Premier’s COFA Visual Arts Scholarship

Exhibition as Learning Site: Repositioning the Conceptual Framework Agencies in relation to Contemporary Art

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FOCUS

* 1. What aspects of the art world are represented in the Shanghai Biennale and Venice Biennale and how and why are they different from each other?
	2. How do contemporary art world trends of critical education programs affect Biennales and institutional exhibitions like Hayward Gallery’s *Wide Open School*? What agencies are repositioned in these examples?
	3. How do academics such as Professor Irit Rogoff at Goldsmith’s University, London understand and respond to these art world changes, otherwise known as the Conceptual Framework agencies of NSW syllabus?

SIGNIFICANT LEARNING

The 9th Shanghai Biennale 2012 and 55th Venice Biennale 2013 were selected as two contrasting types of Biennale representing agencies in the artworld. While Venice is the oldest Biennale, originating in 1895, Shanghai employed a city pavilion model at the 2012 Biennale; the first approach at dealing with the incongruence of the national pavilion model; a relic from Venice Biennale.

In the face of much production and potential of art in China and globally, the Shanghai Biennale (SB) curators considered the broad scope of current conditions of contemporary art and its huge challenges, but also opportunities and decided to imagine a topology of contemporary art and manifest it in the form of an exhibition in a new space and in a specific and fast changing cultural context as summarized by Boris Groys. The Biennale type came second to the curator’s unique ambition and vision. This allowed for an experimental approach where art roles and practices were not the fixtures of art institutions.

Conversely the Venice Biennale (VB) has a loaded history that weighs on most of its exhibition structure to reproduce an historical format in which contemporary art, artist, audiences and world factors are filled into to pre-existing roles. The Venice model is largely constituted of national pavilions distributed through the Giardini and Arsenale accompanied by a large curated exhibition.

I have outlined some examples of these two different Biennale investigations under repositioned Conceptual Framework agency titles.

World/Exhibition types

SB’s Inter-City Pavilion model allowed for the complexities of cultural, social and economic identities within a city to be recognised without the more generic national representation. It established a different format that is closer to the way the globalised world operates and focused on international connectedness. The SB comprised of a large thematic exhibition at the newly built Power Art Station, 30 city pavilions (29 from overseas) and the Zhongshan Park Project. The theme was ‘reactivation’ with four tangential themes of; ‘resources, revisit, reform and republic’. This focus dictated a selection of artists whose work reconsidered historical events and transformed how citizens related to their own regions locally and globally.

The VB is not only the oldest but also the most well known Biennale, and its national pavilions are a legacy of its World Fair beginnings. “Along with affirming nationhood, colonial and imperial power one of the functions of the World’s Art Fairs was to imagine the future through innovation, technology”. (Chris Sharp for *ArtReview*). The VB has continued to affirm these traditions so its current significance is not necessarily derived from its capacity to present what is new. As expected, the older the institution the more fixed and less flexible its functions are. “Venice is a biennale of ratification, and is often limited to what has been ratified by the western market. Consider the national pavilions; rarely does a young artist represent his or her country. Far from inaugurating, Venice crowns a career.” (Chris Sharp for *ArtReview*)

The 55th VB was themed the *Encyclopedic Palace.* It was an “imaginary museum that was meant to house all worldly knowledge, bringing together the greatest discoveries of the human race from the wheel to the satellite.” It was intended to allow for a broader variety of artists who have attempted to capture the richness. According to 55th Venice Biennale Curator Massimiliano Gioni.

This thematic exhibition of the VB could at best be considered a microcosm for the breadth of cultural engagements occurring on this global art platform. It presented works from professional and ‘outsider’ artists who had not been recognised during their lifetime for making art. There was an Austrian insurance clerk Peter Fritz whose 387 hobby architectural models were discovered in 1993 by artist Oliver Croy and subsequently displayed at the introduction to the exhibition.

Even though there was a diversity of artists, the configuration was, overall, museological, with more white walls introduced throughout the building and an anthropological ordering of each of the works. This shifted the audience gaze from one of engagement to one of voyeurism considering works in historical contexts rather than the rich levels of creativity envisaged by the curator, and consequent relationships.

Artist as Curator/Curator as Artist

The decision to work with a city inter- pavilion model in Shanghai was made by curator Qui Zhijie, who is also a prolific artist. His artistic practice is often a cartography of the systems of the artworld. The Biennale model was an initiative of Qui Zhijie, implemented with three other international co-curators; German theorist Boris Groys, Jens Hoffman and Johnson Chang.

Terry Smith has written about a phenomenon in contemporary art where unlike any other time period in art the artist and curator have an incredibly productive relationship and often perform both roles in the artworld simultaneously, creating a positive and dramatic re-invention of exhibitions.

