

Biennials as Pedagogical Tools:

Examining strategies and effects of the discursive practices on education and public programmes of large-scale periodic contemporary art exhibitions, Learning from the Mercosul Biennial (6th, 7th, 8th, and 9th editions) and the Liverpool Biennial (2016 and 2018)

+ A Critical Toolkit

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Abbreviations

EEBA – East Europe Biennial Alliance

ERL – Exhibition Research Lab – LJMU, Liverpool, UK

ESEF – Escola de Educação Física (School of Physical Education) – UFRGS

IBA – International Biennial Association

IBF – International Biennial Foundation

ICBNA – Instituto Cultural Brasileiro Norte-Americano (Brazilian-North American Cultural Institute) Porto Alegre, Brazil

ifa – Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen (Institute for Foreign Cultural Relations)

LB – Liverpool Biennial

LJMU – Liverpool John Moores University

MA – Master of Arts

MB – Mercosul Biennial

NBP – Núcleo de Documentação e Pesquisa (Documentation and Research Centre) – Mercosul Biennial

TCAS – The City as a School

UFRGS – Universidade Federal do Estado do Rio Grande do Sul (Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul State)

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Abstract

Situated at the intersection of contemporary art history, exhibition studies, and biennial studies, this doctoral research examines the discursive practices of education and public programmes within large-scale, periodic contemporary art exhibitions. These practices generate knowledge beyond the exhibition itself through catalogues, publications, events, and pedagogical initiatives. Since the proliferation of biennials in the 1980s and 1990s, such programmes, often referred to as public or educational, have become central strategies to extend, challenge, and complement exhibitionary formats. Although their documentation is frequently fragile, overlooked, or inconsistently archived, limiting both scholarly analysis and institutional reflection, they have grown in scope and complexity. Symposiums, debates, talks, and mediation programmes now operate as infrastructures of knowledge production, enhancing public understanding of curatorial discourse and artworks, while special publications and essay collections extend thematic debates beyond the exhibition itself. This research does not aim to provide a comprehensive historical survey but instead develops an experience-based and practice-based analysis.

The research draws on the researcher's professional experience in various roles, as mediator, educator, producer, facilitator, and curator within contemporary art biennials. It takes the Mercosul Biennial (6th–9th editions) and the Liverpool Biennial (2016, 2018) as case studies, analysing their strategies and effects while situating them within wider shifts in biennial-making. The study combines theoretical reflection, case study analysis, and practice-based methods in an autotheoretical mode.

The thesis makes two key practice-based contributions. First, a collection of essays that critically reflect on biennial practices from an embedded, autotheoretical perspective, testing conceptual propositions such as biennials as utopian machines, radical pedagogies, or experiments in precarity. Second, the *Biennial as Pedagogical Tools*, a

critical taxonomy in a toolkit format designed as a non-linear, dialogical instrument for planning, reflecting on, and evaluating discursive programmes. This toolkit consolidates a legacy vocabulary emerging from fieldwork, case studies, and lived experience, and is intended to be adaptable across biennials, museums, and grassroots projects.

Through these outputs, the thesis argues that biennials must be understood not only as sites of exhibition-making but as infrastructures of mediation, education, and discursive practice. It contributes to biennial studies by reframing historiography around pedagogical and discursive dimensions; to curatorial practice by proposing a pedagogical-curatorial paradigm that recognises mediators and educators as co-authors; and to discursive art education by demonstrating how critical pedagogy can be part of the exhibition spaces.

Keywords: biennial studies, contemporary art, education and public programmes, Liverpool Biennial, Mercosul Biennial.

Declaration Page

I declare that no portion of the work in the thesis has been submitted to support an application for another degree or qualification from this or any other university or learning institute.

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My profound thanks to everyone :)

1 Introduction

This thesis incorporates practice as a central research method and outcome, but it integrates analysis of the work undertaken before the PhD with the proposition of a novel critical framework. The thesis draws on two case studies across six editions of contemporary art biennials: the Mercosul Biennial (2007–2011, 6th–9th editions) and the Liverpool Biennial (2016 and 2018), which inform the conceptual and analytical framework of the research. Most of the work in the projects that serve as case studies was produced collaboratively, and, in these contexts, I worked in multiple capacities, sometimes as curator, mediator, or facilitator. This thesis identifies my own contribution in the conception, development, and reflection of these practices, situating them within a critical framework.

The research culminates in two practice outputs: a collection of autotheoretical essays and a critical taxonomy organised as a toolkit. The essays situate the research within an autotheoretical framework, while the toolkit proposes a non-linear and dialogical instrument for planning, reflecting on, and evaluating discursive and pedagogical programmes within and beyond biennials. These outputs are presented respectively as *Biennials as...* and *Biennial as Pedagogical Tools*. The written and practical elements are not presented separately but as an integrated body of work, demonstrating the reciprocal relation between practice and theory throughout the research.

The thesis is not intended to be read as a linear progression of separate components, though it can be approached that way. It becomes stronger and more comprehensible in relation to the movement between its parts. The research developed through a back-and-forth movement between theoretical analysis and practice-based experience, particularly in the context of the case studies of the Mercosul and Liverpool Biennials, where the analysis emerges from the inside. The autotheoretical essays extend this

process, functioning as outputs and as structures within the text where experience and thinking take place. The autotheoretical framework allows concepts introduced earlier to be reorganised and reworked through this lived experience. In this process, theory becomes more complex, taking the form of a dialogue with practice. As a result, the research questions are addressed gradually across the thesis, through the balance between analysis and experience.

It is also important to point out that by discursive practices, this thesis refers to the modes of knowledge production that extend beyond the exhibition display itself, including catalogues, symposia, talks, debates, mediation programmes, and educational initiatives. Whilst pedagogical practices refer to discursive modes that explicitly facilitate learning, dialogue, and lifelong education. Although analytically distinct, in biennials these two spheres are rarely separable: discursive programmes often carry pedagogical implications, while pedagogical initiatives frequently generate discursive knowledge. This interrelation forms a key concern of the thesis, which examines how biennials construct, name, and sustain such practices.

The autotheoretical essays and the toolkit operate as distinct yet interrelated components within the research. The essays extend the analytical framework through situated reflection, allowing lived experience to reorganise and test the conceptual propositions developed in earlier chapters. The toolkit, in turn, translates these insights into a structured but open-ended instrument, enabling the articulation and circulation of discursive and pedagogical strategies beyond the specific case studies. Rather than functioning as supplementary materials, these elements are integral to the thesis, shaping both its method and its form.

This thesis is grounded in my sustained professional involvement with contemporary art biennials. Beginning in 1999, when I first participated as a ‘monitor’¹ in the Mercosul Biennial and developed through successive curatorial and mediation roles, this trajectory has provided both access to and critical insight into biennial practice. Projects such as *Three Borders* (Mercosul Biennial, 2007), which engaged artists with local farmers, indigenous communities, moto-taxi workers, authorities, and smugglers,² revealed how pedagogical and discursive practices emerge in contested social and political contexts. Later experiences as Operational Coordinator of the pedagogical project at the Mercosul Biennial (7th–9th editions), as coordinator of the mediation team at the Liverpool Biennial (2016 and 2018), and as guest curator at the 33rd São Paulo Biennial (2018) further consolidated this perspective. These situated roles provide the empirical and methodological grounding of the thesis, informing both its case study analysis and its autotheoretical reflections.

The possibility to work backwards by reflecting on experience, translated into autotheoretical parts that are embedded in the text, also relates it to a creative writing practice. The form chosen to organise some of those passages or journeys is the form of vignettes. In the vignettes, themes and concepts are discussed, as well as historical passages and reflections on these events. These parts are identified by being formatted in a different font and style, like this whole paragraph. The format change suggests a layered reading and differentiates these passages within the text’s structure. The parts in which

¹ ‘Monitor’ is what mediators were previously called at the Mercosul Biennial from its inaugural edition until it changed between the third and fourth editions, when the ‘mediator’ concept was incorporated into the institution.

² The artists involved in the project were Jaime Gilli (Venezuela–UK), Daniel Bozhkov (Bulgaria–USA), A-1 53167 (Anibal Lopez, Guatemala), and Minerva Cuevas (Mexico). Later, in 2018, Gabriel Perez-Barrero invited me as a guest curator for the 33rd edition of the São Paulo Biennial to organise a biographical exhibition of A-1 53167 (Anibal Lopez, Guatemala), who passed away in 2014.

the text reflects on themes and concepts and works with references and comparative assumptions are formatted in the regular style, like this paragraph.

1.1 Research Context, or How Every Two Years, We Do It All Again

Biennials are large-scale, periodic international exhibitions of contemporary art that have become significant cultural events extending beyond the art system. Although the term *biennial* implies a two-year cycle, it broadly encompasses other large-scale exhibitions with varying frequencies, such as triennials, documenta, and quadrennials like the Prague Quadrennial (Ardenne, 2006; Filipovic, Van Hal, and Øvstebø, 2010; Vogel, 2010; Gardner & Green, 2013, 2016; Lin-Hill, 2013; Kompatsiaris, 2014, 2017; Sheikh, 2016; Patel, Manghani, and D'Souza, 2018). However, as most authors cluster these large-scale exhibitions together because they have what Sassatelli (2017) terms the same 'lineage', numerous articles and books have been dedicated to the study of biennials, focusing on specific iterations. Since the publication of *The Biennial Reader*, in which curators and art historians Elena Filipovic, Marieke van Hal, and Solveig Øvstebø (2010) propose the term 'biennialology', there has been increased focus on the biennial phenomenon.

The *OnCurating* journal, edited by Dorothee Richter and Ronald Kolb, dedicated four editions to the theme: October 2016, number 32, 'In this Context: Collaborations & Biennials'; June 2017, number 33, dedicated to documenta; June 2018, number 39, 'Global Biennial Survey', and June 2020, number 46, 'Contemporary Art Biennial – Our Hegemonic Machines in Times of Emergency'. Furthermore, other authors dedicated full publications to the theme, such as *Biennials, Triennials, and Documenta: The Exhibitions That Created Contemporary Art* by Anthony Gardner and Charles Green (2016); *The Politics of Contemporary Art Biennials* by Panos Kompatsiaris (2017); *How to Biennale? The Manual* by Shwetal A. Patel, Sunil Manghani, and Robert E. D'Souza, and *From Roman*

Feria to Global Art Fair; From Olympia Festival to Neo-liberal Biennial: On the 'Biennialization' of Art Fairs and the 'Fairization' of Biennials by Paco Barragán (2020).³ These publications do not offer a historical review of a particular biennial or edition (except for the *OnCurating* web-journal); instead, the authors reflect on the biennial as a model for art history and their interactions with the art system or culture. Biennials have significantly shaped the conversation around contemporary art, serving as a model for art history and influencing the art system. There is no assumed inauguration point to the field of biennial studies, placing it as a contemporary part of art history narrative (even though the edition of *The Biennial Reader* could serve as an embodied starting point for the field, as a marker). Overall, biennials have become significant cultural events, their roles ranging from serving to market cities and strengthen the tourist industry to playing a crucial role in constructing local, national, and continental identities (Gardner & Green, 2013; Marchart, 2014; Kompatsiaris, 2017).

The study of biennials involves analysing their historical development and the impacts these exhibitions have on art and culture. Philosopher and sociologist Oliver Marchart (2014), reflecting on more peripheral examples of biennials, notes that they 'fulfil a wide array of functions'. Their impact goes beyond the direct economic benefits we may assume they have in their local areas, as they also contribute to the consolidation of cultural infrastructures and the global visibility of the cities that host them. Academic and curator Joe Martin Lin-Hill (2013) highlights the dominance of curatorial discourse in shaping the conversation around biennials, emphasising that curators, critics, and art historians have been at the centre of this discourse. However, he also critiques the narrowness of this focus, advocating for the inclusion of perspectives from beyond the

³ It is important to point out that I have prioritised publications in the English language here. Articles in Spanish, Italian, and Portuguese have been considered, but the English language does, fortunately, universalise editorial access to the thoughts of those authors. Some German, Chinese, and Russian publications were also accessed during the research process with the support of online translators and AI tools.

traditional art world, such as sociology, economics, and political theory, when reflecting on biennials and their impacts.

It is vital to understand that this broader interdisciplinary approach is necessary to fully understand the multifaceted implications of biennials from the economic and cultural perspectives and in their inclination towards creating and improving discursive programmes. This complexity is not incidental but is characteristic of biennial-making: a process profoundly shaped by the shift of institutional alliances, the acceleration of cultural production, and a growing emphasis on discursive frameworks that often remain invisible but are still vital. As biennials continue to absorb and reflect broader geopolitical, technological, and aesthetic transformations, they function less as stable formats and more as dynamic structures – simultaneously adaptive, performative, and unsettled.

Before the system of organisation proposed in this text, I have identified three earlier publications that outlined structures to define typologies or group biennials on the basis of both a timeline and the geopolitical and economic considerations of biennials. The first, proposed by curator and art critic Sabine Vogel (2010), groups the biennial into two phases: ‘biennials at the beginning of the twentieth century’ and ‘the second phase of the biennial in the age of globalisation’. For Vogel, the Venice Biennale was connected to the Enlightenment, the foundation of nation-states, and the biennials that followed at the beginning of the twentieth century, which were based on modernity and hegemonic cultures. The second phase is influenced by globalisation and culturally marked post-modernity’ (Vogel, 2010, p.62), which she describes in ‘new social and political developments’.

In the second publication, by Anthony Gardner and art historian Charles Green, *Biennial, Triennials and Documenta: The Exhibitions That Created Contemporary Art* (2016), the

authors argue that ‘the mounting international importance of biennials and their historical study has opened up a research gap that scholars are just beginning to address’. They point out that the field had undergone significant change in the period before their publication. However, their identifications of second-wave and third-generation biennials and their characteristics remain the most cited biennial typology still in use. Their book aims to identify not only the emergence of biennials but also the typology of new modes of curatorial forms – and the rise of the ‘star curator’ within the second wave, unleashed after the 1972 documenta, the figure of curator Harald Szeemann, and ‘the creation of an alternative cultural network’ (Green & Gardner, 2016, p. 81) with the creation of the Havana Biennial and Manifesta in the form of critical regionalism. The authors identify a third generation of biennials that align with those responding to globalism, hegemony, and liberalism. This trend corresponds with a range of ‘self-aware’ biennial formats that develop new discursive practices, ultimately suggesting a new canon for biennials.

The third publication, by Paco Barragán, *From Roman Feria to Global Art Fair; From Olympia Festival to Neo-Liberal Biennial: On the ‘Biennialization’ of Art Fairs and the ‘Fairization’ of Biennials* (2020) proposes a more complex typology of biennials, analysing both their relation to the art system and the position they have to all other biennials, arguing for a time-layered organisation based on similar characteristics. The first type, ‘the experience biennial: from Venice to São Paulo and Sydney’ (1895–1907), reflects biennials as an experiment (here, the publication takes a long time to argue why the São Paulo Biennial is not second after Venice). The second group is the ‘trauma biennial: from Bienal Hispano Americana and documenta via Johannesburg to la Bienal Paix and la Bienal Centroamericana’ (1951–2000s), in which these biennials are embedded with dialectical art politics and trauma (a term borrowed from Okwui Enwezor’s writings). The third is the ‘resistance biennial: la Bienal de La Habana, Asia-Pacific Triennial and Berlin Biennale’ (1984–2010s), which reflects the concept of Marta Traba’s resistance art (1976, in Barragan, 2020, p. 239) that is against colonial processes and resonates with Ranjit Hoskote’s reflections on resistance and biennials (2010, in Filipovic, Van Hal, and

Øvstebø). The last group is the 'neo-liberal biennial: 2nd Johannesburg Biennale, documenta 11, Manifesta, la Bienal de Valencia and Istanbul Biennials' (1989–today), which tracks the route of biennials within the globalised world and in response to it. Despite the compelling offer of a more complex perspective on biennials and a deeper view of their complexities, Barragan's text also shows a sort of liminal rage, in which the object is not transparent. Nevertheless, the depth of the author's research makes it necessary to consult the publication when reflecting on biennials and their historical development.

The development of biennial typologies reflects the different attempts to structure and analyse the proliferation of these exhibitions, moving beyond individual case studies to identify patterns in their evolution, function, and impact. While each framework – whether Vogel's historical phases, Gardner & Green's generational model, or Barragán's layered categorisation – offers a different lens for understanding biennials, collectively they identify the diversification of the biennial-making format over time. As biennials have expanded globally, their curatorial and discursive practices have evolved, introducing new modes of engagement, from public programmes to educational initiatives. Unless they are actively archived, many biennials remain under-documented.

Within this broader trajectory, the Venice Biennale remains a reference point as the earliest and most enduring example and the site where the biennial model was first institutionalised. The Venice Biennale, which began in 1895, remains the canonical biennial model. It was not until the 1950s, in the context of post-war Europe and the rise of national and regional movements in the arts, that other models and local biennials emerged. The São Paulo Biennial, established in 1951, was among the first to achieve similar longevity to Venice, continuing to this day. Other projects started across the globe, including Alexandria, Paris, Mexico, and Tokyo, but many struggled to maintain continuity. The 1960s and 1970s saw several biennials, such as those in Saigon and

Sydney, launch and then phase out. Gardner & Green (2013) try to establish a precarious aligned legacy of Southern biennials, highlighting them as a second wave that 'had to either change focus entirely – the Biennale of Sydney quickly shed its single-minded interest in the Pacific Rim after 1976 – or become defunct through lack of interest, stability, or funding'. Therefore, this discontinuity of projects worldwide becomes essential in understanding the lack of analysis and research on biennials despite their significance to art history (or the history of biennials). It is worth noting that this narrative of the expansion of biennials is often framed through a Eurocentric lens, shaping how globalisation in the biennial model is perceived and historicised. As biennials have become entangled in broader political and cultural discourses, they simultaneously reinforce and challenge these dominant perspectives – a tension that remains central to their development. This issue of globalisation and the role of biennials in reinforcing and contesting hegemonic structures will be revisited later in this thesis.

The authors further suggest that these 'inaccuracies in the timeline' (Gardner & Green, 2013) are part of Northern biases in contemporary curatorial histories. Capturing a legacy from a biased perspective is nearly impossible if one cannot appreciate the diversity in the time of iteration or understand the structures necessary for archiving it in a legible and accessible manner. Nevertheless, returning to the Eurocentric perspective, art historians and curators Barbara Vanderlinden and Elena Filipovic (2005, p. 15) in *The Manifesta Decade: Debates on Contemporary Art Exhibitions and Biennials in Post-Wall Europe* critically reflect on the emergence and development of biennials as fundamental platforms for contemporary art, particularly in post-1989 Europe. They explore how these exhibitions have become sites for showcasing art and intense dialogue, ideological battles, and the redefinition of cultural identities within a rapidly globalising world. Acknowledging that biennials also have a role in strengthening the artistic and political discourse of their time, we can understand how they are established as more than just exhibitions but as spaces of significant cultural exchange.

The consolidation of the biennial as a model became more evident in the 1980s when the Bienal de La Havana (Havana Biennial) was established, followed by many new biennials in the 1990s. In early 2000, art critic and curator Ivo Mesquita (2001-2002) had already recognised that the biennial model was beginning to reshape the geography of the art world by relocating to peripheral regions. The author proposed this shift as a form of 'new diplomacy' for the contemporary art world, renegotiating the relationships between culture, tourism, and the economy. On a less positive account, historian and art critic Paul Ardenne (2006) argues that the proliferation of biennials reflects their role in globalisation and the simultaneous homogenisation of the arts, often characterised by a Western or Eurocentric perspective, later termed *biennialisation* (Marchart, 2014). This process of global spread and the interaction of biennials with cultural diplomacy, politics, and local-to-international entanglements is evident in the early consolidation of biennial studies, which started concomitantly with this takeover of the model in the art system. Therefore, if biennials are spreading and exciting, we must study them more carefully.

In their analysis of the evolution of biennials, Gardner & Green (2013) point to the growing significance of these exhibitions within art history, acknowledging their complex duality as both tools of globalised neoliberalism and potential sites for social dialogue. This duality is reflected in the biennial model whereby biennials are able to act simultaneously as instruments of power – reinforcing capitalist and colonial structures – and as spaces of generosity in which genuine cultural exchange and dialogue can happen. This tension is particularly evident in the organisational structures of biennials; but it also varies depending on the organisations or institutions doing the organising and their main objectives and values. Some biennials, such as the Venice Biennale, documenta, Istanbul Biennial, Berlin Biennale, and Sharjah Biennial, are organised by governmental entities or local councils; thus, they usually take on direct state support and directives and often carry significant historical and cultural weight within their structures. Others, like the Whitney Biennial, Bergen Assembly, and Helsinki Biennial, are organised by art institutions, expanding from their museum activities and contributing to changes in

institutional discourses and structures. Moreover, to offer a different example, the Liverpool Biennial, São Paulo Biennial, Sydney Biennale, and Mercosul Biennial started out as and remain independent organisations, usually in the form of foundations, that play a crucial role in the biennial landscape, focusing on local engagement, educational programmes, and a commitment to accessibility (in particular, all these particular cases are free to visit and not ticketed, the importance of which will be reflected on later in the text). As curator Hou Hanru notes (in Vogel, 2010, p. 115), thanks to the idea that ‘art can shape the world’, biennials have come to embody the ‘new global culture’, functioning as platforms for global art in ways that nationally oriented institutions, such as museums or art centres, often cannot. In this sense, the degree of entanglement between a biennial’s organising body and local authorities or established art institutions influences its direction. The closer the ties to governmental or institutional structures, the greater the political task of aligning values and negotiating expectations. Conversely, the more independent the organisation, the easier it is for the institution to define its programme beyond local or national political constraints.

Thus, it is challenging to form a biennial model due to the increased proliferation of these events and the complex and multifaceted structures they could have. Biennials remain significant platforms for contemporary art, but their impact varies depending on their structure, dissemination, and ability to balance international prestige with local needs. Nevertheless, it is possible to expand on the inherent duality of biennials: they serve both as platforms for capitalist expansion and as spaces that challenge those very systems by enhancing access to contemporary art at a local level. This uneasy balance is a central issue for biennials and the field that studies them. In the editorial text of *OnCurating* no. 46, Kolb, Patel, and Richter (2020) describe biennials as often functioning as ‘hegemonic machines’ (borrowing the concept from Marchart, 2014) that both reinforce and contest dominant cultural narratives, negotiating between local cultural production and global art markets. This dual function – being sites of cultural diplomacy while enabling critical discourse – positions biennials within broader ideological and economic structures. Yet

the contest between these functions still allows biennials to promote contemporary art and access to critical thinking through their discursive practices, mainly when they invest in educational and public programmes. Their investment generates connections between local communities and the global art network, promoting inclusivity and diversity. However, effectiveness is continuously tested by the forces of commercialisation and the pressures of maintaining relevance and securing funding. The duality is always balanced within the biennial model.

In their introduction to *Curating and the Educational Turn*, curators, artists, researchers, and educators Paul O'Neill and Mick Wilson (2010) highlight how 'discussions, talks, symposia, education programmes, debates, and discursive practices' have historically supported contemporary art exhibitions, particularly within the context of biennials and museums. They observe a significant shift where these discursive interventions have become central to modern practice, reflecting the broader educational turn. This transformation, they argue, indicates that the discursive is increasingly framed in terms of education, research, knowledge production, and learning within biennials, which shows how complying with this turn makes projects (and biennials) move away from more traditional exhibition-focused models towards integrative, pedagogical approaches.

The *discursive elements* of contemporary art biennials include all knowledge produced beyond the exhibition, such as catalogues or special editions, public programmes, and educational initiatives. This discursive dimension has become increasingly complex, with symposiums, debates, talks, and guided tours playing a crucial role in enhancing public understanding and engagement with the curatorial discourse and the artworks on display beyond the traditional production of catalogues and, more recently, of special publications that use the core theme of the biennial (like collections of essays). Curators and writers Bruce Ferguson and Milena Hoegsberg (2010, in Filipovic, van Hal, and

Øvstebø, p. 361) observe the rise of 'discursive biennials' as a reflection of the *discursive turn* but suggest that rather than just being elements of a trend, biennials can also be places of knowledge production as a symbol of a heterotopic field that allows research and transdisciplinarity. Kompatsiaris (2014) identifies the discursive as an 'extra visual' characteristic of biennials, referring to a practice of exhibition-making that goes beyond visual qualities to employ discussions, publications, guided tours, seminars, symposia, and other discursive elements. More aligned to discursive practices, Sheikh (2016) examines biennials as 'discursive spaces' and complex sites where conflict and debate emerge; Sheikh suggests that biennials should be analysed through their art presentation and as platforms that reflect broader tensions within the art world, serving as a 'horizon' of contemporary art discourse. In consonance with an analysis more critical to the political and economic characteristics of the discursive in biennials, Barragan (2020, p. 301) suggests that 'the organisation of collateral activities in the form of conferences, workshops, educational programmes, catalogues with essays and so on' is only one element of the configuration of the global biennial that also offers a contradictory relation to the neo-liberal system.



Figure 1 – 6th Mercosul Biennial, Pedagogical Project, class from the Mediation School, Porto Alegre, 2007. No specific date was provided. Photo: Christiano Sant'Anna / indicefoto.com.



Figure 2 – 6th Mercosul Biennial, Pedagogical Project, class from the Mediation School with Prof. Dr. Monica Zielinski at ICBNA, Porto Alegre, 2007. No specific date was provided. Photo: Eduardo Seidl / indicefoto.com.

While Kompatsiaris (2014) offers a valuable framework for considering the discursive as an ‘extra-visual’ dimension of biennials, this perspective risks oversimplifying its role by positioning it in a binary opposition to the visual. Differently, Sheikh (2016) offers a more extensive understanding of the possibilities of discursive programmes, reflecting that they are not just an extension of the exhibition itself but a complementary process through which deeper structural tensions and ideological negotiations might unfold. Barragán (2020) further complicates this discourse by questioning the neo-liberal ties of biennial-making and asking, ‘Who is this for?’ – a crucial question that, while highlighting the contradictions of these large-scale exhibitions, overlooks the tangible local impact of public and educational programmes. Despite observing these complexities, the discursive initiatives within biennials have grown in their reach and influence. While these activities help expand biennials’ impact, they also introduce new challenges, such as the vulnerable nature of the knowledge produced once the biennial concludes.

The increasing involvement of more artists and the extensive debates and publications creates a more prosperous discursive environment, allowing for diverse perspectives and a deeper engagement with contemporary art. Nevertheless, this approach adds more drawbacks, including the overproduction of content, the risk of homogenising knowledge, and the precarious positioning of educational initiatives within the broader biennial structure. Most of the catalogues make it to the shelves of libraries and the archives of institutions. However, videos, materials aimed at scholars and teachers, and special programmes are more ephemeral and tend to disappear over time and due to changes in the ways that institutions use digital platforms. To be efficient and addressed appropriately, these discursive elements require willing institutions to host these biennials with openness and flexibility; the discursive can only thrive if institutions embrace non-traditional activities and are eager to reframe conventional practices and support out-of-the-box experiments. In my experience, these conditions sometimes prove too much for the institutions, ending up too challenging to be achieved, as they disrupt a more formal mode of making exhibitions. However, at other times, depending

on the vision of the curatorial team, boards, and directors (and even how the ground production team can phrase, explain, or organise the projects), the adaptation comes along, and unexpected projects happen.

Therefore, curators and artists are central in shaping the discursive environments of contemporary art biennials. Curators, as the architects of the exhibition's conceptual framework, initiate and guide these discursive elements, whether by organising symposiums, facilitating debates, or curating educational programmes – or ignoring them altogether. The rise of the education curator (in some cases, pedagogical curator or engagement or learning curator) role within biennials highlights the increasing importance of these strategies, showing the need for a cohesive narrative that ties together the artistic and educational components. Artists contribute significantly to this discourse by participating in activities that go beyond the exhibition, by being part of these programmes as speakers, or by promoting socially engaged or community-based practices. Their involvement is crucial, bringing the discourse to life and making it more relatable and impactful for the audience. The interaction between curators' conceptual vision and artists' creative practices creates a dynamic space where discussions, debates, and reflections can thrive. However, it is essential to point out that this process of necessary availability also requires openness and commitment from the curators, artists, and organisations that organise the projects, as their willingness to devise and deliver the discursive process directly influences their success.

The next element found throughout this research is a return, essentially, to a vision of biennials through the lens of the 'South as a method', which offers a critical shift in perspective on how we think about biennials and how we understand their discursive programmes, as suggested by Gardner & Green (2013, 2016). The approach provided by those scholars, who were initially based in Australia, allows us to challenge the dominant Northern narratives that have shaped biennial histories (as part of a more complex

contemporary art history) and provide an understanding of the countries of the global South both as having a shared history of colonialism and being current spaces of innovation, particularly in contexts marked by defiance of precarity and improvements amid economic crises. We can rethink the global art system and the role of biennials due to the disruption of counter-narratives that have not yet been fully used. This framework prompts to question the biennial model itself and the broader structures of power that it both challenges and reinforces. The perspective of the 'South' encourages a deeper reflection on the relevance of the biennial model, pushing for a more inclusive and critically engaged approach to contemporary art exhibitions. This approach is crucial for addressing the duality within biennials, where instruments of power and acts of generosity coexist, and for driving the necessary change in response to global challenges such as climate change and sustainability. The 'South' also examines the differences between the biennial model and the Western/Eurocentric perspective. The former mainly facilitates the flourishing of the local art system and the expansion or establishment of international relations, contrasting with the imbalances found in areas with existing infrastructure.

Proceeding from defining the context to which this research refers, it is essential to address the aim of contributing to biennial studies by addressing the fragility of the knowledge produced by discursive programmes that operate independently of the visual aspects of the exhibitions. This study does not aim to provide a historical survey of biennial discursive programmes (which goes against the initial idea proposed by the archaeology that grounds this research). However, it seeks to develop an experience-based understanding of biennials. It focuses on the conceptual frameworks that influence these events and treats these extracts as independent knowledge-making, framework-reading, and concept-dealing tasks.

The research emphasises the value of experiential knowledge over speculative analysis, aiming to explore how direct engagement with biennial projects can inform a deeper understanding of their impact and significance. This research aims to critically analyse the Mercosul Biennial (MB) and the Liverpool Biennial (LB) by examining how the themes identified within these projects evolved and how they frame the analysis of their structures and impact. My approach focuses on identifying key characteristics and elements that contributed to their evolution, which I refer to as autotheoretical analysis. Subsequently, the study seeks to develop a toolkit that draws from this thematic analysis, offering a flexible framework for evaluating and initiating similar projects in the future rather than a rigid model.

For this analysis, I drew on my direct experiences with the 6th, 7th, 8th, and 9th editions of the MB and the 2016 and 2018 editions of the LB, exploring the public programmes and considering their internal structures and engagement with audiences beyond the organisation. Through my first-hand involvement in these biennials, I have examined the projects by observing specific characteristics, which are sometimes repetitive and at other times unique. The ideas and issues that shaped their evolution, challenges, and achievements provided a structure for analysis and informed the toolkit's conceptual foundations, offering language and criteria to assess ongoing projects or shape new ones. I focused on how these two case studies could contribute to a critical understanding of the organisation of discursive programmes, particularly their public and educational initiatives. Remaining in Liverpool and becoming a city citizen provided a deeper understanding of the LB's local impact and the difficulties faced within its context. Although these biennials functioned within distinct cultural ecosystems, their education and public engagement approaches reflected similar tensions between local artistic communities and broader institutional objectives. As one of the few independent cultural organisations in southern Brazil, the MB navigated the challenge of aligning local artistic needs with its overarching biennial framework – an issue mirrored in the LB and other biennials worldwide. My involvement in both contexts showed me the ongoing challenge

of integrating local artists into large-scale international exhibitions while negotiating the balance between global aspirations and local realities.

While this study does not conduct an exhaustive historical analysis, it examines the selected case studies' underlying conceptual foundations. By situating these elements within the broader field of biennial studies, the research aims to generate insights that extend beyond the immediate scope of the projects analysed. This approach draws on experience gained through professional involvement in biennials, underscoring the importance of lived practice as both an empirical and methodological entry point for understanding how biennials are organised and sustained.

The identified gap lies in how discursive and pedagogical programmes are both poorly documented and institutionally marginalised. Their fragile archival presence, often due to the lack of consistent institutional structures for preservation, makes them difficult to access for scholarly or curatorial analysis. At the same time, within the hierarchies of exhibition-making, these programmes are frequently treated as outputs of the curatorial vision rather than as constitutive practices in their own right. As a result, despite their central role in generating content, creating meaning, and establishing partnerships, they are routinely overlooked in both historiography and institutional reflection.

In response, this thesis addresses the following research questions:

- How do discursive and pedagogical programmes operate within biennials, and how do they shape institutional histories and local contexts?
- Through what typologies and overlapping forms do biennials generate discursive engagement, and how do these models intersect?

- Which theoretical frameworks best account for these practices, and how do they shape curatorial strategies and institutional forms?
- How can insights from case studies be translated into practical instruments, such as a critical taxonomy and toolkit, for developing and evaluating discursive programmes in biennials and beyond?

To pursue these questions, the literature review situates the thesis within intersecting fields of scholarship. It first considers the critical debates in exhibition studies and art history that have framed curatorial and institutional analysis. It then turns to the emergence of biennial studies as a distinct field, before exploring educational and pedagogical theories that inform the study of discursive practice. A further section examines transdisciplinary perspectives that expand the scope of biennial analysis, while an annotated mapping of biennials provides a contextual grounding. Together, these strands establish the conceptual and historiographic framework through which the case studies and practice-based components of the thesis are examined.

1.2 Literature Review

The interdisciplinary approach of this research is reflected in the literature review, which critically assesses the multifaceted nature of biennials. It integrates perspectives from art history, exhibition studies, biennial studies, and art education and pedagogy, alongside sources offering transdisciplinary insights. This breadth is necessary to capture the complexity of biennials as both art-world phenomena and broader cultural practices.

Particular attention is given to the study of discursive practices in biennials, here understood as encompassing educational and public programmes. Because scholarship in these areas often overlaps thematically, publications have been grouped into broad

categories to organise this review. The literature review is therefore complemented by a parallel consideration of biennial sources: annotated examples of discursive and pedagogical programmes drawn from the Mercosul and Liverpool Biennials, as well as from other significant exhibitions. Together, these two strands, the scholarly literature and primary sources, constitute the list below, ensuring that the field is approached through both critical analysis and direct documentation of practice.

1.2.1 Exhibition Studies and Art History

The historiography of exhibition-making is our starting point to understand the evolution of contemporary biennials. Bruce Altshuler's *Salon to Biennial* (2008) maps the development of large-scale exhibitions from the mid-nineteenth century to the post-war period, offering a genealogy in which biennials emerge not as anomalies but as culminations of long-standing changes in exhibition culture. Similarly, Amelia Jones's *A Companion to Contemporary Art Since 1945* (2005) investigates how the post-1945 moment marked the rise of curatorial autonomy, performative aesthetics, and transdisciplinary experimentation – conditions that ground the curatorial logic of contemporary biennial-making. *The Manifesta Decade* (Vanderlinden & Filipovic, 2005) offers crucial insights into the shifting paradigms and practices of exhibitions over the long decade between 1989 and the establishment of the European Union, signalling the end of an era of post-Wall optimism. The book investigates artistic practices and platforms worldwide, explicitly focusing on Europe to examine cultural structures and economies. While it expands reflections to include other contemporary art biennials beyond Manifesta, it is organised primarily from the perspective of contributing to the art system, making it relevant to the broader context of biennial studies. Publications such as Rachel Weiss's *Making Art Global (Part 1): The Third Havana Biennial 1989* (2011), from Afterall's series of books *Exhibition Histories*, contribute to this discussion by historicising the impact of specific biennials. This publication investigates the importance of understanding the historical context of the 3rd edition of the Havana Biennial in framing discussions around the role of art exhibitions in global discourses. In the book,

authors such as Charles Esche (pp. 8–10) draw parallels between the exhibition and significant geopolitical, economic, and cultural changes in 1989. For Esche, the Havana Biennial unleashed a new way of making biennials; he goes on to describe how other projects started in the Global South, such as Dak'Art, Sharjah, Gwangju, and Johannesburg. Described as 'one of the first contemporary art exhibitions to aspire to a global reach, both in terms of content and impact' (Weiss, 2011, pp. 14–15), Havana's position outside the Western canon enabled it to critique and reshape that canon from without. Claire Bishop's (2006) exploration of the 'social turn' in contemporary art highlights the transformation of artistic practices into more collaborative and socially engaged forms. This shift is essential for understanding the proliferation of discursive programmes within biennials. Bishop identifies diverse modes – from socially engaged art to community-based and dialogic practices – that expand the field of relational aesthetics, concepts crucial to parallel discussions on pedagogy and education. These practices move beyond traditional aesthetics, emphasising the creative rewards of collaboration, whether through engaging with pre-existing communities or constructing interdisciplinary networks. This shift is particularly relevant to exhibition studies, where the artist's role increasingly intersects with social dynamics, transforming exhibitions into platforms for participation and collective production.

Further expanding the field of collaborative aesthetics, Ted Purves's edited volume *What We Want Is Free: Generosity and Exchange in Recent Art* (2005) draws attention to alternative economies embedded in socially engaged art. By assembling a range of projects centred on generosity, barter, and informal exchange, Purves points to the political and affective dimensions of participation, showing how these practices challenge the logic of commodification and invite reflection on forms of mutual value and social intimacy within artistic encounters. This approach complements Bishop's emphasis on participation by introducing the ethics of exchange as a critical framework. Purves's work, which I encountered as part of an international seminar at the Mercosul Biennial in 2017, resonates to this day in my practice and the practices of projects connected to the

institution. In a more philosophically grounded approach, Grant Kester's 'Conversation Pieces: The Role of Dialogue in Socially Engaged Art' (2004), included in *Theory in Contemporary Art Since 1985* (Kocur & Leung, 2008), extends this discussion by positioning conversation as artistic material. His writing emphasises the role of sustained dialogue, mutual responsiveness, and ethical commitment, moving the focus from symbolic gestures to lived, negotiated relations. These insights emerge through understanding how discursive and participatory strategies operate not simply as extensions of form but as ways of reconfiguring the conditions under which art takes place. Expanding on this shift, Maria Lind (2009), in *Active Cultures: The Curatorial*, analyses the curatorial role not only as an organiser of experience but as a cultural producer whose work intersects with pedagogy, mediation, and knowledge-making. Lind's conception of 'the curatorial' is a form of cultural work that extends into the scope of exhibition-making or thinking beyond the idea of the display, aligning it with broader processes of research, critical reflection, and public engagement. Her articulation of the curator's role in an expanded frame helps us understand how biennials function as generative sites of discourse rather than merely representational platforms.

Parallel to these developments, Claire Doherty (2004, 2006) introduces 'new institutionalism' as a curatorial strategy premised on openness, flexibility, and 'the exhibition as situation'. While this approach reorients exhibitions from static displays to dynamic social spaces, privileging experimentation, responsiveness, and publicness as strategies, it aligns with Elena Filipovic's (2006) critique of the 'global white cube', which problematises the homogenisation of exhibition spaces and their failure to accommodate cultural specificity. Filipovic's analysis reinforces the need to re-evaluate display aesthetics, particularly within the transnational circuits of biennials. This spatial turn also resonates with Miwon Kwon's analysis in *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* (2004), in which exhibitions are not only situated in place but also actively produced as a curatorial and discursive construct. Her work proposes how shifting notions of place – especially within globalised exhibition frameworks – demand a

reconsideration of context, mobility, and situated meaning. These discursive and spatial shifts are further contextualised by contributions from Thierry de Duve (2005, 2007), whose writing engages with the 'glocal' economic condition of art and the transformation of form into attitude. His reflections align with Marion von Osten's (in Sheikh, 2005) interrogation of institutional methodologies and public-making practices, which situate the exhibition not merely as a container for artworks but as a mode of knowledge production and symbolic negotiation. Taken together, these works outline a curatorial and historical theme in which biennials are increasingly legible not as temporary events but as performative and pedagogical institutions that mirror – and at times subvert – the changing infrastructures of contemporary art.

1.2.2 Biennial Studies

The challenge of pinpointing the exact moment when biennial studies emerged as a distinct field reflects the complexity of large-scale exhibitions such as biennials, triennials, and similar events. While studies and reflections around biennials have occurred within exhibition-making and contemporary art history since the inception of the first such events, it was not until the 1990s that a more concentrated focus on biennials as a distinct area of study began to increase. Early attempts to analyse the function and form of biennials include Lawrence Alloway's *The Venice Biennale 1895–1968: From Salon to Goldfish Bowl* (1968), in which the author traces the transformation of Venice as a cultural and political spectacle. Though written before the field of biennial studies consolidated, the text offers a foundational account of the biennial as a hybrid site of national representation and shifting exhibition and curatorial modes.

The anthology *The Biennial Reader*, edited by Solveig Øvstebø, Elena Filipovic, and Marieke Van Hal, which was published after the seminar 'To Biennial or Not to Biennial?' (17–20 September 2009), represents a critical turning point in biennial studies. Organised

by the Bergen Kunsthalle and serving as the starting point for the Bergen Assembly, this publication remains one of the field's most comprehensive and referenced works. *The Biennial Reader* presents two editions of the conference documentation (2009) and a compilation of critical texts on biennials (the anthology itself: 2010), with the contribution of most of the conference participants. In reflecting on models of biennials, the conference delved into the format's response to local specificities and the construction of discursive spaces and platforms (Filipovic, Van Hal and Øvstebø, 2009, p. 6). Alongside this, Gustavo Grandal Montero (2012) raises important questions about how biennials are documented and remembered, arguing in 'Biennialisation. What Biennialisation?' that consistent critical or archival practices have not matched the increasing proliferation of biennials. His reflection points to a structural gap in how these large-scale events are situated within contemporary art historiography, which bases this research on the initial concern that such gaps entail.

In 2010, Marieke Van Hall further contributed to the field with her MPhil thesis, *Rethinking the Biennial*, which extensively examines biennials' history, globalisation, and impact. Van Hall addresses the evolution of biennials from their origins, often associated with events like the Venice Biennale, to their proliferation worldwide. By exploring the critical debates surrounding biennials, she highlights their role as platforms for artistic experimentation, dialogue, and tensions between local and global cultural dynamics. This is aligned with van Hal and Sabine Vogel (2010) in *Biennials – Art on a Global Scale*, which analyses the trajectory of biennials using a more straightforward typology (as reviewed earlier), but offers an interesting conclusion.

The proliferation of discursive and educational programmes in recent decades within contemporary art biennials, as well as other periodic large-scale exhibitions, has been identified by Gardner & Green (2014, 2016) as a hallmark of 'self-conscious biennials'. These biennials contribute significantly to the body of knowledge by connecting to global

networks and responding to various theoretical turns in recent art history, such as the international, discursive, educational, social, decolonial, and, more recently, environmental turns. This characterisation highlights the evolving role of biennials not just as cultural events but as reflective and critical spaces that adapt to and shape contemporary theoretical discourses. Similarly, Marchart (2014) emphasises the crucial role of biennials within these global networks, describing them as ‘hegemonic machines’ that link the local to the international within symbolic struggles for legitimation. This dual role underscores the function of biennials as agents of global cultural exchange and instruments within the broader power dynamics of the art world. This idea is echoed in Kolb, Patel, and Richter’s special issue of *OnCurating*, ‘Contemporary Art Biennials – Our Hegemonic Machines in Times of Emergency’ (2020), which gathers voices from multiple global contexts to interrogate the biennial’s role in contemporary conditions and how biennials might respond to crisis. The contributions critically assess the biennial as a site of institutional reproduction and a platform for dissent, particularly on precarity, mobility, and transnational governance.

The globalised context in which contemporary biennials operate is central to this research, particularly as the projects under analysis are part of what Gardner & Green (2016) describe as the ‘third wave’ of biennials. This term refers to exhibitions that have emerged in a globalised era and that focus on engaging an international, nomadic audience and developing local contexts through tourism and educational programmes. The biennials examined in this study have periodically implemented discursive and dialogical programmes under various labels, such as pedagogical, academic, learning, engagement, and public programmes. According to Papastergiadis and Martin (2011, p. 51), the critical dialogue fostered by these programmes often characterises biennials as ‘symposiums’, offering a space for reflective and interactive processes. Furthermore, this research identifies examples of biennials that, despite being aligned with this globalised wave, propose programmes that intentionally relocate their educational processes away from the entertainment-oriented approach of some biennial reflecting models, or as

suggested by Basualdo (written in 2003 but published in 2010, in Filipovic, van Hal, and Øvstebø, p. 134), propose a radical move that has not been theorised.

Globalisation has become a recurrent theme in biennial studies. Thus, Lin-Hill (2013) notes that 'biennials and globalisation seem to go hand in hand as central protagonists in the story of contemporary art's transformations', highlighting how globalisation has driven biennials to new heights in numbers and influence. Lin-Hill critiques the narrow focus of current biennial studies on curatorial and art historical perspectives, advocating instead for an interdisciplinary approach that includes insights from fields like sociology and economics to understand these broader impacts fully. Addressing the global and political dimensions of biennial-making, Papastergiadis and Martin (2011) argue that biennials often assert themselves as global ventures while simultaneously offering platforms for anti-globalisation discourse within the art field. They characterise biennials as spaces where curatorial practices and dialogical projects can be explored and developed, allowing for critical engagement with global cultural narratives. Panos Kompatsiaris, in *The Politics of Contemporary Art Biennials: Spectacle of Critique, Theory and Art* (2017), further explores the inherent ambiguity of the biennial model, noting that while these events often promote openness and inclusion, they also maintain a coded, hierarchical language that aligns with the traditional structures of the art world. This duality reflects the complex interplay between progressive ideals and established power relations within biennials.

Another theme that becomes recurrent in biennial studies is the intersection between biennial-making and its political entanglements, highlighting how biennials act as active cultural agents – both locally and internationally – and serve as bold spaces for artistic experience. As Kompatsiaris (2017) does a deep dive into the biennial as a form, he investigates how social space, and subjectivities take different positions with authorship and economic values. Aligned with Kompatsiaris, Sheikh, in the article 'Biennials and

Conflict Questionnaire' (2016), offers another in-depth examination of the intersection between art, politics, and economic structures in the context of biennials, noting that biennials are 'contested sites of conflict' where issues such as artistic autonomy, labour conditions, and ethical funding practices come to the forefront. This critical analysis contributes to biennial studies by highlighting how these events are influenced by and respond to global political and economic pressures. Earlier, in 'Marks of Distinction, Vectors of Possibility' (2010), Sheikh had already drawn attention to how biennials encode selective forms of visibility, agency, and institutional critique, framing the biennial as a format charged with both representational and political function.

In addition, Sassatelli (2017) concludes that contemporary biennials have evolved into complex cultural spaces where diverse narratives coexist, favouring a dynamic environment over traditional representational order. She emphasises that biennials should be understood as cognitive events and spaces where aesthetic experiences shape symbolic production. Biennials challenge established exhibition norms and highlight the importance of the experiential and affective dimensions for understanding biennials' cultural significance, creating a blend of divergent agendas. In this sense, while not contributing substantially to the critical discourse, *How to Biennale! The Manual* by Patel, Manghani, and D'Souza (2018) is the only publication to adopt a 'how-to' format for biennial-making. While the material has a reductive tone, the manual highlights the normalisation and institutional embedding of biennials as repeatable, procedural events – a reflection of the format's increasing ubiquity and professionalisation. Nevertheless, as it is drawn from the authors' expertise on and professional criticism of biennials, it is a necessary read despite the need for possible revision. Further questioning the institutional shifts between biennials and the broader art market, Pedro Barragán (2020) reflects on the 'biennialisation' of art fairs and the reciprocal 'fairisation' of biennials. The analysis draws attention to the fluid boundaries between display, commerce, and discourse, suggesting that the convergence of these exhibition formats has redefined how cultural value is produced and circulated within the contemporary art world.

1.2.3 Art Education and Pedagogy

The term pedagogy is not neutral. Its etymological origin, “to lead the child”, embeds assumptions of hierarchy, authority, and dependency that continue to shape educational discourse and institutional practice. In curatorial contexts, these assumptions are often reproduced through structures that position knowledge as something to be transmitted or mediated.

This thesis approaches pedagogy as a contested and historically situated concept. Drawing on critical pedagogy, particularly the work of Paulo Freire, alongside Jacques Rancière and John Dewey, pedagogy is understood as a relational process through which knowledge is produced rather than delivered.

In this sense, the pedagogical within biennials is not framed as instruction, but as a set of conditions that enable dialogue, participation, and the reconfiguration of roles between curators, artists, and publics. This shift situates pedagogy as a political and institutional practice, attentive to how authority and expertise are organised and contested.

Within this framework, the work of Paulo Freire is particularly significant to any reflection on education within the context of biennial-making. Freire's pedagogical ethos is a formative influence on public education and on cultural institutions and organisations like the MB. His writings – particularly *Ação cultural para a Liberdade* (1982) and *Pedagogia da autonomia* (1996) – established principles such as conscientização crítica (critical consciousness), praxis, and dialogue as structuring methods of emancipatory learning. These ideas establish the basis for the MB's decision to adopt the term pedagogical in place of more institutionally conventional labels like public or education, signalling an alignment with Freire's vision of cultural action as a transformative social force.

John Dewey's contributions, especially *Art as Experience* (1980; originally 1934), inform the development of dialogical practices in contemporary biennials. Although his thought entered the Brazilian context after Freire's, his influence remains foundational. Dewey conceives art and learning as experiential and situational, an approach that resonates with the discursive and participatory structures of biennial programmes. His writing provides a philosophical basis for practices now embedded in educational and curatorial thinking.

Jacques Rancière's writings provide critical insight by challenging hierarchical models of knowledge. In *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* (1991), *The Politics of Aesthetics* (2004), and *The Emancipated Spectator* (2009a), he recasts education as an egalitarian process, grounded in the assumption of equal intelligence. Learning emerges through the sharing of experience rather than through authority. This perspective is particularly relevant to mediation and pedagogical curating, where emphasis shifts from instruction to co-presence and dialogue. It also reinforces the need to rethink biennials as sites of shared inquiry.

However, a seminal reference in shaping the pedagogical potential of biennial-making is the volume *Arte para an educação / Educação para an arte* (*Art for Education, Education for Art*, Camnitzer & Pérez-Barreiro, 2009), which was developed in the context of the 6th MB. More than a thematic publication, the volume documents and theorises an ambitious curatorial proposal that positions education not as a supplementary activity but as a structural and conceptual axis of the exhibition. Camnitzer, acting as pedagogical curator – a title and role that, to date, remains rare if not unprecedented in biennial formats – argued for the equal status of educational and artistic curatorship, proposing that pedagogical strategies could generate, rather than merely translate, curatorial meaning. In his 2007 opening remarks to the international seminar (2007), Camnitzer stated: 'Education is the construction of the context in which meaning becomes possible',

positioning education not as mediation but as infrastructural to the exhibition itself. This redefinition of roles shifted the institution's coordinates, enabling the biennial to function as a learning infrastructure. This proposition is not only conceptual but methodological for this research. My own involvement in the pedagogical structures of the Mercosul Biennial did not take place alongside curatorial practice but within it, where educational processes actively shaped how projects were developed, mediated, and sustained. This positioning complicates the distinction between curating and education, suggesting that pedagogical work does not interpret the exhibition but participates in its construction. While this research draws on a range of theoretical perspectives, its conceptual grounding is structured primarily through Freire's critical pedagogy and Glissant's relational thinking, extended through South as method as a methodological orientation. Other authors are engaged to situate and inflect this framework rather than to establish it.

The pedagogical initiatives of the 2007 edition made way for the 7th MB projects that were consolidated in the publication *Micropolis experimentais: traduções da arte para a educação* (*Experimental Micropolis: Translations of Art for Education*), edited by Marina De Caro (2009), who also served as the pedagogical curator for that edition. More than an exhibition report, the volume combines reflections, documentation, and methodological propositions developed through key programmes such as *Artistas em Disponibilidade* (*Artists at Hand*), *Mapeamentos Práticos* (*Practical Mappings*), and the international seminar 'Mesa de Encontros' (Table of Encounters). Collectively, these components framed education not as a supporting function but as a conceptual and structural axis of the biennial. The seminar gathered artists-in-residence and invited thinkers, including Tania Bruguera, for public and closed-door exchanges that explored the relationships between art, education, and cultural policy. In his reflections on the seminar, Lucas Rubinich (2009, in DeCaro, p. 186) highlights how the project intervenes productively in debates around cultural specificity and access, arguing against forms of isolated cultural relativism and favouring shared, plural engagements with art's histories

and social functions. This pedagogical framing, as documented in *Micropolis*, reveals an ambition not only to design engagement tools but also to interrogate participation conditions, reorganising the educational project as an interface between contemporary art and the political complexity of social space. These projects do not simply expand participation but reorganise how knowledge is produced within the biennial, emerging as a redistribution of authorship, in which educators, mediators, artists, and participants operate in overlapping roles.

The 8th Mercosul Biennial marked a conceptual broadening of its pedagogical programme, grounded in more experimental and decentralised approaches to mediation and engagement. *Pedagogia no campo expandido* (Helguera & Hoff, 2011) gathers reflections from participating artists, curators, educators, and institutional collaborators and was framed by two international seminars – held at the opening and closing of the edition. Organised by Pablo Helguera and Mônica Hoff, the volume offers a cross-section of theoretical, procedural, and situated contributions that reflect the scope and ambition of the pedagogical work developed during this edition. Helguera's presence as a pedagogical curator framed a practice-based methodology that informed his theoretical writing on the subject, later published as *Education for Socially Engaged Art* (2011). This publication draws partly from his fieldwork in Mercosul, where he collaborated in decentralised workshops across the countryside of Rio Grande do Sul, reflecting on the practice of Eugenio Dittborn. These workshops – developed with local educators and artists – emerged as spaces where core concepts such as participation, mediation, and authorship were rehearsed and discussed in dialogue with local contexts. Alongside this, the 'Múltiplas Vozes' (Multiple voices) document complemented the edition by gathering qualitative evaluations from mediators and educators, articulating the complexities of the encounters and methodologies that shaped the pedagogical work of that year.

To counterpoint the references from the MB, the writings of Sally Tallant offer valuable insights into the tensions and possibilities of integrating education and curating within biennial frameworks. Her 2009 text 'Experiments in Integrated Programming', published in *Tate Papers*, reflects on her work at the Serpentine Gallery and articulates the need to position programming and education not as ancillary to exhibitions but as structurally embedded in curatorial planning (Tallant, 2009). Her emphasis on integrated approaches analyses how public programmes can shape institutional thinking and shift the relationships between artists, audiences, and institutions. This framing begins to unsettle conventional hierarchies between exhibition-making and learning. Her later text, written after she visited the 8th MB and shortly before assuming directorship of the Liverpool Biennial (Tallant, 2013), offers a more cautious reflection. While recognising the transformative ethos of Mercosul's pedagogical experiments, she also points to the dissonance between the pace of biennial cycles and the slower rhythms of institutional learning. 'People learn slowly', she writes, a phrase that registers both as an acknowledgement and a subtle critique of the structural limitations of biennials. Her notes, written in a moment of institutional transition, capture the ambivalence of attempting to reconcile long-term educational commitments with the accelerated temporality of biennial-making. Still, the fact that such reflections were made in dialogue with Mercosul's approach underscores its impact and the broader resonance of educational strategies within biennial discourse. Read from within practice, this tension becomes structural as the difficulty is not only the pace of learning but the institutional conditions that limit how pedagogical approaches can be sustained. As my later experience at the Liverpool Biennial suggests, the integration of education within curatorial frameworks does not automatically produce pedagogical agency and may instead expose contradictions between discourse and operational structures.

The 9th Mercosul Biennial (2013) produced a set of publications that serve as critical literature for understanding curatorial-pedagogical experimentation in large-scale exhibitions. *Manual para Curiosos* and *The Cloud* (Hoff et al., 2013) operate not as

catalogues in the conventional sense but as reflexive spaces of documentation, notation, and conceptual inquiry. These volumes map the methodologies, questions, and pedagogical structures that shaped the edition, offering insight into how curatorial formats can shift when education is positioned as a foundational axis rather than a supporting feature. Rather than prescribing a single narrative, they unfold as open-ended compilations of fieldwork, encounters, and pedagogical strategies. This editorial decision mirrors the biennial's emphasis on participation and distributed knowledge.

Within this publishing framework, essays such as 'City as Curriculum' (Hoff & Willsdon, 2013)⁴ further develop the conceptual framework of the biennial's pedagogical ambitions; the notion of the city as a curriculum becomes a generative metaphor, framing the urban context as both a site and methodology for learning. Hoff and Willsdon emphasise the role of mediators as active interpreters and the importance of constructing spaces where learning occurs outside formalised institutional timeframes. In dialogue with the broader publications, their writing reinforces the biennial's commitment to horizontal practices and educational propositions that are affective, open-ended, and deeply situated.

Nevertheless, more broadly, the evolving presence of education within biennial-making reflects more significant transformations in how art is taught, framed, and institutionalised. The anthology *Art School: Propositions for the 21st Century* (Madoff, 2009) brings together reflections from artists, educators, and theorists that trace shifts in the pedagogical landscape of art education. Rather than prescribing a singular vision, the volume assembles a constellation of propositions that reflect the challenges and

⁴ This notion of the 'city as curriculum', developed collaboratively at the 9th Mercosul Biennial, anticipated ideas that would later reappear in the Liverpool Biennial's 'The City Is a School' (2014, 2016, 2018), suggesting a continuity of experimentation and shared influence between the two biennials.

urgencies of contemporary artistic training, many of which resonate with the discursive and process-oriented ambitions found in biennial formats.

Alongside Madoff's edition's approach to education and art, O'Neill & Wilson's (2010) *Curating and the Educational Turn* provides a critical framework for understanding the evolving role of discursive and educational programmes within contemporary art biennials. The authors highlight how these elements, once considered secondary to the exhibition, have become central to curatorial practice, particularly in biennials. This perspective situates the development of biennial programmes within a broader historical and theoretical context, emphasising the shift towards educational and discursive practices as critical components of contemporary curatorial strategies. O'Neill and Wilson have authored a series of influential works exploring these themes, but this volume stands out as the most significant for this research because of its comprehensive analysis of the intersection of curating and education in the biennial format.

However, when considered from within practice, this centrality is neither stable nor guaranteed. My experience working across the pedagogical structures of the Mercosul Biennial and later coordinating mediation within the Liverpool Biennial revealed a more uneven translation of the 'educational turn'. While discursive and educational programmes are institutionally foregrounded, the conditions that would allow them to operate as sites of critical pedagogy are not always sustained. In some instances, these structures enable long-term engagement, collective learning, and the reconfiguration of institutional roles. In others, they risk becoming programmatic layers that remain adjacent to the exhibition without fully transforming its logic. What O'Neill and Wilson identify as a structural shift thus emerges, in practice, as a contested field, one dependent on labour conditions, institutional commitment, and the degree to which pedagogical work is allowed to exceed its supportive function.

Published in the aftermath of the cancelled Manifesta 6, *Notes for an Art School* (Abu ElDahab et al., 2006) documents the curator's ambition to reimagine the biennial as a functioning educational institution. Rather than staging an exhibition, the project proposed the construction of a temporary art school in Nicosia, organised around transdisciplinary teaching, artistic research, and collective study. The publication brings together reflections on institutional critique, pedagogical form, and the limits of existing academic models, making the school not a theme but the biennial's core structure. Further examples of how biennials have become platforms for educational and mediating work appear in curatorial statements and documentation from recent editions. At the 12th Berlin Biennale (2022), a text by Samar G. reflects on how mediation practices can be reframed through a decolonial lens, proposing alternative ways to relate to audiences beyond the institutional norm. This approach aligns with broader shifts towards epistemic plurality within curatorial mediation.

My research has also been shaped by two long-term research groups dedicated to pedagogy. Since 2019, I have participated in the Para-Educational Research Seminar led by Nora Sternfeld and Julia Stolba, where education and curating are approached as intertwined forms of knowledge production. Engaging with this group has informed the methodological positioning of this research, particularly in understanding pedagogy as a situated and relational practice. During the COVID-19 pandemic, I was also part of Educação em Público (Education in Public), organised by Mônica Hoff and Fábio Tremonte. These exchanges reinforced the importance of non-hegemonic pedagogical perspectives and contributed to framing this research through situated practice rather than abstract models.

1.2.4 Transdisciplinary Perspectives

Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui's reflections on decolonial practices and the tensions between the Global South and North are central to this research. Her work in *Un mundo ch'ixi es posible: Ensayos desde un presente en crisis* (2018) and *Ch'ixinakax utxiwa: Una reflexión sobre prácticas y discursos descolonizadores* (2020) provides a framework for engaging non-Western epistemologies without essentialising them. Rather than proposing a resolution, her concept of the *ch'ixi* sustains contradiction and coexistence, allowing different epistemic positions to remain in tension. This perspective informs how this research approaches biennials as sites where colonial legacies are not overcome but persist in complex and uneven ways, particularly in the movement between South and North.

In dialogue with this, Boaventura de Sousa Santos's *Epistemologies of the South: Justice Against Epistemicide* (2014) reinforces the need to recognise plural forms of knowledge production and to resist epistemic violence. His notion of an 'ecology of knowledge' supports an expanded understanding of pedagogy and curating, where situated, vernacular, and marginalised forms of knowledge are not supplementary but constitutive. Within this research, this perspective does not function as a general call for inclusion, but as a methodological position that informs how practices are read across different contexts.

These positions are extended through Édouard Glissant's *Poetics of Relation* (1997), which introduces the concepts of relation, opacity, and creolisation as ways of thinking beyond transparency and universality. Glissant's refusal of full legibility becomes particularly relevant when considering transnational curatorial practices, where cultural translation does not resolve difference but maintains it. His work provides a conceptual

grounding for understanding biennials not as unified global formats, but as relational fields shaped by asymmetry, translation, and partial understanding.

Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987) further extends this framework by foregrounding the epistemic and affective dimensions of inhabiting border spaces. Her notion of *mestiza consciousness* introduces a way of thinking through hybridity and contradiction that resists binary logic. Within this research, her work supports an understanding of biennials as spaces where multiple identities, languages, and epistemologies coexist without being reconciled.

These perspectives inform a transdisciplinary approach by allowing institutional structures, community-based practices, and theoretical frameworks to be read together. In this research, this becomes visible in residency programmes and in the development of experimental projects, such as *The City is a School*, where learning does not remain confined to institutional formats but emerges through situated encounters. The work of Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, Boaventura de Sousa Santos, Édouard Glissant, and Gloria Anzaldúa supports this positioning by making it possible to work across these boundaries without forcing resolution. Their contributions allow for a sustained attention to learning as an ongoing process, to forms of knowledge that exist outside institutional validation, to the acceptance that not everything needs to be fully articulated, and to positions that do not conform to binary structures. In this sense, they provide a way of working that supports the space in between theory and practice, institution and community, without reducing one to the terms of the other.

1.2.5 Annotated Biennials

In addition to scholarly literature, this research draws on biennials themselves as primary sources of practice. The examples listed here are not analysed in detail within this review but indicate the exhibitions most relevant to the thesis. They are taken up in subsequent chapters: Venice, São Paulo, documenta, and Havana are examined in Chapter One as part of an ‘archaeology of engagement’, while the Mercosul and Liverpool Biennials are addressed in depth in Chapter Two as case studies. Together, these biennials provide the empirical grounding for the analysis of discursive and pedagogical programmes:

- *Venice Biennale* (1895–): archetype of the biennial as cultural diplomacy and national representation, foundational to the genealogy of large-scale exhibitions.
- *São Paulo Biennial* (1951–): early adopter of mediation and pedagogical strategies, tracing the structural embedding of education within biennials.
- *documenta* (1955–): a key site for institutionalising discursive formats (notably *documenta X*), central to the analysis of curatorial discursivity.
- *Havana Biennial* (1984–): decolonial counter-model, mobilising biennials as spaces of pedagogical experimentation and geopolitical critique.
- *Mercosul Biennial* (1997–): case study selected for its sustained investment in education and mediation, offering a distinctive model of pedagogical innovation.
- *Liverpool Biennial* (1999–): case study selected for its experiments in mediation, public engagement, and socially engaged practice embedded in local urban contexts.

Taken together, these biennials represent a cross-section of the field: foundational models, decolonial interventions, and case studies with embedded pedagogical practice. They provide the comparative framework through which this research interrogates how biennials construct, name, and sustain discursive and pedagogical programmes.

1.3 Methodology

The methodological approach adopted in this thesis is practice-based, grounded in my embedded work within biennials, and informed by a combination of theoretical and experiential strategies. It brings together four interrelated elements: a literature review of exhibition studies, biennial studies, pedagogy and art education, and transdisciplinary perspectives; an autotheoretical mode of writing that situates lived experience in dialogue with critical frameworks; detailed analysis of two case studies, the Mercosul and Liverpool Biennials; and practice-based research outputs developed in the form of a collection of essays and a critical toolkit. Together, these elements enable a methodological framework capable of addressing both the analytical and experiential dimensions of biennial practice. This research is situated within a practice-based doctoral framework; here, practice functions as a method of enquiry and development within the study.

A key premise of this research is the need to clarify the distinction and overlap between discursive and pedagogical practices. As introduced earlier, discursive practices are understood as the modes of knowledge production that take place beyond the exhibition display, while pedagogical practices refer to those that explicitly facilitate learning and dialogue. Methodologically, I treat these categories not as fixed or hierarchical but as intersecting fields whose boundaries shift in practice. The decision to hold them analytically distinct while attending to their entanglement allows for a more precise analysis of biennial programmes: how they are named, how they operate, and how they circulate within broader curatorial, institutional, and educational discourses. This framing enables the thesis to interrogate biennials as pedagogical tools without collapsing all discursive activity into pedagogy, or vice versa, thereby keeping open the complexity of their practices.

A central point for this research was the lack of sustained critical analysis of the discursive and pedagogical programmes implemented by large-scale periodic exhibitions. Addressing this gap required a methodology that could integrate theoretical reflection with practical engagement and allow subjective, situated knowledge to inform critical analysis. Initially, I considered autoethnography, particularly reflexive ethnography, as a framework for interweaving lived experience with theory, positioning the researcher both as subject and analyst. Yet, its prescriptive sociological methods proved too rigid for the fluid and situated writing this research demanded.

The methodological shift emerged through reading Lauren Fournier's *Autotheory as Feminist Practice in Art, Writing and Criticism* (2022), which foregrounds autotheory as a mode of practice that embraces subjectivity and positions lived experience as a form of critical knowledge. Fournier's account helped me recognise that autotheory provided greater flexibility than autoethnography, allowing personal experience to be mobilised not as anecdotal evidence but as a method of interrogating broader discursive and institutional frameworks. Autotheory offered the conceptual space to examine the contradictions of biennial-making through the entanglement of personal narrative, political context, and theoretical discourse.

Adopting autotheory as a methodological approach aligns this research with feminist traditions of writing that unsettle the boundaries between the personal and the political, the subjective and the institutional, the local and the global. This positioning is crucial to a study of biennials, which are themselves shaped by asymmetrical power relations and the interplay between hegemonic and marginalised perspectives. Autotheory provides a way to bring these tensions into view while resisting the abstraction of lived experience into purely theoretical terms.

My direct involvement in the Mercosul Biennial (6th–9th editions) and the Liverpool Biennial (2016, 2018) further shaped this methodological orientation. These case studies were selected not only for their relevance as contrasting examples from the Global South and the Global North, but also because my embedded professional roles within them allow for an analysis that is simultaneously critical and situated. The combination of case study analysis and autotheoretical writing enables the research to retrace projects I participated in, examine their discursive and pedagogical infrastructures, and generate new conceptual tools for reflecting on biennial practice.

1.3.1 Research Methods and Adaptations Due to the COVID-19 Pandemic

The initial plan for this research was to adopt multiple methods, including interviews with curators, education curators, and non-professional participants, alongside archival studies. In addition to drawing on the extensive literature on biennials held at Liverpool John Moores University and through online databases, significant archives such as the Svevo Archive in São Paulo⁵ and the documenta Archive⁶ in Kassel, were identified as key sources, given their comprehensive documentation of biennial histories and engagement with radical archiving methodologies. The COVID-19 pandemic, however, required substantial methodological adaptation. Restricted access to physical archives necessitated increased reliance on online resources and shifted the emphasis of the research towards a more introspective and reflective analysis.

To ensure analytical depth despite these constraints, the case studies selected were biennials with established discursive programmes, based on the following criteria:

⁵ <http://arquivo.bienal.org.br/>.

⁶ <https://www.documenta-archiv.de/>.

- sustained periodic programming of discursive projects;
- public dissemination of programme rationales through advertisements and publications;
- availability of materials for general audiences, schools, and communities;
- the existence of some form of archival record, even if limited to press coverage.

The pandemic context also reinforced the adoption of an autotheoretical approach, blending personal narrative with theoretical reflection. This method integrates experiential vignettes with critical analysis, positioning subjectivity as a productive tool for examining discursive practices while maintaining reflexivity and analytical rigour.

Beyond analysing existing discursive structures, the research contributes a critical taxonomy and toolkit for future projects. This acknowledges both the fragility of biennial projects and the challenges posed by discontinuous or inaccessible archives, while adopting an ‘archaeological’ approach to reconstructing discursive histories. The following section details how the research was structured and how its methods evolved in response to both external constraints and intellectual developments.

1.3.2 Research Stages

1. Definition of the Field of Study, Mapping, and Bibliographical Research

The first stage, initiated in 2019, established the place of this research within exhibition and biennial studies. It focused on situating biennials in relation to the discursive, educational, and social turns. Key activities included:

- mapping biennial discursive models and identifying dominant cases.

- analysing the design, periodicity, and construction of discursive programmes, with the Mercosul and Liverpool Biennials as primary case studies, based on personal archives, online platforms, and archival sources;
- conducting a bibliographical review, drawing on LJMU's extensive collection of exhibition and biennial studies and access to the LB archive;
- adapting the research structure to address archival constraints and integrating autotheory as a central methodological approach.

2. Adapting Research Methods and Shifting to Autotheory

The second stage involved methodological adaptation following the outbreak of COVID-19. Limitations on physical research access, including restricted travel to archives and the cancellation of planned interviews, prompted a decisive shift towards autotheory. This approach incorporated critical reflexivity to acknowledge subjectivity and positioned the researcher's direct experiences of biennials as central to the analysis. Vignettes of personal engagement were developed as methodological tools, bringing together lived experience and theoretical reflection. The pandemic context also prompted a reassessment of the study's relevance, reinforcing the decision to embrace a more introspective and narrative-driven methodology. This shift directly shaped the next stage (3), influencing both the organisation of research material, the writing of the essays and the design of the toolkit.

3. Organising and Structuring the Research Output

The third stage organised the material developed in earlier phases into three interrelated components, aligned with the autotheoretical framework:

- *Archaeology of Discursive Programmes* – a reflective and narrative-driven analysis that reworks the literature review through the lens of the case studies.

- *Personal Histories and Critical Reflexivity* – a series of analytical vignettes developed from lived experience and positioned within critical debates.
- *Development of a Toolkit* – an iterative process through which the comparative analysis of the MB and LB is translated into a working structure for reflection and application.

Overall, the methodological structure evolved in response to both intellectual developments and external constraints. The integration of archival research, analysis of discursive programmes, and autotheoretical writing enabled a reflexive engagement with the subject, allowing the research to move between documentation, experience, and critical analysis.

1.3.3 Research Sampling and Analysis

A central exercise of this research is the development of a critical taxonomy and toolkit for the field of contemporary art. Biennials' discursive programmes often appear under divergent terminologies: education, pedagogical, learning, engagement, or public. Such variations are not superficial but reveal the theoretical frameworks to which each institution imagines itself and its relations to audiences. Naming thus becomes a practice of institutional positioning. Tallant (2010), before becoming Director of the Liverpool Biennial, suggested that integrative programme structures can reshape institutions from within, aligning with what has been described as 'new institutionalism.' This framework acknowledges that discursive and pedagogical programmes are not simply supplementary but recalibrate the institution's core organisational logic. A comparable proposition was articulated by Luiz Camnitzer in his design of the pedagogical programme for the 2007 Mercosul Biennial.

The question of naming becomes especially evident in relation to the role of mediation. Having worked as Mediation Coordinator for two editions of the Liverpool Biennial, I experienced the conceptual and institutional dissonance between different uses of the term. At the Mercosul Biennial, mediators operated within complex pedagogical frameworks, occupying positions that combined critical interpretation with experience-building. In contrast, at Liverpool Biennial, the mediators were integrated into a more conventional model, functioning as gallery assistants rather than pedagogical agents. Institutional structures in the context of the biennials reinforce these distinctions: while Tate's Visitor Assistants belong to the front-of-house team, rather than education, other museum mediators in Brazil are firmly positioned within its educational architecture. These divergences highlight that the term 'mediator' carries very different implications depending on the institutional model in which it is embedded. Such tensions also echo Simon Sheikh's (2010) discussion in *Letter to Jane (Investigation of a Function)*, where Andrea Fraser's Jane Castleton frames mediation as a practice that reflects the public back to the institution as pedagogical subject. Yet what becomes of the term when mediation is reduced to invigilation?

Because language itself is central to this research, I draw on psychoanalytical readings of Jacques Lacan, particularly as interpreted by Slavoj Žižek (1991). Two aspects are especially relevant. First, the concept of the other: Lacan positions the other as a constitutive element of the self, an external entity that simultaneously defines and destabilises identity. This resonates with Rancière's (2004) account of the distribution of the sensible, where political subjectivity is structured through the recognition of who belongs and who is excluded. Second, Lacan's analysis of symbolism and language, as emphasised by Žižek, informs the construction of a critical taxonomy in this study. Developing such a taxonomy requires recognising how shared language produces symbolic orders within the field, shaping both institutional practice and subjective experience. These frameworks support the analytical and autotheoretical components of

this research, enabling personal experience and institutional language to be read within a broader symbolic structure.

1.3.5 Research Contribution to Knowledge

This thesis addresses its central research questions by advancing knowledge in two primary ways: through a body of critical essays and the development of a critical taxonomy translated into a practical toolkit:

- Critical essays: Developed through an autotheoretical methodology, the essays situate lived experience in dialogue with theoretical frameworks. They propose a distinct mode of writing in biennial studies, where reflexivity and subjectivity are mobilised not as anecdote but as critical method.
- Critical taxonomy and toolkit: Through mapping biennial discursive practices, analysing the Mercosul and Liverpool Biennials, and constructing a vocabulary “legacy list,” the research generates a taxonomy that clarifies how biennials conceptualise and name their pedagogical and discursive programmes. This taxonomy is then consolidated into a toolkit, designed as a dialogical and practical resource. Rather than prescribing “how to make a biennial,” the toolkit provides flexible structures for reflection and analysis that can be adapted to different institutional and cultural contexts.

The critical essays form an essential contribution, demonstrating how autotheory can be used to interrogate biennial practice, bringing together personal engagement, institutional critique, and theoretical reflection. The presentation of knowledge in this hybrid form as essays might extend existing methodologies in exhibition and biennial studies, opening a space for subjective experience as a legitimate site of critical insight. They also serve as the conceptual ground from which the toolkit emerged: the act of

writing, reflecting, and revisiting lived experience created the conditions for the taxonomy to be articulated and ultimately translated into a usable format.

The toolkit builds directly on this foundation. The unconventional and often *transpedagogical* (Helguera, 2010; Birchall, 2015) structures from which biennial programmes continually generate new terms and neologisms. Therefore, by consolidating these into a critical taxonomy and translating them into a toolkit, this thesis contributes a framework for future projects that is at once analytical and practical.

1.4 Overview of Structure

This thesis is organised into four interconnected parts that bring theoretical analysis and practice-based knowledge into dialogue. These components operate as a relational structure. Following Édouard Glissant's notion of the archipelago, they function as distinct but connected elements rather than as a hierarchy. Each part develops specific aspects of the research while remaining in dialogue with the others, so that meaning emerges through their interaction.

The first part, *Archaeologies of the Discursive (or Studying in the Exhibition Everything That Is Not the Exhibition)*, reflects on the formation of the field of biennial studies in parallel with the rise of the discursive as a methodology for exhibition-making. It traces the emergence of discursive programmes at the Venice Biennale, São Paulo Biennial, Havana Biennial, and documenta, examining how these practices initially evolved in response to immediate needs before becoming institutionalised. These developments are analysed in relation to broader shifts in contemporary art history, including the introduction of new roles such as the education curator. This analysis is informed by the

research's engagement with curatorial and pedagogical practice, which underpins the interpretation of these developments.

The second part, *You Start with Planning for the End of the World*, presents the case studies of the Mercosul Biennial (6th–9th editions) and the Liverpool Biennial (2016 and 2018). It examines their educational and discursive programmes as methodological sites, situating them within wider debates on biennial-making and addressing how distinct geopolitical contexts shape curatorial and pedagogical approaches.

The third part presents the practice-based outputs functioning as part of the research rather than as standalone outputs. They also inform and ground the analysis developed in the previous sections, particularly by bringing specific moments of practice into dialogue with the theoretical frameworks and case studies, allowing concepts to be tested and reworked through lived experience. Those are:

- *Biennials as ...*, is a collection of essays written in an autotheoretical format. Developed through sustained engagement with the Mercosul Biennial and the Liverpool Biennial, these five vignettes draw on my situated experiences. They function simultaneously as personal narratives and critical tools, contextualising theoretical frameworks, demonstrating how lived practice generates knowledge, and informing and grounding the theoretical analysis and case studies developed in the thesis.
- *Biennials as Pedagogical Tools – A Toolkit*, proposes a critical toolkit for planning and evaluating discursive programmes in contemporary art. Designed as a flexible and dialogical instrument, the toolkit can be adapted beyond the immediate scope of biennials to support non-hierarchical forms of collaboration and critical knowledge production, building on insights developed through both theoretical analysis and practice-based experience.

The fourth and final part, the Conclusion, revisits the research questions, synthesises findings across the four parts, and reflects on the dual modes of writing (autotheoretical narrative and theoretical analysis). It identifies the research's contributions to biennial studies, curatorial practice, and discursive art education, while also pointing towards future lines of enquiry opened by the study, drawing together insights developed through both analysis and practice-based experience.

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2 Chapter One – Archaeologies of the Discursive (or Studying in the Exhibition Everything That Is Not the Exhibition)

This chapter introduces an *archaeology of the discursive* in biennials, examining how audience engagement, educational initiatives, and editorial formats developed across four foundational cases: Venice, São Paulo, documenta, and Havana. Drawing on Altshuler (2008), Filipovic, van Hal and Øvstebø (2010), Gardner & Green (2013, 2016), Marchart (2008, 2014), Bishop (2006, 2012), and Weiss (2011), it investigates how these programmes emerged, often spontaneously, before becoming institutionalised, and how they reconfigured curatorial authorship, publicness, and pedagogy. The title signals a Foucauldian archaeological concept, reading biennials as layered sites where discourses sediment and shift over time (Foucault, 2008/1969). The chapter adopts an objective scholarly register; where a brief first-person vignette appears (marked visually, as explained in the introduction), it serves to clarify method and positionality. It aims to establish the historical ground and key inflexions that orient the case studies and practice-based outputs that follow.

The structure of exhibitions and the ways audiences interact with them have shifted with changes in technology, immersive practices, and the geopolitical and economic conditions of contemporary art. Public engagement and education programmes have become essential elements of biennials, fostering deeper connections between audiences and the art on display. This chapter investigates how some pioneering efforts of Venice, São Paulo, documenta, and Havana shaped what we now recognise as discursive and pedagogical programmes. Examining their historical contexts and motivations reveals how public engagement and education evolved as integral components of biennial practice, particularly across the shifting dynamics of the Global North and South.

Reflecting on this multiplicity, Vittoria Martini's assertion that 'each biennial has a founding narrative that demands an archaeology of historical specificities' is pivotal (Martini in Van Hal, 2010, p. 19). Martini's call to attend to difference resists homogenising accounts of biennial history. Similarly, René Block's emphasis on the 'workshop character' of biennials underscores their capacity to generate collaborative and situated practices (Block in Van Hal, 2010, p. 9).

Taken together, these perspectives provide the scaffolding for the chapter, which is structured in three sections. Section 2.1 maps the emergence and historical evolution of engagement strategies across the four foundational biennials. Section 2.2 examines how discursive, educational, and social turns have defined the curatorial and pedagogical trajectories of biennials, raising questions about institutional responsibility, curatorial authorship, and mutual learning. Section 2.3 considers the broader process of biennialisation: the global proliferation of biennials and the tensions it generates—between localisation and standardisation, institutional critique and cultural branding, pedagogy and policy. Together, these sections situate biennials as key sites in negotiating publicness, discourse, and educational labour in contemporary art.

2.1 Archaeology of Engagement

In this context, the establishment of significant biennials from the late nineteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries laid important groundwork for the evolution of discursive and educational practices within the global art scene. While each biennial – Venice, São Paulo, documenta, and Havana – emerged from distinct cultural and geopolitical conditions, they collectively transformed the exhibition into a space of artistic exchange and public dialogue. This section approaches these biennials as archaeological sites of engagement, where stratified layers of historical shifts reveal how discursive practices developed in tandem with curatorial, institutional, and political change.

From the Venice Biennale's inception in 1895 as a cultural gesture tied to national representation, to São Paulo's post-war modernist aspirations, to documenta's post-WWII reconnection with the international art world, and Havana's active decentring of Eurocentric models, each case signals a turning point. Their respective strategies of audience mediation, education, and public engagement demonstrate how the biennial form evolved into a critical infrastructure within the global art circuit.

Historically, the Venice Biennale was the first to be established, in 1895. From its outset, it offered prizes and invited national representation through pavilions, with the Golden Lion emerging as the most prestigious of these awards. Its formation occurred alongside the rise of self-organised artist projects across Europe – movements challenging the academic restrictions of the salon system and laying the foundations for the avant-garde (Altshuler, 2013). The São Paulo Biennial (1951) and documenta (1955) soon followed, each rooted in different imperatives and regional contexts. Venice began as a cultural gift that in its independent format would subsidise official salons; São Paulo was a project of national modernisation; and documenta a post-war cultural rehabilitation effort aimed at reintroducing Germany to global artistic discourse.

Crucially, the practice of gathering publics through spontaneous and organised forms of mediation has long been embedded in these biennials. As Gardner & Green (2013, 2016) observe, these are 'self-conscious' biennials – aware of their positioning within global art circuits and often prefiguring the 'turns' later theorised in contemporary art discourse. In Havana, informal pedagogical programmes emerged early on, particularly in its second and third editions, emphasising collaboration and dialogue. In São Paulo, artist-led mediation practices date back to the 1960s and later evolved into a formalised pedagogical structure, now partially archived and reflected in the #30xbienal research initiative.

The São Paulo Biennial, established in 1951, was part of a broader assertion of Brazil's modern cultural identity. Drawing on the legacy of the *Semana de Arte Moderna de 1922*,⁷ It embodied a move away from colonial paradigms, emphasising regional hybridity. Its establishment by Italian-Brazilian industrialist Ciccillio Matarazzo positioned it as a vital infrastructure in the Latin American art landscape. The iconic Ciccillio Matarazzo Pavilion, designed by Oscar Niemeyer and Hélió Uchôa in 1957, which spans 30,000 m² and now houses the Biennial Foundation, remains central to the biennial's symbolic and material legacy.

Designed with a very different structure, the first edition of *documenta* was an introduction to contemporary art production in West Germany and all the geopolitical weight the region had in the post-war period. Founded in 1955 by Arnold Bode, a Kassel painter and academy professor, its inception aimed to re-establish Germany's connection with the global art community after World War II. The first *documenta*, conceived as a retrospective, showcased works deemed degenerate by the Nazis alongside classic works of modernism and was organised as a '100-day museum'. The unexpected success of the event spurred the establishment of a recurring exhibition cycle, with *documenta* becoming a seismograph for contemporary art developments. Harald Szeemann's appointment as Secretary General in 1972 institutionalised the role of the independent curator and expanded the format into a curatorial experiment of global significance. *documenta* has consistently influenced international art, functioning as both an exhibition and an institutional critique, reshaping expectations around the temporality and authorship of contemporary art display. The *documenta* und Museum Fridericianum

⁷ The *Semana de Arte Moderna de 1922* (Week of 22), held at the Theatro Municipal de São Paulo from 13 to 17 February 1922, marked a turning point in Brazilian cultural history. Featuring figures such as Mário de Andrade, Oswald de Andrade, Anita Malfatti, and Heitor Villa-Lobos, the event rejected academic artistic traditions and embraced a modern, nationally rooted, and experimental ethos. It set the stage for a critical engagement with Brazilian hybridity and the tensions between regional and international cultural forces (Schwarz, 2000; Santiago, 1995).

gGmbH, a non-profit organisation supported by the City of Kassel, the State of Hesse, and the German Federal Cultural Foundation, holds a significant archive of its history.

During the 1960s and 1970s, several new biennials emerged, including the India Triennale and the Sydney Biennale, although only the latter remains active (Vogel, 2010). By the 1980s, roughly twenty biennials had taken root globally (Grandal Montero, 2012), setting the stage for the rapid multiplication of the format in the 1990s. This period is defined by Marchart (2008) as the era of ‘biennialisation’ – a condition in which the proliferation of biennials reflects broader globalising dynamics. Marchart describes the biennial as both a political structure and a mode of producing and asserting identity at local, national, and continental levels.

The Havana and São Paulo Biennials are particularly significant as expressions of non-aligned political and cultural positions. They laid early foundations for the decolonial discourse that has become increasingly prominent in curatorial theory and practice. As Gardner & Green (2013, 2016) argue, these biennials responded to shifting global formations before such strategies were theorised as institutional critique. Niemojewski (2011, in Lin-Hill, 2013) observes that these events emerged from historically marginalised regions, offering counter-narratives to Western-dominated art history. These biennials were not just exhibitions but were part of a broader movement to decentralise and democratise the art world, challenging the dominant Western narratives and offering new platforms for voices from the so-called peripheries.

These biennials make visible the diversity of the field rather than offering a single model to follow. The Mercosul Biennial, for instance, initially replicated aspects of the Venice model through national representation, aligning itself with the geopolitical identity of Mercosur, while at the same time distinguishing itself from the more international

orientation of the São Paulo Biennial. The Liverpool Biennial, by contrast, did not adopt this structure, developing instead through a curatorial model without national pavilions. Across these contexts, mediation and education are consistently present, but rarely central at the outset. In Venice and São Paulo, and in the early editions of Mercosul and Liverpool, these roles are largely aligned with invigilation, even when terminology shifts. Only later do they begin to be institutionalised as pedagogical or discursive practices, and even then, this shift remains partial and uneven.

While the Havana Biennial introduced forms of encounter and gathering that resonate more directly with later developments, these approaches are not transferable as models. Each biennial operates within specific cultural, political, and institutional conditions that resist replication. In this sense, the value of these precedents lies not in offering methodologies to be adopted, but in exposing the limits of their translation. This becomes particularly evident in *documenta 15*, where the attempt to operate through a collective and decolonial framework made the tensions between different cultural, institutional, and epistemological positions explicit. Rather than resolving these differences, the exhibition exposed the difficulty of sustaining such approaches within a Eurocentric institutional context, making the conflict itself visible.

This condition can be read through Édouard Glissant's notion of relation (1997), which sustains difference across contexts without reducing them to coherence. Read in this way, these biennials do not form a lineage or a transferable model, but a field of relations shaped by their specific conditions. This is critical for approaching the Mercosul Biennial and the Liverpool Biennial, where pedagogical and discursive practices emerge through situated negotiation rather than continuity.

2.1.1 Venice Biennale: Diplomacy and Display

The Venice Biennale's approach to audience engagement was not embedded from the outset but gradually developed over time, even as the Biennale established itself as a canonical model for others. The inaugural edition in 1895 introduced the 'return ticket strategy', offering free entry to visitors presenting return train tickets and thereby broadening the Biennale's reach beyond the established art world. Vogel (2010, pp. 14–15) links this gesture to Riccardo Selvattico's Enlightenment-inspired vision of the 'unbiased development of audience' and the 'fraternal association of all people'. Resistance to censorship during the first edition – when organisers defended a prize-winning nude painting against the church's objections – further aligned the Biennale with wider struggles for access to knowledge and artistic expression (Szeemann, 1968, p. 46). Though not initially present, formal educational programmes were foreshadowed by the Biennale's curatorial strategies from the 1970s and appeared at different historical moments during its founding. The Biennale reveals an entanglement between audience development, national representation, and the concept of 'soft power'. Aligned to this idea, Vogel (2010, p. 33) describes the Biennale as an 'international' forum, but only for Western civilisation, Europe, and North America, mimicking the relationship of these countries with the others and the separation of 'civilised' and 'non-civilised' countries. This distinction was and still is very clear, as Venice is still regarded as the essence of Western modernism'.

As the twentieth century progressed, the Biennale became a site of *soft power* and geopolitical display. National pavilions operated as platforms for forging identities and projecting political narratives. The Russian Pavilion, for instance, presented the artistic vision of the Revolution in the early 1920s, while the controversial 1922 exhibition of African masks exposed the colonial frameworks underpinning the categorisation of art. These episodes demonstrate how the Biennale functioned simultaneously as an art exhibition and a stage where politics and audience perception were closely intertwined. One of the most charged moments came in 1934, when Benito Mussolini hosted Adolf

Hitler at the Biennale, a visit captured in celebratory illustrations and film footage (Alloway, 1968). The Biennale continues to operate as a geopolitical arena: in recent editions, the Russian Pavilion has remained closed since the invasion of Ukraine and was temporarily assigned to Bolivia, while the Israeli Pavilion did not open in 2024 in response to the renewed Israeli–Palestinian conflict. These decisions were taken in anticipation of public backlash, as protesters camped outside the Giardini with signs denouncing Israel and supporting Palestine.

In recent years, the Venice Biennale has expanded its engagement through a range of parallel projects. The Biennale Sessions (launched in 2007) offers universities enhanced opportunities during their visits, with fifty-four institutions participating in 2024. Since 2013, the Meetings on Art programme has staged talks and debates aligned with the Biennale’s curatorial theme across its six-month duration. Mediation has also become more structured: the ‘*Catalogo Attivo*’ or ‘Human Catalogues’ guide visitors through the exhibitions, with the 53rd edition (2013) recording 72,931 participants in tours and workshops. These programmes now differentiate by age group, with tailored itineraries for children, students, and young adults; in 2024, the high school activities were developed in collaboration with chief curator Adriano Pedrosa under the titles *Found in Translation*, *I Am Another*, and *Unquiet Genealogies*. Finally, the Biennale College fosters emerging artists across all disciplines, pairing them with international mentors to develop new works for the Biennale’s departments (La Biennale di Venezia, n.d.).

Conversations with ‘Human Catalogues’ from the last three editions (2019, 2022, 2024) suggest that the initial cohort received six months of training, while later groups had significantly less. Responsibility for educational programmes spans all Biennale sectors—art, architecture, cinema, theatre, dance, and even the carnival—which may account for the limited training resources compared to other projects. Partnerships with local authorities have also been established to reduce transport and ticket costs for students,

a strategy introduced six to seven years ago, though the exact starting point is undocumented and difficult to verify. Like many biennials worldwide, the Venice Biennale has recently moved towards a more specialised education and engagement team, reflecting the ‘educational turn’ in biennial-making since the late 1990s.

2.1.2 São Paulo Biennial: Proto-Mediation and Public Instruction

The São Paulo Biennial, established in 1951, faced distinct challenges compared with the Venice Biennale, primarily in engaging a local community that lacked a well-established background in visiting art spaces or exhibitions. This unique context gave rise to the groundbreaking concept of ‘proto-school mediation’, where, in early editions, curators, commissioners, and cultural attachés assumed the role of guides outside formal educational programmes. They led visitors through the often-complex exhibitions, highlighting the dedication of the early organisers and revealing the need for a more structured and formalised system dedicated to the audience. The challenging nature of showcasing modern and later contemporary art often posed barriers for working-class and illiterate audiences. Recognising this gap, the São Paulo Biennial pioneered the development of the first dedicated training programmes for mediators, which were later formalised. These mediators emerged as vital bridges between the art and the public, demystifying the works and fostering a deeper understanding. Their role transcended mere explanation; they facilitated artistic exploration, empowering audiences to engage with the art more personally.

The early approach of ‘proto-school mediation’ played a crucial role in shaping the later formalisation of educational programmes. According to Mineirini Neto’s (2014) thesis ‘Educação nas Bienais de São Paulo: Dos cursos do MAM ao educativo Permanente’ (Education on the São Paulo Biennials: from the MAM workshops to permanent education), the 1st São Paulo Biennial was organised by the Museum of Modern Art of

São Paulo (MAM SP). However, after its 6th edition in 1961, the biennial detached itself from MAM SP when its founder, Ciccilio Matarazzo, donated the biennial's collection to the University of São Paulo (USP). Mineirini Neto highlights that one of his research objectives was to document the history of education at the São Paulo Biennial, which had previously lacked sufficient coverage. He notes that a series of publications up to 2000 and 2001 focused on the history of the São Paulo Biennial but often failed to describe educational activities clearly. This changed with the publication of *Revista USP* in 2000, which dedicated part of its reflection to educational programmes. Additionally, a CD-ROM organised by Maria Celeste Martins and Giga Piscoque for the *Discovery of Brazil Exhibition (Mostra do Descobrimento do Brasil)* about the five hundred years since the Portuguese arrived in Brazil included a profile of educational teams at the São Paulo Biennial since its 8th edition.

Despite the progress, Mineirini Neto points out that an ongoing issue for the biennial's organisation has been the frequent changes in the team's responsible for each edition, particularly the educational teams. This has resulted in a discontinuity of ideas and processes, which presents a significant gap in the work with scholars and communities. However, as an art educator, Mineirini Neto emphasises that establishing a permanent educational team in 2011 marked a turning point in the biennial's engagement with the public.

In 1951, Brazil was undergoing significant change, consolidating its economy through industrialisation and beginning to establish cultural infrastructure such as museums and art galleries. For many visitors, the Biennial was their first encounter with modern and abstract art. Of the 100,000 visitors to the inaugural exhibition, 10,000 were students (Mineirini Neto, 2014, p. 30). The public's unfamiliarity with abstraction generated widespread questions and led to the creation of a new role for individuals who could facilitate understanding. The primary goal was to make this art accessible to a broad

public, including workers and the city's growing population. As journalist Luis Fransechini noted in 1951, 'All efforts should be dedicated to popular education' (Fransechini, 1951, in Mineirini Neto, 2014, p. 34). The 'explanatory tours' (*passeios explicativos*) of the first edition thus became the first step towards a sustained pedagogical programme at the Biennial.

A central figure in the proto-mediation school was Wolfgang Pfeiffer, the technical director of MAM SP and a teacher of art history and design at the parallel school run by MAM. Pfeiffer was responsible for training the monitors for the biennial until 1965. The training programmes had two clear objectives: to familiarise participants with contemporary art movements and their representatives and to train them to communicate effectively with a diverse public (Mineirini Neto, 2014, p. 54). Mineirini Neto's research indicates that by the 2nd edition of the biennial, the school for the 'art explainers' had garnered as much attention in the newspapers as the artworks themselves. Mirko Lauer (in Weiss et al., 2011, p. 187) recalls the Sao Paulo Biennial as 'the forefront of Modernisation and Internationalism of art in Latin America' when it took the chance and reversed the standing of art from something conventional to something popular. The work of Pfeiffer and the later organisers of the education programmes also have something to do with this.

In 1968, in an attempt to enhance the qualities of the Venice Biennale in comparison with other art exhibitions and projects across the globe, Lawrence Alloway (1968, p. 15) described the São Paulo Biennial as a place out of the city, a factory-like structure, disconnected from the citizens and the city. When the biennial moved to the newly refurbished Matarazzo Pavilion in Ibirapuera Park for its 6th edition, the organisation provided free transportation for people across the city to visit the park. Throughout the year, this strategy led the people of the city to adopt the park as a must-go place and the biennial as part of the city. The São Paulo Biennial's commitment to free access

profoundly influences how its educational programmes are shaped today. The São Paulo Biennial Foundation, an independent organisation not directly connected to the city, state, or national governments, has developed a complex structure supporting the biennial's mission. The São Paulo Biennial remains the most extended ongoing educational programme for biennials, and its model, thoroughly studied by Brazilian and international researchers (like Ivo Mesquita, Aracy Amaral, Paulo Herkenhoof, Pablo Lafuente, Carlos Esche, Isobel Whitelegg,) stands out as a potential model for other biennials worldwide, showcasing the influence and importance of the event in the art world.

The 28th edition in 2008, curated by Ivo Mesquita and Ana Paula Cohen, known as the 'biennial of the void', is a particularly emblematic recent edition, as it was intensely self-reflexive and was accompanied by an extensive discursive programme. Featuring a series of polemics on budget cuts and the violent political response to protesters during the opening, the 2008 edition occupied the Matarazzo Pavilion, reserving the ground floor for meetings, panels, and conferences, while intentionally leaving the second floor empty. The space was 'dedicated to panels, conferences, performances and other related educational activities' (Barragán, 2020, p. 160). However, what came to define the edition in public discourse was not only the curatorial strategy but also a spontaneous action that disrupted it. Also depicted as an 'empty biennial', the 28th São Paulo Biennial marked a series of shifts and discussions within the Brazilian and Latin American art systems. On opening day, a group of around forty *pixadores* entered the building and covered the blank white walls of the second floor with tags such as 'Down with the dictatorship' and 'Is this art?' The act, rooted in the São Paulo tradition of *pixo* – a transgressive and codified tagging style – confronted the commodification of graffiti as contemporary art and exposed the ongoing conflict between the elite art system and forms of expression aligned with the urban periphery. Two participants were arrested, but only one, Caroline Pivetta, remained in prison for fifty-three days, facing charges of criminal conspiracy and

destruction of a protected site. Her case marked the longest sentence ever given to someone connected to *pixo* in Brazil (Silva in Bach & Erstad, 2023, p. 40).

In the Perennial Biennial publication *Local Perspectives on a Global Format* (Bach & Erstad, 2023), this episode was discussed not only as a moment of rupture but also as a site of pedagogical tension between institutional containment and insurgent publics. The collective text, originally published at the time of Pivetta's imprisonment, reflected on the incapacity of the Fundação Bienal de São Paulo and its curatorial leadership to accommodate *pixo* as a legitimate form of cultural production and expression. The incident exposed a fundamental contradiction between the biennial's discursive openness and its institutional limits, particularly the disparity between its declared commitment to participation and the repressive measures enacted in response to uninvited public intervention. In a gesture that could be read as either reparation or co-optation, three *pixadores* were later invited to participate as exhibiting artists in the following edition, in 2010 (Silva in Bach & Erstad, 2023, p. 40).

Pérez-Barreiro's call to move beyond professionalised curatorial scripts towards more intuitive and dialogical modes highlights both the possibilities and the constraints of working within an institution such as the Bienal de São Paulo, where the complexity of organisational structures often limits the scope for improvisation. My role as guest curator in the 33rd edition was relatively modest in the large scale of the organisation, yet I believe it offered a space to insert a necessary political inflexion through the biographical exhibition of Aníbal López, the late Guatemalan artist. It somehow introduced a situated urgency that counterbalanced critiques of the overall curatorial approach as overly soft, particularly in the context of Brazil's political uncertainty. His presence also underscored the tensions between thematic coherence and affective resonance that Pérez-Barreiro identified in his reflections on the curatorial method of *Affective Affinities* (Fortin, 2018, pp. 42–47).

The Biennial's educational initiatives have continued to evolve and now constitute a significant dimension of its programmes, with a dedicated team managing public and educational activities year-round, including itinerant projects during non-exhibition years. In recent editions, curatorial teams have played a crucial role in shaping educational concepts, contributing to a more cohesive visitor experience and commissioning site-specific participatory works. Another important strand has been the Biennial's extensive editorial practice, which extends beyond catalogues to include guides and a growing range of specialised materials for children, young people, and families. Through essays, critical reflections, and pedagogical publications, the Biennial extends its conversations beyond the exhibition space, creating opportunities for sustained engagement. As Jochen Volz, artistic director of the 32nd edition, observes:

It is, therefore, the responsibility of an institution like the Bienal de São Paulo not only to present the art made by our contemporaries across various parts of the world but also to be a platform where the strategies and practices of contemporary artists can be experienced, experimented with, and, most importantly, shared with a large audience. (Volz in Fortin, 2018, p. 120)

2.1.3 documenta: From Retrospective to Discursive Arena

documenta, held every five years in Kassel, Germany, has evolved into one of the most significant platforms for contemporary art. Started in 1955 under the curatorship of Arnold Bode, who conceived the exhibition as '100 Days of a Museum', the model it pioneered has significantly influenced other biennials worldwide. Over the years, documenta has transformed from a traditional exhibition to a more critical inquiry format, proposing to the art field new global dialogues and displaying various transformations; especially in recent editions, it has been the site for a series of polemical conflicts and has had a notable and increasing emphasis on discursive practices. Although the transformation of the discursive in documenta was particularly evident in documenta X (1997), documenta 11 (2002), documenta 14 (2017), and documenta 15 (2022), marking significant moments in its history, earlier iterations, such as the 5th and 6th

editions, had already registered the changing field. In these two moments, in 1972 and 1977 respectively, documenta staged two interventions by the artist Joseph Beuys as more experimental or alternative forms of discursive practices. For documenta 5 in 1972, at the invitation of curator Harald Szeemann, Beuys created a cabinet for his ongoing project *Organisation for Direct Democracy (Büro für direkte Demokratie)* during the one hundred days of the exhibition.⁸ During documenta 6 in 1977, Beuys engaged with visitors through the *Free International University (Freie Internationale Hochschule für Kreativität und interdisziplinäre Forschung)*, a project that ran from 1973 to 1988 and that took over the Fridericianum's rotunda throughout the one hundred days of the event (documenta, n.d.). This institution was considered central to Beuys's mission of merging political activism with education and art (Bishop, 2012; Hoff, 2014).

Subsequently, Catherine David's curatorial vision for documenta X positioned Kassel as an immersive environment 'where art and the urban landscape intertwined' (documenta, n.d.). By creating a walking route that integrated art installations with the city's infrastructure, David encouraged viewers to engage with the exhibition in art walks, integrating the city and its surroundings. The '100 Days–100 Guests' programmes established a global forum for dialogue in the exhibition, inviting diverse voices to discuss pressing contemporary issues and lending a broader social, economic, and environmental theme for the discussions. The format was innovative, challenging conventional exhibition practices and setting a precedent for art as a catalyst for critical thinking and public engagement. The global impact of documenta X's curatorial vision on audience engagement is crucial and of huge significance in the art world. Kompatsiaris contrasts documenta 9 and documenta X, identifying documenta X as a turning point in curatorial history for its focus on 'militant knowledge production' (Kompatsiaris, 2017, p. 53). He

⁸ The project was captured in a two-day interview documentation (Beuys & Bodenmann-Ritter, 1975), which describes the office's structure and engagement with the public (and the artist's reflections).

notes that documenta X was ‘radically different from its predecessor’ and played a significant role in spreading the model of the discursive exhibition. This edition of documenta reclaimed ‘the political project of the avant-garde’ and opposed the typical mega-show structure, promoting disobedience against globalisation and capitalism.

The following documenta (in 2002) had Okwui Enwezor as its curator, the first non-European to lead the exhibition. Enwezor’s documenta 11 was structured around four ‘platforms’ that served as discursive and educational forums before the actual exhibition in Kassel, which was the fifth and final platform.⁹ These platforms manifested the curator’s concept of exploring different themes across various global locations, emphasising a transdisciplinary approach to art and its intersections with political and social issues. This made the exhibition a global and postcolonial exercise, showing the complex intersections of culture, politics, and knowledge systems. Enwezor’s direction of documenta represented a radical departure from its predecessors by decentralising the exhibition’s focus and challenging Western-centric perspectives. The curator envisioned it as a genuinely global event, dedicating this decentralised approach to decolonising the art world by bringing in diverse voices and addressing globalisation, postcolonialism, and social justice issues. As Enwezor (in Smith, 2006) stated:

The exhibition as a diagnostic toolbox actively seeks to stage the relationships, conjunctions, and disjunctions between different realities: artists, institutions,

⁹ The four platforms that preceded the leading exhibition in Kassel were: ‘Democracy Unrealized’ (Vienna, March 15–April 20, 2001; Berlin, October 9–30, 2001), exploring the concept and reality of democracy and questioning its realisation in various global contexts; ‘Experiments with Truth: Transitional Justice and the Processes of Truth and Reconciliation’ (New Delhi, May 7–21, 2001), with a focus on the processes of truth and reconciliation in post-conflict societies, looking into the challenges of achieving justice and healing; ‘Créolité and Creolization’ (St. Lucia, January 13–15, 2002), addressing the concepts of creolisation and cultural hybridity, particularly in the context of postcolonial societies; ‘Under Siege: Four African Cities, Freetown, Johannesburg, Kinshasa, and Lagos’ (Lagos, March 16–20, 2002), focused on the urban dynamics and challenges faced by four major African cities, examining how they cope with political, social, and economic pressures.

disciplines, genres, generations, processes, forms, media, and activities. In short, between identity and subjectification.

Reflecting on the tension between documenta's ambitious goals and its conservative display methods, Filipovic (2006, p. 74) critically reflects that both documenta X with David and documenta 11 with Enwezor have, in their statements, explicitly challenged the neutrality of the exhibition space and the universality claimed by Western display conventions. While some of its practices radically expanded into the exhibition's scope by incorporating global perspectives and diverse media, the author argues that the events remained 'tethered to the traditional white cube', reinforcing Western-centric/Eurocentric ideals. The wish to expand the significance of the event through new formats led to research on potential spaces that would be incorporated into later exhibitions. The reliance on the 'white cube' could have undermined the exhibitions' potential to challenge and deconstruct the hegemonic narratives fully, but instead built up the pathway to the following editions. Regardless, Charles Esche identifies documenta 'the mother of all curatorial statements' (Weiss et al., 2011, p. 9) due to the impact of the legacies that continue to resonate.

Subsequent editions, rather than concluding with Enwezor's marked shift, particularly documenta 12 (2007) and documenta 13 (2012), extended and refined this trajectory of critical engagement. documenta 12 (held from 16 June to 23 September 2007)¹⁰ advances the exploration of alternative curatorial and exhibition models by foregrounding questions of knowledge production, cultural diversity, and the politics of representation. Its programme was structured less as a singular exhibition and more as a constellation of events and platforms that encouraged interdisciplinary dialogue and

¹⁰ curated by Roger M. Buergel and Ruth Noack, featured 109 artists from 43 countries

contested fixed narratives. The edition was accompanied by the *documenta 12 magazines* project, which involved over 90 international publications producing more than 300 contributions that expanded the exhibition's themes into a global discursive network. *documenta 13*¹¹ (held from 9 June to 16 September 2012) further strengthened the critical trajectories established by its predecessors, embracing collaboration and the urgent inclusion of social, ecological, and political concerns. Under the overarching theme of "collapse and recovery," it emphasised relationality and process over the traditional object-based display, frequently prioritising participatory and performative practices that challenged conventional museum logic. This edition sought to cultivate a critical institutional self-reflexivity, interrogating its position within global systems of power, cultural production, and political activism. The inclusion of diverse artists and the exhibition's engagement with movements such as Occupy Wall Street exemplified its commitment to art's social and intellectual responsibilities. *documenta 13*, alongside *documenta 12*, sustained the project of moving beyond Eurocentric paradigms by expanding notions of curatorial practice, audience engagement, and the political potential of large-scale exhibitions.

This progress in *documenta*'s curatorial approach, especially in *documenta 14*, reflects a broader interest in learning from the urban commons, a dynamic explored in detail by Tsampalla (2022) in her research on Athens and *documenta 14*. The edition was the first to approach a reallocation of geography. As she notes, *documenta 14*'s engagement with Athens brought to the fore tensions around commoning and institutional frameworks, revealing both the potential and limits of biennials as spaces for learning from urban common space (p. 206). The passage highlights the critical challenges faced by *documenta* in attempting to operate as platforms for socio-political reflection and grassroots engagement within complex urban realities.

¹¹ Curated by Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev

This broader discussion of documenta's curatorial trajectory also connects with my own field notes from Kassel in 2022. Written during visits to documenta fifteen, these notes reflect on how the exhibition's pedagogical claims and collective ethos translated into lived experience. Positioned as an autotheoretical entry, they extend the critical reflection into situated observation, capturing moments of encounter, tension, and speculation as part of the research process.

Press the button' or learning at documenta 15: the future is made of uncomfortable conversations¹²

It took me almost two months after returning from documenta 15 to begin writing this text. Not because of post-pandemic inertia or lack of material, but because the experience resisted immediate articulation. The 2022 edition unfolded as a site of speculation, critique, contra-narratives, manifestos, resignations, controversies, censorship, withdrawals, and exhaustion. Approaching its educational programmes without attending to both micro and macro dimensions would only produce a partial account. Despite some scepticism, I recognise documenta 15 as a turning point in the art system. Whether one visited or not, its reverberations are already in circulation. If one did visit and disagrees, the invitation remains open.

Curated by the Indonesian collective ruangrupa, documenta 15 proposed a radical reconfiguration of the exhibition form. Building on their earlier involvement in rururadio at documenta 14, the collective extended their long-standing, adaptive, and non-hierarchical mode of working into the

¹² This text is a draft of 'Learning at documenta 15: the future is made of uncomfortable conversations. Or don't choose your side, choose your friends' about the engagement and educational practices prepared for E-Flux Art & Education Field Notes, written in September 2022 but not submitted, therefore, unpublished.

institutional framework itself. Their acceptance of the curatorial role came with a counterproposition: the institution would enter their trajectory as much as they would enter the institution's. This repositioning disrupted the conventional model of curatorial service and introduced an ecosystemic logic based on shared resources, collective authorship, and distributed responsibility. It resonated with what I understand as South as method, a way of working grounded in relation, contingency, and collective knowledge. However, within the Eurocentric institutional structure of documenta, this approach did not settle easily. Instead, it produced friction, revealing a cultural conflict and the institution's incapacity to fully absorb practices grounded in different epistemological and relational frameworks.

The conceptual framework of lumbung, derived from the communal rice barn, structured this approach, which functions both as a metaphor and an operational model: a methodology for collective care, resource sharing, learning, and survival. Its values are local anchoring, humour, generosity, independence, transparency, and sufficiency, shaped both the preparatory phases and the exhibition itself, including the public assemblies held online during the pandemic.

Across Kassel, this framework materialised. The transformation of the Fridericianum into a living space for learning and making, the presence of the Gudskul collective inhabiting the museum, and the dispersed activation of spaces through kitchens, studios, and resting areas all contributed to an exhibition that prioritised encounter over display. The exhibition was not something to be viewed in sequence, but something to be inhabited, navigated, and negotiated.

Within this structure, the Sobat Sobat mediation group became particularly significant, especially for the contradiction they revealed. While they were essential to the institution's functioning, they were not fully aligned with the collective logic proposed by lumbung. Positioned between institutional expectations and emancipatory ambitions, they embodied an unresolved

tension. On one hand, they were tasked with guiding visitors through recognisable formats; on the other, they were invited into a more dialogical, open-ended mode of engagement. Their response was self-organisation. They developed their own training processes, experimenting with language, methods, and forms of encounter that exceeded the structures provided to them.

This tension did not remain at the level of method. It became explicitly political. At certain moments, Sobat Sobat mobilised collectively, articulating demands and interrupting the exhibition's smooth operation. From a Eurocentric institutional perspective, such processes may appear unexpected, particularly given the precarity often associated with temporary cultural labour. Yet within the pedagogical and collective framework of Lumbung, this form of action became possible. It points to a different understanding of precarity, not as a lack of resources, but as a condition that exposes and expands institutional limits. In this sense, their actions resonate with instances I discuss in relation to the Mercosul Biennial, where mediation similarly moved beyond facilitation to organise political negotiation. Mediation emerges here as a contested space where labour, learning, and institutional critique converge.

Coming to Lumbung was quite familiar to me. I am originally from Porto Alegre, a city in the south of Brazil that became part of a left-wing historical legacy as the host of the World Social Forum. The project aimed to provide a counterpoint to the annual World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, and to bring together non-governmental organisations from across the globe in a shared space for exchange. Maybe this does not seem immediately relevant, but the model presented then resembles what lumbung proposes: we together are stronger than apart. World Social Forum meets contemporary art.

As someone who has grown, politically and personally, within the World Social Forum's constitution. I was both a volunteer and a worker in all the editions

my hometown hosted, and the similarities are clear. Because of this, I recognised in Lumbung a mode of collective organisation grounded in horizontal exchange, where learning is inseparable from political and social life, much like the model proposed by the World Social Forum as a counterpoint to Davos. I recognised it straight away, but it did not settle easily. What seemed aligned in practice became more complicated within the institutional structure of documenta, and I found myself constantly adjusting to that difference.

The controversies that emerged, particularly around antisemitism, made the framework's limits visible. Here, the reflection proposed by Paulo Freire becomes unavoidable. Liberation, as Freire insists, is not achieved through simple inversion. The oppressed do not automatically become emancipated subjects: they may also reproduce the structures they seek to dismantle. What documenta 15 revealed was precisely this fragile terrain. The attempt to construct a decolonial, collective space did not eliminate conflict; it intensified it. Positions hardened, misunderstandings escalated, and dialogue itself became strained.

For some, my flag is a signal of failure, I understood it as an exposition of pedagogies under pressure. The question shifts from whether conflict should exist to how it is sustained, who is heard, and what forms of listening remain possible when disagreement is structural rather than incidental. In this sense, documenta 15 functioned less as a resolved model and more as an open problem. Which is fine if you are from the south, as a everyday normalcy. Not fine if you are from the north where things are stable.

In parallel, I could also see independent and self-organised initiatives operating within and alongside the exhibition. For example, the work of the Instituto de Artivismo Hannah Arendt, led by Tania Bruguera, exemplified this condition. Described informally as "a documenta within documenta", it demonstrated how the platform could be appropriated to give rise to alternative voices and political positions. Their occupation of the space gave

voice to Latin American and Caribbean artists, especially those based in Cuba, with a chance at a programme every week and a whole new appropriation of the space, including two major international seminars.

But I arrived at Gudkitchen with one of the Sobat Sobat mediators I had met earlier. He guided me to the space, but by the time we got there, people were already cooking and had invited us to join the meal and the party later. We sat and talked with people from Lebanon, Indonesia, Germany, France, Australia, and Colombia, sharing conversations about their practices, their work, and their ways of making art. At some point, one of the artists brought a supermarket trolley and asked for help. We organised a small collection of money to buy beers, ice, and drinks for the gathering later that evening, where Indonesian DJs were going to play. This was not a public event, but something happening behind the office, among those already involved. We walked together to the supermarket, filling the trolley, carrying drinks back, singing and talking along the way. Conversations moved easily between art and other matters, including discussions about colonisation in Australia and Aboriginal histories. Only later did I realise that the person I had been helping to carry beers was Richard Bell. This is one of the moments in which it becomes difficult to separate the exhibition from the life around it.

Education at documenta 15 did not reside solely in formal programmes. It was embedded in how one moved through the exhibition, how one engaged with others, and how one negotiated uncertainty. The exhibition demanded a different temporality, one that required patience and openness to not knowing. It proposed that learning might occur through discomfort, through friction, and through sustained encounter.

The legacy of documenta 15 then does not come in a format but in its insistence on complexity and discomfort. What became visible was not only a series of tensions but a structural unease: an Indonesian collective proposing a model grounded in shared resources, collective learning, and relational knowledge within a Eurocentric institutional context that remains attached to

forms of control, authorship, and stability. The encounters in the lumbung format did not unfold smoothly; rather, they exposed the institution's discomfort with the loss of control that such a model demands, as most European-based institutions would feel after this shake. In this sense, the exhibition suggests that large-scale exhibitions can operate as collective, unstable ecosystems in which knowledge is produced through relations rather than transmission. At the same time, it makes clear that these propositions, aligned with what I understand as the South as method, cannot be seamlessly integrated into existing Eurocentric institutional structures. The tensions that emerged are the conditions through which these encounters take place.

So, remember to make friends, not art.

2.1.4 Havana Biennial: Polyphonic Pedagogies and Decolonial Encounters

The Havana Biennial stands out as a distinct and transformative event within the biennial circuit, particularly in engaging with local communities and challenging Eurocentric models of exhibition-making. Established by Fidel Castro's national decree in 1983 (Checa-Gismero, p. 1, 2024), the Havana Biennial emerged as a response to the growing influence of market-driven biennials like Venice and São Paulo, which often prioritised elite participation and commercial interests. In contrast, the Havana Biennial adopted a grassroots approach, emphasising community engagement and education. This approach was particularly evident in its third edition in 1989, where spontaneous public programmes occurred alongside the official exhibition, with local communities actively creating and finalising artworks. In this edition, small makeshift bars were established alongside the exhibition venues scattered throughout the city, a strategy designed to foster informal debate and interaction between residents and visitors. Checa-Gismero (2024, p. 37) argues that the Havana Biennial signalled a third-world avant-garde, as the exhibition pointed to a 'polyphonic' gathering of people and forged an 'unprecedented alliance that included artists with different degrees of visibility'.

Aligned with the reflections on the Havana Biennial format, Weiss (2011, p. 60) describes the Havana Biennial as extraordinarily public, owing to its use of public spaces and programmes spread across the city. It also seemed that the artists were there ‘much more to meet each other than to show work’. ‘It was a model that allowed for an approach to the local not mired in the archaic, and to globality not flattened into homogeneity’ (p. 65). The biennial also organised the conference ‘Tradition and Contemporaneity’, which lasted eleven days and attracted the participation of contemporary art curators, artists, and critics from around the world.¹³

Evaluating the Havana Biennial, Luis Camnitzer (1994) notes that it challenged the traditional biennial format by rejecting the commodification of art and emphasising local engagement and the exchange of ideas. He argues that the biennial’s focus on education and social practice distinguished it from market-driven events like Venice and São Paulo and positioned it as a transformative model for how biennials could operate globally. According to Camnitzer, the Havana Biennial redefined the function of art exhibitions, making them more about fostering dialogue and less about serving commercial interests. This is emphasised by Gerardo Mosquera (2011), who argues that ‘the Havana Biennial broke away from the restrictive art circulation prevalent in the mid-1980s and challenged mainstream hierarchies by creating a new space for South-South dialogue’, which was ‘based on personal contact between individuals from different art worlds’ (Gardner & Green, 2013). This informal exchange complemented the biennial’s formal symposium, which focused on ‘tradition and contemporaneity’. Standing in a unique location and

¹³ The participants described by Weiss were Juan Acha (Mexico), Badi-Banga Ne Mwine (Zaire), Rashid M. Diab (Sudan), Jorge Glusberg (Argentina), Geeta Kapur (India), Mirko Lauer (Peru), Sergio Magalhaes (Brazil), Federico Morais (Brazil), Lisbeth Rebollo (Brazil), Nelly Richard (Chile), Roberto Segre (Cuba), Aly Sinon (Burkina Faso), Elvira Vernaschi (Brazil), Fruro Vivas (Venezuela), David Kunzle (USA), Lucy Lippard (USA), Charles Merewether (Australia), and Pierre Restany (France).

playing a pioneering role in transforming the international art landscape, the Havana Biennial has often been misrecognised and underappreciated on the global stage (Mosquera, 2011) despite its transformative impact. The Havana Biennial was not merely a showcase of contemporary art but a critical platform that engaged with pressing socio-political issues of its time.

Drawing on Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of 'chronotopy', which explores the interconnectedness of time and space in shaping human experience, Rojas-Sotelo (2009) suggests that the Havana Biennial served as a unique intersection where historical and cultural contexts converged, allowing for the creation of new, meaningful dialogues. This 'chronotropic' nature of the biennial enabled it to become a site where the local and global, the past and present, could meet and interact, fostering a discursive environment that addressed issues of postcolonial identity and global inequality in ways that were deeply rooted in both time and place. Aligned with Rojas-Sotelo and Mosquera (2011) and Kompatsiaris (2017), these authors observe that the biennial created a new discursive sphere that explored complex predicaments, such as postcolonial identities and global inequalities. Kompatsiaris highlights the discursive nature of the Havana Biennial, describing it as 'one of the early instances of a new type of heterogeneous discursive sphere capable of addressing current art practice while simultaneously exploring some of the most complex predicaments of our time' (Kompatsiaris, 2017, p. 25). This combination of innovative curatorial practice and critical engagement with socio-political issues set a precedent for future biennials, positioning Havana as a leader in discourse-driven exhibitions. In contrast, Gardner & Green (2013) argue that while the biennial format carries a significant colonial legacy, the approach of the Global South was not about radically severing ties with this past, as Walter Mignolo's concept of 'delinking' from coloniality might suggest. Instead, these biennials, including Havana, sought to transform the colonial-era format from within, redirecting it to regenerate local cultural infrastructures and fostering new forms of international relations. This complex negotiation allowed the South to use biennials not merely as a continuation of colonial

practices but as platforms for connecting cultures through shared histories of colonialism, or what the Chilean curator Beatriz Bustos Oyanedel refers to as ‘the link of our tragedies’ and finding ways to overcome them (in Gardner & Green, 2013).

Read through practice, the ‘chronotopic’ condition of the biennial does not refer only to the coexistence of time and space, but to the instability of their boundaries within curatorial and pedagogical processes. In the case of the Havana Biennial, this instability becomes visible in how exhibitions extend into the city, how informal and formal programmes overlap, and how encounters unfold across durations that exceed the exhibition’s defined timeframe. In this sense, the chronotope operates not only as a descriptive framework but as a way of understanding how biennials organise and unsettle the conditions under which discursive and pedagogical encounters take place, and as an analytical lens that will inform the reading of the case studies that follow.

However, the Havana Biennial has not been immune to severe criticism, particularly in recent years, as the political situation in Cuba has shifted. The once-collaborative spirit of the biennial has been overshadowed by increasing censorship and government control, leading to the exclusion of local artists who criticise the regime. Artists like Tania Bruguera have become leading voices against this censorship, highlighting the tension between the biennial’s original decolonial intentions and the current political reality. Despite these challenges, the Havana Biennial remains a critical example of how biennials can engage with local contexts in meaningful and transformative ways, offering an alternative to the Eurocentric models that dominate the global art scene.

2.2 On Turns and Frameworks: Discursive, Educational, and Social

The increasing incorporation of discursive, educational, and socially engaged formats into the structure of contemporary biennials marks not only a shift in curatorial approaches but also a broader evolution within the art system. While these ‘turns’ are often referenced in theoretical discourse, they correspond to tangible transformations in institutional and pedagogical practice – particularly in the context of biennial-making. This section seeks neither to construct a linear genealogy of these shifts, nor to treat them as discrete or sequential movements. Instead, it recognises their overlapping and co-existing dynamics, which often predate their formal naming and continue to inform biennials as both discursive and operational frameworks. Although these turns do not function as analytical categories in the case studies that follow, they are essential to understanding the conditions under which the MB and LB have developed their associated programmes. They form part of the broader critical terrain in which biennials negotiate their roles as cultural institutions, platforms for knowledge, and laboratories of social encounter.

Discursive programmes have become an integral element within the framework of biennials. Because this research examines associated initiatives in the MB (editions 6, 7, 8, and 9) and LB (2016 and 2018), it also considers the evolving contexts in which these projects are embedded and how these biennials articulate their position within a shifting art system. These hybrid structures integrate expansive discursive and experimental frameworks, generating diverse knowledge and building sustained collaborations with institutions, schools, and communities. In both MB and LB, this evolution is reflected in the strengthening of educational departments, the incorporation of dialogical and critical activities into curatorial planning, and the cultivation of long-term relationships with local publics – elements that point to the consolidation, rather than the dissolution, of these frameworks. These practices have contributed to a broader shift in which biennials extend beyond their temporal cycles, embedding themselves in year-round, context-

sensitive initiatives. Yet no comprehensive document critically and comparatively analyses the historical development of these programmes, nor examines the institutional conditions that sustain them.

Helguera (2011) notes that discursive activities within contemporary biennials, despite evolving into increasingly structured programmes, remain under-researched and lack consistent evaluation. Often implemented with limited scope – or reluctantly – these programmes have yet to be addressed in depth within biennial studies, which tend to prioritise exhibition-making, curatorial authorship, or political context. Addressing this gap requires acknowledging discursive initiatives as embedded within a broader and more intricate art system – one that reflects and adapts to contemporary shifts. This research, therefore, engages with how such programmes are shaped by three interrelated turns in contemporary art theory: the discursive turn, the educational turn, and the social turn.

The *discursive turn*, notably articulated by Miwon Kwon (1997), refers to the growing prominence of formal language, specialised vocabulary, and critical discourse in identifying, describing, and situating contemporary artwork or art-making. This shift has been particularly influential in biennials, where the focus has moved beyond the mere display of art to include the active generation of content that engages critically with the conditions of production and reception. Kwon (1997) argues that this turn signals a broader transformation in the art world – one in which discursivity becomes central to how art is produced, curated, and understood.

This transformation is evident in the evolution of biennial practices, where educational materials for teachers and visitors have become integral, and catalogues have developed into hybrid publications that combine literature, critical theory, and visual

experimentation. These publications not only document curatorial frameworks but also act as interpretative tools, continuously reassessing the shifting dynamics of contemporary art (Lazar, 2012). The discursive turn has also redefined the roles of curators, educators, and audiences, positioning interpretation as a shared and evolving process. In this context, biennials have widened access to contemporary art by cultivating discursive practices that promote inclusive and dialogical engagement between the art world and its publics.

Rather than a marginal or supplementary trend, the discursive turn signals a deep structural change in the biennial model, shifting the emphasis from visual display to knowledge production and critical dialogue. As Marchart (2014) suggests, this paradigm may have originated not in canonical centres, but in the periphery, where biennials operating outside the European and North American axis began to articulate their distinct intellectual and cultural positions. These non-Western initiatives – including early editions of the Havana Biennial and MB – challenged prevailing narratives by developing situated and often experimental approaches to discursive engagement. In doing so, they not only redefined the modalities of biennial practice but also contributed to what might be understood as a southern epistemology, where the *South* operates not as a fixed geography but as a method. By claiming space for different modes of cultural production, these biennials positioned themselves as active contributors to global art discourse, rather than passive recipients of it.

This repositioning is further illustrated by Kompatsiaris (2017), who describes biennials as ‘heterogeneous discursive spheres’ – platforms where artistic presentation coincides with engagement in critical social, political, and cultural issues. Within this framework, the biennial becomes not just a space of display, but a structure for sustained inquiry. The discursive thus defines a more universal function of the biennial: as a field for the negotiation of ideas, practices, and positions among artists, curators, and publics. This

framing is particularly significant when considering how specific biennials adapt these practices to their local and institutional contexts.

In this sense, the integration of discursive frameworks within MB and LB reflects a commitment to sustained reflection, not just production. Both have consistently treated discourse as a core component of their curatorial ethos, embedding critical debate into the processes of selection, programming, and mediation. Far from being an extra element to exhibition-making, the discursive dimension in these biennials enables conditions for confrontation, dialogue, and the rearticulation of meaning. The discursive turn, then, continues to shape biennials as evolving platforms for situated knowledge production and public cultural thought. O'Neill and Wilson (2010) identify the *educational turn* as a critical moment in contemporary curatorial and artistic practice, wherein educational formats and processes have moved beyond their traditional margins to become integral to the making and presentation of art. This shift goes beyond merely incorporating education as a thematic concern by signalling a broader reconfiguration of curating itself – one that embraces expanded pedagogical structures and epistemic models. One outcome of this turn has been the emergence of the education curator (sometimes referred to under different titles), who operates alongside the chief curator, integrating educational objectives into the artistic and institutional vision of the biennial. Such integration also necessitates a critical appraisal of the systems in which these practices are embedded, particularly as they begin to challenge inherited education models. Museums, for instance, have increasingly incorporated such roles into their internal structures, participating in a wider shift toward dialogical and participatory approaches to knowledge production and dissemination.

To further contextualise the educational turn, it is necessary to situate its relation to experiential models of learning. In this sense, Dewey's account of experience remains instructive. As he argues, 'the creation and acquisition of language and the reading of the

world give materiality to the relationship between the experience of the senses and the meanings of experience' (2008, p. 15). Within biennials, this is not simply reflected but operationalised, where curatorial and discursive structures are designed to produce conditions for experience rather than to stabilise meaning. At the same time, translating experience into programmed formats raises questions about how far such openness can be sustained within institutional frameworks.

A Freirean understanding of education as a process in construction also informs the educational turn. Within biennials, however, the translation of dialogue and critical consciousness into institutional programmes is not straightforward. While pedagogical initiatives are positioned as participatory and transformative, their conditions remain shaped by curatorial frameworks, funding structures, and temporal constraints. In this context, Freire's emphasis on dialogue does not simply reposition education at the centre of curatorial practice but raises questions about how far such processes can operate within institutional limits, and for whom they become accessible.

This position is further complicated through a Rancièrian critique of hierarchical learning. The proposition that one may be "knowing what one is doing without knowing" (2009b) disrupts linear models of instruction and unsettles the authority attributed to curatorial mediation. In the context of biennials, this does not simply reposition artists and audiences as co-participants in the production of knowledge but exposes the instability of such roles within institutional frameworks. Emancipation, in this sense, does not resolve hierarchy but reconfigures it, revealing its persistence in more diffuse forms.

The educational turn in biennials represents a reconfiguration of the relationship between art, education, and curatorial practice as well as a significant shift in the role of art as a catalyst for social transformation. Yet, which biennials can meaningfully assume

this responsibility when adopting programmes intended to support such engagement? Biennials have increasingly moved beyond traditional exhibition formats to operate as dynamic spaces of learning, dialogue, and critical reflection – particularly when pedagogical approaches are embedded in curatorial and artistic frameworks. This shift, aimed at enabling biennials to respond to and influence societal conditions, has become a defining feature of those seeking to generate new forms of collective knowledge production and participatory engagement. As Vergara (2011) suggests, the biennial is an open, relational space where artistic and educational processes are not pre-defined but emerge through collective experimentation, exchange, and meaning-making. His reflections (alongside Jessica Gogan's) have been seminal in shaping my understanding of education within the biennial context, making me in my practice reflect as a form of critical engagement with an evaluation of these platforms' spaces of inquiry rather than as vehicles for didactic transmission. When incorporating this shift, biennials usually position themselves as laboratories of experimentation, where education is not a supplementary function but an essential mode of artistic inquiry, enabling more inclusive, emancipatory, and transformative encounters between art and its public.

This influence is particularly evident in how the MB and LB have engaged with the educational turn, not only adopting but also reinterpreting its frameworks across changing curatorial and institutional contexts. At LB, the departure from the structure that guided the institution from 2014 to 2018 led to a redefinition of the education team's role, most notably turning the mediation team into guides, who now operate more as orientation staff than as facilitators of pedagogical inquiry. This shift, however, was accompanied by a broader reconceptualisation of learning within the institution, marked by renaming the educational curator the learning and engagement curator, which deepens an investment in long-life and community-centred practices. The year-round programme remains a strong feature, recently expanded to include strategies for accessibility and neurodiversity, shaped in dialogue with external specialists. In contrast, the MB has experienced a more fragile trajectory. Following the discontinuation of its

continuous education programme and the dissolution of its archive, its educational dimension has become increasingly contingent on the curatorial direction of each edition.

The most recent MB, opened in 2025, reinstated a robust mediation team and prioritised training linked to contemporary artistic and political debates – though these gains were shadowed by public complaints regarding outdated salary structures and precarious working conditions. These contrasts reflect broader structural frictions: education remains among the most vulnerable sectors of institutional practice, often the first to face funding cuts, despite being central to audience engagement and long-term impact. Nonetheless, both biennials continue to shape their contexts in distinctive ways. The MB operates as a platform for infrastructural access across its own peripheries, with some of its former participants – once visitors or students – now working within the biennial team, a generational continuity that reflects the programme's long-term former cultural investment. The LB, in turn, occupies a different position – engaged in critical self-reflection while maintaining international visibility, and serving as a site for ongoing experimentation within the broader ecosystem of biennial practice. Taken together, these case studies demonstrate the educational turn not only as a curatorial concern but also as a live process, where pedagogy becomes part of institutional identity, social responsibility, and the conditions of cultural labour.

The *social turn*, as articulated by Claire Bishop in her 2006 essay 'The Social Turn: Collaboration and Its Discontents', signals a shift in contemporary art from individual authorship toward collective, participatory forms of practice. Emerging partly in response to the alienating effects of neoliberal capitalism – especially in the aftermath of the 1980s economic downturn – this movement reflects a renewed artistic engagement with social and political concerns. Artists began to develop practices that intervened directly in social contexts, repositioning art as a tool for civic participation and transformation (Bishop, 2012; Finkelpearl, 2013). These socially engaged practices prioritise the

collective over the individual and often involve collaborative projects directly interacting with specific social groups. Bishop (2012, p. 3) emphasises that while socially engaged art practices are often lauded for their potential to empower communities and promote social change, they also raise important questions about the artist's role, collaboration, and the aesthetic and conceptual rigour of these works. This is particularly relevant in biennials, where the 'social turn' challenges traditional artistic authorship and evaluation notions. In biennials, the artist is increasingly seen not merely as a creator of objects but as a facilitator of social interaction and collective experience. As Bishop points out, this shift 'puts pressure on conventional modes of artistic production and consumption under capitalism', pushing the boundaries of what art can be and do. Bishop cautions against allowing ethical or political aims to eclipse aesthetic and conceptual rigour, arguing that critical engagement must assess not just intent but also form. In this sense, the social turn expands art's capacity to act in and with society, while simultaneously challenging conventional modes of evaluation. Its presence in biennials has contributed to a reconfiguration of the relationships between art, artist, and audience, where engagement is not supplementary but structural. As socially engaged practices gain prominence in the global exhibition circuit, they bring with them both promise and complexity: the promise of transformation, and the need for critical scrutiny to ensure they remain both ethically meaningful and artistically robust.

The social turn, while less consistently institutionalised than the discursive and educational turns, has nonetheless resulted in meaningful projects within both the MB and LB. At the MB, socially engaged practices were incorporated through artist residencies and locally embedded projects, such as *Three Borders (Três Fronteiras, 2007)*, developed with moto-taxi workers, smugglers, and the Mbya Guarani community. The residency model expanded in 2009 and 2011 into more complex formats, facilitated by the pedagogy team and operating across a wide geographical range. These initiatives, often co-produced and context-responsive, did not emerge from pre-established frameworks but from situated collaborations that advanced both artistic experimentation

and social proximity. At the LB, the invitation of Jeanne van Heeswijk in 2010 catalysed a new orientation towards long-term community projects, with *2Up2Down/Homebaked* becoming a landmark in how the biennial embedded itself in local social infrastructures. Subsequent projects – such as Ryan Gander’s 2018 collaboration with children from Knotty Ash Primary School (Jamie Clark, Phoebe Edwards, Tianna Mehta, Maisie Williams, and Joshua Yates) – explored a rare co-authorship model, recognising the children as contributors to a public artwork shaped through playful processes of shared making. However, despite these examples, the structural commitment to mutuality and redistribution of authorship remains uneven across both biennials. While the LB has recently brought in specialists to address inclusivity and access, such concerns are often led by individual curators or artists rather than embedded in institutional policy. In both contexts, the social turn reveals its dual nature: generative in its outcomes and aspirations, yet fragile in its infrastructural support – at times even perceived as extractive. It continues to unfold less as a formalised strategy and more as an ethics-in-practice: intermittent, locally shaped, and variably sustained.

These turns – discursive, educational, and social – continue to shape biennials as complex cultural structures. The discursive turn has reframed biennials as platforms for critical inquiry and situated knowledge production. The educational turn has embedded pedagogical strategies within curatorial and institutional infrastructures, opening new possibilities for long-term public engagement. And the social turn repositions the artist as collaborator and the audience as co-producer, prompting biennials to negotiate aesthetic integrity and political responsibility in new ways.

2.3 Biennialisation

Biennialisation refers to the widespread adoption and proliferation of biennial art exhibitions across the globe, a phenomenon that not only promotes economic growth

through tourism and cultural capital but also plays a crucial role in shaping and reinforcing local, national, and continental identities. As Marchart (2014, p. 264) writes, 'biennialisation not only facilitates the accumulation of capital; it also aids in constructing local, national, and continental identities'. This process can be compared to the historical function of World Fairs, which served as platforms for nation-building strategies and the assertion of cultural dominance during the colonial and industrial eras. By linking local contexts to global networks, biennialisation now functions as a contemporary vehicle for cultural exchange and identity formation, continuing the legacy of these earlier international exhibitions while adapting to the demands of a globalised world. Read through practice, this expansion is sustained by forms of labour that often remain invisible, even as biennials present themselves as platforms for critical and discursive engagement.

Lin-Hill (2013) elaborates on this role, describing biennials as key nodes in a global network connecting diverse geographies through shared curatorial templates and exhibition formats. This globalising effect strengthens the international presence of biennials and solidifies their role as mechanisms of cultural exchange and integration – key to forming a unified global contemporary art world. Offering a counterpoint to this narrative, Hou Hanru (in Vanderlinden & Filipovic, 2005) proposes that biennials generate hybrid cultural spaces: sites of innovation where identity is no longer tethered to the nation-state but is instead marked by flux, mobility, and transnational exchange. His framing recasts biennialisation not as a stabilising force but as a dynamic, generative process that resists fixed definitions of identity.

In contrast to the more optimistic narratives of biennialisation as global cultural integration, Édouard Glissant (in Van Hal, 2010, p. 14) provides a pointed critique: biennials risk contributing to the homogenisation of global culture. He warns that their proliferation, often directed by international curators, may erode local particularities by

imposing a repeatable curatorial logic that overrides cultural differences. This concern echoes the ambivalence already outlined in the core structure of biennial studies: the very mechanisms that globalise art can also flatten its distinctiveness. Without dismissing this critique, Sheikh (2016) nuances the picture by observing that biennials increasingly function as ‘public spaces’ and ‘ideological state apparatuses’. As they intersect with social and political crises, their cultural roles become entangled with larger systems of representation and power. In these conditions, art may risk being instrumentalised – its aesthetic and conceptual specificity overshadowed by urgent political demands. Nevertheless, this shift has also enabled socially collaborative practices to flourish. Claire Bishop argues that this context has produced a new avant-garde logic: artists engaging through social forms to create dematerialised, politically engaged projects that challenge commodification and blur the boundaries between art and life. These contradictions do not undermine the biennial model but are part of its evolution and its often uneasy positioning within global contemporary art.

The increasing proliferation and significance of biennials in the art field, considered alongside museums and art fairs, links them closely to the intense processes of globalisation (Papastergiadis & Martin, 2011; Lil, 2013). The biennials analysed in this research – the MB and LB – are situated within what Gardner & Green (2016) describe as the ‘third wave’: exhibitions conceived in a globalised era, simultaneously addressing an international nomadic audience and cultivating the local through tourism, education, and discursive programming. This dual orientation speaks to the complex role biennials have come to play in the cultural field – at once global spectacles and sites of situated engagement. As Iara Boubnova reflects in conversation with Sylvie Fortin, the 1990s marked a ‘golden age’ of biennial-making, driven by the aspiration to reshape the field of contemporary art through commitments to diversity, critical practice, and peaceful coexistence (Fortin, 2018, pp. 60–63). That period’s optimism, characterised by experimental formats and the inclusion of younger, transdisciplinary curators, has since given way to an increasingly standardised curatorial grammar. Jens Hoffmann echoes this

view, observing that although biennials once aimed to pluralise the field, they now risk becoming formulaic large-scale exhibitions, constrained by institutional demands and market dynamics (Fortin, 2018, pp. 89–93). Both authors point to an ongoing struggle to negotiate between local specificity and transnational frameworks – a struggle that defines much of the curatorial labour in biennials today.

Prior to the widespread use of the term *biennialisation*, Vanderlinden and Filipovic (2005) traced the emergence of biennials as a global phenomenon, identifying how, particularly in the post-1989 art world, these recurring exhibitions became key platforms for the presentation and negotiation of contemporary art. They emphasise that the expansion of the biennial form was not merely a response to globalisation but also an active agent in shaping the cultural, political, and ideological landscapes of a rapidly transforming Europe. Ferguson, Greenberg, and Nairne (in Vanderlinden & Filipovic, 2005) argue that biennials have come to compete for cultural influence on a global scale, asserting themselves on the international exhibition map. In parallel, Sassatelli (2017) situates the phenomenon within a broader process of ‘festivalisation’, suggesting that while such cultural events are often criticised for promoting a passive, consumer-oriented public sphere (Chaney, 2002), they may also cultivate discursive sociability and new forms of critical dialogue. Rather than simply reflecting global consumer culture, biennials – when responsive to their context – can actively contribute to shaping the cultural public sphere by enabling the articulation of politics through affective and aesthetic modes of communication (Papastergiadis & Martin, 2011).

This framing resonates with earlier characterisations by curators and theorists who underscored the dialogical potential of biennials. René Block (n.d.) proposed that they should be approached as ‘dialogue events’ – spaces where exchange, rather than spectacle, is the driving force. Henry Meyric Hughes (in Van Hal, 2010, p. 10) similarly describes the Venice Biennale as a ‘place of encounter’, where diverse cultures and

artistic practices converge and influence one another. These understandings position biennials not simply as instruments of circulation or competition, but as infrastructures of negotiation – between global narratives and local specificities, artistic ambition and political contingency, curatorial authority and public interpretation.

Walter Zanini, chief curator of the 16th São Paulo Biennial, organised a pioneering conference in 1981 that marked the first international gathering of biennial organisers (Spricigo, 2009, in Filipovic, van Hal, & Øvstebø, 2013, p. 17).¹⁴ This early meeting facilitated the exchange of critical and historical insights on the management of international exhibitions, yet its significance remains largely overlooked in comparison with subsequent events – most notably the emergence of the Havana Biennial, which is frequently credited with marking the ‘global turn’ in the biennial model. Vogel (2010, pp. 113–14) recalls a later similarly important but under-documented conference organised by the Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen (ifa) at the Museum Fridericianum in Kassel, possibly in 1997. It brought together a broad array of curators to discuss the evolving purpose of biennials and to draft a provisional ‘Biennial Codex’, which ultimately did not take formal shape. Further meetings followed, reflecting a growing desire for dialogue and structural analysis. In 2002, ‘Biennials in Dialogue – Exchange or Global Incest?’ took place at the Museum für Moderne Kunst in Frankfurt, alongside Manifesta. Comparable discursive platforms emerged in parallel with the 1st Singapore Biennale (2006), the 7th Shanghai Biennale (2008), and the 6th Gwangju Biennale (2006), which hosted the ‘World Contemporary Art and International Biennials’ forum. In 2009, the three-day symposium ‘To Biennial or Not to Biennial’, organised in Bergen by Filipovic, van Hal, and Øvstebø, critically examined the biennial model as both a product and agent of globalisation. It laid the groundwork for the influential 2010 publication *The Biennial Reader* and initiated

¹⁴ Notable participants included Bernice Murphy, George Boudaille, Luigi Carluccio, Rudi Fuchs, and Oscar Mejía.

plans for the Bergen Biennale, conceptualised as a discursive rather than exhibitory project. The second World Biennial Forum, held in São Paulo in 2014, further developed these trajectories. Published as *Making Biennials in Contemporary Times*, this edition was co-organised by the curators of the 31st São Paulo Biennial and the International Biennial Foundation (IBF),¹⁵ which had emerged from the Bergen discussions in 2009. While IBF has since shifted its focus toward consultancy and publication – launching an annual online journal in 2020 – its earlier work helped lay the foundations for a new phase of transnational coordination.

In this evolving landscape, the International Biennial Association (IBA)¹⁶ has taken a leading role as a consortium of biennial organisers committed to co-commissions and the ethical repositioning of biennial practice. It convenes monthly IBA Stages and annual conferences around rotating thematic concerns. More recently, we have seen processes of clusterisation emerge, in which strategic collaborations are formed between biennials allowing not only co-commissioning but also staff exchanges and shared programming. Examples include the East Europe Biennial Alliance (EEBA),¹⁷ uniting Matter of Art Prague, the Biennale Warszawa, the Kyiv Biennial, the OFF-Biennale Budapest, and the Survival Kit Festival in Riga. Another initiative, The Perennial Biennial,¹⁸ operated in partnership with IBA between 2018 and 2022 and involved the Liverpool Biennial, the Berlin Biennale, the Riga International Biennial of Contemporary Art - RIBOCA), and MGLC – the Ljubljana Biennial of Graphic Arts. The group is currently preparing a new iteration of its collaborative project.

¹⁵ <https://www.biennialfoundation.org/>.

¹⁶ <https://www.biennialassociation.org/>.

¹⁷ <https://eeba.art/en>.

¹⁸ <https://www.perennialbiennial.com/>.

As O'Neill and Wilson (2010) describe, the educational turn coincides with the broader process of biennialisation. This shift signals an increasing emphasis on education and knowledge production within recurring global exhibitions. As biennials have proliferated across diverse geographies, they have incorporated pedagogical models into their frameworks, responding not only to the demands of a more engaged public but also aligning with the economic and cultural tendencies of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries – particularly the rise of a neoliberal cultural economy. The more formal integration of education into biennials has not simply extended their reach but has contributed to redefining their institutional function: from exhibition events into platforms for critical discourse, life-long learning, and situated reflection. Pedagogical curating emerges within this context as a significant development in contemporary curatorial practice. As Panos Kompatsiaris (2017, p. 187) notes:

“the Liverpool Biennial has embraced educational initiatives as a core aspect of its structure, blending discursive elements with artistic presentations to create a more engaging and inclusive environment for contemporary art. This approach allows biennials to serve as artistic display platforms and spaces for critical engagement and public education.”

Rather than a supplementary or interpretive gesture, it reflects a structural reorientation in which curatorial work increasingly privileges the mediation and circulation of ideas over the mere presentation of art objects. As discussed by O'Neill and Wilson (2010), this shift marks a departure from traditional notions of curating as selection and display, reframing the exhibition as a discursive and participatory space. The curator, in this expanded role, becomes both a selector and a facilitator – prioritising the visitor's engagement with the conceptual and political stakes of the exhibition, and enabling conditions for shared reflection and meaning-making.

For art institutions, this pedagogical turn also marks a redefinition of their social function. The rise of the art-viewing public signals a shift away from the logic of the private collection or singular artistic authorship, towards more dialogical, participatory forms of engagement. As Vidokle (in Madoff, 2009, p. 193) notes, this shift complicates the sovereign position historically granted to the institution, prompting new questions about representation, legitimacy, and the circulation of knowledge. In this expanded context, curating becomes not just an institutional practice, but a cultural gesture that mediates between publics, ideas, and artworks – reshaping how exhibitions relate to their audiences and to broader social debates. Lin-Hill (2013) critiques the prevailing discourse on biennials for being disproportionately shaped by curatorial perspectives, often overlooking the roles and contributions of other stakeholders, including local audiences, educators, and economic actors. This observation aligns with the broader concerns of this research, which seeks to foreground more inclusive and dialogical approaches to discursive practice. Pedagogical curating, in this sense, resists hierarchical structures of knowledge production and embraces collaboration as a methodological and ethical stance. It involves working with artists, educators, and communities to co-develop exhibitions that resonate across contexts, attending to what is shown as well as how meaning is constructed. This repositioning of the curator as a facilitator – rather than an authority – reflects a shift in institutional priorities, where learning is no longer confined to interpretation but becomes a shared process of negotiation and engagement.

In practical terms, pedagogical curating entails the design of exhibitions that are both visually compelling and intellectually stimulating. This often involves interpretative materials, guided visits, and participatory formats that prompt audiences to explore the artworks' contexts more deeply. The aim is to construct a space that is accessible without being reductive – where visitors are invited to question, engage, and reflect on complex artistic and social ideas. Groys (in Vanderlinden & Filipovic, 2005, p. 94) observes that 'the artist is primarily the curator of him- or herself because he or she selects him- or herself. And he or she also selects others: other objects, other artists.' His remark signals

a broader shift in curatorial practice, where the line between artist and curator becomes increasingly porous, allowing for collaborative and integrative forms of exhibition-making. In this context, the educational turn is not an add-on but emerges organically from a shared curatorial ethos.

The rise of pedagogical curating reflects a wider institutional rethinking of responsibility. No longer positioned as neutral custodians of objects, curators increasingly act as mediators of knowledge, negotiating between the artwork and its publics. This shift invites further reflection: How might curators reconcile the imperatives of artistic experimentation with those of public engagement? Which methodologies sustain complexity without sacrificing accessibility? In responding to these questions, pedagogical curating offers more than a set of tools – it proposes a mode of exhibition-making grounded in dialogue, inquiry, and the transformation of institutional norms.

Kompatsiaris (2017, p. 41) introduces the notion of the ‘discursive biennial’, characterising it as a format that privileges semiotic production, conversation, exchange, education, pedagogy, and open-ended encounters. This framing extends the educational turn by placing biennials within a wider shift in global exhibition-making – one that sees exhibitions not just as sites of representation, but as spaces for constructing relations between practitioners, institutions, and publics. Rather than treating discourse and pedagogy as supplementary, this model positions them as constitutive elements of the curatorial proposition. It is within this framework that pedagogy becomes not a task delegated to education departments, but a curatorial responsibility, embedded in the very grammar of the biennial form.

Recently, biennials like the LB and MB have increasingly integrated discursive and pedagogical practices into their programmes. This evolution reflects a broader trend in

the biennial landscape where education and discourse are not merely supplementary but central to the biennial experience.

The evolving role of the education curator in contemporary art biennials reflects broader shifts in pedagogical practices within the art world. Integrating sociocultural learning theories – such as those proposed by Vygotsky (1978, 1986 in Lee, 2020), Lave and Wenger (1991 in Lee, 2020) – into artistic and curatorial practices has significantly shaped how education is conceptualised within these institutions. These frameworks help reposition the curator not simply as an organiser, but as a facilitator of knowledge production and critical engagement. Lee (2020) shows how these learning theories underpin socially engaged art projects, emphasising the importance of dialogue, situated knowledge, and participation in shaping learning environments. In this context, the educational turn in curating is both a structural addition and a shift in ethos, towards more reciprocal, transformative encounters between artworks, institutions, and publics.

The role of the education curator has emerged in direct response to this educational turn in contemporary art. Positioned as a counterpart to the chief curator, the education curator plays a key role in developing programmes that accompany but also critically expand the biennial's curatorial vision. Over the past decade, however, this role has evolved. Public art museums have increasingly adopted models of public engagement that go beyond traditional education departments, moving towards more porous and experimental forms of public practice. This shift reflects a growing investment in socially engaged work, often artist-led, that extends beyond institutional walls. As Birchall (n.d.) observes, 'curators have responded to the challenges associated with art making by producing projects that rely on educational models and ultimately seek to educate audiences', generating new forms of situated knowledge and experience within and beyond the museum.

2.4 Conclusion to the chapter

This chapter has introduced an archaeology of the discursive, tracing how audience engagement, educational initiatives, and discursive formats emerged and evolved across four foundational biennials: Venice, São Paulo, documenta, and Havana. The analysis demonstrated that what are now regarded as integral structures of biennial-making often began as improvised or experimental responses to specific institutional and geopolitical conditions. Over time, these practices became formalised, shifting biennials from sites of display towards platforms of knowledge production, cultural negotiation, and public dialogue.

Building on this historical ground, the chapter examined how discursive, educational, and social turns have reconfigured the field of exhibition-making. These turns underscored the centrality of mediation, pedagogy, and collaborative practice, while also exposing ongoing tensions between curatorial authorship, institutional responsibility, and the demand for long-life learning.

The final section situated these trajectories within the global proliferation of biennials, or biennialisation. Expansion has enabled new forms of connection and exchange but has also brought risks of homogenisation, branding, and political instrumentalisation. This ambivalence defines biennials as both hegemonic machines embedded in global circuits and as potential sites for alternative pedagogical and discursive practices.

In this way, this chapter establishes the historical ground for recognising discursive and pedagogical practices as constitutive of biennials, clarifying the analytical gap this thesis seeks to address..

3 Chapter Two: Case Studies

This chapter opens with an autotheoretical vignette drawn from my participation in *Planning for the End of the World* (2011), a project developed within the 8th Mercosul Biennial. Beginning from this situated account allows the writing to register the lived dimension of biennial-making and the forms of knowledge that emerge from fieldwork. Rather than framing the case studies solely as objects of analysis, the vignette sets the ground for a mode of inquiry in which experience, reflection, and critical positioning inform how biennials are studied.

From this starting point, the chapter develops a comparative analysis of the Mercosul Biennial (MB) and Liverpool Biennial (LB). The focus is on how these biennials have configured their educational, discursive, and organisational frameworks, and how these frameworks shape their place within both local and global art worlds. While Chapter 2 established a historical and discursive archaeology of biennials, Chapter 3 turns to the case studies themselves, tracing how MB and LB have become laboratories where questions of education, mediation, and socially engaged practice are tested and contested.

The analysis unfolds across five subsections: 3.2 introduces the case studies; 3.2.1 and 3.2.2 present detailed accounts of the MB and LB respectively; 3.2.3 explores their structural, thematic, and geopolitical trajectories; 3.2.4 examines how they configure public and educational accessibility; and 3.2.5 analyses their funding and organisational structures. Together, these sections situate the MB and LB within the broader field of biennial-making while grounding the arguments that inform the thesis as a whole.

3.1 You Should Start with Planning For the End of the World



Figure 3 – 8th Mercosul Biennial, Pedagogical Project, activity with Sebastian Romo in Santana do Livramento, July 2011. Still from TV programme A Plateia. Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2YK-exROYTU>

In June 2011, on a midweek day, the temperature in Santana do Livramento was around 6°C. It had been a cold winter in the south. The cafeteria displayed two old tube televisions showing a teenage soap opera. The team tried to warm up by getting some coffee and soup. The material for the project had already been loaded in the truck the day before, all set up to start the work with the children from the public school on the Brazilian side of Riveramento, which is where Santana do Livramento, Brazil, merges with Rivera, Uruguay. We were waiting for the school to open, with the Mexican artist Sebastian Romo joining the group minutes before we moved to the school. While slurping the warm liquids, he explained the order of the day, how he would like to work and what everyone's role in the activity was. We lingered more than we should because we knew we would face the cold for hours. The team packed up their things. We filled the truck with some last-minute materials acquired at the corner shop and jumped into the van, still shivering from the

thermal shock of moving from inside the cafeteria to outside. The combo car, van, and motorbike crossed, zig-zagging the weird avenue that makes up the border between the cities towards the east of the school. It was 7.30 a.m.

It was not the first time the Mercosul Biennial team had worked with the school. Two years before, some students joined the artist João Modé during his project Artists at Hand (Artistas em Disponibilidade), collaboratively hand-sewing a giant web over the border of the International Park that sits on the division of the two cities. The continuity of the partnership excited the teachers. They had a lot of fun with the students, and two years later, they were open to more. Arriving there, we ran a kind of meet-and-greet session. Romo took the lead, giving an instructional talk to the schoolteachers and the young people, showing who would coordinate each part of the work, which materials would be handled only by the adults, what should not be touched for safety, and so on. Slowly, student groups were separated into sessions for cutting letters and preparing the floor of the classrooms. Some headed outside, where the cement preparation would occur, and others helped unload the truck. All tiny hands and arms were exhilarated because this art-making session replaced science, history, or maths classes. One of the students asked if he could work on the cement preparation, as his dad is a construction worker and he knows how to do it. The teacher agrees if he stays under the supervision of our technician, Gerson Marques.

Santana do Livramento is a peculiar small city on the southern border of Brazil. It is small compared with its continental country, with a population of around 80,000 inhabitants and more than 100 km of dry border with the ‘hermano’ country Uruguay. The uniqueness of the place comes from the great historical importance it has in defining the Brazil–Uruguay border. It was the first place in Latin America to receive an international train station between countries. It has a strong history of British and Italian colonisation, hence it also had the first golf club in the country and a large share of the fresh pasta industry. Previously, it was a region that overlapped with the indigenous nations of

Charruas, Mbya Guarani, and Minuano. Outside the urban area, cattle fields mix with more recent wine production, poverty, and the pampas, the ‘green sea’. The city’s open border with the Uruguayan town of Rivera has an International Park that celebrates the countries’ friendship. Rivera is the opposite of its Brazilian sister: it is the capital of its department (or state) and has better economic conditions. This open, dry border is a unique experience. For the locals, it means having better-priced goods on one side or another and that anyone can establish citizenship in both countries, which is called double-chapas. Once you cross these streets, you change culture, currency, and cuisine. Customs offices are set up outside both cities, by the main highway exits, to curb mass untaxed import/export. Still, the other areas across the regions are accessible with only stone monuments acting as border markers reminding one of the geo- political separation. The ‘no-borders’ area has created a long-term partnership, which operates under the affiliation of both cultures and has become even less conflicted since 1991, conferring the free trade of goods and free movement of people to Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay, and Paraguay, the Mercosul.



Figure 4 – 8th Mercosul Biennial, *Ensaio de Geopoéticas*, map of Travel Notebooks. Catalogue, pp. 302–3. Source: Fundação Bienal de Artes Visuais do Mercosul (2011c)

This unique place with its distinguishing characteristics is the context in which Romo plunged when invited to work for the residency project *Travel Notebooks*,¹⁹ part of the 8th Mercosul Biennial (10 September–15 November 2011), *Essays in Geopoetics*. The artist comes from a country with a notably volatile border situation, Mexico. This is possibly one reason he chose first to use a motorbike to explore the border markers. He called them ‘fictional monuments’. The border markers, significant stone monuments that attempt to mark the separation of the countries, became a character for the artist’s work, which explores not only the historicity but also the repetition of the construction of those monuments as an object to mark something artificial and, therefore, invented. This idea of fabulation that gives the border markers a ‘fictional’ characteristic was explored further by investigating the degree to which these invented borders were locally accepted.

Romo’s agenda was much more extensive than just exploring the region. Arriving at the school, the artists guided us through the steps needed to work on his proposal. We were on our third visit to the school, and that day, we would work on the practical process of the project, a small intervention called ‘End of the World Square’. The purpose was to build a bespoke cement floor made with tiles that would represent the students’ wishes as a forecast for their future and what would remain a symbol of their existence even at the end of the world. Romo said it was like intervening in the urban area as drawings in the cave. He also encouraged the students to rethink the borderline as something made and created. The students’ active involvement in creating this collective object – space – would remain for future

¹⁹ Travel Notebooks was a residency experience part of the 8th Mercosul Biennial. The first residencies started in January 2011 with Bernardo Oyarzún (Chile) ’s visit to the Misiones region. The other artists who participated in the project were Beatriz Santiago Muñoz (Colombia), Kochta & Kalleinen (Germany/Finland), Nick Rands (UK/Brazil), María Elvira Escallón (Colombia), Santiago Romo (Mexico), Marcos Sari (Brazil), and Marcelo Moscheta (Brazil).

generations. Their engagement was a demonstration of their potential and creativity. The tiles would retain certain students' expectations, even if made of simple drawings, letters, and numbers. The work would lie on the border between countries to become something that would repurpose Romo's project, his future interventions in the region, and the outcome of the Travel Notebooks' lead exhibition. One day we worked on the Brazilian side and the other on the Uruguayan. Some of the families and the students joined us for the second day, willing to help more and involve their families, 'Look, this is my drawing', said one of the students pointing to the tiles while we set them on the ground. The project had a profound impact on the students. It gave them a sense of pride as they expressed their excitement in sharing it with their families and classmates who had not participated. It also gave them a sense of ownership of the tiles and the border when they saw their tiles being placed and said that they would like them to exist there for the rest of their lives. When reflecting on the endurance of their work, some students wished they could have added greater detail to their contribution. Unfortunately, the limit of the material, cement tiles, did not allow it. The involvement of families, particularly on the Uruguayan side, added another layer of meaning. While a formal evaluation of the project's long-term impact was not conducted, teachers were enthusiastic, later bringing the students to Romo's exhibition in the city centre. The collective intervention created a marker, possibly another of the 'fictional monuments', but one that symbolised the students' presence and potential for future generations.



Figure 5 - 8th Mercosul Biennial, Pedagogical Project, tile preparation with students at Saldanha Marinho School for the project Planning for the End of the World, Porto Alegre, July 2011. Personal archive.



Figure 6-- 8th Mercosul Biennial, Pedagogical Project, activity of the project Planning for the End of the World. Author unknown. No date informed

Romo's project was one iteration of the biennial, during which I worked as a professional in the field, working face-to-face with communities. In this context and with this form of practice, my attention was drawn to the artist's methodologies and approaches to reading or learning about spaces and drawing out the creativity inherent in them. I was not only a facilitator for Romo's project within the Pedagogical Project of the 8th Mercosul Biennial; fieldwork also offered a welcome departure from the bureaucracy of the office, allowing for direct engagement with the material and social contexts of the work. I was the project leader for the residencies and other projects throughout that biennial edition. In Riveramento, I contacted the schools, made material purchases, and organised the teams' work schedules. On the other hand, I was a fundamental part of the endeavour, a ground curator for the work's success, and, overall, tasked with assembling my suppositions and reflections from experience. While curator Alexia Tala described Travel Notebooks as a project in which artists acted as 'containers and collectors of experience' (Roca, 2011), I increasingly recognised myself in that description. This practical role made me part of the projects, an experienced collector in the engagement with the young people. As the operations coordinator of the Pedagogical Project, working face-to-face with students and teachers allowed me to be part of this collection of experiences that Tala used to describe the project, giving me an alternative viewpoint on the work.

Travel Notebooks was a hybrid intervention in twenty-two cities across the Rio Grande do Sul state, Uruguay, and Argentina, benefiting from the complex network established by the MB Pedagogic Project in previous years. This network's growth and complexity have been exponential since the 6th edition in 2007, when a teacher-training team travelled to several parts of the state to hold classes and seminars, most of which led to school visits to the exhibition space. The project artists had multiple tasks: developing local engagement, a local exhibition, and a piece for the final show in Porto Alegre. Just from the Pedagogical Team, we had eight members working on the ground as facilitators,

curators, and producers who were involved in the activities, showcasing the network's vast reach and impact. The production team had a couple more people involved who were responsible for overseeing this transition between the residency and the artworks for the final exhibition. We also had two full-time installers working in between the teams.

The impact of *Travel Notebooks* at the border between Santana do Livramento and Rivera did not have an official conventional evaluation framework. While the pedagogical programme of the 8th MB was formally documented in the institutional 'Pedagogical Programme Report' (Relatório do Projeto Pedagógico, Fundação Bienal do Mercosul, 2011), many of the most meaningful outcomes emerged through lived experience. Teachers' responses – particularly their expressions of gratitude for exposing students to a 'living artist' – spoke to the affective and imaginative reach of the project. Students actively claimed ownership over the 'End of the World Square' (Praça do Fim do Mundo) through physical contributions and by recognising their ideas and identities inscribed in public space. At the time, I lacked a critical vocabulary to articulate the work I was facilitating. After reading and reflection, the turning point was the conversation I recorded in the 'Múltiplas Vozes' qualitative report. The interview made me recognise this work as a site-specific, socially engaged practice. That moment catalysed my trajectory as a researcher and marked the beginning of this project. Although no formal impact evaluation was conducted with participants, the project's resonance with students, teachers, and me remains central to this process. It also exemplifies how, even within the structural constraints of a biennial, pedagogical curation can initiate and sustain learning, recognition, and symbolic authorship processes.



Figure 7 – Public visiting the 8th Mercosul Biennial, Travel Notebooks, 'Fiction Accelerator Machine', by Sebastian Romo, 27/10/2011. Photo: Christiano Sant'Anna / Indicefoto.com.



Figure 8 – 8th Mercosul Biennial, Pedagogical Project, fieldwork for the project Planning for the End of the World, rock collection for local exhibition display, Santana do Livramento, July 2011. Polaroid by Maria Luisa (Neca) Leonardis, Queen of Braguay. Personal archive..

After the activities on the border, it was back to the office; in an evaluation exercise, I was called to write about or share my experiences with the team, reflecting more critically on these practices. What kind of art practice were we creating or facilitating through Travel Notebooks? Why were we allocating them under a pedagogical approach? What different tools did we use to approach the communities? How would each of us participate in local schools? Was it a new or old partnership? Were there different tools we used for this? Over time, I realised I lacked the vocabulary I needed to describe the processes I was facilitating. I studied. I learnt that my involvement and experiences with this and other projects over the last few years at the Mercosul Biennial had turned me into a community-based project specialist, who was facilitating socially engaged projects in the context of educational and public programmes. I also learnt that the work in the field was a site-specific or place-oriented practice, that I was essential for the dialogical process needed to complete and construct the work, and that I was working in a new genre of public art. I started to enquire about proposals for these experience-building spaces and the opportunities and potentialities they had as a practice. I did not have a straightforward method or instruction method; rather, I worked from what the artists wished in their practices, and followed gut feelings when dealing with challenges and being approachable when meeting new people. Furthermore, there were always limits to configuring the contexts found along the way of each one of the biennials, such as budget and timing. Looking back at these initial reflections, I am still surprised at the potential they had to spark local processes and projects that continue to thrive and develop. Even more, how did all this happen in a biennial context?

Romo's project with the students was well received, and the artist spent almost two months in the field. Close to the end of the sessions with the students, one of the teachers came to thank the team for allowing them to interact with a 'living artist'. At that moment, I did not realise the importance of her phrase. However, later, and still now, the teacher's acknowledgement

raised my interest in researching more about this moment in which a project proposed in a biennial context expanded the primary expectation of action into a space of exchange of experiences. The reflection on Romo's work and others works in similar contexts became a master's dissertation investigating the directives and methodologies of these kinds of collaborative and socially engaged practices. The research aimed to understand my position as a facilitator of these processes, their site-specificity, and the integration of the Other in the artist's methodologies. These ways of sharing art practices reshaped my understanding of the limits of artworks, showing that aesthetic experience can extend beyond the immediacy of the encounter – lasting, unfolding, and continuing through relation and reflection. Or as defined by Kester (2004), the aesthetic experience is something lasting rather than being immediate. At the end, I understood that the experience shared in such a project only happened because the MB is 'the first international art biennial [that] has tried to transcend its vocation for exhibition and transform ... itself into an instrument radically dedicated to cultural change' (Camnitzer & Perez-Barreiro, 2009, p. 287).

From the 6th MB edition in 2007, a fundamental shift in the organisation of the project happened when the Pedagogical Programmes started to give feedback on the whole event as an educational tool, rather than proposing an attached educational or public programme running in parallel to the exhibition, as is traditional practice at biennials (Camnitzer, 2009). The Uruguayan artist Luis Camnitzer was responsible for this initial proposal, both imagining the possibilities for audiences and re-studying the concept of art education. As the first appointed pedagogical curator, the artist reflected that there was no naiveness or arrogance embedded in the idea, but rather a hope that this could propose, even if only locally, 'a model that slowly fertilises the ground so that many generations later there might be a profound revision of the social function of art'. Therefore, the Mercosul Biennial is the starting point for this research. Romo and the

students would be around longer, maybe not longer than the floor tiles, but long enough for the significance of the practice to work its way into our life perspectives.



Figure 9 - Cover of *Experimental Micropolis: Translations of Art to Education*, pedagogical publication of the 7th Mercosul Biennial, organised by Marina de Caro, 2009. The cover portrays spreadsheets organising the Available Artists residency programmes. Porto Alegre: Fundação Bienal do Mercosul.

3.2 Introduction to Case Studies

This research examines the discursive programmes of the educational and public framework of the Mercosul Biennial (MB) and the Liverpool Biennial (LB) as case studies to explore the impact of different turns that influence contemporary biennials. Gardner & Green (2013, 2016) describe ‘self-conscious’ biennials as those that reflect continuously on their role within the ‘global art circuit’. The MB and LB exemplify this

characteristic, as both events have integrated hybrid programmes that extend beyond traditional exhibitions, incorporating extensive discursive and experimental structures that foster knowledge production and collaboration with various institutions, schools, and communities. Beyond illustrating divergent institutional approaches, these case studies serve a methodological function to explore how biennials can reconfigure curatorial and educational paradigms under distinct geopolitical pressures. Read alongside the practice-based reflections developed in the essays in Vol. 2, these projects can also be understood as non-linear interventions that do not always align with institutional timelines, but persist through repetition, care, and situated engagement.

The following sections present each case study in detail, reflecting on its inception, evolution, and institutional shifts over time. The case studies are addressed individually – first the Mercosul Biennial, followed by the Liverpool Biennial – with comparative points drawn between them to articulate the thematic concerns that underpin this research. This structure allows for an examination of how each biennial navigates its institutional context, geographical positioning, and curatorial logic, while also enabling a broader discussion of the role of biennials in shaping contemporary pedagogical and discursive practices.

3.2.1 Mercosul Biennial

Mercosul Biennial started in 1997 and, for its first five editions, followed the traditional Venetian model of having two sections: one composed of representatives from the countries of the Mercosul bloc and another curated by a guest curator(s). The first edition was curated by the Brazilian Frederico Moraes, who proposed, with the Uruguayan Alberto Torres, that the biennial should reflect a rewriting of the map of Latin American art as part of a review of the region's produce after the impact of multiple military dictatorships (and the value of Latin American art was increasing in the art market). In

parallel with this were two individual exhibitions, one by Argentinean painter and linguist Xul Solar and one about the Brazilian art critic, researcher, and diplomat Mário Pedrosa.

The exhibition is a clear example of the 'third wave of biennials', in that it started as an affirmation of the cultural status of art between decolonisation and globalisation (Gardner & Green, 2016), and in its connection to the globalised world that aims for local legitimacy rather than looking to the centres of art-making or art exhibiting. Filipovic, Hal, and Øvstebø (2010) describe the MB as 'pairing its name to a more evocative description of their regional ... focus'. Alternatively, as examined by Knaack (2008, p. 83):

The relevance of the Mercosul Biennial, despite the name that refers to the formation of a bloc for the Southern Common Market, is now much more linked to the power of international insertion of this event and its agents than the ability to promote criticism of Contemporary Latin American Art, restricted to countries of the Southern Cone or, outside the hegemonic patterns of global arts.

From its foundation in 1997 to its 5th edition, the MB had various projects focusing on the education and training of teams under the umbrella of pedagogical programmes. These sections of the project worked from different perspectives due to specific demands:

- Training of invigilators/monitors/mediators: It was necessary to prepare a group of people to 'host' the different publics inside the exhibition spaces, from scholars to the public.
- Teacher training in partnership with the local state education chamber.
- Partnerships with education teams were already working in the spaces used by the exhibitions.
- Work with artists, curators, and local universities to provide public programmes.



Figure 10 – 8th Mercosul Biennial, Pedagogical Project, visit with fourth-grade students from Olavo Bilac City School, Novo Hamburgo. No date informed. Photo: Livia Stumpf / indicefoto.com.



Figure 11 – 6th Mercosul Biennial, Educational area in the old port quays that were turned into the pavilion, 2007. Photo: Eduardo Seidl / Indicefoto.com.

A key moment in its history was in 2007, when Gabriel Perez-Barreiro, the curator for the 6th edition of the MB, restructured the event, appointing artist Luiz Camnitzer as its first Pedagogical Curator. This role was created so that pedagogical work would be performed alongside the co-equal function of the curator, marking a fundamental shift in the biennial's focus, emphasising the integration of educational initiatives with the main exhibition rather than as a response or accessory to it. Moreover, the strategy was widely noted: Ellegood (2008) highlights the shift in the approach to the role of the curator in placing a greater emphasis on pedagogical aspects and collaborating on nearly every curatorial and educational component. This 'presented a diverse programme, making the range of curatorial methodologies as much a subject of consideration as were the works on view', and proposed 'a space for discussion, exchange, negotiation, and heterogeneity' that was evident both in the structure of the biennial and in its substantial pedagogical programmes. The restructuring of the MB coincided with broader shifts in the art world, showing tendencies that would later be described as part of the educational turn (O'Neill & Wilson, 2010), such as the 2006 (cancelled) Manifesta, led by Anton Vidokle, which proposed a school as a methodological form for the exhibition, and the approach seen in documenta since its 12th edition.

When the Uruguayan artist Luiz Camnitzer became the first Pedagogical Curator for the event, he proposed the full integration of all these sections and their work into the exhibition's curation and production. Once all teams were integrated, the proposal was clearly understood, and the programme's construction was guided by these aims. From then on, there was an informal directive that all the exhibition spaces would be spaces of experience and knowledge exchange. This integration did not simply expand the scope of educational activity but redefined it as a structural condition of the biennial, in which curatorial and pedagogical processes were conceived as interdependent, shaping how knowledge was produced and circulated across the exhibition. These shifts were also identified by Bruna Wulff Fetter (2017) in her analysis of the 6th Mercosul Biennial as a

curatorial and institutional turning point, where pedagogy operates not as a supporting function but as a central organising principle of the exhibition.

In these terms, the MB proposed an entirely new model that addressed the cultural challenges of its context and focused on the ‘pedagogical’ process and the possibilities that the exhibition can bring. As described by Ferguson and Hoegsberg (2010, in Filipovic, van Hal, and Øvstebø, p. 369), the model proposed by the project remains unique in its transformation of the exhibition into a ‘pedagogical experiment’, in which the interaction with the audience and the approach to education in a vast number of initiatives lead to the creation of a new type of biennial. Once it had been decided to name the project ‘pedagogical’, the MB aligned itself with a series of ideas, possibly having as a starting point the writings and direct influence of the educator and philosopher Paulo Freire.²⁰ Freire’s work remains emblematic of education worldwide, especially in Brazil, and his influential work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* might be a reference for the project’s name.

From its 6th to 9th editions, the MB has significantly evolved its discursive programmes, turning them into complex structures, including a wide range of educational initiatives and partnerships, actively engaging local communities and broader audiences, making them an integral part of the biennial experience. As a biennial from the ‘periphery’ in the South, it has had less general attention due to its distance from the mainstream exhibitions of the art system. However, it remains an exciting biennial representing what happens in the South. We may not hear about it because it is too far away, but ‘more people visit the biennial in Mercosul in Porto Alegre than do the Documenta in Kassel, for

²⁰ Paulo Freire (1921–97) was a teacher, educator, and philosopher who dedicated his life to constructing and discussing critical pedagogy. His most well-known work is *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1968), which introduces his education theories and shows how dialogue is an essential part of the pedagogical process.

example, but historical importance in the art world, geographical placement and media attention all play a role in the significance of the biennial' (Sheikh in Filipovic, van Hal, and Øvstebø, 2010, p. 154). Terry Smith (2012, p 89) briefly mentions the Mercosul Biennial as an example of a project that 'hires people on and off' but says no more about this than that. The few other mentions of the MB in the biennial study field in English and in international art system publications will be explored throughout this research, but they are notably scarce. Therefore, the non-transparent hierarchical structure of the art system situates the MB in a peripheral place. It is within this gap in documentation and visibility that the practice-based essays developed in this research emerge, drawing on direct involvement with the MB to examine how these discursive and pedagogical structures are enacted, negotiated, and sustained in practice. These reflections are used to read the case studies.

Although it is true that the MB is positioned in a peripheral place from the Eurocentric perspective, it pursues its distinguishing characteristic. Compared with other biennials worldwide, the Pedagogical Project is integrated throughout the entire conceptual structure. For example, at the 8th edition, the lines of curatorial action were conceived as pedagogical activities, including training activities for teachers, a course for mediator training, workshops, conferences, seminars, publications aimed at diverse audiences, and especially the programmes of Casa M, scheduled guided tours, free transportation for public schools, and differentiated activities offered to the visiting public during the exhibition period (Artischock, 2011).

This chapter investigates the MB as a potential matrix for a new model of organising and realising biennials, particularly in how its editions engage with discursive practices. This model challenges traditional exhibition frameworks by prioritising education and public engagement as core components rather than supplementary activities. While discursive practices emerge across biennials as part of a broader shift in which institutions engage

with forms of work that extend beyond the exhibition, such as educational programmes, local partnerships, and public engagement, in the case of the MB these elements assume a more structurally integrated role. While the MB's uniqueness is recognised, there is a clear gap in comprehensive documentation, particularly regarding its pedagogical shift, its evolving model and structure, and its influence on other biennials.

Before integrating the cohort of curators for the Liverpool Biennial 2016, Dominic Willsdon in a residency wrote a series of letters as The Resident, turning them into the *LB Stages #3* journal.²¹ He writes to Monica Hoff,²² reflecting on his role as Cloud Curator for the 9th Mercosul Biennial | Porto Alegre | *Weather Permitting*:

It gave me a lot to think about in terms of what it means to be an 'education biennial' – you know that your mediators' programmes from Porto Alegre have become a model for the biennial in Liverpool; small-scale at first, necessarily. It is good that you had the chance to talk to Polly about that. We discussed it a bit during The Resident – about how your programmes, over the years, over successive biennial editions, became something like a 'periodic college of continuing education, allowing artists and others to gain skills and knowledge that empowered them to participate in the cultural life of the city in deeper or more extensive ways – as artists, teachers, writers, in terms of running art spaces etc. (letter to Monica Hoff, 2/11/2014)

Alongside the experience from the south of Brazil, the LB also proposes a (re)connection to the discursive and dialogical through public programmes and educational programmes that work with the community in parallel to the proposed exhibitions. Both biennials were initiated in the same period (the late 1990s) and we can observe a moment in the

²¹ <https://www.biennial.com/journal/issue-3/introduction> accessed on 29 Nov 2019.

²² Monica Hoff was the Coordinator of the educational project of the Mercosul Biennial for its 5th edition, the Pedagogical Coordinator for the 6th to the 8th editions, and the Base Curator for the 9th edition.

trajectory of a shift towards public and education programmes. They repurposed their model of activities towards the public, focusing on engagement activities and more experimental projects. For that reason, the Liverpool Biennial is the second case study with the MB guiding that research.



Figure 12 – 8ª Bienal do Mercosul: Ressonâncias geopoéticas 10 anos depois [8th Mercosul Biennial: Geopoetic Resonances 10 Years Later], still from roundtable streamed by Instituto MESA, 2021. Screenshot from YouTube broadcast, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OKxRDXnjP3w&t=3771s>

In 2021, a decade after the 8th Mercosul Biennial, the Instituto MESA organised a commemorative live event titled ‘8ª Bienal do Mercosul: Ressonâncias geopoéticas 10 anos depois’ (8th Mercosul Biennial: Geopoetic Resonances Ten Years Later), reflecting on the resonances and ongoing influence of that edition. The conversation brought together pedagogical and curatorial collaborators from the time – Luiz Guilherme Vergara, Pablo Helguera, Mônica Hoff, José Roca, Diana Kolker, Marina de Caro, and me – in a live online session broadcast across continents. In his opening address, Vergara described the group as a ‘transcontinental geopotential group’ (Vergara, 2021, 2:12),

acknowledging the diasporic network of contributors then located across Latin America, Europe, North America, and Australia.

Throughout the meeting, participants reaffirmed the embedded nature of pedagogy in the 8th edition as a framework that shaped its infrastructure, methodology, and critical ambition. Speakers reflected on how this pedagogical model continued to inform their practices, including José Roca, who spoke about its direct influence on his curatorial work for the Biennale of Sydney. In my reflection, I spoke of the MA research I initiated in the wake of that edition and how it evolved into this PhD project – tracing the threads between the Mercosul experience and the pedagogical work I later undertook at the Liverpool Biennial. The idea of *geopoetics* emerged throughout the session, particularly in Vergara’s introduction, where it served as a prism for thinking about place, knowledge, and the aesthetic- political affinities that transcend disciplinary and geographical boundaries.

3.2.2 Liverpool Biennial

Established in 1998 by James Moores with Jane Rankin Read, Lewis Biggs, and Bryan Biggs, the Liverpool Biennial (LB) has become a leader among biennials and one of the most important cultural events in the UK. Since the first festival in 1999, the biennial has collaborated with various partners in a diverse range of contemporary art mediums, from traditional ones to public sculpture and community and socially engaged art. Opening on 24 September 1999, curator Anthony Bond directed the inaugural international exhibition in Liverpool, *Trace*. The first edition included the work of sixty-one artists from twenty-four countries (Oxenius, 2017). The biennial was intended to occur every two years, though in 2002 it was postponed due to Liverpool City Council’s bid for the European Capital of Culture 2008. This early structure set the basis for how the biennial

would later negotiate its relationship between international ambition and local engagement.

Reflecting on the positioning and installation of the biennial in the city, sociologist Ronaldo Munck (in Vogel, 2010, p. 64) writes, 'going beyond all the rhetoric of participation and social inclusion, the people of Liverpool have not lost hope in a better future and have the political imagination to reinvent the city if conditions allow'. In this regard, Munck cites Lewis Biggs, the inaugural director of the LB, explaining how the city was one of the country's poorest areas with too many derelict spaces as vestiges of its former wealth. 'What can artists do for Liverpool? Make artists help to imagine a better future.' The aim of establishing a biennial elucidated and changed the parameters of the city's relationship within the country and internationally, becoming a strength for the development of the project in later years.

Expanding its reach with a series of 'collateral' events, the LB is organised and supported by embassies, international agencies, and galleries, providing an extensive cultural experience to the city's citizens and visitors from its very first installation. Within parts of the programme, the LB, through numerous partnerships developed over the years, initiated various streams, including the John Moores Painting Prize, New Contemporaries, and an independent 'off' section. Since 2002, an important characteristic of the LB had been its maintenance of a year-round programme, commissioning public art installations such as Richard Wilson's *Turning the Place Over*, Antony Gormley's *Another Place* at Crosby Beach, and family and school workshops, extending its activities beyond the exhibition period.

'Tracing the Biennial' was a one-off event organised by the Bluecoat on 13 September 2023 to pre-celebrate the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Liverpool Biennial's

establishment. Programmed by Bryan Biggs (Director of Cultural Legacies, Bluecoat) and Adam Smyth (curator, Bluecoat), the discussion aimed to reflect on the LB's early years and how its role evolved in the city and provide reflections on its impact on Liverpool's cultural landscape. As chair of the panel, I learned from the discussion and reorganised many ideas I had on the structure and history of the LB. The meeting's participants were people who had made its formative editions, including Lewis Biggs (former Director of the LB), Jonathan Swain (leader of the independent programme that complemented the first biennials), Bryan Biggs (who has been involved with the biennial from the start), Laurie Peake (Project Director from 2002 to 2012), and Lois Keidan (co-curator of Liverpool Live, a live art programme developed with the Bluecoat and the Live Art Development Agency). An important theme of the meeting was the initial biennials' difficulty in gaining national relevance while maintaining positive and integrated connections with local artists.

What came to the fore was how Liverpool had historically been perceived as a cultural 'black sheep' within the UK, with high levels of poverty and economic challenges shaping its artistic landscape. Aware of these tensions, the founders of the LB worked towards offering the city a model to deliver a strong contemporary art scene that could dialogue internationally while creating meaningful local participation. Aligned to this strategy, Hsu (in Van Hal, 2010, p. 27) argues that the LB emphasises its role in urban regeneration and engagement with the city's socio-political context, which is evident in the constant use of derelict spaces in the city (like the ABC Cinema in 2016 and the Old Blind School in 2014), exemplifying how biennials can go beyond mere exhibition platforms to actively contribute to revitalising their host cities, illustrating the potential for biennials' impact.

Returning to the anniversary discussion, the change from the first to the second edition and the aim of introducing a more collective model of curating aligned with broader trends in biennial-making, transitioning from top-down curatorial approaches to more

open, multi-voiced structures. However, there were unexpected successes and setbacks. As the LB positioned itself as a significant cultural event for the city, gaining significance and international recognition slowly over its editions, tensions started to emerge with local artists and organisations, highlighted by the challenges of balancing global ambitions with grassroots engagement. Jonathan Swain's Independent Programme paralleled the initial editions of the LB and was very important to the profusion of experimental and emerging practices. The project also created the basis for the Independents Biennial, a parallel platform to the LB that integrates local and regional artists. The Bluecoat also shapes the LB's discursive and live art elements. As Liverpool's oldest contemporary arts centre, it hosted and supported the change to integrating other cultural spaces into the LB's practice. Another key transformation discussed at the meeting was changing the approach to artist commissions. For the participants, it was clear that there was greater financial support for large-scale public artworks in the early years, when the city was more derelict and in need of occupation. The ambitious projects that LB supported had a significant visual impact and took over spaces at a time when the city was in construction mode. Changes in funding have now created possibilities to fund missed works: recent editions have focused on site-specific, community-driven, and smaller-scale interventions.

In its initial years, the LB's foundation and continuation also positively influenced Liverpool's successful bid for the 2008 European Capital of Culture. Contributing to local commercial developments demonstrated that Liverpool could host an internationally significant contemporary art event, which helped secure funding for large-scale cultural and urban transformation projects. Another event outcome was the LB's influence on the proliferation of other arts organisations and events in the city, encouraging them to adopt more contemporary, experimental, and discursive programming approaches.

However, its relationship with Liverpool-based artists and collectives remains complex. While the biennial has undeniably positioned Liverpool as a major contemporary art destination, many local artists have felt excluded or detached from its internationalised focus. This tension is normal for biennials worldwide, where the balance between local engagement and international prestige is often tricky to navigate. That said, projects like *The Old Paint Shop* (2010), which invited artist-run spaces to occupy a disused paint shop, demonstrated that moments of more profound engagement with Liverpool's grassroots art scene have occurred.

The discussion at the Bluecoat showed the complex role the LB has played in the city over the last two decades, at least as reflected by its first editions, helping evolve the city's cultural landscape. It showed how, from the early challenges in establishing national and international recognition to its ongoing negotiations with local artists and organisations, the LB has continuously adapted to shifting artistic, social, and economic conditions. While it has played a pivotal role in positioning Liverpool as a major contemporary art destination and influencing the city's broader cultural infrastructure, questions of local engagement, funding limitations, and the evolving nature of commissions remain key areas of reflection.

Like the MB, the LB has progressively developed its discursive and educational programmes. These programmes incorporated social engagement and participatory practices, aligning with contemporary art trends. The establishment of the Martha Rosler Library in 2008 is an example of a strategy to engage the public in a different form (or platform).²³ The library was an ongoing project hosted by the biennial giving the public

²³ The Martha Rosler Library was open to the public from 12 April to 14 June 2008, hosted at the former building of the Liverpool School of Arts and Design (currently the Liverpool Institute of Performing Arts [LIPA]).

access to the collection of the artist Martha Rosler. In the document that reflects on the library, Byrne and Domela (E-Flux, Domela, and Byrne, 2008, p. 2) recall the status of the space as an artwork and a public resource, one that also established the connection between the biennial and Liverpool John Moores University as a partner institute. Anton Vidokle, curator of the project (E-flux, p. 21; Domela and Byrne, 2008), reflects that the project is the totality of the installation and the public programmes that come with it, encouraging a level of public engagement beyond that of the observer of an installation.

These growing commitments to discursive participation and long-term engagement are further exemplified in commissioned projects that moved beyond the temporary or symbolic. Within this broader shift toward embedded, socially responsive commissions, Jeanne van Heeswijk's *2Up2Down/Homebaked* (2010) is a particularly resonant example of how the biennial began exploring co-authored, long-term forms of local engagement. Invited by the biennial, van Heeswijk began working with residents and young people in Anfield, Liverpool, to reimagine the future of a derelict bakery opposite the Liverpool Football Club stadium. Through workshops and design sessions, young participants shifted from being merely consulted to becoming co-designers of the space and neighbourhood, shaping architectural plans and governance models. The project eventually evolved into *Homebaked*, a cooperative bakery and community land trust that continued independently of the biennial. While it began as a temporary commission, it challenged narratives of urban regeneration and offered a long-term platform for collective ownership and civic imagination, prompting the biennial to withdraw and allow the project to live on as a resident-led initiative.

The 2012 edition sustained this emphasis on critical and socially grounded practice, deepening its engagement with critical discourses around identity and migration. Kompatsiaris (2017) further explores this trajectory by analysing John Akomfrah's video installation *The Unfinished Conversation*, showcased at the Liverpool Biennial 2012,

highlighting how it challenges dominant narratives. The following passage underscores the biennial's role in fostering critical dialogue beyond traditional approaches, particularly in addressing complex social issues like race and migration. He states:

It suggests a non-cognitive pedagogical trope, transgressing a dominant political -economic rationality that racialises class and tends to treat migration mainly through statistics. Here, by displaying this artwork, the Liverpool Biennial, as a platform of extensive visibility, channels these particular value systems in the social world. (Kompatsiaris, 2017, p. 26)

Sally Tallant's appointment as Artistic Director in 2012 further consolidated the biennial's commitment to education and social engagement. Known for her previous work in public programming, her leadership marked a shift toward more structured educational and community initiatives. Tallant's appointment followed her participation in *the International Seminar on Education and Art* at the 8th MB in 2011, where she engaged directly with the biennial pedagogical model. For one week, she learned in depth about the projects developed by the Pedagogical Programmes and the creation of permanent education and community programmes in 2014. Like other biennials, the LB increasingly engaged with educational and discursive programmes to integrate these elements into its broader structure. This focus has allowed it to position itself as a significant player in the global biennial landscape. As noted by Kompatsiaris:

The Liverpool Biennial, through its extensive educational initiatives, has managed to bridge the gap between art and its audience, making contemporary art more accessible and engaging for the public. (Kompatsiaris, 2017, p. 187)

Invited to reflect on and respond to mediation in the arts, Tallant (2013) defines the work as rooted in collaboration, partnership, and open dialogues, requiring continuous openings for art to rupture and disrupt the everyday.

Developing an understanding and a practice is a learning process ... Radical and resilient resistance seems necessary to ensure this work remains relevant ... I want to maintain this conflicted environment and resist a culture of consensus, to retain a constant process of rethinking in all of the places I operate. (p. 29)

These structural changes, including the creation of a dedicated curator of education role filled by artist and educator Polly Brannan, extended the biennial's pedagogical scope. My own experience coordinating the mediation team at the Liverpool Biennial in 2016 and 2018 complicated this shift. Coming from the Mercosul Biennial, where mediation had been framed as a pedagogical and relational practice, I encountered in Liverpool a different institutional understanding of the role, closer at times to invigilation, visitor services, and exhibition care. This tension made visible how the language of education does not automatically produce pedagogical conditions. Mediation depends on institutional structures, training, labour conditions, and the degree to which the organisation allows mediators to operate as critical agents rather than as guardians of the exhibition space. Read alongside the practice-based reflections developed in the essays in Vol. 2, particularly *From Casa M to Toxteth: Radical and Invisible Pedagogies, Counter-pedagogies at Large*, and its resonances with projects such as the LB's *Imaginary Friend*, this condition makes visible how pedagogical and socially engaged practices rely on forms of labour that are often temporary, affective, and unevenly recognised within the institutional structure of the biennial.

These developments signalled a shift that was not only structural but also conceptual, positioning education as an active, curatorial methodology rather than an auxiliary programme. Oxenius (2017) emphasises the LB's function as a site of knowledge production, particularly the complex interactions between local cultural production and global artistic discourses.

3.2.3 Characterising and Evolving MB and LB: Structural, Thematic, and Geopolitical Trajectories

To further develop this comparative frame, it is useful to draw from broader characterisations of biennials and how the MB and LB variously reflect or diverge from them. Paul Ardenne (2006) characterises biennials as tools of legitimisation, highlighting their ability to operate on varying scales, from national showcases like the Whitney Museum's American art exhibition to regional platforms such as those in Dakar, Cairo, Buenos Aires, Lima, and Sharjah. This characterisation can be extended to understand both the MB and the LB and how they embody different characteristics. Initially focused on promoting regional artistic activity within the Southern Cone, the MB reflects Ardenne's notion of biennials serving third-world demands, akin to the civilisational biennials of Havana and Johannesburg. By contrast, the LB has increasingly asserted its place within the international biennial circuit, promoting co-commissions and cultivating cross-institutional partnerships.

The MB and LB contribute to contemporary art by challenging and expanding existing discourses within the global art world. The MB, known as the 'pedagogical biennial', has established itself as a model for integrating educational and discursive practices into the core of the biennial structure, primarily because of the vulnerability of the local infrastructure, including its educational system, for the arts and creative practices. The MB's approach offers a platform for innovative educational models that resonate beyond the exhibition space, contributing to a more extensive network of discourse-driven art practices. On the other hand, the LB engages with challenging themes related to its historical context, particularly the strong connection of its host city (Liverpool) to the transatlantic slave trade. By confronting this uncomfortable topic, the LB positions itself as a postcolonial exhibition platform, using art to reflect critically on the city's complex history. Both biennials redefine the role of biennials in the global art system, pushing boundaries of what these events can achieve regarding education, public engagement, and local and historical reflection.

The educational and public engagement strategies of the MB and LB differ significantly in scale, scope, and approach. These differences are already visible in the specific configurations discussed in Sections 3.1.1 and 3.1.2, but are here brought into comparative relief. The MB operates on a much larger scale, both in terms of geographic reach and logistical coordination. Located in the southernmost state of Brazil, Rio Grande do Sul, MB collaborates with the Secretary of Education to engage with the entire state. Here, it is important to note that this state's size is comparable to that of England. This partnership facilitates extensive school visits, with free buses transporting students from up to twenty-five miles away. In contrast, the LB, while similarly focused on public engagement, operates within a more concentrated urban environment, working closely with the Liverpool City Council to develop targeted educational projects. The recent leadership of Learning and Education Curator Aimee Harrison has enhanced the LB's approach. However, it remains more focused on broader public engagement rather than the extensive, structured educational programmes seen at the MB. The 'small team' for the MB's educational programmes – just for *Travel Notebooks* in 2011, the team comprised eight producers and three assistants – rivals the entire education team for the LB in 2018: the whole team for the 2011 MB was about 260 people, including mediators, supervisors, the booking team, teachers of teachers, and producers. This information on numbers highlights the immense difference in the scale and resource allocations between the two biennials.

Both the MB and LB exemplify the characteristic 'glocalisation' of contemporary art, evident in their efforts to engage local publics through discursive projects while remaining connected to the broader international art system. The MB, despite its peripheral location in southern Brazil, far from major cultural hubs such as Rio de Janeiro or São Paulo, has succeeded in attracting international curators and artists while being deeply anchored in regional educational structures. Over time, it has adopted a 'glocal' approach, engaging international artists while retaining its regional identity, thereby legitimising both regional and global art practices.

The LB, by contrast, benefits from its proximity to London, an international art hub, and from the UK's extensive museum infrastructure, positioning itself within the global biennial circuit without a fixed geographic frame. As a 'gatekeeper' mediating between local cultural institutions and global artistic practices (Oxenius, 2017), the LB illustrates the tension between local identity and global cultural flows, while the MB demonstrates how a peripheral biennial can nonetheless cultivate distinctive pedagogical and discursive models that resonate internationally. This tension was also evident in practice, where mediation and public engagement were required to negotiate between local expectations and internationally framed curatorial agendas, often without the institutional flexibility needed to sustain these negotiations beyond the exhibition timeframe.

This dynamic becomes more explicit in *City as Curriculum: The 9th Mercosul Biennial*, another conversation between Mônica Hoff and Dominic Willsdon. Reflecting on the pedagogical programme developed for the 9th MB, they describe an educational structure operating without a fixed centre, in which “the whole region would be our classroom, our curriculum” (Hoff & Willsdon, 2013). Learning unfolds through movement across sites, encounters, and transdisciplinary exchanges, extending beyond the exhibition format. As Willsdon later reflects on applying these ideas in other contexts, including the Liverpool Biennial, what emerges is not the transfer of a model but its reconfiguration under different institutional conditions. While the MB sustains a distributed and process-driven structure, the LB remains more centrally organised, shaping how such pedagogical approaches can be translated and maintained.

These structural and thematic differences set the stage for the next section, which examines how questions of accessibility and education have been framed in both biennials, positioning art as a public good and testing institutions' capacity to learn from and with their audiences.

3.2.4 Public and Educational Accessibility: Art as a Public Good and Institutional Learning

A core attribute shared by the MB and LB is their commitment to accessibility, reflected in their policy of offering free entry to exhibitions and associated public programmes. This approach embodies the ethos that art and culture should be public goods accessible to all, regardless of socioeconomic background. By eliminating entry fees, these biennials create inclusive environments that encourage diverse audiences to engage with contemporary art. Kompatsiaris (2017, p. 26) observes that by making thought-provoking artworks accessible to a broader audience, the LB fosters engagement with issues such as racial identities, social struggles, and political agency, positioning itself as a cultural event with a clear social mission.

Another strategy common to biennials is evaluation and reporting to show measurable impacts on local communities. The MB has consistently commissioned third-party research to assess the exhibition's effects, with internal teams maintaining steady documentation. This has generated a rich archive of reports detailing visitor numbers, economic contributions, and long-term influence on the local art scene. Similarly, the LB collaborates with universities and third-party organisations to produce reports on visitor statistics, job creation, and economic impact. These practices not only strengthen the legitimacy of both biennials but also provide mechanisms for institutional learning and adaptation.

Despite these advances, both biennials have faced criticism concerning their educational and public engagement strategies, explored more deeply in Chapter Three. At the MB, institutional critique has often emerged from within, highlighting challenges of team structure and decision-making. At the LB, concerns focus on the size and resourcing of the education team, which some perceive as limiting its ability to integrate discursive and

educational practices into the wider structure. These critiques underscore the need for continuous reassessment if biennials are to sustain relevance in an evolving art world.

As outlined in Sections 3.1.1 and 3.1.2, both biennials have significantly strengthened their public and educational approaches. For the MB, this was particularly evident in 2007 when Luis Camnitzer introduced a pedagogical programme that worked alongside the main exhibition rather than supporting it from the margins. Similarly, the LB saw a shift in 2014 with the establishment of a dedicated education team and the role of Education Curator. Both biennials have also expanded their discursive presence through publications: the LB has reimagined its catalogues as collections of essays and free public guides, while the MB has developed catalogues, educational materials, and project-specific publications. As Gardner & Green (2016) noted, these developments reflect a broader trend where accessibility and engagement are increasingly prioritised, underscoring the importance of art as a tool for education and public discourse. These adaptations are deeply entangled with each biennial's foundational positioning—whether MB's pedagogical model is shaped by institutional vulnerability or LB's negotiation of global-local dynamics within a UK context.

3.2.5 Funding and Organisational Structure: Financial Architectures and Curatorial Priorities

The MB and LB face substantial challenges in sustaining and enhancing their educational programmes, as discussed in the previous section. These challenges are not merely logistical but reflect structural decisions embedded in each biennial's institutional DNA. As independently funded entities, both must adopt diverse income-generation strategies and establish strong organisational frameworks to ensure financial viability. For the MB, the key challenge lies in securing resources to maintain the scale and ambition of its projects. Having reached a peak in pedagogical initiatives, it now faces the task of

balancing innovation with the financial constraints of its environment. A recent organisational decision to separate public and educational programmes was presented to improve outreach, but according to informal accounts, it was also aimed at streamlining fundraising²⁴. This restructuring, however, risks fragmenting the comprehensive pedagogical model that has long defined the MB. By contrast, the LB must revisit earlier strategies to reassess the structure and impact of its educational team. A renewed emphasis on curatorial vision within learning initiatives, combined with stronger financial backing, could enable it to more fully integrate education into its broader discursive framework. Both biennials are thus compelled to innovate while negotiating the material limits of their contexts.

Unlike government-run institutions that often rely on a single public funding stream, the MB and LB depend on a mix of income sources, including government grants, private sponsorship, and partnerships with local businesses. This financial diversity provides a measure of independence and flexibility but also places heavy demands on internal operations, requiring dedicated teams for fundraising and partnership development. Both biennials have established specialised units to sustain this flow of resources, yet the dynamics of fundraising inevitably shape programming decisions, thus affecting artist selection, the scope of public initiatives, and the framing of curatorial narratives. At the MB, reliance on local business partnerships has fostered a governance model that privileges financial sustainability and project feasibility. While this secures local support, it can constrain risk-taking and redirect resources away from expansive educational ambitions. In contrast, the LB's status as a National Portfolio Organisation supported by Arts Council England ensures a more stable financial base. This stability allows for a balanced funding strategy that combines public investment with private and

²⁴ <https://www.bienalmercosul.art.br/post/bienal-do-mercosul-anuncia-artistas-e-espa%C3%A7os-da-sua-pr%C3%B3xima-edici%C3%A7%C3%A3o>.

philanthropic contributions, enabling a governance structure where business priorities and curatorial vision, including the role of education, can be held in more productive tension.

3.3 Conclusion to Chapter

This chapter started with a fieldwork account from *Planning for the End of the World* (2011), a project that opened onto questions of pedagogy, temporality, and affect, setting the tone for how lived experience inflects this research. From that starting point, the case studies of the Mercosul Biennial and the Liverpool Biennial were examined across subsections that traced their institutional trajectories, accessibility strategies, and financial architectures.

The analysis explores three main findings. First, education and public access are not supplementary but central to both biennials, though they are configured differently: MB through expansive state-level infrastructures and LB through more targeted urban partnerships. Second, structural and funding arrangements decisively shape the scope and sustainability of pedagogical practice: MB's business-oriented governance prioritises financial feasibility even at the risk of narrowing its pedagogical ambition, while LB's Arts Council-backed framework provides relative stability but often limits the scale of its educational initiatives. Third, the global positioning of each biennial reveals asymmetries in visibility and recognition: MB asserts pedagogical leadership from a peripheral geography, while LB leverages national and international infrastructures to negotiate global relevance through local histories.

Taken together, these findings frame MB and LB as laboratories for experimenting with education, mediation, and socially engaged practice within biennial-making. They also

reveal the fragilities in funding, governance, institutional recognition, and conditions that raise the question of how such practices can be sustained. The chapter, therefore, establishes a grounded comparative basis from which the thesis moves into its next stage: autotheoretical reflection and the elaboration of conceptual tools for biennials as pedagogical and discursive infrastructures.

By analysing MB and LB in depth, the chapter demonstrates how contrasting geographies, scales, and governance models generate distinct pedagogical configurations, thereby advancing comparative understanding within biennial studies and curatorial practice.

4 Chapter Three – Practice Outputs: 'Biennials as' Essays and Critical Toolkit

This chapter presents the practical outputs of the thesis, which crystallise its methodological arc and extend its contribution beyond analysis into a proposition. Developed at the intersection of autotheory, case study research, and practice-based enquiry, the outputs are conceived as parallel yet interrelated forms: a collection of essays (*Biennials as...*) and a critical toolkit (*Biennials as Pedagogical Tools*). In the submitted thesis, they reflect substantial scope and distinct formats, while remaining integral to the overall project. Both emerge from the contradictions, negotiations, and pedagogical tensions encountered in the fieldwork with the MB and LB, translating them into forms that are at once reflective and generative.

The essays advance propositions for thinking biennials not only as exhibitions but as unstable institutions where pedagogy, discourse, and publicness are continually tested. The toolkit complements this by distilling the research vocabulary into a dialogical resource, designed to be adapted, circulated, and reactivated in diverse contexts. Together, these outputs signal a methodological turn: from critique to proposition, from documenting practices to generating tools that can be taken forward by others.

4.1 'Biennials as' Essays

Let us talk about money; let us talk about power; let's talk about structural violence; let's talk about states of emergency; let's talk about new formats; let's talk about old struggles; let's talk about representation and identities, let's talk about differentiating emancipation from domination; let's talk about the thin line between governmentality and anti-hegemony; let's talk about drop exhibitions and clashes between local art communities and international imports. Let's also talk about society and its neglect (or support) of art and culture. Let's talk about these contradictions and the new questions they raise – let's talk about biennials today. – Editorial (*OnCurating*, no. 46)

Let's visit a biennial. You get a map and the programmes and start preparing to commute from where you are to the exhibition area. What will you see from your exciting list of artists? Is there a theme or trail you could pursue? Furthermore, will you be lucky and find that part of the live programme is happening during your visit? When reflecting on this preparation, I remembered a family once rushing into the gallery space of a biennial, asking, 'Where is the art?' It was as if they had given themselves half an hour to investigate three artworks for their daughter's homework before hitting the high street to shop. It was a Saturday, and the task was part of the family's programme for the day.

The preparation described above is a fundamental part of being a biennial visitor for many of us. However, this is only one example of the multiple ways people can be involved in the processes that constitute a biennial. Most biennials operate their main scheme or infrastructure, envisioning the diversity of visitors. However, the focus will be on the 'specialised' visitor, on the one hand, and the type of family described before, which I will call the 'number' visitor, on the other. The 'specialised' visitor is someone with a connection to the art world who is aware of the biennial narrative and curatorial statements: they may come to the biennial as part of their work or study; they usually have a 'must-see list'; and are seen in the exhibition spaces closer to the opening weekend or the closure of the event. The 'number' visitors are liked a lot by the biennial-making machines because they are easy to quantify. They are one click of the tally counter as they pass through the door. 'Number' visitors are the ones that help you tally the numbers at the end of the day and sum up the event at the end of the exhibition season.

These dynamics are especially relevant to the MB and LB. Despite their differences, both types of visitor tend to ruffle feathers when the biennial's aim is to get into a theoretical

and critical space that reflects its complexity. On the one hand, you have art consumers, who are the reason for the globalised features of the biennial. Conversely, faceless quantities of visitors help you pay the bills.²⁵

Let us focus first on the ‘number’ type of visitor. In the parts of the biennial’s structure driven by a ‘the more, the merrier’ mentality, the type of visitor makes no difference to the organisation or institution’s accounting/financial team as long as it can show that a systematic quantity of people are interacting with what has been created (and, somehow, this same dynamic occurs, in general, in art institutions, museums, and art galleries, even though we are here focusing on biennials). Moreover, this process brings all the politics, hierarchies, and power structures into the same sphere as the ‘regular’ organisations and institutions. The ‘numbers’ are the key element of the reports (one document or a series of papers, depending on how many funders you must provide feedback to), proving that you have properly spent the money gathered and are ready for more. Despite the affirmation that biennials are often fickle (Kolb et al., 2020; Kompatsiaris, 2019), there is always a part of the institution that makes the biennial machine work around the clock to provide a ‘normality’ to the enterprise. This mechanical mode leads us to understand that the core of the biennial-making machine is connected to the basics of microeconomics and supply and demand, and, therefore, is of a capitalistic nature.

The other public we are discussing, the ‘specialised’ visitor, is what brings the elements of value and significance to the biennial-making structure. They are the ones who validate

²⁵ Creating these events is a complex process; the objective is not to minimise the efforts of the teams working around the clock to make a biennial happen. However, this ‘number’ of visitors points to one of the most significant paradigms art institutions – and therefore biennials – face at the beginning of the 2020s (and, of course, after the COVID-19 pandemic): who are we here for? What is the objective of these institutions, programmes, and projects?

the aesthetic importance of the exhibition. Such matters will allow us to compare and understand the narratives around curatorial statements and the feedback to the art system, proving the biennial's legitimacy (or otherwise). Compared to the 'number' visitor, the 'specialised' visitor is the focus of most of the biennial-making machine teams' work, because these visitors are the ones who must be pleased. As a prime principle, constructing a trail of satisfaction for the 'specialised' visitor guarantees the biennial at least the positive feedback of the art world. The enjoyment of the 'specialised' visitor can be procured with extra bags of goodies and complimentary tickets to sold-out performances and dinners. From the perspective of the biennial-making machine, the dynamics of preparing for the two publics (and those in between them), in a rough way to simplify the mechanics around it, constitutes a constant cycle of conflicts and imbalances. In biennial studies or biennialology (Filipovic, Hal & Øvstebø 2010), this reveals an ambiguity over what constitutes a biennial and, therefore, to whom a biennial is dedicated.

Once we understand the ambiguity present in the space(s) created by or structured through these large-scale exhibitions, we are also confronted with a paradigm. This has become one of the most critical discussions in recent biennial studies, in which the potentialities and the negotiation within the local are in conflict with the repetitions of the (art) system/market. Panos Kompatsiaris (2017), who dedicates most of his *The Politics of Contemporary Art Biennials* to trying to understand the elements of this dynamic, suggests that biennials are spaces of 'coded dissent' that try to respond to the day's agenda while remaining meaningful to a broader public. However, biennials remain typical of the elitist spaces of the art system, despite the camouflage of an attempted reconciliation with all sides of this complex system. In *Hegemonic Shifts and the Politics of the Biennialisation*, Oliver Marchart (in Filipovic, van Hal and Øvstebø, 2010, pp. 466–90) describes the workings of this conflict in which different parts of the biennial apparatus struggle for domination, creating a 'hegemonic' imbalance where a power struggle is imminent. Both authors understand that the core of biennial-making is the

capitalist enterprise. Consequently, these political dynamics are natural to biennials, even if the idea of a biennial being primarily a platform for the political rather than the aesthetic is a recent phenomenon (Kompatsiaris, 2017). Building on the idea of the biennial as a 'hegemonic apparatus', Marchart (in Filipovic, van Hal and Øvstebø, 2010, p. 473) understands that part of the biennial-making process is to 'lend symbolic legitimacy to marginalised discourses' in which the act of allowing the marginalised to the centre confers to the apparatus (biennials in general, or in the case of the example the author uses, documenta) the ability to understand the dynamics of politics in practice while pursuing a more positive (or less grim) outcome for the process in the exhibition.

The family mentioned earlier that exemplifies the 'number' type of visitor is one of the key elements of this paradigm. While biennials are constituted to focus on curatorial discourse aimed at providing the exhibition with a meaningful narrative, part of the public, specifically the one representing the organisation, tends to experience the biennial merely as another form of entertainment or cultural offering. In reviewing a biennial from a theoretical and critical perspective, this 'number' type of audience allows the event's existence in terms of funding, programming, and partnerships, but it does not necessarily affirm the event's overall significance or role within the art system itself. Numbers are relevant only up to a certain point and hold more substantial importance for the internal workings of the biennial-making process. They will be effective if they increase comparatively from one year to the next, but they are often less meaningful when compared across different biennials. Regardless of this assertion and the local/global significance of their comparison, the institutions organising the MB and documenta must consistently work to legitimise their projects and secure funding. This is part of the challenge of maintaining a structure that is meaningful, desirable, and fundable, despite the ongoing struggles among these components. The repetitive task of resource management is an indispensable aspect of the biennial structure, ensuring the foundation of the hegemonic process, which even small-scale biennials must emulate to

carve out a place in the self-sustaining attention economy established by the larger biennials (Niemojewski, 2021).

The ambiguity created by the biennial-making machine regarding frequency and significance, as well as the distinction between the 'number' and the 'specialist' public, remains unresolved. The proliferation of biennials can provide a potential model for art circulation within the art system, as seen in books, conferences, articles, magazines, courses, and research such as this. However, what if we cease to perceive biennials as problematic newcomers? What if the perspective from which we attempt to understand biennials stems from an outdated approach (or an outdated art historical framework) for analysing them? We observe a gap between the theoretical and practical aspects underlying the complexity of the biennial-making machine. This observation aligns with Carlos Basualdo's (2003–2010, in Filipovic, van Hal, and Øvstebø) suggestion in his seminal text, *The Unstable Institution*. Basualdo reflects that part of this conflict lies in evaluating biennial-making 'in terms of the logic of institutions of modernity and not concerning the challenges they embody'. The author also suggests that we view the biennial through the lens of an outdated art system that requires constant refreshing and reshaping. Most literature, theories, and critiques regarding contemporary art biennials focus on discovering what a biennial is within the commodified art system. What if biennials could transform how people understand and interact with art?

This text does not aim to reiterate the familiar criticism of the biennial as a compromised or co-opted structure. Instead, it seeks to explore the contradictions of the biennial model – working through its fragilities to discover what kinds of pedagogical, discursive, and institutional potentials might still be mobilised. As a researcher deeply involved in biennial practice, I approach this task not only as a critic but also as someone who actively shapes and reshapes these spaces through curatorial and educational work. Basualdo's reflection resonates strongly throughout these essays and in the development of my

research ethos. His call to reassess biennials beyond the frameworks of modern institutional critique makes space to understand their contradictions not as failures, but as structuring forces. It is precisely the inability to stabilise a singular 'biennial mode' that gives the format its generative tension. Since the 1980s, upcoming models such as the Havana Biennial have not simply challenged hegemonic formats but offered distinct, locally grounded propositions. Rather than replacing existing infrastructures, many of these projects have strengthened local artistic and pedagogical ecosystems, sometimes enabling scholarly and public access to contemporary art where none existed before.

From that position, aligned with the 'South as method' approach, these texts rethink the biennial not as a problem to be solved but as a discursive and pedagogical space to be continuously reimagined. What follows is not organised as a linear analysis but as a series of intersecting entry points into the curatorial, pedagogical, and institutional dynamics of biennial-making. Through five propositions, utopian machines, invisible pedagogies, schools of experience, social engagement, and institutional precarity, the essays draw on my experiences with the MB and LB to think through what a biennial can do. This framing leads into the work of Bruce W. Ferguson and Milena M. Hoegsberg (2010, in Filipovic, van Hal, and Øvstebø), who identify in *Talking and Thinking about Biennials: The Potential of Discursivity* that biennials arising through what has been referred to as the discursive turn generate disruption in the art world – through both their proliferation and the perceived dilution of curatorial significance. What if, as they suggest, curatorial energy is essential only to the art world? What if the so-called lack of 'serious curatorial ambition' (Birnbaum in Ferguson and Hoegsberg, 2010) does not necessarily correspond to a lack of local relevance? The authors connect these possibilities to the often inconsistent and fragile links between biennials and their embedded communities. The proliferation of 'discursivity' may point to the biennial's potential to overtake museums and the academy in the production of knowledge, but it can just as easily be fetishised as a strategic placeholder – one that fails to meaningfully disrupt what we already understand as a hegemonic process. At stake here is the potential of discursivity not only to challenge

established models, but to reposition biennials as spaces that unsettle institutional boundaries, redistributing where and how knowledge is produced. While discursivity can indeed become a temporary mask or institutional tactic, it also holds the capacity to shift the function of the biennial – from spectacular display to more situated, process-based, and pedagogical forms of engagement.

Revisiting Basualdo's proposal, the biennials establish a regular mode of contributing to how people approach and understand art. At the same time, they are evaluated and understood as a medium for knowledge-making, sharing, and experiencing. The discursive elements, such as editorials, symposia, or educational programmes, are the components that facilitate public interaction with the biennials on a different level. And they are the way to let us know what they think, by capturing their response on evaluation forms and through observing the arts. As a meta-process, the discursive aspect of biennials might be the key to understanding them in a reshaped and refreshed way. The outcomes expected will be much more qualitative than quantitative.

When invited to reflect on the biennials she had organised, Mahita E. B. Urieta (Bergen Kunsthall, 2010) suggested that 'a biennial has to think its place through and further develop education as an education of the place'. Moreover, it allows outsiders to learn about this newly known culture and test new agendas and new exhibition-making practices. Perhaps her suggestions do not resolve the conflict and ambiguities addressed, but they suggest that we should remain open to the discursive for more positive outcomes.

By examining MB and LB as case studies, we recognise that both have evolved into discursive projects. At a certain point in their dynamics, institutional work continued with the aim of developing lasting relationships with visitors through experimental and

unusual projects and spaces. In this part of the research, these expanded modes of engagement are translated through discursive practices as propositions for what a biennial can be.

As the thesis *Biennials as Pedagogical Tools: Examining strategies and effects of the discursive practices on education and public programmes of large-scale periodic contemporary art exhibitions, Learning from the Mercosul Biennial (6th, 7th, 8th, and 9th editions) and the Liverpool Biennial (2016 and 2018) + A Critical Toolkit* traced the historical and structural development of biennials as geopolitical and pedagogical formations, what follows departs from that analytical position and inhabits the contradictions experienced from within. Rather than interpret these systems from a distance, this introduction makes proposals from a place of implication, articulating the biennial as lived, negotiated, and reimagined through practice. It unfolds through five interrelated propositions:

- *Utopian Machines and the Maramo Effect* – or when biennials open up possibilities to collectively reimagine what is utopian, proposing alternatives to the present through shared aesthetic and political imagination.
- *From Casa M to Toxteth: Radical and Invisible Pedagogies, Counter-pedagogies at Large* – or when informal and often overlooked pedagogical approaches emerge through situated, community-based experiences.
- *The City as a School and Schools of Experience* – or when biennials draw from the format of a school to create spaces of experience, engaging the city as a site of learning and public encounter.
- *Social Engagement Practices in Biennials* – or when biennials engage with their communities, enabling participation, shared authorship, and long-term relationships.
- *Precarity as an Exercise in New Institutionalism* – or when biennials are compelled to reshape their institutional structures, whether through experimentation or systemic fragility, thereby testing new forms of sustainability and responsibility.

This collection of essays suggests a shift in method, shaped by the tension between critical distance and situated knowledge. I write from my position as researcher-practitioner, but also as participant, friend, and critic. Theory does not arrive from above but grows from experience: lived, tested, and provisional. The writing resists neutrality. It draws on contradiction, on the fragment, and practices of attention. 'South as method' is not a framework applied, but a condition inhabited – a rhythm of knowing through relation, through broken time and situated voice. Some passages will remain unresolved, incomplete, or arrive too soon. They are left that way intentionally, as part of a process where critique and becoming remain entangled.

As a contribution to knowledge, *Biennials as...* offers a practice-led, autotheoretical account of biennials as spaces of potentiality. It advances biennial studies by foregrounding the discursive and pedagogical layers that often remain marginal in existing scholarship, while also proposing tools for rethinking curatorial and educational practice. In doing so, it situates biennials as unstable but generative institutions—neither reducible to spectacle nor to critique, but as sites where new forms of learning, relation, and imagination can take place.



Figure 13 – 7th Mercosul Biennial, Grito e Escuta (2009), Absurd Pavilion, external area installation. September 2007. Photo: Personal archive.



Figure 14 – 7th Mercosul Biennial, Grito e Escuta (2009), Absurd Pavilion, external area. Date not informed. Author unknown.

4.1.1 Utopian Machines and the Maramo Effect

Why make biennials? Vanity, recognition, and curiosity naturally take their part, but I suspect another level of desire or motivation is involved. Let us call it the utopia of art on centerstage. – Jonatan Habib Engqvist (in Fortin, 2018, p. 76)

The sunset on Porto Alegre's heritage docks that day was beautiful. There was a commotion of people continuously filling buckets in line, moving them from the piles of sand standing by the riverside and moving them slowly into the warehouse. We did not have much of a break to enjoy the clouds, the changing colours of the sky, or the reflection of the building in the river. There was less than an hour until the speeches and the event's official opening. Hundreds of people would soon arrive at the site.

The people involved in the project, including technicians, artists, mediators, and curators, were still trying to overcome the gloomy feeling of the accident that had occurred just a few days before. One of the electricians, working during the rush of the last few days of installing the project, had not used the correct PPE and had been killed in a terrible work accident, dying only a couple of hours after being electrocuted. This tragic situation terrified us all. It sparked conversations between teams and directors. 'Should we cancel the opening? Should we cancel it at all?' The electrician's family was involved. Understanding the accident, they asked the organisation not to stop the process. The electrician was also a nephew of the head technician. Following this, an ambulance remained onsite to prevent a similar incident from occurring again.

The truth is that no one had expected to have to deal with the actual violence of death in the exhibition. It was embedded in the theme of some artworks, but was not as now, a factual presence, as one of us was gone. There was a bittersweet, solid feeling in the air. On one of the walls in a participatory piece

by the collective CDM – Centro de Desintoxicação Midiática (Media Detox Centre) someone had tagged ‘one of our brothers is dead’. The sentence lingered silently, pressing on us all, folding the outside world into the exhibition space.

The people were queuing in large groups of more than forty people, trying to finish covering the floor of the Absurd Pavilion. The task was to move the last tons of sand quickly inside. A mix of people wore formal attire for the event, which was set to open in a few minutes. An artist left her high heels, coat, and earrings in a pile with the bags and coats stacked on the benches by the gigantic metal doors. Others took off their socks and shirts to feel more comfortable, making the necessary movements. There was more silence than chatting. Only a few words, such as ‘grab here’ or ‘take this one’, were spoken occasionally. If someone had stepped out, they would have seen a beautiful image of this unusual choreography of bodies illuminated by the golden hour.

In moments like this, a biennial becomes a utopian place of harmony and sensibility, a non-planned performance. We were all mourning and creating beauty together in situ. There was a collective silence about the life lost, and a sense of duty prevailed, prompting preparations for the celebration. Only a want-to-be-utopian space would be a place for both. In this fragile and momentary kind of utopia, not defined by planning or perfection, but by its capacity to hold contradiction, in this shared silence and unspoken effort, something emerged that resisted instrumentalisation, something closer to a rehearsal of possibility. Was it hope?

The Absurd Pavilion, curated by the artist Laura Lima, was a place in which death, life, surprise, and loss were clustered together. Filled with meters of sand, it was like boxing part of a desert. The accident that occurred a few days before changed the entire dynamic of the work: the relationships between teams and the normality of the installation process. In this place, the non-discursive spoke aloud, as the non-said or the

non-directly mentioned. Gaush's (2011, pp. 408–12) idea that utopian spaces emerge from idealised planning and confrontation with the absurd and the unexpected resonates here. The accident and its impact transformed the Absurd Pavilion into a space where the boundaries between life and art, planned and unplanned, dissolved into a new reality. The pavilion became an example of the layers of symbolic processes within biennials that resist entrapment, identification, or translation into a catalogue version.

For the German philosopher Ernst Bloch, utopia is not something impossible or unreachable but rather a function of reality as a blind spot in which hope and the unexpected make the present bearable, allowing us to transcend the transmogrification that occurs throughout life (Costa, 2007). Bloch's idea of utopia also attempts to distance itself from the classical perspective from which we read or understand utopia in a modernist world. Utopia has shifted in meaning alongside the transformations of the world and culture, because it belongs to them as much as it does to the art world and to biennials.



Figure 15 – 7th Mercosul Biennial, *Grito e Escuta* (2009), screenshot from video report by Vernissage TV, accessible at <https://vernissage.tv/2009/12/14/7th-merc-sul-biennial-2009-grito-e-escuta-porto-alegre-brazil-part-12/>, 25'.

As we attempt to follow Basualdo's approach of 'finding new strategies to understand the biennials', we should also adopt new approaches to utopia, rather than adhering to Thomas More's classic island narrative.²⁶ Biennials are not islands per se – they are highly interconnected. The idea of utopia, rather than a theme to mention only briefly, can also suggest how we might understand what biennials could be and how they could be a way to potentialise their self-affirmation, as mentioned by Harald Szeemann when visiting the 2nd Mercosul Biennial.²⁷ Another theme is how the art world perceives the process of biennials, which constitutes its approach to communities or the idea of community. As exemplified by the Absurd Pavilion, the composition of the space or the choreography narrated draws a line between the instability of the exhibition space and the possibility that the space, as a biennial space, must constitute something utopian. Here, it is impossible to deny the connection of this idea to the classic text from 1967 by Lucy L. Lippard and John Chandler on the dematerialisation of the work of art through the understanding that we were facing an 'ultra-conceptual art that emphasises the conception process almost exclusively' (1967), which had already announced that a change in the process would demand more of the spectator's participation: 'when works of art, like words, are signs that coin ideas, they are not things in themselves but symbols or representations of things'. Thus, new circuits of waiting and reformulation become games suggesting rethinking a new form of utopia. Considering a biennial as a potential space of utopia reflects the changes and possibilities of becoming. As this is often organised or focused as a theme for the exhibition space, how would the discursive feed this expectation? Building on this framing of biennials as utopian spaces, these collection of essays now turns to the MB and LB as sites where such possibilities have been differently mobilised and tested.

²⁶ In *Utopia* (1516), Thomas More imagines an island society governed by reason, communal ownership, and structured equality, trying a radical alternative to the political and economic structures of sixteenth-century Europe. The island becomes both a spatial metaphor and a critical mirror, allowing readers to question the values and contradictions of their world.

²⁷ The curator was the key speaker at the opening symposium of the event's pedagogical programme on 5 January 2000.

Victoria Noorthoorn and Camilo Yanes, the curators of the 7th MB edition, *Grito e Escuta (Screaming and Listening)*, invited Marina de Caro, a feminist Argentinian artist and educator, to act as Educational Curator. *Artists at Hand* was the response to *Screaming and Listening's* main curatorial proposal for the 7th edition of MB. Organised around the concept of the availability of being and sharing, de Caro's idea was to enhance the already conceived and operating network by involving residencies, professors, schools, and other projects in the countryside, to become a scheme she later called *Experimental Micropolis*. The artist's proposal invited fourteen artists' projects that shared elements and refocused their framework to work collaboratively with others in shared processes. These projects were re-staged across the Rio Grande do Sul region, covering the borders with Argentina and Uruguay, applying their pedagogical characteristics and engaging with local communities.

One of the projects developed by the artists André Severo and Maria Helena Bernardes, *Histories of the Peninsula and Great Beach / Pulling (Histórias da Península e Praia Grande / Arranco)*, applied a distinctive approach to the expected engagement process. Through visits to the state's coastal area, the project collected narratives from the region's inhabitants and recorded videos and drawings of the region's lighthouses. However, the process became even more atypical when they decided that the project's exchange would be centred on developing a partnership and friendship with one person. This development of the affective as part of the project's method was, on the one hand, a way to dismantle any possible status defined by the artists as 'x person from the community that we engage with', and, on the other hand, a way to reflect on the everyday life practices of this person and their relation to the artists in residence.

Another project organised as part of this edition was proposed by the Chilean curator Gonzalo Pedraza, who replicated the *Neighbourhood Collection (Colección Vicinal)* project first created at the community-based Galería Metropolitana in Pedro Aguirre Cerda,

Chile. The project's initial proposal was to invite neighbours to loan artworks to demonstrate what a collection organised within the neighbourhood itself could constitute. The curator's methodology worked through a two-sided process in which individuals had to consider what they had at home that they considered artistic and what, ultimately, might qualify as part of this collaborative process. The project was replicated in Caxias do Sul, a medium-sized industrial city located in the centre of the state. Instead of working independently for the first time, Pedraza partnered with twenty local individuals who acted as ambassadors for the project, including the mayor's wife, local artists, and community activists. The space selected for the exhibition was a regional council museum, spread across four rooms and featuring more than two thousand artworks.

Both projects expanded the space in which the biennial could operate as a *utopian machine* by exploring the possibilities embedded in the availability of artists as a process for generating experimental sites of knowledge, reflection, and shared experience – feeding back into the biennial's existing network and its outcomes. In this sense, I understand the term *utopian* as referring not to an idealised form, but to the contemporary way in which biennials are often formalised within a hegemonic framework. Biennials, generally speaking, are dominant and influential in shaping the discourse, understanding, and representation of art both globally and locally. The term *hegemonic machines* (Marchart, 2014, 2022; Kolb, Patel, & Richter, 2020) emphasises how biennials function as powerful institutions that propose particular ways of comprehending and inhabiting the world, structuring how subjects are positioned in terms of race, class, and gender in contemporary society. Although the MB continues to carry structural deficiencies – having begun in a canonical form and reflecting its local hegemony, at times colonial, politically influenced, and hierarchical – it has also sustained experimental processes that permitted the creation of a series of *micropolis*, challenging the dominant model and leaning instead towards a utopian horizon.



Figure 16 - 7th Mercosul Biennial, *Grito e Escuta* (2009), *Artists at Hand* project, *Neighbourhood Collection* by Gonzalo Pedraza, Caxias do Sul. Date not informed. Photo: Caxias do Sul Communication Secretary.

This utopian perspective on pedagogy connects the diverse projects encompassed by *Artists at Hand*, which unfolded across multiple locations and engaged a wide range of partners and communities. The project's geographical spread and operational scale are crucial to understanding its significance. It involved numerous cities, producers, artists, and communities over an extensive area, with each artist contributing in distinct ways to the broader initiative. Around six full-time producers worked on the ground with different communities, alongside a lead coordinator overseeing the operations. Each artist worked according to their own methods. De Caro believed that positive outcomes could be assured by proposing replicating already tested and effective projects that would generate strong results because they were, in themselves, already robust. At the same time, she recognised that artists' capacity to engage with these communities depended on their openness to pedagogical exchange, a notion that is central to this research.

At the heart of pedagogy lies a profoundly utopian process that not only emerges from the exchange of knowledge but also embodies a continuous gaze into the future. Paulo

Freire, a key figure in pedagogical reflections, makes a significant contribution to this idea, particularly in the public sphere. The term *pedagogy in public* was used in a study group I participated in during the COVID-19 pandemic (organised by artists and educators Fabio Tremonte and Monica Hoff, 2021). While this will be discussed further in a separate section focusing on experiences, I aim to comprehend how these notions intertwine. There is an intrinsic relationship between necessary joy in educational activities and hope, as expressed by Freire in his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed: Knowledge Necessary for Educational Practice* (*Pedagogia do oprimido: saberes necessários à prática educativa*, 1970). In this context, hope is not something added to human nature but a fundamental part of it. It is what being human means: by its very nature, unfinished and aware of this unfinished nature, participating in a constant movement of seeking. Hope is the natural and necessary impulse that propels this movement, while hopelessness represents a denial of that impulse, almost an abortion of it. Hopelessness, therefore, is not a natural characteristic of human beings but a distortion of hope. We are essentially hopeful beings who, for various reasons, may become hopeless.

The struggle for hope lies in diminishing the objective reasons that lead to hopelessness and immobilise us. It is contradictory for a progressive individual committed to justice and decency, who fights against discrimination and impunity, not to critically embrace hope. The de-problematisation of the future, whether in a right or left mechanistic view of history, results in the authoritarian denial of dreams, utopia, and hope. The mechanical and deterministic understanding of history, which presumes a future is already known *a priori*, eliminates the need for hope, thereby perpetuating a hegemonic narrative. In the context of *Artists at Hand*, the struggle for predefined future limits the space for hope, contributing to a forceful break from the socially and historically constituted notion of human nature.

The notion of pedagogy as a utopia extends to all artists available and their practices, creating intense and beautiful projects. These initiatives, which utilise the network established by previous biennial editions and take place in the countryside of Rio Grande do Sul, create a somewhat autonomous movement. The involvement necessitates intricate partnerships, navigating conversations with artists, producers, and pedagogical contributors on the ground while collaborating with diverse communities. The projects within *Artists at Hand* create spaces for utopia, aligning with Freire's (1996) idea of establishing environments where happiness and pedagogy intersect, fostering hope and a sense of utopia. The micro-political change embedded in these projects catalyses shifting perspectives, inviting individuals to reconsider their ideas. Understanding the project's size is crucial to grasping its approach and geographical scope, because it not only connects to the network, as mentioned earlier, but also directly engages with multiple places and partners, seeking the potential of each project. This makes evident a connection to Marchart's (2014) perspective on writing the history of biennials from the periphery, as these projects empower local participants, challenging the conventional hegemonic approach. Autonomy emerges as a central theme within these projects. While connected to a central idea, they exhibit a decentralised nature, spreading across the state without thorough control from the central organisation.

The transformative potential of autonomy is significant in this context – the shift from hegemony to utopia is facilitated by creating spaces for autonomy. Autonomy becomes a dynamic force that evolves, allowing for change and adaptation. This contrasts sharply with hegemony, which lacks the flexibility and freedom inherent in utopian spaces. The reflection on autonomy as a critical factor in this shift adds depth to the analysis, emphasising the transformative power that emerges when individuals and communities are granted the autonomy to shape their narratives and contribute to constructing utopian spaces. This dynamic interplay between autonomy, utopia, and hope sets the stage for a paradigm shift in the discourse surrounding biennials and their impact on local communities.

Reflecting on *Peninsula and Great Beach / Pulling*, Severo and Bernardes draw a connection to a process of self-discovery within the southern area of Rio Grande do Sul state. Focused on the extensive Cassino Beach, recognised as the world's longest beach, spanning 254 km (158 miles), the project delves into the historical and cultural richness of the region. The uniqueness of the landscape, marked by straight-line expanses and historical lighthouses, becomes a canvas for exploration. The approach is distinctive – rather than simply creating an archive of memories, it develops meaningful conversations with local inhabitants. The aim was to register lighthouses and extract narratives and memories from the community through the experiences of one person. Collaborating with various artists, the project adopts imagery and storytelling interventions.

What emerges from this process is a transformative encounter with a local figure, the owner of a small village hotel, who becomes a symbol and voice of the place. The artists' engagement with this individual takes on a personalised dimension, evolving into a unique one-to-one project. The collaborative journey involves traversing the world's longest beach and unravelling its layered histories as narrated by the local custodian. This immersive process culminates in a book – an organic outcome capturing short stories and photographs that transcend any predefined expectations. In this manifestation, *Peninsula and Great Beach / Pulling* become a microcosm embodying utopian ideals by fostering deep connections with local narratives. The autonomy granted to the artists enables a more nuanced exploration of cultural landscapes, departing from hegemonic frameworks.

The second project, *Neighbour Collection*, also introduces the concept of autonomy while layering further thematic complexity into its reflective process. Transplanted to the city of Caxias do Sul – a landscape marked by industrialisation and shifting urban dynamics – Pedraza reimagined the project for a new context. In this iteration, the curator extended invitations to a diverse group, including the mayor's wife, artists, and community activists.

Together, they ventured into their neighbourhoods, encouraging residents to share and reflect on the artworks present in their homes. The outcome was a collective exhibition at the Museum of the City of Caxias do Sul, showcasing a striking variety of artistic expressions drawn from across the city.

One compelling aspect of Pedraza's project lies in its challenge to established perceptions of art and the democratisation of artistic representation. By inviting individuals to lend pieces from their homes, the project invited a revaluation of what counts as art. Beyond traditional paintings or photographs, participants offered sculptures and other domestic objects, disrupting conventional ideas of what is worthy of display. The resulting exhibition resembled a vast cabinet of curiosities, resisting expected hierarchies. Moreover, *Neighbour Collection* prompted reflection on curatorial authority and process, influencing subsequent initiatives. The project created a ripple effect that reached local schools, where educators embraced the methodologies introduced by artists in *Artists at Hand*. Teachers adopted a curatorial lens, asking students to explore the contents of their bags, curate selections, and collaborate on shared displays. The positive feedback from schools highlighted the transformative potential of integrating artistic methodologies into educational contexts, where schools developed their own collections and rotated curatorial roles across year groups and classes.

This reflection on pedagogy unfolds as artists' methodologies find resonance within school settings, creating new possibilities for the future. Taking artistic processes into educational realms becomes a catalyst for the unknown, opening up spaces for forms of creativity and collaboration that might not have been conceivable. In essence, the *Neighbour Collection* project becomes a microcosm where autonomy, artistic expression, and pedagogy intersect, contributing to the notion of utopia discussed here.

The French artist Nicholas Floch embarked on *The Great Exchange (El Gran Trueque)* project, which differed from the others. The idea was to work in an urban city setting, hosting the exhibition. The core idea behind this initiative was to facilitate a process of reciprocal dedication to different communities. Floch aimed to unite people from four distinct communities to collaborate to discern their material desires. The project unfolded as a collective workshop, where each community collaboratively compiled lists of their needs.



Figure 17 — 7th Mercosul Biennial, *Grito e Escuta* (2009), *Artists in Availability* project, *El Gran Trueque* by Nicolas Floch, overview with details of the wooden van. Date not informed. Personal archive.

The selected communities for this action represented a spectrum of aspirations. An urban building serving as an occupied area sought materials for painting, refurbishing, and revamping its living space. A school group in the southern region of Porto Alegre

expressed a desire for musical instruments for their band, football equipment, and uniforms, while a primary school in the rural outskirts aimed to address transportation challenges by seeking a van. The initial stage of the project involved the communities shaping and formalising their desired objects. Working alongside Floch, they crafted wooden sculptures that physically represented each object – whether instruments, painting materials, uniforms, or a van. The resulting sculptures served as factual, life-sized copies made collaboratively by each community with the artist. Unfolding over approximately nine months, Floch worked closely with each community. Together, they created the desired objects, incorporating them into the project's budget. The wooden sculptures were brought into an art space for the leading exhibition. The unique aspect of *The Great Exchange* became apparent as potential collectors were invited to participate. For this exchange, individuals had to provide the community with the exact real-life objects they saw in the exhibition. This process explored the reciprocal nature of the initiative, where the participants were not merely observers but active contributors to the project's success. The entire project, orchestrated by Nicholas Floch, highlights the innovative intersection of art and community while demonstrating how subtle adjustments within an art system can be directed for social good. *The Great Exchange* thus becomes an example of the transformative power of art in addressing social needs and enabling community collaboration.

In the utopian process under consideration, Nicholas Floch transcends the conventional notion of the object as a mere commodity. His project navigates beyond the commodification of the object and the artwork itself. Within this innovative exchange, the emphasis shifts towards the intrinsic value of ideas, creating a pathway that redefines access to these meaningful objects. The project, therefore, becomes a poignant exploration of the transformative potential within the realm of artistic exchange, highlighting the profound value embedded in shared ideas and collective processes rather than in the conventional exchange of commodities. It offers hope, marking a utopian gesture within the process.



Figure 18 – 7th Mercosul Biennial, Grito e Escuta (2009), Artists in Availability project, El Gran Trueque by Nicolas Floch, wooden football T-shirts. Date not informed. Personal archive



Figure 19 – 7th Mercosul Biennial, Grito e Escuta (2009), Artists in Availability project, El Gran Trueque by Nicolas Floch, band with school children using wooden instruments. Date not informed. Personal archive.

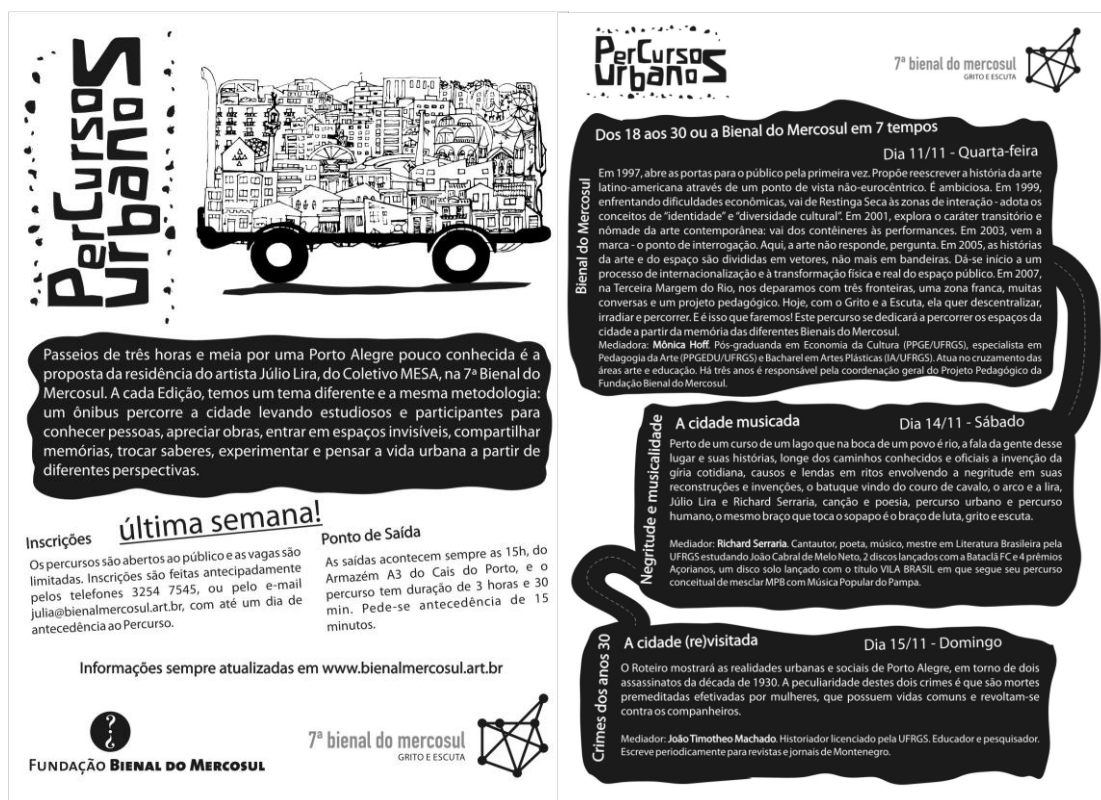


Figure 20 – 7th Mercosul Biennial, *Grito e Escuta* (2009), leaflets distributed in exhibition spaces to invite the public to visit *Urban Paths* (part of *Artists at Hand*) across the city, organised by producer Júlia Coelho under the orientation of artist Julio Lira. Date not informed. Personal archive.

Urban Paths (*Percursos Urbanos*) becomes a distinctive project for *Artists at Hand* that unfolded an exploration of Porto Alegre through multiple lenses. Developed within a collective from the Federal University of Ceará, artist and educator Julio Lira was invited as the representative of this collective to adapt and replicate the method for the MB after it had been running for a decade. The project was rooted in a long-term methodology that invites participants to re-encounter the city, allowing them to inhabit and rethink its spatial, social, and cultural structures. Across twelve iterations, each gathering brought together diverse guests to navigate thematic framings, reflecting context, dialogue, and exchange rather than predetermined routes. For example, one of the iterations explored the religiosity of Porto Alegre through the lens of Umbanda, a syncretic Afro-Brazilian religion. Guided by the religion's practitioners, such as Pai de Santo Antonio Babba, to reflect on their training and formation as sons and daughters of saints, the route revealed

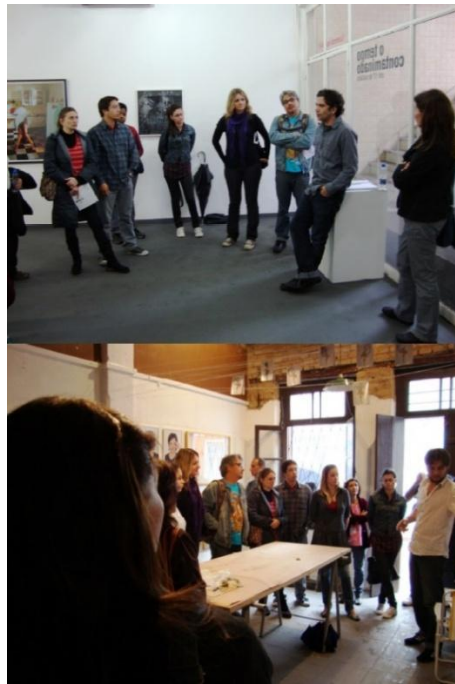


Figure 21 – 7th Mercosul Biennial, *Grito e Escuta* (2009), *Urban Paths, Scaping the Varnish* (Artist-Led Spaces), conducted by artist and teacher Claudia Paim with visits to *Desvend* (studio of Rodrigo Lourenço), *Galeria Subterrânea* (collective), and *Galeria Azul*. 24/10/2009. Photos: Liane Strapazzon / Bienal do Mercosul (2009a)

how spiritual practices intersect with urban life. The group moved through places of significance for the Afro-Religiosity in Porto Alegre, including the central market where a spiritual guide (*bara do mercado*) is held, the riverbanks, and a river beachside. These locations hold symbolic weight within Umbanda cosmology and also allow for the final stages of initiation to take place. The project exemplifies a utopian process by creating conditions where contrasting perspectives meet, explore integration, and unsettle normative understandings of the city. Through this embodied engagement, *Urban Paths* catalysed moments of dialogue and co-learning, contributing to a layered, more open understanding of urban experience. The reconfiguration of the city encouraged participants to move across urban landscapes not as passive observers but as engaged interlocutors. As Lira (in De Caro, 2009) defines:

“Percursos Urbanos are not just routed through the city; they are transformative journeys, weaving dialogues and experiences that transcend physical spaces. Rooted in the philosophy of sharing knowledge, these paths become dynamic classrooms, fostering a pedagogy of exploration, understanding, and collective learning” (p. 126)

Diego Melero's project, *Powerlifting Philosophy* (*La filosofía política en el gimnasio* or *political Philosophy in the Gym*), was a surreal convergence of physical exercise and philosophical engagement. Through a series of sessions held in gyms, Melero invited participants to consider how the movement of the body might extend beyond physicality, entering the realm of thought. The project proposed – almost poetically – that uplifting the body through exercise could also activate philosophical understanding. This became a transformative journey of self-discovery and reflection. In these sessions, Melero collaborated with a wide range of participants, some in public spaces across the city and others in school settings. People engaged in physical activity while being guided through discussions that intertwined philosophy, politics, and lived experience. His project connected people to their own bodies while opening space for dialogue that stretched from personal well-being to wider social questions.



Figure 22 – 7th Mercosul Biennial, *Grito e Escuta* (2009), *Artists at Hand*, session at the School of Physical Education (ESEF) with teacher Monica Dantas and 30 students, reading Plato's *Republic* and Machiavelli's *The Prince*. 11/10/2009, 7:30–9:00 a.m. Photos: Author unknown / Bienal do Mercosul (2009a).

Powerlifting Philosophy challenges the passive norms often reinforced in schools and resists the domestication of work, particularly as it manifests in early education. The project opens up an experimental space that questions the conventional school logic of 'do not stand up, do not move, stay quiet'. By integrating bodily activity with philosophical and political dialogue, the project disrupts dominant educational models, giving rise to a more dynamic and participatory form of learning. Its collaborative approach – bringing together participants from diverse age groups and contexts – cultivates a sense of togetherness and collective inquiry. What emerges is a utopian educational space where the boundaries between movement, reflection, and discourse dissolve, allowing for a more integrated way of learning that exceeds the limits of the traditional classroom. The essence of Melero's project lies in the integration of physical and intellectual labour, showing how the body can become a conduit for philosophical engagement beyond abstraction. The project seeks to bridge the gap between conceptual thinking and embodied experience, encouraging participants to live philosophy through the interplay of movement, thought, and practice.

The artists in *Artists at Hand* play a role in creating the experimental *micropolis* that Marina de Caro proposed – spaces where knowledge, thought, and sharing are intricately aligned with the network built through the biennial and the resulting creative output. While the projects replicate existing methodologies, they unfold in new, site-specific encounters. This act of reapplication – of methods already tested – enables a kind of situated pedagogy where what matters is not the novelty of the method but the affective and processual quality of its exchange. Artists are invited to return to familiar frameworks within unfamiliar communities; in doing so, the work becomes neither static nor easily commodifiable. It changes shape through the hand of the producers, through the gestures of facilitation, and through the responses that emerge from the communities involved. Even though the biennial may operate as a hegemonic structure, the active part of these projects becomes affective, relational, and present – it moves through people. It becomes almost utopian.

Most participants of these projects do not relate to the MB as a hegemonic or institutional framework. They engage with it as something that arrives locally, through a person they trust, through a relationship, through a question. In Caxias do Sul, for example, participation spanned from members of local elite groups to those situated in peripheral areas. In another case, a community occupying a city-centre building in Porto Alegre only agreed to participate because the MB team member had long-standing ties with civil movements and understood how to approach them. These forms of affective trust shift the tone entirely. When effectiveness comes on board, whatever is hegemonic dismantles. These projects were not structured as one-off interventions, like a UFO-style project that arrives and suddenly vanishes. The outcomes were carried through with attention, care, and long-term commitment. The pedagogical exchanges they enabled opened spaces that more hierarchical structures often cannot. In resisting instrumentalisation, they created fragile but powerful rehearsals of other ways of being and making together. What these practices reveal – through their repetition, intimacy, and situated improvisation – is not just a pedagogy of availability, but something else, still forming: a space in which methods are not fixed but activated anew through presence and response. I return to this as a kind of echo of what I later came to understand as the Maramo effect – where things are not just redefined through time and activation, but where knowledge reveals itself partially, relationally, or not at all. It resists totalisation. It resists erasure. ‘There is no claim to universality without erasure’ (Rolando Vázquez, in Attia, 2022, p. 26). It is from this refusal of totalisation that I return to maramo, a Mbya Guaraní word meaning ‘time without time’. Maramo gestures toward a cosmovision in which time is not measured but lived in relation. It does not designate utopia as a future endpoint but suggests something continually happening – anchored in observation, feeling, and reciprocity. When held alongside biennials, maramo does not offer a new universal concept or system. Rather, it shifts the temporality of the biennial as such. It moves from the promise of impact toward the practice of attention. It invites us to read these pedagogical

and curatorial gestures not as models, but as momentary alignments. Not as blueprints, but as utterances.

For the artist Daniel Bozhkov, Maramo Trade Post was a deep learning experience into the Mbya Guarani Culture. Bozhkov is one of those open-learner artists who tend to incorporate knowledge and people as a creative archive, taking those techniques, thoughts, and meetings into account when summing up what has been produced at the end of a journey. For this residency process, he asked me to stay for a certain period to help him acquire a few words and feel more independent. We brought food for him and the families. And then he started learning the threads, processes, and methods of basket weaving. This becomes the tree of life. For the process of building the house in the exhibition space, Bozhkov wanted to have it made by Mbya Guarani hands, which led to Cirilo coming on board. Cirilo is the chief of the Mbya Guarani, and our first talk with him made us understand the shock of borders for his nation and the relations involved in this process of retaking the land. Daniel wanted everything that Guarani and Cirilo agreed on. The tekooa was incorporated in the making of a wattle-and-daub hut in the middle of the exhibition, all by the Mbya people. But first, we needed to ask the spirits if they agreed. So, we went to ask. We went to sleep in the tekooa, and early in the morning, went to the field to talk to the spirits. A fire was made, we sat, and we remained in silence. Cirilo kept speaking certain words in Guarani, opening the work and the conversation with the entities around us. After a couple of minutes of silence, he asked Daniel, 'What'd you want to ask?' The artist smiled and said he wanted to ask whether they were willing to let us take what we needed to do his work. And that he apologised for himself because the position might not be right, but the intention was. Seconds of silence and steadiness were broken by a strong blow in between the trees, moving everything around us and our bodies in surprise. Cirilo said, 'I think this is a yes.'

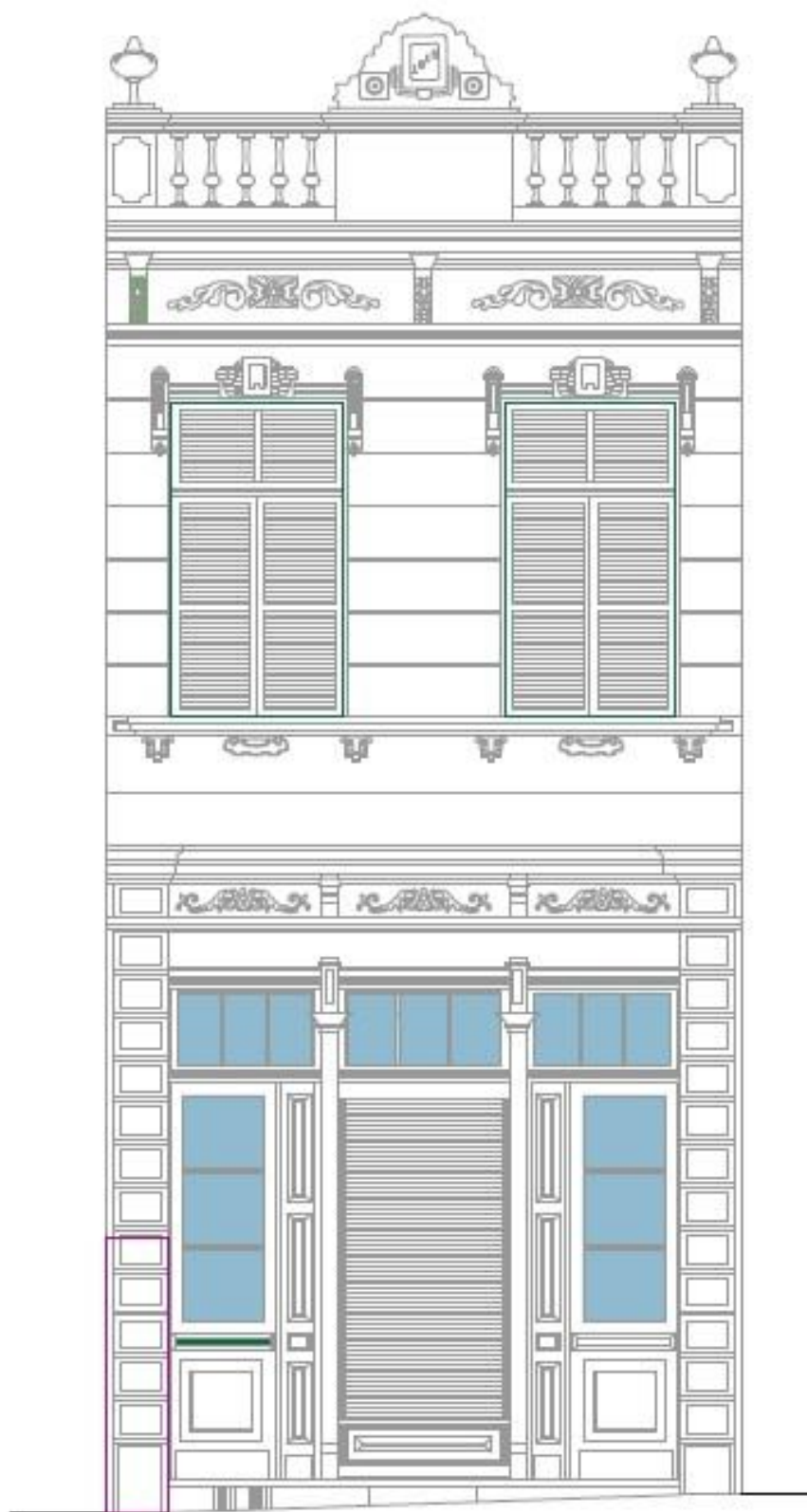


Figure 23 – 8th Mercosul Biennial, Ensaios de Geopoéticas (2011), architectural drawing of Casa M, front cut. Date not informed. Personal archive.

4.1.2 From Casa M to Toxteth: Radical and Invisible Pedagogies, Counter-pedagogies at Large

The control of the archive is also the control of memory. (Derrida in Sholette, 2011, p. 92)

We set the alarm, closed the door, and locked it with the chunky keys. The teams would come in the following days to empty the house, distribute materials, help the architecture team pack the custom furniture, put the archive back into boxes to be hidden from the public, and possibly leave stuff behind. After more than eleven months of dedication to the project, I was still in shock, maybe drunk – a big celebration had just ended – but definitely aching with tiredness. The last act in the house was for the Duos. The Duos project allowed us to invite local artists from different backgrounds to work together for the first time in commissioned activations. The closing session featured the collaborative work of puppeteer and visual artist Maira Coelho and writer Marcelo Noah. After a day of celebrations, films, workshops, drinks, potlucks, and other collaborative food made in the kitchen, the public was invited to leave the house and stare from the street through the windows. The audience then became a group of voyeurs, while the eclectically styled house – combining art nouveau and classic Portuguese elements – functioned like a small tower, its windows turned into screens. Coelho and Noah presented a twenty-minute show narrating the house’s trajectory: a homage to the previous owner and a reflection on the labour of artistic occupation in general. We were all stupefied when the lights and sound went off. Silence. The quiet audience, still unsure whether they were supposed to leave – whether that was it – lingered for a few minutes. We waited at the base of the long staircase

in front of the house for the street to clear before performing the final act of closure.

It was the end of something significant. I looked up at Carla, waiting for me to begin the procedure of shutting the house after everyone left. My gesture suggested it was just another day. She was tearing up. I finished, looked at her, and we hugged and cried. A few silent moments later, we ended our embrace and started to walk quietly down the road. After a few steps, she said, 'We did it, my friend!' Carla and I are now friends. For those months, our friendship was forged through trust and through the making of the projects inside Casa M (M House). We knew each other before – friends of friends, from afar, hearing of each other's existence – but this was different. Casa M was a project that allowed us to experiment and experience in multiple ways: as partners in all the processes, inside and outside the house, defying the institution, gambling with possibilities, turning the street into a space of celebration among neighbours, hosting international curators, directors, artists, using it as a starting point for parades that took over the city. The work we did together made our friendship exist. That was part of the project's outcome.

There is a space between the realisation of these projects and the desire to preserve their memory – a space we will never fully capture. What remains here is one memory, from someone who participated in that history, which will stay with those who experienced it until we fade away. But there is also the unbearable history of what cannot be archived or recorded; the ruins of what we cannot hold; the invisible we feel, and we do not. Often, we are disposed to keep the binarism of the visible and the invisible, trusting that one concept necessarily opposes the other. But throughout the experience of Casa M and beyond, I began to understand the invisible as a concept parallel to the radical. Radical because it can be missed, but not unsensed. It disrupts, discharges, moves, and transforms – and is hidden, doing the same things, but quietly. The radical and the invisible do not differ in outcome, but in how they

move the body: one from outside in, the other from inside out. In this, I find resonance with what Monica Hoff Gonçalves proposes in Counterpedagogical Reflections: Unlearning and Burning Are Not Things That Can Be Separated (Reflexões contrapedagógicas: desaprender e incendiar não são coisas que se pode separar), in which she reflects on how this constant gathering of bodies becomes something we cannot miss, dismiss, or ignore. Because we cannot. It changes us, as Casa M did – in the undeniable force of the radical, or in the quiet motion of the invisible.



Figure 24 – 8th Mercosul Biennial, Ensaios de Geopoéticas (2011), the author presenting the Casa M counter during the roundtable 8ª Bienal do Mercosul: Ressonâncias geopoéticas 10 anos depois [8th Mercosul Biennial: Geopoetic Resonances 10 Years Later], streamed by Instituto MESA. 2021. Screenshot from YouTube broadcast: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0KxRDXnjP3w&t=3771s>.

Casa M was built from the core premises proposed by the curatorial team for *Geopoetics Essays* (Roca, 2010). The objectives of the house were presented early to the Mercosul Biennial Foundation to support the reallocation of team budgets and the commission of the structure. These objectives were:

- To serve as a central receptor for the local non-specialist public, including students.
- To involve a greater proportion of local artists from Porto Alegre and the wider region.
- To present the Education Programme as an intrinsic part of the curatorial project, not as parallel to or derived from it.
- To understand the biennial as a platform for building infrastructure, rather than simply occupying spaces.

As Roca (2011) emphasised, the context in which the MB operated suggested that, as a project of long-term cultural policy, its initial strategy aimed to engage from the outside in. In hindsight, the plan closely resembled what we might now identify as a form of radical pedagogy: a project that entangles political activation with discourse and proposes structural transformation. In this sense, the curatorial team's vision was to reimagine the city's space as an opportunity for collective reflection on art, community, and belonging. The overarching goal was to cultivate a biennial with a lasting presence, capable of inspiring continued creation and collaboration even after the event's conclusion.

Despite the MB historically being considered a peripheral event, Roca envisioned Casa M as a form of collective delirium – a space of experimental practices and activities that operated as an autonomous zone (TAZ). This notion relied on the generation of processes within spaces, driven not by institutions alone but by the users of those spaces. Casa M was woven into the complex programme of the biennial as both a site of activation and an anchor for broader engagement. It was also the host venue for an international seminar held at the end of the main exhibition, which focused on art pedagogies. Following the approval to create such a space, the next step was to organise its functions from a long and detailed 'wish list'. Finding the right house proved difficult. It needed to

be large enough to host multiple uses simultaneously, and central enough to connect with other MB venues. The production team found an old *solar* (townhouse) in the city centre – three storeys high and full of potential. Adding a twist to the story, the former owner of the house, Dona Cristina Balbão, became something of a godmother to the project. An artist and painter, she had taught at local institutions and universities for decades. Before the occupation, her house had already been the location for soirees and artistic gatherings. She was a painter, her husband, a musician. The house carried its own atmosphere of shared creative life.

Taking over the site was a highly collaborative effort, primarily driven by the precise work of the epigraphy and architecture teams. They designed its use based on the spatial needs and capacities of each group working there. These conversations happened alongside the rest of the exhibition and residency planning. The collectivity embodied by Casa M became a strong, multi-threaded environment for the projects and teams it held. With its rich history and singular character, Dona Cristina's house quickly became a buzzing, beloved presence in the neighbourhood and the wider art scene. During the occupation, she even opened a Facebook profile and became an interactive figure in the digital realm, commenting on posts and promoting events. The design team, which were initially responsible for the spatial organisation, took on an expanded role in facilitating artists' projects. They adapted the space according to each team's needs and the collective vision for how the house might function. A small basement room was transformed into a cinema. The garden was reshaped with a vivid red sand installation, *Vermelho-Pungente (para Dona Cristina)* (2011) by Fernando Limberger. The library hosted the Documentation and Research Centre (*Núcleo de Documentação e Pesquisa – NDP*), made public for the first time. The kitchen became the local teams' base, while also serving as a site for workshops, dinners, informal TV programming, and partner meetings. The front *vitrine* was turned into an exhibition space to highlight artists from the countryside. Behind it, a larger flexible room alternated between being a stage, seminar space, and workshop area. The house's multiple rooms – from backyard installations to collective

meeting zones – gave it a distinctive character. Nonetheless, accessibility issues remained: the top floor could not be reached by wheelchair users or those with mobility limitations.



*Figure 25- 8th Mercosul Biennial, Ensaios de Geopoéticas (2011), Neighbours Workshop at Casa M. 21/05/2011.
Photo: Flavia Quadros / indicefoto.com.*



Figure 26 – 8th Mercosul Biennial, *Ensaíos de Geopoéticas* (2011), installation by Fernando Limberger in the backyard of Casa M. Date not informed. Personal archive.

Casa M was primarily envisioned by José Roca and Pablo Helguera, respectively the head curator and education curator of that edition. They intended to create a pedagogical hub capable of offering the local community a space for production. During its eight months of existence, Casa M issued ten issues of a handmade newspaper, hosted 349 activities, and welcomed dozens of artists, neighbours, researchers, and curators. These activities included a residency programme for local artists (*Duos*), a passage point for representatives of international artist-led spaces from rural areas (*Continentes–Continents*), a long-term project with neighbours (*Oficina dos Vizinhos*), a display space for local artists (*Vitrine*),²⁸ two international conferences, four Brazilian curatorial residencies, and several new models for public engagement and evaluation. Casa M was also home to two mediation teams – one dedicated to activities within the house, and another committed to *Cidade Não Vista* (Unseen City), a project that commissioned artistic interventions to reclaim overlooked public spaces.

Spaces like Casa M are increasingly common in biennial structures, appearing as platforms for activation or social practice. They tend to serve as meeting points, hubs, or collaborative spaces that allow local communities to propose unexpected and often unofficial programmes. Recent examples include the Centre for Narrative Practices (Prishtina, Kosovo, Manifesta 14, 2022) and the Good Kitchen project by Goodskool during documenta fifteen (2022), which featured an open, participatory kitchen behind the Fridericianum Museum. Reflecting on the role of biennials, Elvira Dyangani Ose (2016) draws on South African urbanist Abdoumalik Simone’s notion of ‘people as infrastructure’ to describe the trajectory of three African biennials and triennials – the Salon Urbain de Douala (SUD, Cameroon), Dak’Art (Senegal), and the Biennale de Lubumbashi (Congo). Ose suggests that when informality becomes a way of life, it reveals both political and

²⁸ The list of artists for the Vitrine project is as follows: Glaucis de Moraes, Helene Sacco, João Genaro, Rogério Severo, Rommulo Conceição, Tiago Giora, Viviane Pasqual.

cultural precarities – especially where governments hold little interest or power. It is within these contexts that spaces like Casa M may appear not only radical but necessary.

Building on the idea that radical pedagogies intensify friction with institutional norms by enabling self-determined and collectively shaped learning processes (Fedotova & Nikolaeva, 2015), Casa M can be read as both a situated experiment and a living articulation of this concept. Rather than functioning as a model or replicable methodology, radical pedagogy in this context emerged through urgency, relationships, and responsiveness – always partial, always shaped by those present. It was an unfolding process rather than a premeditated framework, embedded in the specificity of time, people, and place. The project's radicality stemmed from this exact condition: not despite being inside a biennial, but because of it. To insist on the relevance of such a pedagogical gesture within an event often aligned with hegemonic institutional forms is, in itself, an act of disobedience.

Within this unfolding, Paulo Freire's influence was not textual but felt. His emphasis on dialogue, relationality, and the transformative potential of collective processes was not cited through slogans or frameworks but encountered through practice. The pedagogical process at Casa M did not seek to rehearse Freirean ideals but responded to the relational dynamics of those involved, making space for acts of listening, offering, and reconfiguration. Where many projects instrumentalise Freire, turning his language into policy or token, this was something else: a process where friendships became pedagogical forms, where hospitality became method, and where each action had the potential to reshape the project from within.

While figures such as Kaprow, Beuys, and the situationist 'Free University' are often invoked in discussions around pedagogical art practices, particularly in Grant Kester's

reflections on participatory learning and the destabilisation of hierarchical models (Helguera and Hoff, 2011), Casa M emerges from a different genealogy. Its roots lie closer to Latin American educational experiments, feminist collectives, and the informal infrastructures nurtured by artists and educators within conditions of constraint and invention.

A broader articulation of this ethos appears in María Acaso's (2013) analysis of the pedagogical project developed during the 9th edition of the Bienal do Mercosul.²⁹ Acaso describes how, under the guidance of Luis Camnitzer and his curatorial team, the MB became what she calls a pedagogical biennial, where education and art were not treated as separate fields but were fundamentally integrated. According to Acaso, the event functioned less as an exhibition than as an ongoing educational institution. She argues for a curatorial approach in which pedagogy is not an addition or an outcome, but the foundation through which the work of the biennial is conceived and carried. In this sense, her reading invites a rethinking of the relationship between art and education, grounded in a commitment to shared processes and sustained inquiry.

²⁹ María Acaso participated in the 9th Bienal de Mercosur in 2013 as an 'agitadora invitada,' where she collaborated with cultural agents Mónica Hoff, Analice Dutra, and Gabriela Bon. Her involvement included conducting workshops, lectures, and a laboratory, contributing to the biennial's exploration of contemporary processes in art and education. Her experiences in Porto Alegre reshaped her views on the relationship between art, pedagogy, and curatorship, reinforcing that these fields are deeply interconnected.



Figure 27 - 8th Mercosul Biennial, Ensaios de Geopoéticas (2011), Duos, project developed inside Casa M with Carla Borba and Rodrigo John. Date not informed. Photo: Cristiano Sant'Anna / indicefoto.com.



Figure 28 – 8th Mercosul Biennial, *Ensaíos de Geopoéticas* (2011), Casa M opening. 24/05/2011. Photo: Cristiano Sant'Anna / indicefoto.com.

Unlike pedagogies, counter-pedagogies do not structure themselves as palatable or even recognisable responses to power structures, nor do they worry about teaching new ways of learning; they are. Therefore, living, individual and collective processes of unlearning the world and the set of knowledge, norms and ways that this world has considered should be learned until then. Therefore, they are not talking to us only about the right to exist as a citizen but about the right to exist outside the norms determined by the state and the social order that defines what a citizen is.

Deviant, displaced, dissident, disobedient, and, therefore, unknown to the colonising, oppressive, racist, misogynistic forces of white supremacist capitalist patriarchy, counter-pedagogies are not theories that can be outsourced into reproducible practices and models; they are not 'civilised' or civilising because they do not believe in the imposed concept of civilisation; they are not saviours or ask for permission; they do not adapt or want to adapt; they are the pedagogies (as their episteme, as Cusicanqui defends) of those who no longer allow themselves to be oppressed; they are pedagogies whose existence is directly related to their ability to disobey the very notion of pedagogy. That is why it is so difficult for us to understand; they demand that we change our logic of understanding. They are not gardens. They are forests! (Hoff, 2019)

The projects within Casa M, such as *GeoChoreography* and the *Neighbourhood Workshop*, were central to the ambition of making the biennial a space of shared process. *GeoChoreography*, developed by a group of performers and artists taking part in the Duos project, occupied the street and the steps across from the house, transforming these spaces through reflections on movement as choreographic expression. The actions proposed by the group speak directly to the logic of counter-pedagogy, where the city becomes a site for learning, improvisation, and presence. The performances invited others to join at their close, modelling a temporary but powerful collective encounter that echoed the MB's broader investment in radical pedagogy.

The *Neighbourhood Workshop*, initiated by artist Claudia Sperb, invited local residents into a durational process. Over time, the workshops shifted from participatory to collaborative, with neighbours proposing ideas, shaping outcomes, and presenting a final exhibition that took over the street during the house's last days. In both projects, occupying space was not a metaphor, but a shared, material experience. The distinctions between artist, neighbour, and participant dissolved into a practice of co-making.

The *Unseen City* project was one of the most compelling expressions of counter-pedagogy within *Casa M*. It invited groups of children, often accompanied by family or school groups, to explore the city guided by the mediation team based at the house. These walks broke with institutional expectations around mediation, allowing for a sense of experimentation and play. Each outing became an opportunity for surprise. The mediators were encouraged to create open-ended encounters, stepping beyond prescribed roles and working with the city as both prompt and participant. Inspired by the legacies of Flávio de Carvalho and Hélio Oiticica, the project reclaimed the act of walking as a form of attention, affect, and drift. Like Carvalho's urban interventions or Oiticica's *Parangolés*, it treated the city as something to be felt, contemplated, and moved through differently. Rather than asserting occupation or claiming space, *Unseen City* asked participants to slow down, notice, and respond. In this way, it proposed the city itself as an open-ended curriculum.



Figure 29 – 8th Mercosul Biennial, *Ensaíos de Geopoéticas* (2011), front of Casa M and internal space transformed into a seminar room. Date not informed. Personal archive.

Even though Casa M was conceived within the structure of the MB, it soon became something closer to an artist-led platform. The house transformed into a space of conviviality, collaboration, and circulation, where boundaries between organisers, artists, neighbours and visitors were not strictly upheld. The character of Christina Balbão, the house's former owner, became part of this atmosphere. Her presence was recalled as a kind of godmother to the space, lending a layered and almost fictional dimension to the unfolding events. As the biennial neared its end, this sense of collective attachment took form in the '*Stay Casa M*' ('Fica Casa M') campaign, which sought to keep the house open beyond the exhibition. The effort was local, spontaneous, and driven by those who had inhabited the space: residents, educators, producers, and artists. While the campaign could not prevent its closure, its existence signalled something important. Casa M had moved from being a project of the biennial to becoming a project of the people involved in it. Its resonance extended well beyond the biennial's timeline, leaving behind a network of relations and practices that shaped other initiatives to come. This continuity

of thinking and doing, across cities and contexts, began to ripple outward even before the house had fully closed its doors. The memory of Casa M lingered beyond its duration, but it also set in motion future entanglements between people and places. One of them would eventually lead me elsewhere.

The international seminars hosted at Casa M marked a significant moment in consolidating the pedagogical dimension of that edition. The second, which took place during the final phase of the project, focused on curatorial and educational strategies within biennial formats. Among its invited speakers³⁰ was Sally Tallant, who shortly afterwards became the Artistic Director of the Liverpool Biennial. Her participation in the seminar was not incidental but formative, contributing to a deeper integration of education into curatorial practice in her subsequent role. The extended life of Casa M, continuing after the official end of the edition, reinforced its resonance. By sustaining activities and hosting critical discussions beyond the timeline of the exhibition, the house became a site where pedagogical ideas could unfold at their own rhythm, enabling new curatorial and institutional imaginaries to emerge.

The evaluation process conducted by Instituto Mesa was instrumental in understanding both the unfolding and the afterlife of Casa M. Coordinated by Jessica Gogan and Louise Garmer Vergara, the evaluation was structured around three key phases of the project: beginning, middle, and end. This temporal approach allowed for a situated reading of the evolving relationships, expectations, and responses that shaped the project. The final output, a video titled *Multiple Voices*, became more than a record of testimony. It functioned simultaneously as an archive, a method, and a reflective artwork. The

³⁰ This seminar was the start of my connection with Sally Tallant, eventually leading to my involvement with the Liverpool Biennial team in subsequent years.

testimonies collected revealed the emotional, social, and methodological stakes of working collectively within an open-ended framework. The evaluation returned to some of the original intentions behind Casa M – as proposed by Roca – as a temporary autonomous zone. In doing so, it acknowledged the house not only as a responsive structure within the MB but also as a space where the politics of listening, co-making, and presence were momentarily sustained.

Long after the keys had been returned and the doors locked, the themes and practices developed within Casa M continued to echo, not only in Brazil but also in new settings that would soon become my own. The themes and practices developed within Casa M have extended well beyond the context of the MB, finding resonance in other international settings. One such continuation can be observed in the LB, where ideas of community, collaboration, and shared experience have continued to evolve. Friendship, in particular, has emerged as both a recurring motif and a method. It connects the experience of Casa M to other projects, suggesting that relationality itself can become a way of working, thinking, and inhabiting artistic practice.

In 2016, Danielle Freakley was commissioned by the LB to present *Imaginary Friends*, a long-term collective performance and installation. Set in the Oratory, a site marked by historical and ritual significance, the work invited visitors to reflect on solitude, intimacy, and social connection within contemporary life. Participants were asked to fill out forms and decide whether to leave contact information for future sessions. These gatherings, facilitated by Freakley and the team of mediators, became a space for exploring how solitude and collectiveness shape belief, attachment, and expression. Rather than treating friendship as content, the project activated it as form, offering a situated reinterpretation of a method that had quietly structured Casa M. Through *Imaginary Friends*, the enduring presence of friendship as both artistic and social practice was made visible once again, this time in a different city, with different stakes.



Figure 30 –Liverpool Biennial, Episodes (2016), installation Last Planet Parade by Arseny Zhilyaev, exhibited at Granby Four Streets. Date not informed. Personal archive

As I reflect on the movements between Porto Alegre and Liverpool, I return less to the idea of migration than to a resonance of places, people, and shared urgencies. Casa M did not end for me in Brazil; it carried on into the everyday gestures, encounters, and responsibilities I came to inhabit in Toxteth – a neighbourhood that, like many of Casa M’s surroundings, had long been a site of experimentation, solidarity, and cultural work. It was not a methodology that travelled, but a condition: a disposition towards trust, interdependence, and the possibility that art and pedagogy are not parallel tracks but folded into one another.

What unfolded next was not a deliberate export of method or project, but something more subtle: a continuity born of resonance and invitation. This continuity was not planned. I did not imagine, at the time of Casa M’s closure, that it would lead to a new role within the Liverpool Biennial. But when Sally Tallant visited the house and later invited me to stay, it felt less like a rupture and more like the next sequence in a shared conversation. I had already been considering a move to the UK, but this invitation marked a turning point. It

was through a curatorial encounter that a cycle opened up – one shaped by friendship, proposition, and the risk of remaining in proximity to others, again.

Transitioning from Porto Alegre to Liverpool, the dislocation was more than geographic. It marked a shift in the place of pedagogy in public life. And yet, arriving in Liverpool, I encountered a different kind of challenge: the cultural shock of a context where pedagogy is more often professionalised, scheduled, and distanced from the everyday. In Brazil, education moves through us – in family meals, at bus stops, in community kitchens, and in collective improvisation. In the UK, I entered a system where education, especially within institutions, was more isolated from public life. This was not a failure of individuals but of infrastructure. I found myself in a position where the role of mediation was gradually deconstructed into that of supervision. The space to experiment, to invent collectively, became increasingly constrained. I struggled. And I learned from that struggle.

Friendship, however, remained. It was through the bonds forged within the biennial team and beyond that I could begin to translate – not methodologically, but relationally. Friendship became a condition for learning: not a soft accessory but a rigorous practice of co-presence, of bearing with. It allowed for trust, missteps, care, and return. When friendship did not emerge, the work still mattered, but it changed. It became more transactional, less transformative. Not worse, just less porous.

In both Porto Alegre and Liverpool, friendship gave shape to the pedagogical. It allowed us to challenge inherited power structures, not by reversing them, but by refusing their terms. In Casa M, it was through friendship that neighbours became co-authors, artists became hosts, and the boundaries between roles dissolved. In Liverpool, friendship helped navigate a terrain shaped by other hierarchies – better resourced, more institutionalised, and at times more brittle. What I brought with me was not a model, but a rhythm. Friendship made continuity possible, not through structure, but through resonance. Of letting practice be reshaped by those who arrive.

4.1.3 The City as a School and Schools of Experience

I would sum up 2016 as a year of unlearning. Of moving, again. Of trying to do something I didn't quite know how to name. I had landed in Liverpool, a city I didn't yet understand, to coordinate the mediation team at the Liverpool Biennial. I thought I knew what mediation was. I thought it would be about listening, about translating art into relationships, about building something with others. And maybe it was. But the scale of the organisation, the tempo of decisions, and the formality of roles all hit differently. I was not prepared for the split between education and public life in the institutional North. I came from a place where learning leaked through everything – where pedagogy wasn't a programme, but a practice of survival. Here, it felt more boxed, timed, measured, professionalised.

Toxteth was different. The neighbourhood held me gently. If it had been another city, I'm not sure I would have stayed. But Toxteth carried a hum of resistance, of creative refusal, of people already doing the work before institutions noticed. It reminded me of other places, other projects, and the kinds of proximity I had learned to trust. Still, entering a new context meant re-encountering everything with a kind of clumsiness. I was learning to speak again, not just in English, but across institutional dialects – across systems that assumed different publics, different pedagogies, different senses of urgency.

I did my job. I coordinated. I supported the team. I wrote documents. I listened. I asked questions. I planned sessions. But I also stumbled – again and again – into the strange terrain of expectation. What counts as education here? Who is allowed to guide? What does mediation mean when it leans more toward supervision than relationship?

These questions didn't have immediate answers. They hovered. And it took me time – maybe the whole year – to understand that I wasn't failing at a task. I was just somewhere new.

Before turning to my own experience, it is important to consider the shared and exchanged practices between the Mercosul Biennial (MB) and Liverpool Biennial (LB) that preceded it. In 2011, Sally Tallant, Director of LB, was invited to speak at the International Seminar on Education and Art organised by the MB. Three years later, Monica Hoff, who had long coordinated the educational programme at the MB, contributed to the International Biennial Summit (2014),³¹ describing how the biennial had 'enlisted over 2,000 mediators to work with the 400,000 students that visit each time: an unquestionably valuable task that directly affects local groups' (Goodbody, 2014). These moments of encounter seeded what elsewhere has been described as a form of *contamination* – as a method of connection and resonance between biennials.

In Liverpool, such influences became tangible in 2014, when the biennial launched its first Mediation Programme, explicitly aiming to 'build a community in the city by offering programmes suited to all demographics'. One of its most experimental initiatives was The City Is a School (TCAS), described at the time as a 'free pop-up school ... open to all, with weekly sessions that explore the 2014 Biennial and its participating artists' (Tillotson, 2014). The aspiration, as articulated in the LB report, was to create 'something of a free art school within the city'. TCAS was presented as a:

'long-term, strategic investment in young people and the arts infrastructure of Liverpool and the North West region'. According to the same report, several

³¹ The International Biennial Summit took place at the Bluecoat, Liverpool, in September 2014, in partnership with the IBA (International Biennial Association), welcoming speakers from different backgrounds and projects.

2014 Mediation Fellows later credited the programme with enabling their professional development in the cultural sector – some going on to establish galleries, freelance practices, or art-related businesses. (Liverpool Biennial, 2014)

Across its three iterations, TCAS shifted structure while maintaining its core intention: to empower the mediation team to participate actively – and sometimes critically – in the framing of the biennial. In its first edition, the programme was coordinated not by the Education Curator, Polly Brannan, but by Francesca Bertolotti-Bailey, then Head of Production and International Projects. Weekly sessions were held in the biennial's office³² and included conversations with participating artists, curators, and practical workshops. Some sessions also addressed logistical matters such as health and safety protocols and installation practices. While framed as a 'school', it was also a flexible, open platform situated within the infrastructure of the institution.



Figure 31 – Liverpool Biennial, *A Needle Walks into a Haystack* (2014), still from the video *On Public Speaking and Pecha Kucha* with Frances Bertolotti-Bailey and Polly Brannan. 04/06/2014. Screenshot from YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCgbf4VDMYDuT1F9Y4KM3-7Q>.

32 The videos for the weekly sessions are still accessible at <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCgbf4VDMYDuT1F9Y4KM3-7Q>.



Figure 32 – Liverpool Biennial, A Needle Walks into a Haystack (2014), Mediation Fellows team meeting with Head of Programmes Rosie Cooper at one of the Biennial venues. Date not informed. Photo: Author unknown / The City is a School Evaluation Report (Liverpool Biennial, 2014)

By 2016, when I coordinated the Mediation Team, the programme undergone a significant shift. The emphasis moved from internal training to the collective authorship of public programming. From the beginning, it was clear that the intention was to move towards a more DIY model, where the mediators could propose and organise sessions themselves. Senior staff remained available to support the team with planning and writing, but the conceptual direction came from within. TCAS thus began to function as a different kind of organism within the biennial: less a pedagogical supplement and more a site of proposition.

This evolution was shaped partly by budgetary constraints but also by an experimental attitude towards institutional learning. The programme that emerged included workshops, talks, performances, and screenings. Unlike in 2014, we developed a two-week mediation school in advance of the biennial, allowing mediators to engage with

curators, meet artists, and learn about the city and its venues. This pedagogical space, though modest, was essential in cultivating a sense of belonging and shared authorship among the team.

However, the expanded role of the mediation team also revealed institutional frictions. One of the clearest contrasts with my previous experience at the MB was the distribution of responsibilities. At the Mercosul Biennial, the mediation team focused primarily on organising and delivering sessions for the public – they were not expected to manage the venues, handle artwork logistics, or oversee technology. At the Liverpool Biennial, these tasks were folded into the role, often blurring the distinction between educational engagement and operational maintenance. While this may reflect differences in team size and infrastructure, it also reveals a different institutional outlook on mediation as a practice.



Figure 33 – Liverpool Biennial, *Episodes* (2016), *The City is a School*, comedy night at Cains Brewery. 20/09/2016. Personal archive.

The events organised by the mediation team in 2016 were diverse in format and unfolded across multiple spaces of the biennial, forming what we came to describe as a kind of parallel map of the exhibition. At Cains Brewery, for instance, we hosted a comedy scratch night – an open mic session conceived in response to the central structure of that year’s biennial, *Collider*. Though formally presented as a framing device for the exhibition, *Collider* was deeply shaped by Monster Chetwynd’s surreal and playful video *Bugsy My Bone*, which set the tone for our own intervention. Mediators Raphaella Davies-Brannan and Devon Forrester-Jones coordinated the event, inviting members of the public to take over the microphone. The resulting ninety-minute programme was open and participatory and offered an accessible platform for emerging artists and performers to test ideas in a supportive setting. Another site of activation was the derelict ABC Cinema in Liverpool’s city centre – a space of suspended use, heavy with memory, and deeply embedded in the city’s collective imagination. There, the team facilitated a creative writing workshop in which participants were invited to revisit and reimagine their memories of the cinema. Blending personal recollections with fictional narratives, they contributed their own texts alongside those written by the mediators. The resulting collection was later compiled into a booklet, giving form to the multiplicity of voices that had temporarily reclaimed the space.

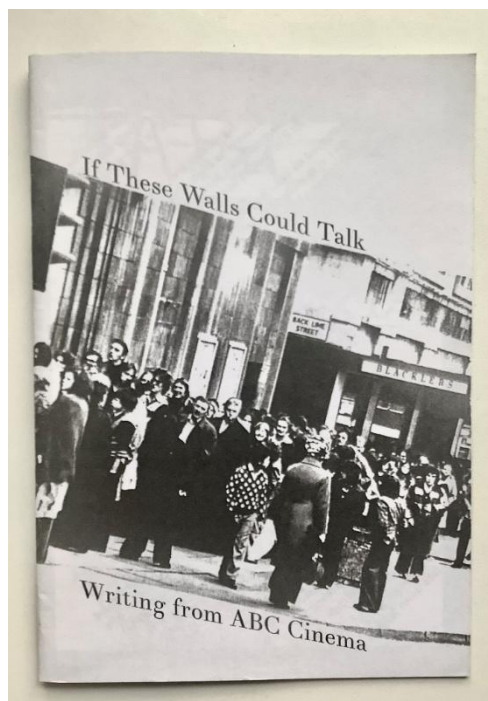


Figure 34 – Liverpool Biennial, Episodes (2016), cover of the booklet for workshops organised in the ABC Cinema by mediators as part of *The City is a School* project. Date not informed. Personal archive.

In the India Building, a space the biennial temporarily reactivated, mediator Alexander Croft organised a session focused on precarity in the arts. The event brought together artists from working-class backgrounds to discuss the economic challenges of sustaining an artistic practice, the need for resilience, and strategies for gaining visibility and support. It concluded with an open Q&A and drew a strong audience, largely through word-of-mouth invitations and social media posts shared by the participating artists. This form of communication proved more effective than the official channels of the biennial, which struggled to accommodate the sessions of *The City Is a School*. Despite being conceived as part of the public programme, TCAS was not formally included in the biennial's main communication materials. It was often treated within the organisation as a secondary feature, absent from archives and public listings, which continues to affect how the work is remembered.³³



Figure 35 – Liverpool Biennial, Episodes (2016), The City is a School session by mediator Alexander Croft on arts precarity. 13/09/2016. Personal archive.

³³ This was approached later in the internal reports but never sufficiently resolved for the following edition, 2018.

At 24 Kitchen Street, mediator Farhood Jafari curated an evening that combined poetry and creative writing with a live soundtrack by the electronic duo Kepla. Jafari, also a musician, used the space to bring together different forms of artistic expression, proposing a moment of crossover between sonic and textual practices. The event offered a chance to experiment with forms that did not usually occupy space within the biennial, while remaining attentive to the audience and the site.

Another session, organised by Gabriella Warren-Smith and Bethan Ward in collaboration with the artist Marcos Lutyens, invited the public to engage with an alternative geography of Liverpool. Drawing on Lutyens's personal archive, the session focused on the unbuilt Catholic Cathedral designed by his great-grandfather, Edwin. Participants began their journey at the Lutyens Crypt, where they received headphones and media players with a recorded narration. The story traced the unrealised architectural ambition to construct a cathedral to rival the Anglican counterpart and guided the group from the crypt to the Museum of Liverpool, where a scale model of the project is housed. This slow movement through the city offered a different way of inhabiting public space, shaped by memory, speculation, and the imagined scale of a project that was never completed.



Figure 36 – Liverpool Biennial, Episodes (2016), *The City is a School* art walk with audio-guide by Marcos Lutyens, from Lutyens Crypt to the Museum of Liverpool, organised by Gabriella Warren-Smith and Bathán Ward. Date not informed. Personal archive.



Figure 37 – Liverpool Biennial, Episodes (2016), *The City is a School* art walk with audio-guide by Marcos Lutyens, participants listening to the first part of the walk. Date not informed. Personal archive.

The City Is a School, like other experimental learning initiatives, led to reflection on how contemporary art biennials have increasingly appropriated the idea of a school as part of their discursive frameworks. Whether by reshaping established models of education or proposing alternative pedagogies, the notion of the biennial-as-school has become one of the most recognisable patterns within discursive programmes. Part of its appeal lies in the legibility of the concept itself: regardless of how experimental or avant-garde the proposition may be, 'school' is a form that remains culturally intelligible across contexts. Monica Hoff (2018), in her research on artists' schools, identifies the creation of a school as a pedagogical practice intrinsically linked to what has been described as the educational turn. Within the landscape of contemporary art biennials, this tendency is exemplified in several key initiatives, from *100 Days – 100 Guests*, to Catherine David's documenta X, and the unrealised Manifesta 6, which attempted to conceive the exhibition explicitly as a school (Ferguson & Hoegsberg, 2010).

I was rushing up the stairs of the Memorial of the State. I thought I was late for a meeting – although that might have been a side effect of doing multiple non-things that year. Somewhere along the way, we started calling my role 'Producers of the Waters'. It made sense at the time because both my main projects involved water. But that was only a partial truth. I was also thinking about the symposium, the community-based outcomes, the narratives we were building within the team.

Carina Levitan, the artist and educator responsible for Home Inventions – or Escola Caseira de Invenções in Portuguese – registered my presence with a nod while talking to two teenagers who had just arrived. They were thinking of building something. She pointed them to the best sessions to attend. They made space for me in the circle. Despite the good weather, the sky was cloudy. I sat, out of breath, trying to absorb what I had missed. The meeting was about the performance programme starting the following week. Lately, time had taken on a different texture.

Within the team, I was seen as one of the older members, someone known to 'push the institution's boundaries' (Preiss, 2013). The group needed to work out how far they could go with activist-like actions and what kinds of restrictions might apply to documenting them. Since the previous edition of the biennial, much of our work had been about creating this space of autonomy – relinquishing control over documentation, allowing it to dissolve, to remain partial or disappear.

Sofía Hernández Chong Cuy, curator of the 9th edition of the Mercosul Biennial (Weather Permitting, Fundação Bienal de Artes Visuais do Mercosul, 2013), described the programme as marking a shift in the terms of engagement – from educating, to learning, to mediating, to sharing. This transition mirrored the overlapping themes of art, science, and technology that permeated the exhibition and its related activities.

Home Inventions emerged as one of the most public-facing components of the biennial, positioned as a creative hub at the opening of the exhibition cycle. 'The space was created as a call to imagination', educator Frederico Testa told me, while we watched the tools being rearranged for the afternoon session.

For the MB, some of the schools developed across its editions were conceived as responses to structural gaps in the local art system. Porto Alegre, a city of over one million inhabitants, has a well-established cultural infrastructure. It is home to prominent art museums and a major art institute affiliated with the federal university, alongside regular cultural programming such as Latin America's oldest book fair and a longstanding international theatre festival. Yet despite these favourable conditions, none of the major cities in Brazil's extreme south offered degree programmes in museology, though some offered courses in art criticism with less of a focus on curating (something that has changed in the last fifteen years). As a result, many professionals working with contemporary art were often trained in adjacent disciplines such as art history, history, anthropology, or education.

By contrast, the LB operates within a denser educational ecosystem. Liverpool hosts several higher education institutions, including programmes in art history, curating, and arts education. The city's arts infrastructure is broad, with cultural organisations and academic institutions working in relative dialogue, even if this relationship is uneven. While formal courses tend to align with traditional approaches to art history and museology, contemporary art increasingly informs both curricular and public-facing initiatives. TCAS, launched in 2014, emerged at the intersection of these contexts: at once an experimental offer, a point of access to the institution, and a space for critique. Its informal and flexible structure enabled the mediation team to reimagine what a school could be within a biennial, not through a predefined pedagogical model but through lived experimentation. Unlike the MB's more formalised and continuous engagement with public school teachers, TCAS functioned as a form of alternative self-schooling, shaped primarily by its participants. Although it occasionally reached individuals outside formal education, many contributors were already connected to the biennial's network. Despite its ambition, TCAS was never fully integrated into the core public programme and remains absent from the LB's institutional memory. It stands as a peripheral experiment, rather than a formative legacy.

This contrast opens space to consider how the figure of the school has been adopted, adapted, and mobilised within biennial contexts. Art schools, as Anton Vidokle suggests, are inherently multidisciplinary spaces where discourse, practice, and presentation can coexist without necessarily privileging one over another (Vidokle in Madoff, 2009, p. 193). This proposition resonates with the role that some biennials have assumed in recent decades, acting as temporary pedagogical infrastructures that respond to – or emerge from – gaps within formal educational systems. In the case of the MB, one of the first initiatives to resemble a school was developed in collaboration with public school teachers. Through partnerships with local and regional educational authorities, teachers were invited not only to attend training sessions but also to help shape the pedagogical strategies of the biennial. From the 5th edition (2005) onwards, training was formalised

and expanded across multiple regions, engaging over 1,600 educators that year alone. Documentation of this programme is consistent from that point forward, showing that earlier iterations of the MB sustained a long-term commitment to embedding educational work within its curatorial and territorial frameworks. By comparison, the LB's engagement with educators has remained more sporadic and project-specific. While the biennial has produced toolkits, held teacher sessions, and partnered with local schools, these activities have not evolved into a consistent framework. Projects like TCAS offered meaningful, if temporary, forms of alternative learning, but they were never institutionalised. In recent editions, the LB has phased out its mediation programme altogether, with guides now assuming primary responsibility for public interaction, marking a departure from the more embedded and experimental approaches that had once characterised its pedagogical ambition.

As I introduce the ideas of *schools of experience* and *schools of knowledge*, I return to the idea of these schools not as educational supplements but as contact zones, spaces of exchange between art and education, and between art and place. To contrast the models developed within the LB and MB is to attend to the hybrid pedagogical frameworks that shape both contexts. What emerges is a kind of Frankensteinian composition. In Brazil, particularly within its more experimental schools, pedagogical approaches often reflect a composite of influences: the rationalist tradition of Jean Piaget, the emancipatory practices of Paulo Freire, and the sensorial, child-led learning of Maria Montessori. These models frequently coexist in tension rather than being integrated. In the UK, pedagogical approaches are shaped by a different set of educational expectations, often grounded in constructivist and inquiry-based learning theories, with an emphasis on collaboration, differentiation, and continuous formative assessment. While these strategies encourage student agency and flexibility in principle, they are often deployed within highly regulated systems that prioritise standardised outcomes. Within this framework, initiatives like TCAS operate both within and against the institutional structure, improvising with inherited structures while searching for moments of rupture or redirection.

Rancière offers a way to think of experience in biennial contexts not only as an aesthetic rupture but also as a political encounter. His concept of the *distribution of the sensible* addresses how visibility, audibility, and presence are socially organised, framing what is possible to sense, say, and do within institutional space. Biennials, while often invested in inclusion and discursivity, are also sites where these distributions are revealed, challenged, or reinstated. Rancière does not offer a guide for transformation, but instead asks how art can momentarily reconfigure what is perceptible, opening a space in which different ways of being and knowing might emerge. Yet the institution remains a structuring force. As Kompatsiaris (2017) observes, even when art attempts to redistribute the sensible, ‘the institutional boundaries within which these biennials operate frequently curtail the full realisation of this transformative power’ (p. 67). What is offered, then, is not resolution but tension: presence within the biennial space becomes a negotiation between possibility and limit, action and containment.

Larrosa Bondía (2002) introduces a different vocabulary for experience, one that refuses capture. For him, experience is not what we do but what happens to us. It is not produced, scheduled, or guaranteed. Rather, it is rare, slow, and affective, and can only emerge when we allow ourselves to be touched by what we do not already know. ‘Experience is not what passes through us’, he writes, ‘but what happens to us, what touches us’ (Larrosa Bondía, 2002, p. 21). This view offers a critical challenge to biennials and other programmed pedagogical spaces: while we may structure environments that invite experience, we cannot ensure that it will take place. We might set up experiments, open-ended sessions, and shared encounters, but we do not control the threshold at which an experience becomes real for someone else. In this sense, biennials may be repeated, but experiences are not. This distinction is central to how I read certain educational and mediation practices within biennial-making: they aspire to proximity, not mastery.

Freire, in turn, offers a vision of experience grounded in relational learning and ethical transformation. While he, too, resists fixed hierarchies of knowledge, his emphasis lies in the dialogue between subjectivities and the world, not simply to reveal conditions, but to act within them. Freire insists that no education takes place in isolation. 'No one educates anyone else, no one educates themselves alone, people educate each other, mediated by the world' (Freire, 1970/1994, p. 39). His pedagogy begins from experience but turns experience into a method: a shared inquiry that opens the possibility for change. Unlike Rancière and Larrosa Bondía, whose emphasis often remains on rupture or singularity, Freire's proposition is also temporal and procedural. Experience matters not just as a moment of encounter but as a basis for critical consciousness, a knowing that emerges from naming the world and acting upon it, together.

These three perspectives do not align in a balanced framework, but that is precisely what makes them productive. Rancière reveals the politics of visibility; Larrosa Bondía affirms the fragility of the event; Freire insists on its ethical implications. Together, they form a constellation through which to understand what I mean by *schools of experience*, not schools that deliver content, but spaces where something might happen. Within biennial contexts, initiatives such as TCAS or *Home Inventions* operate not as fixed educational models, but as contact zones where art, place, and pedagogy encounter one another without a predetermined outcome. Setting them up is a gamble: they may succeed, they may dissipate, but they are necessary because they signal the institution's willingness to be reconfigured by what it cannot fully anticipate. They create the conditions for something to touch someone, even if we never know for sure when or how that might occur.

One example from the LB is the event Public Faces and Safe Spaces: Is Your Gender Neon, Sandalwood or Vibrato?, held on 6 September 2018 as part of TCAS. Organised and facilitated by a trans woman mediator, the session created space for trans and cisgender

people to reflect on gender, embodiment, and institutional language. Though situated within the informal and experimental framework of TCAS, it led to a series of outcomes that reached beyond the biennial. Following the event, the mediator was invited to lead workshops with several Liverpool institutions – including Bluecoat, the Walker Art Gallery, and Open Eye Gallery – introducing gender awareness practices and facilitating discussion among their teams. From this moment, a group of mediators also formed AART (Artists Against Transphobia), a grassroots collective dedicated to creating safe spaces and events for the trans and non-binary community. AART has since played a key role in organising Trans Pride Liverpool. These developments were not part of the biennial's strategic planning, but emerged from what Barragán (2020) describes as 'the ups and downs of accumulated experimentation'. This example shows how, when biennials make room for situated and affective knowledge to circulate, the outcomes can exceed both intention and authorship, allowing experience to unfold in other forms and places. These schools of experience do not offer closure. Their temporality is often unresolved, their results unpredictable. And yet, they remain essential: not because they solve a pedagogical gap, but because they suggest the possibility of something else, something improvised, situated, and real. When biennials are willing to absorb these unruly pedagogies, they begin to shift, not through structure, but through relation. What follows continues this inquiry by returning to projects where the tension between socially engaged art and institutional form becomes most visible. If schools of experience open space for possibility, socially engaged practices test the limits of how far and how durably that space can hold.



Figure 38 – Liverpool Biennial, Beautiful world, where are you? (2018), meeting with Delfina Foundation residents as part of The City is a School at Bluecoat. 21/08/2018. Personal archive



Figure 39 – Liverpool Biennial, Beautiful world, where are you? (2018), The City is a School session led by mediator Dora Colquhoun on comedy and women's participation in the arts, at Blackburne House. 18/09/2018. Personal archive



Figure 40 – Liverpool Biennial, *Beautiful world, where are you?* (2018), *The City is a School* session led by DACS at The Royal Standard. Date not informed. Personal archive



Figure 41 – Liverpool Biennial, *Beautiful world, where are you?* (2018), *The City is a School* karaoke night led by Claire Henderson, with all music dedicated to the theme *Beautiful world, where are you?*. 24/10/2018. Personal archive

4.1.4 Social Engagement Practice at Biennials

Socially engaged art has moved from the periphery of contemporary practice to a position of institutional recognition. Once considered experimental or marginal, collaborative and participatory projects are now integrated into biennials, public art commissions, and academic programmes. Claire Bishop (2006) has described such practices as a new kind of avant-garde – dematerialised, politically situated, and often defined less by formal outcomes than by social encounters. These works rely on the participation of others, engaging collaborative or community-based processes that sit somewhere between activism and aesthetics. Although the terminology varies, I use the term *participatory projects* to refer to this broad field of socially engaged, dialogic, and co-produced practices. Key contributions to the theorisation of these forms have come from artists, curators, and thinkers such as Maria Lind, Suzanne Lacy, Merle Laderman Ukeles, Claire Bishop, Grant Kester, and Nato Thompson.

How do participatory projects function within the temporality and structure of a biennial? Bishop's critique of socially engaged art is particularly relevant here, as it identifies the tension between artistic autonomy and institutional frameworks, where the encounter itself becomes art. My experience with both the MB and LB has made this tension palpable. In MB, particularly through its discursive and public programmes, I encountered a model in which participatory projects were structurally embedded. In 2007, I worked as a producer and facilitator on projects that explicitly sought to involve communities through collaborative methodologies. I found myself embedded in a process that extended from conceptualisation to delivery, thinking with the artists, negotiating institutional timelines, and shaping the conditions in which these works might unfold. As Philips (2016) notes, the use of participatory practices in biennials has become increasingly systematic, often framed as a strategy to approach or integrate communities, yet frequently shaped by the very logics these projects aim to question.

Such a direct experience made me (re)think my position as an arts practitioner and how my work contributed to the ongoing debate on participatory projects in contemporary art – a field that has notably flourished since documenta 11 (Kompatsiaris, 2019). On the one hand, the integration of communities can be seen as good practice or a well-intentioned gesture from institutions seeking to be more attentive to their surroundings and the people who neighbour them. It marks a shift in how institutions reconsider their role in relation to their audiences, and signals a mode of local thinking within the broader context of globalisation (Papastergiadis & Marti, 2011). On the other hand, the strategy of engagement may serve more pragmatic purposes – raising visitor numbers, justifying funding, and performing inclusion. Yet by commissioning participatory projects, biennials may begin to transcend their exhibition-based nature and reorient themselves toward more diverse publics.



Figure 42 – 9th Mercosul Biennial, Porto Alegre, Brazil, performance AGUAÍBA: um dia de praia [one day at the beach] by Ana Laura López, at Torre da Usina do Gasômetro. 14/09/2013. Photo: Eduardo Seidl / indicefoto.com.

In what follows, I outline three themes that help analyse participatory projects in biennial contexts: time, planning, and dissemination. Drawing on three indicative projects from the LB and MB – *2up2down/Homebaked*, *AGUAIBA*, and *Resilience Garden* – each theme highlights the specific challenges and contingent possibilities such practices encounter. These are not exhaustive examples, but rather partial snapshots that make visible some of the tensions, negotiations, and moments of invention that shape socially engaged work within the constraints of biennial-making.

Time is possibly the most challenging element for participatory projects within a biennial context. Most biennials follow a predictable operational model: curators arrive and set the conceptual frame, the exhibition is assembled, the public attends, and the event closes, followed by reporting and evaluation. This accelerated cycle encourages short-term experimentation and tolerates failure but also limits the duration and depth of community engagement. With tight timelines between delivery and funding closure, evaluations are often industrial in nature. Occasionally, a project might carry forward its network into future iterations, but this continuity is rare. The structure is not designed for long arcs of process, trust-building, or slow transformation, yet this is precisely what participatory work requires.



Figure 43 – 9ª Bienal do Mercosul, Porto Alegre-RS, Brasil, performance AGUAÍBA: um dia de praia [one day at the beach] by Ana Laura López, at Torre na Usina do Gasômetro. 14/09/2013. Photo: Eduardo Seidl / índicefoto.

2up2down/Homebaked offers a rare example of a participatory project that not only emerged from a biennial context but also eventually outgrew it. Initiated by the LB, the project invited Jeanne van Heeswijk – an artist known for long-term participatory processes – to begin a dialogue with residents of Anfield, a Liverpool neighbourhood adjacent to the football stadium and marked by economic deprivation and partial dereliction. Between 2009 and 2010, van Heeswijk made several visits to the area, and what began as *2Up2Down* – named after the region’s terraced houses – took shape around the closure of a local bakery. The disused site became a gathering point for imagination, planning, and solidarity. In 2012, the project evolved into a community land trust and cooperative bakery that would eventually operate independently of the LB. With the motto ‘brick by brick and loaf by loaf’, *Homebaked* positioned itself as both a symbol of and a tool for neighbourhood transformation.

The LB's direct involvement and funding of *Homebaked* extended over approximately three years, making it an unusual case in the history of biennial making. The project redefined what a biennial could be: not simply a platform for presentation but a catalyst for long-term, community-rooted infrastructure. Its impact in Liverpool continues to resonate, offering a model for how socially engaged art can initiate independent practices that outlast the event itself. *Homebaked* has informed and inspired other local initiatives, including the food activism of Squash Nutrition, the creation of Kitty's Laundrette, and the independent micro-bakery The Wild Loaf.

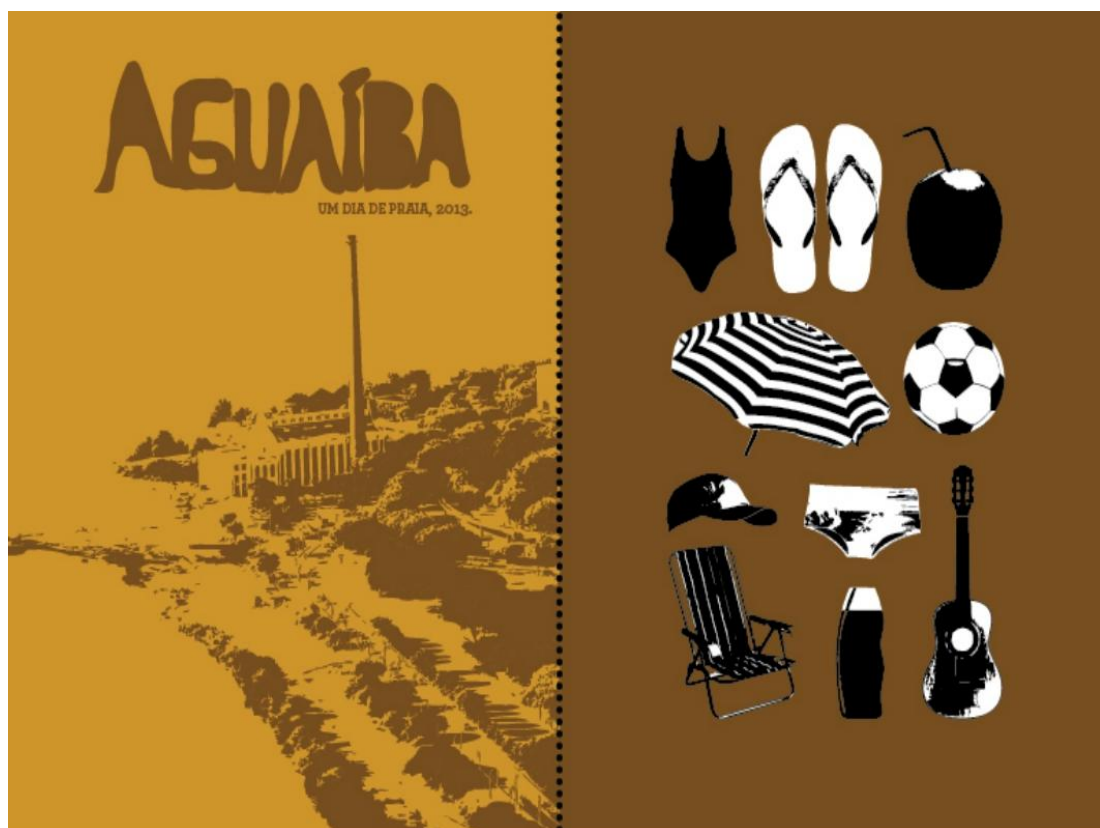


Figure 44 – 9ª Bienal do Mercosul, Porto Alegre-RS, Brasil, invitation for the performance AGUAÍBA: um dia de praia [one day at the beach] by Ana Laura López. Date not informed. Courtesy of the artist

Planning is one of the most rigid elements within the biennial structure. Tasks are listed, timelines are fixed, and multiple teams must coordinate as part of a complex institutional choreography. A small shift, such as a delay, a new funder, or a rejected permit, can

trigger the need to reorganise objectives, logistics, and budget entirely. Within this system, participatory projects introduce particular challenges. Their form relies on relationships, improvisation, and often voluntary contributions from participants. Artists act as provocateurs, but they do not fully control the rhythm or scale of what unfolds. The intentions of curators, institutions, and artists may not always align, and participants may not be available or willing to contribute on predefined terms. As a result, it becomes difficult to predict timelines, formats, or resource requirements, making these projects hard to integrate into the standard biennial planning cycle.

In 2012, Ana Laura Lopez de la Torre was initially hesitant to accept the invitation to participate in the 9th edition of the MB. Known for her DIY practices developed in Brixton, London, she had little interest in institutional commissions or formal funding models. Her approach was grounded in accessibility and autonomy, driven by what she called the freedom to 'do things out of my position and interests' (Lopez de la Torre, 2016). The open-endedness of her work, often developed over long periods and built on unconditional participation, seemed at odds with the timeframes and structure of a biennial. Yet, after attending a municipal arts festival in Porto Alegre, she proposed a new project, *AGUAIBA*. On an intensely hot day, with temperatures nearing 40°C, she set up a plastic swimming pool outside the building, connected hoses, and initiated a spontaneous performance. This informal act, and the connection she felt with people in the city, convinced her to continue developing the project within the biennial's frame.

During the months between the initial performance and the opening of the biennial, the artist and the team dedicated to the project interviewed more than eighty people who had a relationship with water and its memory in the city. Fishermen, water company technicians, political representatives, university researchers and teachers, engineers, activists, shamans and other religious leaders, artists, and members of the riverside population shared their experiences. For the opening and closing phases of the biennial,

the artist proposed a happening titled *Um dia de praia (A Day by the Beach)*, which aimed to revive the memory of swimming in the river – a practice long abandoned due to pollution. The happenings stretched from sunrise to sunset and included meetings with participants from the interviews, beach cleaning, mediation activities, barbecues, picnics, religious rituals, artistic interventions, and other shared moments celebrating the river and its presence in the life of the city.

Since the beginning of *AGUAIBA*, the interviews, meetings, workshops, and discussions had generated a significant body of material, which was gathered and organised as printable content. The idea was to produce a book that would document the project's history and share the knowledge that had been collected. However, the production was cancelled by the biennial because funding restrictions did not allow for its completion within the permitted timeframe. Like many large-scale Brazilian projects, the MB relies on public funding through tax incentive schemes or grants, which offer little room for flexibility. The final documentation of *AGUAIBA* was never edited or published. Still, the quality of the material and the relevance of the ideas developed in relation to water preservation and climate change make me believe, or at least hope, that the artist and those involved may one day reorganise and publish the content independently.



Figure 45 – 9ª Bienal do Mercosul, Porto Alegre-RS, Brasil, performance AGUAÍBA: um dia de praia [one day at the beach] by Ana Laura López, at Torre na Usina do Gasômetro. Opening roundtable conversation with project participants. 14/09/2013. Personal archive

Dissemination is an integral part of any participatory project. Often, the initial theme signals an urgency or points to something unsettled, something in need of collective attention. For the process to unfold, more people need to enter the conversation. In this sense, dissemination begins from the moment an invitation is extended. Once artists initiate a participatory project, they must think carefully about how people will be involved. Sometimes, participation arises naturally from existing networks where relationships are already in place. Other times, an open call is necessary to announce that something is happening and invite new publics to join. The first approach is common when the project responds to an emergency or an ongoing struggle, such as climate action or the threatened closure of a public space. The second suits the temporary and transitory nature of the biennial, often aligning with its broader communication strategies. The Resilience Garden by Mohamed Bourouissa for the 2018 LB followed a third, less common path.

When invited to visit Liverpool, the artist Mohamed Bourouissa began his engagement in Granby, a neighbourhood with a strong history of community-led regeneration and involvement in contemporary art. The area had already developed partnerships through Granby Four Streets Community Land Trust and Granby Workshop, in collaboration with the architecture collective Assemble, whose work in the neighbourhood earned the Turner Prize in 2015. Inspired by the writings of Frantz Fanon and a therapeutic garden created by one of his patients, Bourouissa explored the relationship between medicinal plants and migration. Through the biennial's networks and Granby's local traditions, he encountered a community that shared his interests and was open to experimenting with gardening as a form of artistic and social practice.



Figure 46 – Liverpool Biennial, Beautiful world, where are you? (2018), representatives of Granby Four Streets Community Land Trust, Liverpool Biennial, Kingsley Community Primary School, and Resilience Garden by Mohamed Bourouissa volunteers. 05/2018. Photo: Author unknown / Liverpool Biennial archive

The Resilience Garden was built within the grounds of Kingsley Community Primary School and became the site of meaningful exchange between residents, gardeners, school pupils, teachers, and artists. Together with the community, the artist designed the garden's structures, drawing inspiration from a therapeutic garden in the Blida-Joinville Psychiatric Hospital in Algeria. Community members contributed trees, herbs, flowers, and plants, while the artist brought specific specimens chosen for their medicinal qualities. The garden was open weekly during LB 2018 for community use and collective activity. It had an official opening and a dedicated day of events when it was formally handed over to the school. The programme and schedule were shared through informal methods like leaflets, posters on lamp-posts, and word of mouth. Students at Kingsley Community Primary School began using the garden for at least one hour each week as part of their regular curriculum.

The projects discussed here reflect how participatory practices have been integrated into the biennial format. They echo what Bishop (2006) describes as the avant-garde of our time, where artists use social situations to create politically engaged, dematerialised works that challenge the conventions of the art market. These are examples of meaningful social engagement, yet it is important to acknowledge the critiques of how such practices are sometimes instrumentalised. In some contexts, participatory projects appear to serve institutional agendas, increasing audience figures or reinforcing local cultural authority. Still, these examples suggest that when time, planning, and dissemination are meaningfully embedded in the biennial structure, something more durable can emerge. *Homebaked* remains a powerful example of a project that moved beyond its commissioning institution. The integration of the Resilience Garden into the school's curriculum is another lasting contribution. Although *AGUAIBA* did not fulfil all its original ambitions, it mobilised a public conversation around water and environmental memory in the city. Across all three cases, a gradual sense of ownership developed among participants. The networks built through these projects may be their most enduring legacy, regardless of whether they began inside or outside the biennial frame.

4.1.5 Precarity as an Exercise for New Institutionalism

The mediators organised a strike on the last day of the 9th Bienal do Mercosul / Porto Alegre, Weather Permitting (2013). The group they had organised (the Coletivo Autonomo de Mediadores – Autonomous Collective of Mediators) had already been protesting for one to two months across the spaces in social media (a very different social media from today, mainly composed of blogs). The internal situation came to the attention of the local press and started to spread in the local news. The group organised a couple of letters even after the event's closure. However, on that day, the closing day (10 November 2013), in partnership with artists, locals visiting the city, other staff, and even members of the public, they protested the Mercosul Biennial Foundation, the event organiser, at all the exhibition venues. Their declaration letter, a manifesto-like document, mainly concerned the highlighted instances of arbitrary and discriminatory practices by the institution that restricted visitor access on the basis of biased criteria. The collective firmly opposed these practices, emphasising that mediation should be grounded in respect for all visitors, irrespective of their gender, class, ethnicity, or age.

The conflict began during the first few days after the opening when people were queuing for artists' performances at Santander Cultural, a widely publicised free-admission session that suggested arriving early due to the limited seating. However, only a few people were allowed to enter due to the lack of capacity because the production team had created a guest list, a contradictory move that neither the public nor the mediation team knew about. People had queued for up to two hours in vain. The letter produced later by the mediation team states: 'It is worth mentioning that the names on the list were related to a particular social condition of distinction, status, privilege, and personal connections with figures from the Biennial Foundation' (Coletivo Autonomo de Mediadores, 2013). The situation put the mediation team on alert. Two standard practices of the biennial organisation – hosting a unique series of events with both free tickets for the sessions and a session

with a guest list – created a confusing and contradictory situation that was the initial point for the conflict and led to its escalation.

Unfortunately, during this edition, the situation became aggravated over time, with no open or transparent dialogue from the Mercosul Biennial Foundation. A flash point was a private fundraising dinner organised inside the Museum of Art of Rio Grande do Sul – MARGS (one of the exhibition spaces that year) that disrupted public access without an explanation being offered to the local team and interfered with the mediators' work. The dinner organisers (who were directors of the host museum) ignored all the health and safety rules around Tony Smith's mega-sculpture Bat Cave, a gigantic architectural sculpture made with 4,800 cardboard modules, by throwing a candle-lit benefit dinner. A text by the mediators, exposing the situation to a local newspaper, stated: 'We are responsible for explaining the exhibition etiquette to everyone visiting the spaces, and then the institution chooses who can ignore it. This is segregation!' The aftermath of these conflicts included restrictions and the museum management persecuting the mediators.

On the date of the strike (and ever since), the institution's only open response was a note in the news stating that the strike would not affect visitors to the exhibition spaces during the final days of the exhibition and that the spaces would welcome people at the normal times. A production colleague (and friend) called me, infuriated by the situation and the deposit of materials and protesters' posters at the entrance to the Gas Metre Plant (Usina do Gasometro). Worried about health and safety issues in the space and startled by an incident when security was called on him, he asked me to deal with the situation. My house was a stone's throw from the venue; I was probably there in my pyjamas in less than five minutes, trying to understand the problem and how I could influence the conversation. The main form of mediation I engaged in was to calm down my friend (and colleague) and ask the striking team to take care with security and public visiting arrangements. I was not at all against the strike. On the contrary, I was very much aware of the movement

and the issues raised by the mediation team over the last few months, which included visiting the museum director for him to show me the tapes in which he believed the mediators were plotting against him. This was, of course, on top of a series of emails and accusatory messages between teams.

CURSO DE FORMAÇÃO DE MEDIADORES 8º BIENAL DO MERCOSUL - PROGRAMA						
Mês	Dia	Aula	Tema	Conferencistas sugeridos	Curador-geral da 8ª Bienal do Mercosul	Mini-curriculos
Maio	24 - ter	1	Projeto Pedagógico 8º Bienal Mercosul a partir da perspectiva da Prática da Mediação	José Roca	Curador-geral da 8ª Bienal do Mercosul	Observações
	25 - qua	2	Projeto Pedagógico 8º Bienal Mercosul a partir da perspectiva do campo da História, teorias e processos da	Pablo Harguier	Artista, educador e curador pedagógico da 8ª Bienal do Mercosul	As Minerações não aparecem em aula específica por enquanto, poderiam entrar nesta aula
	26 - qui	3	Os públicos, possibilidades de diálogo	Rita Rumbam	Educadora com formação em história da arte, é profª adjunta de estudos sobre museus junto à Univ. de Columbia, coordena o Dep. de	
	27 - sex	4	Introdução à Arte Contemporânea	Pablo Harguier	Artista, educador e curador pedagógico da 8ª Bienal do Mercosul	Conversa e laboratório de práticas de mediação no
	31 - ter	5	Transmediações: estratégias para	Andréa Santos	Doutor em História, Teoria e Crítica de Arte pelo Instituto de Artes da UFPA, onde atua como docente e pesquisador junto ao PPGAV, é	temas tangenciais: acontecimentos que contemporane
Junho	2 - qui	6	Catopólicas: "geopólicas" crítica -	Eugênio Debom e José Roca	Artista homenageado da 8ª Bienal do Mercosul	temas tangenciais: acontecimentos que contemporane
	7 - ter	7	Catopólicas: "geopólicas" crítica -	Cristina Freire	Doutora em psicologia social, profª na USP, profª associada e vice-diretora do MAC-USP, curadora	temas tangenciais: acontecimentos que contemporane
	9 - qui	8	Geopólicas: escritas móveis - noções	José Roca	Curador-geral da 8ª Bienal do Mercosul	temas tangenciais: acontecimentos que contemporane
	14 - ter	9	Geopólicas: por uma cartografia	Charles Monteiro ou conferencista a definir	Doutor em História Social pela PUC-SP e professor de História Coordenador do Programa de Pós-Graduação na PUC-RS, vice-	temas tangenciais: acontecimentos que contemporane
	16 - qui	10	Atoradas ao Sul: paisagens e memória	Artista Bienal	Doutor em História Social pela PUC-SP e professor de História Coordenador do Programa de Pós-Graduação na PUC-RS, vice-	temas tangenciais: paisagens subjetivas, paisagens do
	21 - ter	11	Artistas e mediação: sobre a	Artista Bienal	Compositor, cantor e escritor, autor do livro "A estética do traço"	Buscar 1 ou 2 artistas da 8ª Bienal que tenham a
	23 - qui	12	Cadernos de viagem (pneus)	Artista Bienal	Curadora adjunta da 8ª Bienal do Mercosul	verificar se há artistas que tenham a
	28 - ter	13	Desdobrando territórios: a mediação no	Artistas parisienses	Mestre em Artes e Mestrado em Artes e Doutorado em Artes e Educação pela Universidade de Nova York, ex-diretor do MAC-Alfama e	Conversa com os artistas - possivelmente todos estarão
	30 - qui	14	Cidade Não Vista: poéticas e	Artista Bienal	Curadora adjunta da 8ª Bienal do Mercosul	
Julho	5 - ter	15	Curadoras e mediação	Artista Bienal	Doutora em História da Arte pela Universidade de Paris 1 (Sorbonne), professora da Faculdade de Arquitetura e vice-coordenadora da	
	7 - qui	16	Processos de inclusão sociocultural e	Artista Bienal	Doutora em Artes e Ciências da Arte pela Universidade Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne, professora do DAV e PPGAV, no Instituto de Artes da	
	12 - ter	17	O corpo na mediação: percepções,	Artista Bienal	Museóloga e educadora de museus, mestre em Estudos de Museus de Arte pela Universidade de Leicester, Inglaterra, atua como	Possibilidade de exercícios de sensibilização e privação
	14 - qui	18	Laboratórios de Experimentação	Artista Bienal	Artista, diretora e radiante, ministra aulas de técnica vocal e interpretação	Aula técnica-prática
	19 - ter	19	Reflexões sobre o cotidiano para o	Artista Bienal	Grupo formado por ex-mediadores da Bienal do Mercosul e Fundação René Camargo, com experiências em mediação, formação de	Atividades práticas e de reflexão sobre a mediação
Agosto	2 - ter	20	Formação de mediadores de museus e	Artista Bienal	Educadora, escritora, curadora, doutoranda na área de Ação Cultural e Mediação pela FCA-USP, atuando também como consultora junto	Convite com a participação de ex-mediadores da Bienal
	4 - qui	21	Educadores e diálogo em repre-	Artista Bienal	Coordenadora do Curso de Formação de Mediadores da 8ª Bienal do Mercosul	

Figure 47 – 8th Mercosul Biennial, *Ensaio de Geopoéticas* (2011), screenshot of the planning document for the mediation school. Date not informed. Personal archive.

The situation escalated over the day. In some areas, artists working on their projects joined the protesters, taking a stance by enquiring about the institution and separating themselves from the curatorial team. Today, it was very clear that most of the team and artists were on the side of the mediators and that, somehow, the articulation of the response they wanted would not come from the board members as they expected. Only the day before, the international seminar on education and inequality had taken place in the same museum that sparked the controversy, and the mediators present at the conference gained the sympathy of the audience and openly discussed the continuous harassment of the museum director in the space. I managed to address this as a significant, shameful incident in the history of the institution, which, in the end, never openly responded to the protesters and had, in a soft power move, appointed the director of the museum that sparked the controversy as the curator for the following edition of the biennial. The strategy led to a considerable shift in the institution, which

had in the last four editions pursued a more international perspective and radical pedagogical experimentation in its structure, with international curators (mainly Latin Americans, but still not local) as part of the leadership of the exhibition. The shift went beyond the departure of most of those who had closely collaborated with the education and public programmes after gaining the impression that something was amiss. For me, it demonstrated how much the intentions of the event depended on the choice of biennial curator and how whoever was selected next could destroy the ongoing history of the biennial and its international 'career'. It also made me reflect on the power of the mediation team, a small army (in this instance, the Mercosul Biennial had about 180 mediators) working daily in the spaces of the exhibition, who were utterly ignored. The programmes did not become defunct, but the MB trajectory has become vulnerable in recent years, hopefully regaining more power in its next iteration in 2025.

This is where I began to understand precarity not just as a condition of contract or income, but as something more diffuse and corrosive. Precarity, in this context, describes the dissonance between the institution's discourse and its operational reality. It is about the erosion of trust, the sidelining of knowledge, the hollowing out of roles that should be central. It's not only the labour conditions, though those matter, but also the affective and epistemic dispossession that occurs when those who have the most sustained contact with the various publics are rendered invisible. To speak of precarity here is to speak of contradictions: of how institutional memory is selectively maintained, of how pedagogical labour is celebrated rhetorically but discarded structurally. What happened at the MB in 2013 was not exceptional: it was merely one single form of rupture that revealed the conditions long in place. And it's in these ruptures that the function of mediation, and the mediator, becomes both clearer and more fragile.

In retrospect, this identification of the mediation team as an 'army' is connected to how Monica Hoff described the MB not as a conventional exhibition but as a *political organism*

(Moore, 2015). Hoff, Ground Curator of the 9th edition, could not officially speak for the foundation during the crisis, but her position was never ambiguous. Informally, she often voiced support for the mediators, recognising that what had emerged was not simply a backlash but the articulation of a critical body within the structure itself. The mediation team was not ancillary. It was embedded, consistent, and deeply attuned to the contradictions between the institution's aspirations and its actions.

In that sense, the MB had created something volatile but vital. Over the course of four editions, the foundation had moved toward a more experimental and pedagogically committed format, shaped by curators from across Latin America, many of whom had prioritised long-term thinking, embedded engagement, and infrastructural care. That trajectory was interrupted. The appointment of the museum director at the centre of the conflict as curator of the next edition sent a clear message: what had been exposed would not be addressed. Instead of dialogue or accountability, the institution pivoted – not just in its leadership, but in its symbolic alignment.

It felt like a retreat from everything we had built. And in that retreat, something broke. Many of us who had worked across education and mediation for years began to withdraw – not as a decision, but as a consequence. The silence that followed the strike wasn't just institutional. It became an atmosphere, a refusal to acknowledge what had been asked, or what had been risked. And with that, the international orientation and radical pedagogical energy that had defined recent editions dissipated. The biennial continued, but something else had ended.

Yet the rupture left a residue. We had been part of a structure that allowed mediation not just to happen, but to reflect, dissent, and organise. Even in its precarity, that possibility mattered. It shaped how I came to think about institutions: not as fixed forms,

but as environments that can contract or expand depending on who is heard and who is silenced. Mediation, I realised, was never only a methodology. It was a position – precarious, relational, and potentially insurgent.

The position of mediation is, in general, an entry point into the art system and exhibition-making, spanning institutions from museums to biennials. The role varies considerably depending on where it is situated: in some contexts, mediation is placed within communications and functions more as visitor assistance, detached from educational frameworks and focused primarily on spatial supervision. This ‘invigilation mode’ centres on enforcing rules and protecting artworks rather than enabling critical engagement. At the Mercosul Biennial, however, mediation had been a consistent component of its structure from the outset. Over time, it evolved from a basic model of guided tours and artwork stewardship into a dialogical practice that foregrounded visitor agency and interpretive exchange.

Scholarly analyses by experienced mediators, such as Bon (2015), have highlighted this evolution. Rather than equipping mediators with fixed scripts, the programme trained them as facilitators of open-ended dialogue. This shift aligns with broader transformations in the field of art education, where the emphasis has increasingly moved from didactic transmission to critical co-construction of meaning. Carolina Mendoza (2015), another long-standing collaborator of the MB pedagogical programme, articulated this transition in her MA thesis, reflecting on her experience moving from mediator to supervisor. She frames mediation not as custodianship, but as a practice of building dialogue:

Initially termed as ‘guides’ or ‘monitors’, these roles have evolved to ‘mediators’ to more accurately reflect the deeper, interactive engagements these positions now entail within

museum and biennial settings. This change mirrors a broader shift in the art education sector, where there is a greater emphasis on dialogue and cultural exchange rather than mere transmission of factual information. (Mendoza, 2015, p. 54)

Despite the Mercosul Biennial's achievements in creating a pedagogically engaged and socially resonant infrastructure, a persistent challenge has been the preservation of experiential knowledge generated through these programmes. Although reports, catalogues, and digital platforms were used to document activities, the closure and discontinuity of the Documentation and Research Centre (Núcleo de Documentação e Pesquisa – NBP) severely compromised institutional memory. This inconsistency reflects a broader issue faced by many contemporary art institutions: the gap between investment in pedagogical innovation and the failure to sustain robust archival practices that ensure continuity, reflection, and legacy.

In the evolving landscape of contemporary art biennials, the 9th Mercosul Biennial exemplifies a critical engagement with precarity and institutional critique, reflecting the dynamics discussed by theorist Fulya Erdemci (in Sheikh, 2016), where she articulates how art biennials, as part of the art world economy, critically unfold the power relations embedded within their operational structures. This theme resonates with the proactive role of mediators during the MB, as this event turned into a pivotal moment of institutional critique, revealing entrenched systemic inequities and exploitative labour conditions, particularly highlighted by the mediators' strike, which challenged the hierarchical privileging of specific audiences and questioned the biennial's commitment to equitable cultural labour. Despite the lack of substantial institutional change following the strike, where the controversial appointment of a new curator served as a 'soft-power' response, it underscored the persistent challenges within such cultural events. Kompatsiaris (2017) builds on Sholette's 'creative dark matter' concept to examine critically the paradoxes inherent in biennials and other large-scale art institutions. Despite

their outward commitments to social justice and progressive change, he argues that these institutions are deeply embedded in the neoliberal frameworks they purport to critique. The reliance on precarious labour – such as flexible contracts, unpaid internships, and the exploitation of volunteers – highlights a significant contradiction: while these institutions publicly advocate for social change, they internally replicate and reinforce exploitative labour practices. This scenario illustrates the complex dynamics of art, capital, and labour, emphasising the need for ongoing critique and potential transformation within the biennial framework. The lack of direct influence on other global biennials does not diminish the MB's importance; instead, it spotlights the localised nature of such protests and the critical dialogue they inspire about the role of art in addressing and reflecting social realities. As such, the MB stands as an example of the transformative potential of biennials to showcase art and serve as forums for critical social engagement and institutional self-reflection, mirroring broader movements within the arts to align practices with ideals of equity and justice.

One notable challenge encountered throughout this research has been the translation – not only linguistic but also conceptual – of the term 'mediator' into English. In both Portuguese (*mediar*) and Spanish (*mediar*), the term carries a connotation of relational facilitation, often aligned with cultural mediation or pedagogical dialogue. In English, however, 'mediation' frequently enters discourse through legal or conflict-resolution frameworks, often implying neutrality or arbitration rather than engagement or learning. This linguistic dissonance is symptomatic of deeper cultural divergences in how mediation is understood and institutionalised within the arts.

This ambiguity is further complicated when placed against the economic architecture of the art world itself. As Sholette (2017) argues, the so-called oversupply crisis in the arts (or the idea that there are more cultural workers than viable jobs) looks radically different depending on one's position within the art economy. For those on the periphery, including many mediators, artists, and facilitators, precarity is not an anomaly but a structural condition. Sholette's metaphor of the 'central park of visibility' captures the

narrowness of institutional recognition: a tightly bounded zone within which certain artists and practices circulate, while vast amounts of cultural labour remain unseen, unsupported, or dismissed as supplementary. Mediation, when marginalised or poorly defined, becomes a site where this dynamic is starkly felt – essential to the functioning of the exhibition, yet persistently misrecognised within its public and professional hierarchies. If mediation is frequently relegated to the periphery of institutional life – celebrated in principle but under-resourced in practice – then the 9th Mercosul Biennial made visible what happens when that margin refuses its position. The strike, while localised, resonated with wider critical debates around the paradoxes of biennial labour, echoing Kompatsiaris's (2017) critique of the institutional entrapment of radical intent. It also posed a sharp question: What happens when those tasked with holding the public are no longer supported by the institution?

In biennials, precarity often manifests as an exercise in new institutionalism, where power dynamics within cultural institutions are actively contested and reconfigured. Simon Sheikh's (2016) exploration of biennials as 'cultural laboratories' resonates deeply with this idea, particularly when considering the precarious conditions of the ground workers and mediators involved in these large-scale exhibitions. Sheikh's interviews reveal how these global art events can become platforms for challenging the entrenched hierarchies that govern them, aligning with the toolkit's emphasis on 'empowerment' and the 'precarity of artists as debtors'. The strike organised by the mediators at the 9th Mercosul Biennial exemplifies how the precarious position of those working within these institutions can lead to significant acts of resistance, forcing a revaluation of institutional practices. This moment of conflict, where mediators, artists, and public members united to protest the biennial's organisers, mirrors Sheikh's discussions on the fluidity of power relations within biennials, highlighting how these events can serve as spaces for both empowerment and the negotiation of new institutional norms. Angela Dimitrakaki (in Sheikh 2016, p. 141) critiques biennials for their reliance on unpaid labour, emphasising the need for data to understand this exploitation fully. She argues that biennials, as

apparent elements of the art world economy, contribute to marginalising artist-led struggles within broader labour movements. Despite this, she sees potential in reimagining biennials as collaborative, activist projects that could align more closely with political and social struggles. For biennials to stay relevant, they must address these precarious labour conditions and become critically aware of their production and reproduction processes.

In her text ‘Can Mediation Be Repaired?’, written for the 2022 Berlin Biennale, Samira Ghoualmia reflects on the impossibility – and perhaps the undesirability – of returning to a supposed original state through the act of reparation (Berlin Biennale & Attia, 2022, pp. 44–46). To repair, she suggests, is often to seek a restoration, a reinstatement of a prior condition. Yet this logic falters when applied to mediation, particularly when mediation itself is implicated in colonial, institutional, or extractive frameworks. Ghoualmia asks what kind of bridge can be built when the very tools of mediation carry the residues of power. If mediation is to move beyond its instrumentalised or transactional uses, it must reckon with the conditions under which it operates and the histories it cannot always disavow.

A more grounded understanding of the role of the mediator can be drawn from earlier pedagogical documents such as *Margem: A Practical Guide for Navigating the Rivers of the 6th Biennial* (*Margem: Guia prático de viagem pelos rios da 6ª Bienal*, Fundação Bienal de Artes Visuais do Mercosul, 2007b), developed for the 6th Mercosul Biennial. Written by the team, this practical guide offers both orientation and a proposition: that mediation is neither instruction nor service, but a relational practice rooted in attention, adaptability, and co-presence. Mediation, in this framing, is defined not simply as the transmission of information but as a means of facilitating dialogue and fostering reflection based on the audience’s own experience. Mediators are not positioned as experts in possession of meaning, but as interlocutors who activate the connection

between artwork, context, and viewer – those who hold the conditions for shared reflection to emerge. The guide stated:

Mediation

Mediation facilitates dialogue and interaction between parties as a bridge or intermediary. In the context of an art exhibition, a mediator is not just an expert who explains the artwork but a facilitator who encourages reflection and engagement based on the audience's experience. Mediation creates meaningful connections between the observer, the artwork, and the broader context, fostering a deeper understanding and appreciation.

Main points for aspiring mediators:

- Engagement and receptivity
- Facilitating dialogue
- Contextual awareness
- Personalisation and adaptability
- Sensitivity and empathy
- Continuous learning
- Balancing information and experience
- Professionalism and conduct
- Creativity in mediation
- Building connections

These elements, while framed in pragmatic terms, reveal an ethic of mediation that is anything but peripheral. They mark mediation as an imaginative, relational, and improvisational task, one that requires not only technical fluency but also affective labour and critical presence. And yet, as Samira Ghoualmia (2022) observes in her reflection for the Berlin Biennale, mediation is often understood as a form of care work ‘without being cared for’. Her words echo what the *Margem* guide implicitly acknowledges: that mediation’s value lies not in control or certainty, but in its capacity to remain responsive, porous, and unfinished.

The guide outlines key attributes for aspiring mediators – engagement, contextual sensitivity, adaptability, empathy, and creative thinking – all of which point toward mediation as a situated, affective, and dialogical practice. It is a practice of listening, of holding space, of staying with uncertainty. Crucially, it also requires ongoing learning and the ability to acknowledge limits – to say, *I don’t know*, and remain present. Yet even as these qualities are celebrated in theory, they often go unsupported in practice.

Ghoualmia’s reflection echoes this dissonance. ‘All too often,’ she writes, ‘mediation is understood as care work in the arts without being cared for’. Her observation returns us to the underlying condition of precarity that shadows much cultural labour. Mediation is celebrated rhetorically – as bridge-building, as accessibility, as inclusion – but structurally, it remains peripheral. This misalignment between discourse and investment reveals the fragility of mediation’s institutional standing, particularly when it is positioned as care without care, responsibility without reciprocity.

This tension was also evident in the Liverpool Biennial’s shift toward a more embedded model of education and public engagement in 2014, under the direction of Sally Tallant. Drawing inspiration from the pedagogical experiments of the Mercosul Biennial, Tallant

appointed artist Polly Brannan as Education Curator, signalling a commitment to rethinking how education could sit within curatorial frameworks. Brannan worked closely with the curatorial team, developing programmes that encouraged participatory learning and audience-led exploration. As Tallant noted, this required the institution to accommodate what she called ‘parasitic and sometimes painful cultures’ within itself – forms of labour, thinking, and timing that do not always align with institutional rhythm or hierarchy (Tallant, 2013, p. 27).

To nurture such cultures is not merely to tolerate friction but to recognise its generative potential. Yet doing so demands more than strategic inclusion; it requires sustained care for those who hold the weight of public interaction. Without this, mediation risks becoming both a projection and a placeholder: celebrated as symbolic labour but unacknowledged in its daily, embodied form.

When I was invited to go to the LB to coordinate the Mediation Team, I had no precedents for the differences between institutions, countries, and concepts of mediation. I was unprepared to take over the role because I didn’t know the differences between them, such as having to run between buildings to cover lunch breaks and pick up building keys daily, because I was the sole key holder for the partner institutions. The intention behind transferring the model from the MB biennial as a reference to build something similar at the LB could not fail in my hands, but it also could not thrive. The organisation’s scope was completely different to what I was used to, as was the number of members of the teams. At the MB, I was dealing with a significant number of people, a small army of three hundred people on four to five different projects, and was team leader for producers, and so on. The LB 2016 offered a twenty-person team to invigilate, mediate, book groups, open and close the buildings, coordinate the volunteers, and maintain the spaces and artworks. We had fun, we were tired at the end, and most of the evaluation points collated by the LB mediation team were similar to those provided by the army of the MB: in particular, the lack of acknowledgement of the team and its work from the institution at large and the precarity of the structure needed to develop the work. From 2016 to

2018, the numbers worsened. From a small team, we went to an even smaller group of eight people, which was definitely responsible for personal burnout but led to the beginning of this research on the practical side of the project.

One expression of this tension could be seen in initiatives like TCAS, which sought to embed educational thinking more fully within the structure of the Liverpool Biennial. While TCAS enabled more autonomous and situated forms of engagement, it also faced challenges of visibility and integration; its contributions were often under-acknowledged within the formal framing of the exhibition. The inconsistency of institutional support, especially in terms of communication and recognition, reveals how education and mediation, even when embraced conceptually, can remain structurally peripheral.

These contradictions extend into the afterlife of such programmes. