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Is Another Biennial Possible? Art, Time and Refusal

Panos Kompatsiaris and Rowan Lear

This text results from a long-distance dialogue between Panos Kompatsiáris and Rowan Lear, who met in a panel at LCCT 2017 and decided to take the conversation further.

Panos Kompatsiaris (PK)

I would like to share some initial thoughts on the idea of ‘radical inefficiency’ that you proposed as potential (anti-)strategy for disturbing capitalist temporalities. To relate this strategy with the interventionist art institution and, indeed, the biennial, I would like to start the discussion with a pretty much ‘dated’ question: the question of boundaries, the boundaries between the inside and the outside or between co-opted and autonomous practice. The constitution of this boundary is regularly an arena of discursive contestation, an arena upon which a practice may be interpreted as radical, conformist, effective, co-opted, incapacitated and so on. And given a recent series of boycotts against prestigious art institutions,⁷⁸ does it make sense to speak about co-optation in the context of a biennial or shall we merely trace the ‘effects’ it produces in the social sphere?

The typical post-Marxist response to this question (and the one that most curators and theorists nowadays use) is that our very fabric is implicated in capitalist temporalities to such a degree that we should have no illusions: there is no outside, no escape from power in the first place. In this manner, the very posing of the question of the ‘outside’ is made redundant if not totally irrelevant: we should only speak about the effects. The argument here is that we need to implicate ourselves with powerful institutions so as to ‘change them from within’ as this would be a far more effective strategy than operating in the margins.

⁷⁸ Joanna, Warsza (ed.), *I Can't Work Like this: A Reader on Recent Boycotts and Contemporary Art* (Sternberg Press: Berlin, 2017).

In these justifications, the prioritizing of politics of affirmation and performance leaves little space for negativity or radical inefficiency. But then we should also ask who can afford to be radically inefficient and navigate time in their own pace? To return to the issue of capitalist temporality, one could perhaps look at calls for its abandonment or its acceleration through touching upon aspects of privilege and situated power; who abandons, who accelerates and how?

Rowan Lear (RL)

This is a restart – a reboot – following a protracted period of time, in which I left you hanging. This unplanned interruption was something of a bodily intervention: a corporeal-barging-into-the-conversation. Pain and sickness is an unwelcome guest that makes itself heard. For Michel Serres, pain literally names the body and makes it appear:

In the silence of health, the body – absorbed in its capacity for omnitude – knows nothing of membership. Illness causes it to fall into a description. Only syndromes exist, the healthy don't say a word.⁷⁹

This recent corporeal disturbance was a sharp echo of another – the one that triggered my initial paper last year. In this, I was preoccupied with exhaustion, depression and psychic trauma, all things that seemed to come hand-in-hand with the labour conditions associated with the artist-led event: in this case, the art biennial. The temporality of the biennial – its oppressive regularity amid dwindling resources – seemed to me to be a problem resistant to any subversive ambitions of the organising team. For me, then a practitioner rather than scholar of biennial organising, this was not an abstract problem, but something concretely experienced through the body.

I proposed radical inefficiency as a potential strategy – a strategy not for revolution, but for survival, bodily endurance. The extent to which one – and who – has agency to choose or capacity to act upon a strategy, needed more scrutiny, which I think you have highlighted

⁷⁹ Michel Serres, *Variations on the Body* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2012), 60-61.

above. In my thinking, I am tending away from the idea that inefficiency might be consciously called upon or chosen but that it is always, already materially embodied: a body under stress will stutter, slow down, become erratic or prone to repetition. It literally produces the effect of inefficiency (let's remove the radical, for now!). The body or bodies I speak of are of course not singular organisms: it might be a body of arts workers, a public body, a body of thought. There is no consciousness *within* a body: the body itself is conscious. This is a philosophical query I'm interested in – but it may take us further from the art biennial itself, and I'm really interested in what you have understood of this phenomena across Europe.

In your article, 'Curating Resistances: Ambivalences and Potentials of Contemporary Art Biennials', you note the biennial's enmeshment with global neoliberalism, economic extraction and the casualization of labour (a sticky web of instrumentalisation brutally realized in my own experience of a micro-scale biennial). Yet, you do not construe this to render the biennial a lost cause for the practice of emancipatory politics, claiming "*such a view fosters a fatalistic conception of political and social relations that overlooks the particularities of social interaction*".⁸⁰

At the conclusion, you pose a series of questions, closing with "*What kinds of new worlds are produced within such settings and for whom are these worlds potentially valuable?*"⁸¹ These suggest to me that you retain some kind of optimism about biennials. For you, does this materialise as a hope for 'another kind of biennial', or that the biennial as organizational model is infrastructurally open enough that it can generate new political possibilities?

PK

I am very glad to hear back from you following this unexpected interruption, an interruption performing our temporal and physical fragilities vis-à-vis (un) productive time, or, in other words, performing the very concept of this conversation.

Concerning your question, I would say that the biennial, as any other type of organizational structure, is always a multiplicity, and as

⁸⁰ Panos Kompatsiaris, "Curating Resistances: Ambivalences and Potentials of Contemporary Art Biennials," *Communication, Culture & Critique* 7:1 (2014) 83

⁸¹ *Ibid.*,86

such, it may be many things at once; it can simultaneously be (self) exploitative and profitable for participants, cities and members of art worlds, it can be both empowering and alienating for local and neighbouring populations or it can simply be a site where the poetics and politics of contemporary art gain visibility and wider distribution. Historically speaking, the biennial assumed diverse forms, served conflicting political and economic purposes and its fragmented histories were connected with different networks of power-something that Anthony Gardner and Charles Green carefully describe in their useful recent title on the topic (2016).⁸² Therefore, to a priori condemn the biennial for its implication with power means to state a pretty much obvious fact, sealing off the discussion somewhat prematurely. A more sensitive approach – for which perhaps ethnography is best suited due to its capacity for ‘thick’ descriptions-would involve tracing the types of power a biennial each time invents and reproduces, ranging from the macro levels of nation and city branding and their impacts upon communities to the ways that interpersonal relations between participants are modelled and the types of subjectivation these entail.

In this context it is crucial to see the biennial not as a free-floating but as an ordered multiplicity, defined by certain “rules of art”,⁸³ to put it in terms of traditional art sociology, and also by the ways these porous rules interact with what lies outside the (supposedly properly) ‘artistic’. For instance, within the current globalized economic framework, the form of the large scale art event is defined by expectations that cast their shadow on the creative aspect of the event itself. For instance, the necessity to generate economies of visibility and prestige so that the event continues to exist institutionally, may shape, as you say, a very demanding repetitive temporality that can be managed (without leading to breakdowns) with proper funding and resources. In turn, to get hold of this funding and resources, the biennial is compelled to think in an entrepreneurial way, to behave like a sort of cutting-edge capitalist and innovator. To give one example, if we see the curatorial statements found in

⁸² Charles Green and Anthony Gardner, *Biennials, Triennials, and Documenta: The Exhibitions that Created Contemporary Art* (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2016)

⁸³ Pierre Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field*. (CA: Stanford University Press, 1996)

prestigious large-scale exhibitions in the past few years we will come across a sophisticated but ultimately very standardized and packaged language, often manifestly modelled to enable the effects of innovation, experimentation and radicalism to audiences. So while one can agree on the idea that there are always cracks in the system and that a biennial can be done otherwise, perhaps it is the very contours of this “otherwise” that may need more scrutiny. I may be slightly caricaturing now, but sometimes when everything is said to be done otherwise one may get the uncanny feeling that everything still looks the same.

I think that this might relate to your idea of radical inefficiency given that this idea acts as a strategy of prevention, of halting, of interrupting a given temporality and withdrawing from an oppressive state of affairs, and thus of balancing between ‘not-doing’ and ‘doing otherwise’. One then could ask how different inefficiency is from efficiency, in the sense that within (austerity and de-unionized) capitalism there is permanent workforce disposability and as soon as one declares oneself to be inefficient there is always someone “efficient” to do the job. Following from that, I was also wondering whether this body under stress that you mention can redirect capitalist violence to platforms of collective resistance and organizing.

RL

I agree that “a more sensitive approach” is necessary, equipped to trace the cultural intricacies of different events in different places, run by different people, resourced differently and so on. To speak of the biennial in general is truly to reproduce a caricature – but it is a persistent one. In my experience, an artist-led group taking on the name “biennial” always evoked one of two responses: first, the institutionalised arts worker expecting an international, highly-resourced event with “named” curators; and second, quizzical looks from friends and neighbours: “what’s a biennial?”. Funnily enough, these two groups never seemed to meet, except perhaps by chance, in the disco lights of the opening party.

Beyond socio-cultural expectations, I wondered whether there was something particular about the term biennial, which indicates only that something will happen every two years. This periodicity might seem akin to body rhythms of breathing, heartbeat and digestion, to

seasonal weather in the Earth's middle latitudes, and of course, to clockwork. Yet heartbeat and other regular body movements have a flexible character, able to respond to stress and different environments, while seasons are mutable and unpredictable, especially now as they are impacted by global climate change. We're left with clockwork, a mechanical, infinite and seemingly inflexible technology for time measurement, and a harbinger of a new capitalist order of routine, which became socially pervasive in the industrial era. This is perhaps the model of regularity that the biennial is too closely associated with.

In search of the opposite – irregularity – I think of moments of surprise and shock, when one is confronted by something not expected. Last Autumn, an anonymous artist collective We Don't Need Gatekeepers (WDNG) was formed to interrupt the proceedings of a public consultation on arts funding in Bristol, UK. Through a coordinated in-person and twitter-based intervention, WDNG called for a redistribution of funds directly to artists rather than accepting what trickled down from a few institutions. It struck me, while WDNG was unfolding and by all accounts, discomfiting and aggravating the directors of various cultural institutions in the room, that the campaign had attained a degree of symbolic power purely because it hadn't been predicted, and therefore could not be prepared for.⁸⁴

While this was happening, I was a resident artist in Wexford, Ireland, and had just visited Vinegar Hill, the site of a bloody battle during the 1798 Irish Rebellion against British rule. It would take another 120 years for Ireland to win independence, but Vinegar Hill was significant, not least because it was here that the Irish rebels (all of them civilians) began to seriously exercise guerrilla tactics, in the face of a organised, orderly and powerful British army approaching on all sides. From wikipedia: "Guerrilla warfare is a form of irregular warfare in which a small group of combatants, such as paramilitary personnel, armed civilians, or irregulars, use military tactics including ambushes, sabotage, raids, petty warfare, hit-and-run tactics, and mobility to fight a larger and less-mobile traditional military."⁸⁵ But

⁸⁴ <https://www.a-n.co.uk/news/dont-need-gatekeepers-artists-respond-bristol-visual-arts-review>

⁸⁵ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Guerrilla_warfare

the irregular warfare of the guerrilla, and its potential to form the basis of a broader strategy of incalculability against more powerful yet predictable forces, seems to be in conflict with the sheer inevitability of the biennial temporal mode.

Yet we know the biennial, in all its forms, already operates on a flexible, resource-light basis, generally unencumbered of the trappings of bricks and mortar, permanent staff and the burden of assets, performing periodic parasitism on a city's resources. To perpetually call for the unexpected and the innovative – as you mention above, a common trope of the contemporary art institution – also appears to consummate capitalism's desire for the ever-new: opposition - or "the otherwise" – is currency. (A side note: a collective that I'm a member of recently drafted a manifesto which included the following line: "We make the ordinary happen. We are unexceptional"). However, Deleuze and Guattari, in their 'Treatise On Nomadology: The War Machine', note that "it is true that guerrilla warfare and war proper are constantly borrowing each other's methods and that the borrowings run equally in both directions."⁸⁶ So it cannot be claimed that it is merely that late capitalism has co-opted our methods of resisting: the poaching is two-sided, and, in rejection of the neoliberal market demand for expedited art production, could we not steal from the institution the parts that work for us?

The only permanent job I ever had was in an art institution and I was taken aback, shocked even, by the freedom enabled by a regular paycheck - despite entailing extensive overwork, it also offered respite from looking for work and promoting oneself; and time to socialise, pay into a pension, register with a doctor's surgery and so on. Perhaps this would lead to complacency, but it lasted just a few months and notably, most of my colleagues at that same institution were made redundant: permanency is no longer security and vice versa. But the formation of new institutions, rather than or despite being a process of sedimentation, could also be an affirmative strategy: as feminist

⁸⁶ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1987), 459

philosopher Ewa Majewska claims: “Forming institutions is a means for the weak: it can be a way of securing agency.”⁸⁷

What Majewska calls “weak resistance” brings me back to your question around whether the body under stress is capable of resistance. I draw from Mark Fisher’s words on depression under capitalism: that whether pharmaceutical, psychoanalytic or psychiatric, treatments are wide of the mark, and miss the most likely cause: that depression results from – and is cultivated by and cultivates – the destruction of a class consciousness. He writes: “Collective depression is the result of the ruling class project of resubordination.”⁸⁸ So while I’m certainly not trying to conflate the two, I think we can see inefficiency and depression as kindred - both an affront to late capitalism, but simultaneously an embodied symptom of it. If depression or inefficiency itself is produced (as a by-product) of enforced austerity, precarity and subjection, what else does it allow us to do? Both are stops in motion, but neither are methods of recuperation. They don’t make us better workers when we return or begin again.

Fisher concludes that it is possible to rebuild our resistance by “converting privatised disaffection into politicised anger.”⁸⁹ In a way, my paper at LCCT 2017, the related essay published in artist journal *Doggerland*, and our continued conversation: they’re all fairly public ways of working through a private frustration, with the hope, surely, that this can become a collective and practiced politics.

PK

I agree with the idea of disturbing patterns of regularity and deterritorializing the rituals that stick with them especially when these patterns and rituals work to empower a business mentality and extract capital from the social landscapes they interact with. On the other hand, I often wonder whether the proper response to oppressive regularities can be their opposite, that is to say posing the irregular and

⁸⁷ Ewa Majewska and Kuba Szreder, ‘So Far, So Good: Contemporary Fascism, Weak Resistance, and Postartistic Practices in Today’s Poland’, *e-flux journal* #76 (2016) http://worker01.e-flux.com/pdf/article_71467.pdf

⁸⁸ Mark Fisher, Good For Nothing, *Occupied Times* (2014) <http://theoccupiedtimes.org/?p=12841>

⁸⁹ Fisher, Good For Nothing.

the unexpected against the ‘complacent regular’. While the irregular may provoke regimes of instability, and thus potential change, instability can often nurture rather dark and demeaning futures. I have things in mind like the recent economic crisis in Europe leading to austerity and the rise of fascisms, conditions that can be seen as irregular in respect to the established political space – at least in the so called Western world of the last decades. Perhaps then the problem may not always be with regularity itself, but with the kinds and qualities of regularities as well as the aims that these regularities are meant to perform. For regularity can also harbour a politics of consistency, by which I mean a politics of being truthful to an ideal, to remain uncompromising vis-à-vis a cause. Even if often unregistered, the rituals and repetitions of subversive politics are part of struggles for change, even in acts of nomadic and guerrilla war as you mention. The sense of self-sacrifice performed by these Irish rebels, for instance, as well as of other rebels elsewhere, the act of putting their lives into danger for the sake of an ideal, requires the shaping of prior patterns of consistency including the belief that the ideals these people fight for are good and just ideals. In other words, it may often be a certain regularity, the rituals of belief it casts, the unshakable belief for instance that a society should be equal in terms of gender, ethnicity and class, that may enable people to protest and disrupt the regular state of things. These rituals may take place publicly or in closed groups but in any case they can stitch together unities of refusal so that the line between the regular and the irregular becomes porous.

Now all this may sound slightly off topic regarding the biennial and its temporalities, but perhaps it could help us approach the question of time, of navigating within present and future time, in relation to the prospect of enabling more equal futures. The biennial harbours a pattern of regularity in which the participants’ practice is intertwined with productive labour. This practice is usually expected to work as a future currency that would ensure more professional success and status. On the contrary, the practice of the guerrilla and the terrorist offers its time in the prospect of a larger cause, casting present day sacrifice – often physical – as indispensable for making the world a better place in the future. The aims of these radicals may vary, it may be benevolent or utterly regressive from the perspective of social equality. In any case this difference in velocities may be one

of the reasons I started growing suspicious of the idea of ‘us’ stealing from the institutions. Does the biennial practitioner inhabit the same terrain with the Irish rebel (and I don’t mean to fetishize the ‘Irish rebel’)? Of course people do not need necessarily to inhabit the same space so as to act collectively (there can be no same space anyway!) but there is a certain imbalance that perhaps needs to be made visible when biennial superstar curators often pose as radicals who similarly ‘steal’ from the institution in order to advance some form of social change. I was recently listening to such a curator quoting people like Lenin and Gramsci in order to frame their practice. I think there may be a danger here of conflating professional practice that can bring future personal success and status with the practice of people who sacrifice their lives to collective causes. On the other hand, a certain courage is required to refer to past radicals in such commercialized contexts, it may be a ritual that needs to be rehearsed so that the art world does not collapse to vulgar aestheticism.

And then a question can be whether acts of refusal should be reflected on the refuser’s ‘lifestyle’ or whether such acts merely rely on the dynamics of the ritual or even performative act (e.g. how many people one managed to mobilize in a ‘radical’ cause)? The figure of the ‘hermit’ and the activist celebrity (of Bono!) would always haunt the specters of these poles and potentially act as a reminder against them. There is then a question of what to do when the ‘ideal’ becomes compromised, ‘tainted’, by the routines- the regularities- of our everyday activities. And I find this quote by Vivian Gornick in her Emma Goldman biography extremely useful:

The turn-of-the-century moderns were admirable in that many of them, when forced to look squarely at things as they were, chose to honor the evidence of their senses, even though that inevitably meant the beginning of the end, not necessarily of their ideals but certainly of their rhetoric. To see oneself in the gap was, almost always, to lose heart for spouting grand, unalloyed certainties. On the other hand, it takes a certain kind of mad courage to reject the claim of experience as superior to that of idealism, and to go on insisting, against all odds, that ultimately the ideal will work because it must work, because it is

not acceptable that it not work. This is the courage of the born refusenik, who, any day of the week, will discard defeatist reality in favor of the elevating ideal.⁹⁰

The dilemma then may be whether one should tone down as a result of reflecting on a ‘compromised’ lifestyle or embrace this ‘mad courage’ and speak for the ideal despite the contradictions of experience?

⁹⁰ Vivian Gornick, *Emma Goldman: Revolution as a way of life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 84-85