“*In most cases, certain artist-curator relationships are coming to seem* ***more*** *definitive in the shaping of contemporary art than those between artists and critics, or between artists and gallerists, collectors, critics, or historians. Nowadays, artist-curator relationships are second only to those between artists themselves. Sometimes, it seems, they can be more generative.”* (Terry Smith)

In *Thinking Contemporary Curating* Smith describes a number of well known instances of artists as exhibition makers in museum settings and of curators who present their exhibition as something close to artworks. Qui Zhijie is one such artist who has been able to re-imagine the exhibition model for SB.

The proliferation of curators can also be exemplified in the only recent inclusion of curators in the organisation of pavilions for the Venice Biennale. Up until 10 years ago commissioners and artists were the only people credited in the Venice Biennale catalogues for national pavilions.

Artwork as Project

Artwork as project was a common occurrence within the city pavilion. This was often evidenced by the presence of fewer art objects and more artist/curator investigations, which allowed the intentions of the artists and curator to continue to be explored beyond the exhibition timeframe, that is, not limited by the duration of product.

This was proven in the Pittsburg Pavilion where artist John Ruskin had purchased the entire contents of an estate sale in Pittsburg and sent it to Shanghai. The home contents where resold to the audience on the condition that they photographically document the object in their own context and return the photo to the artist to collate into a ‘family photo album’. The artist was interested in economies and values. He deliberately contrasted the precious objects of one American family and installed them in China where second hand items are not of value. This pavilion was not confined to the three month time frame but was extended into a longer investigation into family values and global economies. This artwork is still active and evolving.

The most interesting VB pavilions and related artworks, were those which interrogated or disrupted the physical structures of the VB. The Danish Pavilion, *Intercourses*, by Jesper Just was concerned with spatial fabrication. The artist redirected the audience away from the formal entrance of the Giardini pavilion to the back door. Here the audience passed through a storage room of materials that were used to produce the projection screens in the exhibition. Just’s large scale, video installation expanded beyond the boundaries of the projection screen and enabled an installation for visitors to inhabit. Standing at any point in the rooms of the pavilion itself, you were able to see more than one screen and identify with the hybridity of cultures and influences at play.

The national pavilion model at the VB was further challenged through a swapping of national pavilions and more complex invitational structures. For example, at the 2012 VB, France and Germany swapped pavilions, acknowledging the jubilee year of the French / German friendship. To further challenge the national model, the German exhibition (hosted in the French Pavilion) invited artists from China, South Africa and India, operating without intention of representing Germany.

The Collateral events for the VB also provided points of interest where the site enabled more layered engagement with the artworks presented within them. Countries like New Zealand, Taiwan and the Maldives are part of the peripheral exhibitions. They are offered 150 historical buildings in Venice to rent for the 6 month period. These buildings included disused orphanages, hospitals, residences, courtyards, apartment blocks, transport buildings and more. In my experience, when the exhibition site lost its white cube institutional presentation, the unintentional relationship between Venice as a city and the international artworks within them articulated current trends more truthfully.

Audience/Learner/Producer

“South east Asian, African and Caribbean Biennales, given their pioneering novelty and corresponding interest in forming local audiences, often allow education to play an important role in their structure, making them more discursive than the global north counterparts. “ (ArtReview)

Along with the main thematic exhibition of SB *Reactivation* and the city pavilions was ‘The Academy of Reciprocal Enlightenment’. Three ‘academies’ were established: Art writing/journalism, Curatorial Practice, and Art and Technology. This Academy can be seen as an attempt to provide some ‘software’ for the considerable influx of’ ‘hardware’ that was being built in the form of art museums, art galleries and large scale art studios. It also had the deliberate intention of replacing the usual forum and lecture situation with the idea of “education as a self-governing action by learner communities, which serve as a platform of exchanges and dissemination of opinions”. (shanghaibiennale.org/)

I interviewed participants of the SB Curatorial Practice workshop comprising a range of international practitioners sponsored to be part of this community and, among other outcomes envision an exhibition inspired by their new understanding with other members of the workshop, compelling participants to continue critical international dialogue. Observing one of these intensive workshops it was evident members had the opportunity to critically reflect on the current SB and consider it in the context of contemporary art conditions and concerns. There was little evidence of educational sessions or other platforms of engagement such as workshops or sessions in the sites of the VB or in the print and web communication. Despite this, a published statement by the Venice Biennale States: *“The Biennale considers the Art Exhibition as a place dedicated to education and research.”* However, in the main audience members were largely tourists and art professionals, whereas Shanghai had a much stronger local engagement.

It seems that VB as an organiser has not provided the platform for the increase in the mobility of audiences occurring in the contemporary art world. There are artists whose work exhibited in VB required greater participation than the 5B, in which individual pavilions reflected current established practices of audiences participation, however not to the entire event extent that the VB communicated through print and online media.

Between 11 June and 11 July 2012 Hayward Gallery presented an exhibition titled Wide Open School. The roots of this exhibition began with a joint conference between Hayward and Serpentine Galleries London called De-schooling Society in 2010. The conference brought together international artists, curators and writers to discuss and debate the changing relationship between art and education. “Pedagogical models are currently being explored, reimagined and deployed by practitioners from around the world in highly diverse projects comprising laboratories, discursive platforms, temporary schools, participatory workshops and libraries. Simultaneously, progressive globalisation has led to a revaluing of the collective knowledge and agency of local communities.”

From discussions with assistant curator Rahila Haque and Eimear Martin I understood this exhibition as an experiment in public learning. The exhibition had a programme of 100 artists from 40 different countries. The curators explained that the development of the exhibition was artist led and thus reflective of the changes in the role of the artist. It also followed the interests of the artist, which were found to be the non-mainstream, research-driven aspects of culture. The exhibition highlighted a common denominator of “artist as self-educators and experts at embracing contradictions and knowing how to move forward in understanding a problem without first having to neatly resolve it” (Wide Open School Course Guide). The exhibition took place in classrooms built into the Hayward gallery space.

The example of Wide Open School exemplified Artist as educator, audience as participant, audience as learner, institution in the world as facilitator as opposed to the authority. As an art educator, this is a refreshing and in my experience a more productive approach. Hayward Gallery took on the role of the scaffold, sensitively providing the means for which a range of artists could create an ecosystem of art and learning true to their own process. Audience members were responsible participants making distinct judgments, actions, giving and taking skills and instructions. The artists were positioned not as producers but through their workshop, meditation or demonstration they were making accessible the practices of their art knowledge.

“Education in the arts has expanded to match, even sometimes outrun, these (Biennale) developments.” Terry Smith

I am committed to experimenting with different models of the art education exhibition at Concordia Gallery, Newington College, as I believe its is an explosive way to teach the Conceptual framework as a primary experience, then built on and developed in the classroom.

Professor Irit Rogoff was educated as an art historian and founded the department of Visual Cultures in 2002, at Goldsmiths London. This department provides the only PhD program for curators. It is concerned with specifying a rich context for professional curators to develop their own thinking without the pressure of producing an exhibition*.* I visited the University and met with her outside Goldsmiths in London. I find her ontological knowledge of Contemporary Art arresting and able to cut through trends. The discussions we had enabled me to consider what conceptual bridges I needed to make in communicating these experiences. A few summarised key quotes that I have documented during conversations held with Irit Rogoff are as follows:

**IR:** “Contemporary art is a fiction that was highly productive and then turned into a reality.”

I understand this to mean that artists were/are manipulating aspects of the artworld in a non-serious way resulting in distinct reproducible events and ideas that influence such art world practices as the demand of particular artists at Biennales; or artworks in Art Fairs; or themes and key-note speakers at conferences. Moreover, perhaps in the last 20 years there have been events in the artworld that Irit deemed to have insincere intentions but since have become accepted conditions. I think it is important to highlight these fictions and equip students with the knowledge of their consequences, naming them in the Conceptual Framework presented in the classroom.

**HC:** My first encounter with your writing and thinking was where you explained learning as experiencing and experimenting as opposed to analysing. Do you think that the frameworks and language you use to understand contemporary art can be engaged with by students?

**IR:** “All people of all ages need to be confronted with hard questions, it is just how you present the questions.”

This was a clear encouragement to continue to work to make accessible this knowledge for Secondary School students.

Conclusion

“Artists, teachers, critics and theorists become active across this system, but curators as exhibition-makers are its definitive agents.” (Terry Smith)

I am thrilled to be in an informed position to be attempting to reveal some of these discourses in NSW Visual Arts classrooms, as well as personally activating the gallery at my own school to be a learning environment.

The technical process of making the two documentaries and synthesising observations, theories and experiences into a visual essay that informs and excites Visual Arts students in Stage 5 and 6 was empowering. I am very thankful for the opportunity to radically deepen and formalise my understanding of contemporary art and then be resourced to translate it simultaneously into the jargon of adolescents and the updated practices of the current art world.

In addition to this report I have made two 12 minute documentary films based on the repositioning of the Conceptual Framework agencies. It has been screened at the NSW VADEA Annual conference and has been requested to show at the MCA in preparation for the Sydney Biennale 2014 and at Linden Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne. This film will be uploaded to Vimeo to make it available for all. I also plan to create an interactive pdf resource to create deeper understanding for students engaging with the documentaries.

During the two visits to Shanghai and Venice I interviewed on films ten artists and six curators on site. I also interviewed art historians, gallery directors and academics to provide the most in depth account possible of the influences and involvements of Contemporary Art in 2012 and 2013, in particular through the Shanghai and Venice Biennale.

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