular city, *BHB* merely represented one inner-city district within the UK's 'second city', Birmingham. Moreover, its instigators, the artists Chris Poolman and Elizabeth Rowe, who collaborate in the guise of General Public, not only were residents of the neighbourhood in question – and had been for a number of years – but also took responsibility for initiating all the many projects that materialized between 2011 and 2013 with the participation of various members of the public and constituencies of the local community in Balsall Heath. This included turning the bay window of their terrace house's front room on Eastwood Road into a 'Cat Gallery' in which live domestic cats could be viewed languishing amid exhibited items of contemporary art (Poolman and

Rowe 2014: 128–32). Apart from the invitation to stare unashamedly into the artists' front room, or indeed knock on the door and come in, as many did, the *Biennale's* very own newspaper, delivered to all 5,000 residences in the Balsall Heath area, carried the polite suggestion that other houses might like to consider following suit. As an exercise in making themselves known as artists in the neighbourhood – or 'coming out' as they put it in the co-authored book they subsequently produced about the whole undertaking (5) – it proved successful, serving at the same time as a form of poignant counterpoint, first, to the overt prevalence of feral cats in the area and, second, to the one-time practice, which reached its peak in the 1980s, of prostitutes advertising their services in the flesh by parading in the bay windows of their front rooms in nearby Cheddar Road (130–1). Other projects included the staging of a street party for the multi-ethnic, post-Empire community of Eastwood Road (22–7), ostensibly to mark Queen Elizabeth II's sixty-year jubilee in 2012; the development, with the assistance of a network of residents groups, of a 'chilli farm' on a patch of overgrown 'commons' behind a row of houses in Cheddar Road (14–21); and the devising of a *Biennale* 'colouring-in book' based around an alternative A–Z encyclopaedia of Balsall Heath (28–35), which included plans to stage a Balsall Heath World Cup involving the mobilization of a hexagonal football pitch design with three sets of goalposts once devised by the Danish Situationist Asger Jorn (158–61).

If it isn't apparent by now, *BHB* effectively set itself up as a parody of biennial culture, functioning more like an anti-biennial or biennial-as-artwork which used its inverted, common or garden form to raise all kinds of questions relating to who and what biennials are for. While it traded in witty, tongue-in-cheek gestures via its various event-based interventions in the neighbourhood, its purpose at the same time was genuinely to engage with the specificities of the area and the particular urban challenges facing its residents. In spite, then, of being a form of meta-biennial – a spoof that implicitly meditated critically on the nature of biennials per se – it was nevertheless a *thing* in its own right, above all for the people who engaged with it. That is, over a two-year period it offered something to the local community that held the promise of creative participation, social integration, improvement of neighbourhood amenities and infrastructure, and the general enhancement of the quality of life in Balsall Heath in a way that simultaneously pointed up the often elitist limitations and, indeed, *failings* of 'global biennial culture'. The reference to Situationist practice witnessed in the co-opting of Asger Jorn's proposal in itself suggested there was a form of constructive *détournement* or 'critical hijacking' of the global biennial model in operation (see Knabb 2006: 51). Importantly, Balsall Heath is an area of inner-city Birmingham with 'many different histories' and, despite more recent attempts to transform its early 1990s image of being 'synonymous with prostitution, urban decay and crime', it is still 'identified as being socially and economically disadvantaged' while boasting, typically for British post-industrial cities, a 'diverse population of different faiths, nationalities and cultures' (Poolman and Rowe 2014: 4). Clearly, then, a notion of 'global' still applies here;

but, rather than extending its purview to the 'four corners of the earth', the world finds itself already in Balsall Heath. Given such circumstances, contemplating the hosting of a World Cup not only becomes rather less of a far-fetched prospect than it may have appeared at first sight but also acquires a new meaning altogether. This can be extended, moreover, to apply similarly to received ideas of what 'biennial' signifies. The 'unlikeliness' of the location for the staging of a biennial, with its intense focus on a run-down multi-ethnic urban neighbourhood within modern, post-Empire Britain, forms one part of the disarming strategy. Yet at the same time *BHB* was not merely an instance of socially-engaged activity but clearly positioned itself, as a composite, durational artwork, within a contemporary art world discourse of avant-garde practice. Exemplifying this straddling of two worlds was one particular artwork in the *Biennale*, namely a 'video commercial' entitled 'Public Art Shares'. Based on the existence of a 'Balsall Heath Neighbourhood Plan' relating to the future provision of amenities and initiatives for residents, the video effectively raised the question of whether public art should figure as part of such a plan in the form of a shared acquisition by the community of a sculpture by a high-profile international artist. The strap line for the video declares: 'Imagine the improvement to your child's prospects if they've had the opportunity to touch a Franz West every day.' Thus, as the artists point out, the video of the 'Public Art Shares' scheme is instructive, taking 'the system of the art market (a place where rich people buy shiny beautiful things) and giv[ing] the everyday person a point of access into this investment structure' (112). Again, the proposal to neighbourhood residents is fictitious and couched in satire, but is at the same time serious in the way it addresses the question of public art's relevance precisely to the 'public' that such work would seek to claim for itself, to say nothing of the tendency of 'global art' to become the commodified plaything – or investment – of a privileged international clientele. So, the critique is directed far less at Franz West, who indeed produced playful interactive sculptural forms intended for public *use*, than at the culture surrounding and mediating how the artist's work is received and, ultimately, co-opted by a global art world. To underscore the genuine intention of the initiative to instigate debate within the community, it is worth mentioning also that the renowned British commentator and curator of public art, Claire Doherty – who has done more than anyone to shift the debate and practice around public art in recent years (see Doherty 2004, 2009, 2015; Cross and Doherty 2009; Situations 2013) – was invited to give a keynote lecture entitled 'Public Art: How Does It Get Made?' as part of a series of 'specialist talks' staged during the course of the *Biennale*. Again, the *BHB* organizers – I hesitate to use the term 'curators' here, since I sense that they would avoid it themselves – could be seen to be cannily negotiating a fine line between socially-engaged practices with community constituencies, for whom the 'art world' was a remote concept, and subtly introducing the neighbourhood to some of the productive features of precisely that art world in a way that avoided being alienating but instead offered a form of constructive assimilation and ownership of 'ideas of art'.

As intimated earlier, this study of biennial culture and the complex city has commenced with the intriguing instance of *BHB* because of the way its deliberately unpretentious, hands-on approach to mounting a biennial highlights many of the points of criticism that have emerged in the protracted discourse around the marked proliferation of the form since the 1990s on a global scale. Its antithetical premise deliberately seeks to address and realize what is typically perceived to be lacking in biennials. One of these aspects is, of course, *BHB*'s defiantly localized focus. The paradox – if it is one – of the global biennial phenomenon as it has evolved in recent decades is, on the one hand, that by virtue of almost always associating itself with, in Elena Filipovic's words (and emphasis), '*some place*', usually a particular city, the staging of a biennial presupposes the forging of a local identity. As Filipovic continues in *The Biennial Reader*: 'One of the critical particularities of biennials [...] is precisely their potential to be specific – site-specific, if you will, and time-specific as well' (Filipovic 2010: 328). On the other hand, the biennial seeks at the same time to position itself, first, within an art world discourse and, second, more often than not, an urban marketing discourse related to city branding, business development and tourism. Both of these positions are globalist in their respective outlooks. For Thierry de Duve, 'rather than simply signalling either successful integration of the local into the global (the optimist's view) or hegemonic appropriation of the local by the global (the pessimist's view), I think that art biennials are, quite typically, cultural experiments in the *global economy*' (de Duve 2009: 46). So, one purpose of the biennial form is to worry precisely at that tension and, as Simon Sheikh points out – warily – there can, in turn, be a form of misplaced idealization, if not inverted snobbery around emphasizing localism:

[O]ne of the most widespread complaints about contemporary biennials is their lack of connection to the 'local' audience, but this often takes the form of a positivity of the social: that social relations and identities in a specific context are given and whole, if not holy, that the local audience is a singular group with essential qualities and shared agencies. This is a residue of the myth-making of the nation state and its production of citizenry through cultural means, such as exhibitions and institutions, and hardly seems adequate on the postmodern and post-public condition, where identities are, at least, hybrid and agencies multiple, and even contradictory and schizoid. It is, rather, a question of how a biennial produces, or attempts to produce, its public(s) that must be analysed and criticized.

(Sheikh 2009: 73–4)

The question of local urban connectivity looms large, then, and this is certainly one of the preoccupations of this book: how – in some cases, indeed, *whether* – biennial events look to interact with and define themselves in relation to the complexities of the urban locales that would host them.

BHB made a deliberate virtue of the latter within the parameters of its parodic form, which also dictated that it was but a single part of a city, rather than the city as a whole, that received the focus of attention – a kind of (multi-)cultural quarter – for a duration of two years, moreover. But what *BHB* also signified, and in this sense it certainly made a contribution to a broader art world discourse, was that the protracted debate about biennials in general has advanced in the meantime to a point where the form's maturity and integrity can be said to be such that it offers itself up to parody and subversion. In other words, it is robust enough to either withstand it or, indeed, critically and constructively reassess its premise. There have been other instances of playful biennial 'spoofs', which underscore the point. Perhaps the first instance was in fact as early as 1999 after just a decade of the 'biennial boom' when Jens Hoffmann and Mauricio Cattelan famously curated the one-off *6th Caribbean Biennial*. For this

they invited a selection of artists [...] who, in their view, had been the most ubiquitous on the international biennial circuit. The project was advertised, marketed, and mediated through the standard art and media channels, but, on arrival at St. Kitts in the West Indies, the artists and curators enjoyed a holiday together with no exhibition actually taking place. Afterward, they produced a glossy, full-color catalog with holiday snaps, texts, and statements representing the experience.

(O'Neill 2012: 74)

Here the object of critique was perhaps more that of the nomadic, networked curator figure produced by a rampant global biennial circuit, the existence of which also raises questions around local sensitivities and hegemonic appropriation (see O'Neill 2012; Green and Gardner 2016: 218–19). As with *BHB*, in this case the biennial *was* the artwork (or vice versa).

Panos Kompatsiaris, meanwhile, cites the instance of 'the Biennialist' who, by contrast, 'hijacks' extant biennials by assuming the persona of a visitor/viewer and making surprise interventions. The purpose is 'to reveal the contradictions and incongruities in the statements and releases of biennial exhibitions' (Kompatsiaris 2017: 20). At the 2011 Athens Biennale, for example, the Biennialist

took the initiative to invite into the Biennale premises an undocumented migrant residing in the area in order to guide him through the show. As they both roamed around the floors of the venue, the awkwardness of the encounter gradually became apparent. The lack of a common language was obvious in more than one sense; there was neither a grammatical nor conceptual structure through which the communication of radical statements or some kind of resistant action could be made possible.

(1)

By the by, not having witnessed the Biennialist in action myself I am hesitant to make too much here of the whiff of unethical exploitation that Kompatsiaris's account carries. The notion of 'a migrant' – or should that be Migrant A? – potentially being set up in an experiment to make a fool of himself/herself by effectively failing to 'fit the bill' has shades of the controversies surrounding Santiago Sierra's engagement of 'ordinary subjects of the precariat' to be involved in self-demeaning durational acts as a way of drawing attention to the discrepancy between 'norms of aesthetic autonomy and the quotidian violence of global capitalism', as Grant Kester puts it (2011: 167). For Kester the supposed *self-evidence* of these exploitative acts, which Sierra seems blithely to assume, is not borne out and carries the potential of being 'merely iterative, reproducing the same forms of un-self-conscious projection and pseudo-transcendence that he deplores in his art world audience' (171).

Nevertheless, what I mean to suggest in general terms is that with the emergence of such subversive forms, biennials appear to have reached a stage of 'naturalization'. That is, biennial culture is firmly established now and well-developed enough in its varying manifestations to submit itself to such critical interventions, so the rather clumsy, noun-turning existential conundrum famously posed by Maria Hlavajová at the Bergen Biennial of 2009, 'To biennial or not to biennial: *that is the question*', which was obviously intended as an interrogation of whether the advent of the age of biennials was 'a good thing' per se, has in a sense been answered affirmatively and definitively in the meantime (Hlavajová 2010: 293). If anything the question has implicitly been turned into one relating to quantity – in other words, 'too *much* of a good thing?'. For 'naturalization' read 'potential saturation', or 'exhausted shelf-life', as Anthony Gardner and Charles Green suggest: 'In fact, as the second decade of the twenty-first century began, there was a constant critical refrain that the arc of biennials may have reached its limit and that the form itself needed reimagining. Reviewers of almost every major biennial noted this situation' (Gardner and Green 2016: 171). If stagnation and complacency represent the state of play, rather than stopping the bandwagon, what remains perhaps is to determine the intensely challenging matter of bespoke forms and approaches in recognition of the fact that the circumstances of any one urban location are always both highly complex and distinctive.

Backyards and doorsteps

As it happens Balsall Heath, located on the southern side of Birmingham's inner city, is literally a few miles down the road from where I live and work in the nearby city of Coventry. So, the question of localism as explored playfully by its one-off *Biennale* is one that has a particular pertinence, at least from where I'm sitting. Even more local for me, though, is the new *Coventry Biennial of Contemporary Art* which was inaugurated on a shoestring in 2017, just in time to for it to figure as a persuasive feature of that city's successful application to be nominated UK City of Culture in 2021 (a quadrennial occurrence). With its next, expanded staging

already occurring in October–November 2019, the *Coventry Biennial* has evolved very rapidly, but, as if to confirm the point regarding the assimilated maturity in the meantime of biennial thinking and practice in general, demonstrates clear evidence in its business plan of a rigorous conceptual working through of the question of what kind of biennial would be appropriate for the sort of city that Coventry is – which is, in brief, similarly post-industrial, multi-ethnic and in need of infrastructural reconstruction, urban revitalization and cultural repair as Birmingham (for which the district of Balsall Heath is typical). The city’s ‘coventration’¹ in the Second World War was followed by a period of industrial resurgence in the 1950s and ’60s, based largely around the British car industry, and the creation of a civic-minded modernist ‘new town’ for working people grafted on to the former medieval town (of which a few prized relics had remained). After the years of boom, Coventry suffered corresponding decline from the 1970s onwards when the car industry, upon which a majority of the city’s residents depended directly and indirectly, faltered in the wake of the global oil crisis of 1973, and the city has never entirely recovered. The *Biennial’s* founder and artistic director, Ryan Hughes – himself a practising artist – has been insistent from the start that the event should be self-organized and led, first and foremost, by an assembled team of artists. Between them they were responsible in 2019 for curating eight distinct ‘programme channels’, which effectively formed the structure and conceptual direction of the *Biennial* based on the theme of ‘duality and place’ to reflect, as a point of departure, the city’s pioneering work in forming twinned relations with a host of other cities across the globe.² In essence the eight channels prioritized the following:

- 1) presenting activity by, and ensuring opportunities for, local and regional artists so as to reach wider audiences;
- 2) presenting activity by early career artists, ensuring recent graduates and emerging artists receive support in making new work;
- 3) presenting participatory activity by artists that encourages healthier ways of life, including the facilitation of contributions to the civic life of the city;
- 4) presenting activity by artists from or with clear connections to Coventry’s twin cities in order to sustain the city’s internationalist outlook;
- 5) presenting activity by artists who work with new technologies and the networked relationships they produce;
- 6) presenting activity by artists that is freely and widely distributed, ensuring enhanced opportunities for the public to engage with high-quality art;
- 7) presenting activity by artists who are engaged in the production and legacy of conceptual art in order to acknowledge and maintain the role the city played in hosting the renowned *Art and Language* movement (and journal) in the 1960s;
- 8) presenting activity by leading international artists so that audiences in the city have access to industry-leading contemporary art.

(*Coventry Biennial of Contemporary Art* 2018)

The majority of funding in the *Biennial's* relatively modest budget came from public arts subsidy, for instance, from the Arts Council of England. But an important source of support for the event in both its incarnations thus far lay in its director's deft negotiation of free installation space in a range of city centre sites and buildings, some, but not all, of which were abandoned or derelict, and therefore disused. Whether or not it was intentional, this strategy has invoked in fact a certain 'ghost from the past', namely the city's *Virtual Fringe: A Festival of Possibility* mounted in 2004. In this, the local site-specific theatre company Talking Birds commissioned twenty-five separate artists and groups each to provide detailed blueprints and mock-ups towards an installation work that would be sited hypothetically somewhere in the city centre. These proposals were then presented as an online 'virtual fringe' that effectively mapped the urban core in a variety of ways from 3-D sculptural interventions into the built environment, to soundscapes, to performance, serving as an intriguing curation of imaginative ideas towards a city that *could be*. Thus, the exercise implicitly drew attention at the time, first, to the rich, but *missed* potential of urban space in Coventry and, second, to the sore lack of cultural support and infrastructure in the city for such creative engagements. Tragically, so the latter implied, such highly inventive commissions would only ever exist as 'ghosts' within the realm of online fantasy projections when they could feasibly be realized as in situ projects.³ Some fifteen years later *Coventry Biennial* has effectively responded to the melancholic potency of 'the event that deliberately never happened' by successfully turning the virtual into the actual. Moreover, it appears to have implicitly taken on board art world conclusions typically being reached by the likes of Filipovic, which stress the necessity of situated integration:

Merely inserting works in crumbling industrial buildings or any number of other 'exotic' locales is not the solution either. Instead, the future of biennials is to be found in a sensitivity to how the coincidence of works of art and other conditions (temporal, geographic, historic, discursive, and institutional) *locate* a project and how that 'location' can be used to articulate an aesthetic project that is respectful of its artworks and speaks to its viewers.

(Filipovic 2010: 343)

It is not my intention in commencing the present study of biennial practice within the context of Europe to dwell too long on local circumstances, such as they happen to relate to me personally. My main point in focusing initially on what is on my Coventry doorstep is really to emphasize the degree to which there have been various stagings of highly sophisticated biennial-type events in recent years within my very limited, as well as deprived, geographical 'backyard' of the UK's West Midlands. Each of those mentioned here – and there are many more, in fact – has thrown up its own particular questions around art-making and curating in its relationship with the public spaces of the complex city, but in concert they are also testament to a general proliferating culture of committed engagement by

artists both with urban situations and within biennial formats. What kind of *work* is taking place within the context of cities, as a function of being framed by the specificity of the city in question, is precisely the subject-matter of *Contemporary Art Biennials in Europe*.

Globalism and the global

The title of Caroline A. Jones's recent book *The Global Work of Art: World's Fairs, Biennials and the Aesthetics of Experience* (2016) brings into play several key notions that prove pertinent, in terms of defining both differences and synergies, to the present book's points of departure – as encapsulated, indeed, in its title. For one, Jones's emphasis on the 'global' and on 'globalism' – which, rather than being equated with neo-liberalist globalization, should be seen as inevitably representing a critical response to it – makes a very compelling case for contemporary art to be viewed within the context of an interconnected world or, as she has it, 'world picture'. To put it crudely (as Jones herself, incidentally, does not), whatever happens where – be it the construction of walls on the US-Mexican border or in the disputed territories of Israel and Palestine – everything is ultimately an expression of a complex global situation whose tensions and challenges implicate and affect all citizens and communities of the world to greater or lesser extents. Far from being a disavowal of the local or regional, for the artist a sensitivity to the global represents a recognition of the place of art as one that permits it 'to focus on *where we are* in an entangled world, to make us aware, through experience, not of our distanced relation to a picture but of our enmeshment in *situations*' (Jones 2016: 248). And these may be as much to do with what is happening down the road in multi-ethnic Balsall Heath as on the intransigent North-South Korean border. Following from this, critical globalism, which 'thrives on the rupture of the event' that is the biennial (247), emerges as a key tactic in the praxis of artists and curators (not to say scholars) to reveal the workings of what is at stake in situations of human co-existence.

'Global' thus delineates geo-political parameters of enquiry which are reflective of an existential condition that may be shared – and in that sense perhaps 'universal' – but are certainly experienced differently, depending on where one stands in a whole range of ways, not least in terms of one's 'privilege'. When it comes to the biennial and its well-documented worldwide proliferation as a conceptual form for making, curating and presenting contemporary art (since the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989), a global(ist) outlook begins to become enmeshed in issues of *globalization*, bringing into play the perception of biennials as facilitators of an elitist art world circuit that is essentially structured around neoliberalist market values and corporate prerequisites – in other words, either *of* the market or an implicit facilitator of its practices, or both at once. As Peter Osborne suggests, the 'constitutive fiction' of biennials centres on

the fantasy of providing comprehensive artistic coverage of the globe, through something like a world system of art. Within this system, the biennial would appear as the dominant form, articulating the relations between itself and other elements (museums, art centres, galleries of multiple kinds, festivals, fairs, markets, sponsorships and other forms of institutional funding); 'over-determining' these other elements and the relations between them, whilst being determined in its own development by them in turn.

(Osborne 2015: 24).

Implicitly, then, biennials begin to lend themselves to being used as vehicles for conveniently importing 'global flavour' to other ends; the biennial finds itself 'ineluctably tied up with corporate, municipal, national and regional development projects, and property markets in particular. The important role of biennials within the art market is, in this respect, by no means the main capital function at stake in biennials themselves' (28). Here the intersections and tensions of 'local' and 'global' begin to emerge, as de Duve's observation earlier hinted at, but a principal critical preoccupation in the global discourse around biennials in recent years has been more specifically related to a hemispheric North-South divide as exemplified in the focus of the two World Biennial Forums that have taken place to date in Gwangju, South Korea, in 2012 and São Paulo, Brazil, in 2014 (documented respectively in Bauer and Hanru 2013a and Eilat et al 2015). This has brought to the surface in particular the perception of a sharp dichotomy between a post-89 'first world' art scene, based essentially around a traditional 'allied axis' of North America and Western Europe, as against a 'peripheral' geo-political hemisphere of emergent countries which awkwardly encompasses a motley 'other world' that would include the vast territories of Central and South America, Africa and Asia. The divisions and relationships in play are enormously intricate, sensitive and multi-faceted and have been the subject of intense debate, not least around neo- and post-colonialist agendas implied by this bipolar split. Peter Weibel both sums up the historical legacy of what is at stake and points the way towards a new dawn premised on the so-called peripheries seizing the moment and creating new contemporary art worlds:

Modernity, and by extension, modern art, were part of European expansion, part of the expansive universal ideology, part of historical capitalism's ideology of progress. Eurocentric culture as part of the capitalist world system that arose around 1500 in Europe is increasingly being questioned by the colonized countries. Contemporary art in the global age addresses the opportunities for a gradual transformation of the culture of this capitalist world system and the attendant difficulties and contradictions as well as the opportunities for developing an understanding of other cultures and their equality, assuming that such art takes such qualities seriously and is worthy of its name. We are at present witnessing the beginning of a transformation process that needs and utilises the plethora of biennials in Asia, South America, and the Arab world to

take form, whereas modern art, naturally is defending its position hysterically in the capitalist world system's fairs and auctions by charging high prices.

(Weibel 2013: 24)

For Green and Gardner too the biennial of the 'South' proposes a model for change, one which revisits global hegemony, calling into question a North Atlantic-Western-European predominance (Gardner and Green 2015: 38). What is interesting above all perhaps in the evolution of 'Southern' biennial discourse is the emphasis on staging biennial events that seek to assert a committed politics by fostering place-based social engagement. This seeks out the participation of new audiences beyond the customary 'art crowd' and thereby roots itself within parameters of concern that are deeply implicated in the local and regional – in the *placeness* of place. As Bauer and Hanru maintain:

If biennials want to survive, they need to create in the local context a site of public engagement that is not only periodically erupting but also permanently anchored. Interactions with local communities are essential to the *raison d'être* of biennials, although such engagement is largely deemed to be merely part of the public programs and popular pedagogy insisted on by the local (i.e. municipal, regional, or national) authorities and grass-root collectives as a way to promote the locality (ie. the city).

(Bauer and Hanru 2013b: 21)

The prime instance to date of such a focus is perhaps the *Havana Biennial* in Cuba, which seems to be as much a paradigm for the biennial of the 'peripheries' as Venice has been for the Western hegemonic model (premised, among other things, on notions of nationhood). Havana began to assert an eye-opening practice of 'engaged regionalism' – drawing 'horizontally' on surrounding countries of the Caribbean, Central America and beyond – as far back as the 1980s. As one of its founders, Gerardo Mosquera reports on the second edition staged in 1986: 'It was the first global contemporary art show ever: a mammoth, uneven, chaotic bunch of more than 50 exhibitions and events presenting 2,400 works by 690 artists from 57 countries. The Biennial's variegated structure made it a true urban festival, a *pachanga* that involved the whole city' (Mosquera 2010: 203).

Placeness and localism apart, Bauer's and Hanru's cited comment draws implicit attention to a further key aspect of biennial culture – 'peripheral' or otherwise – and this relates to its *temporal* rhythm of repetition,⁴ irrespective of whether this means two, three, five or, indeed, *ten* years, as we shall witness in Chapter 2 with the city of Münster in Germany. In fact, the biennial model's ontology of repetition is closely bound up with 'place' inasmuch as the unavoidable fact of recurrence implies that, unlike the one-off exhibition, the points are set for the nurturing of a localized relationship based on a projected continuity. By virtue of happening more than once the way is paved for the building of a relationship of structured and concerted urban integration, if not gradual transformation in time. Each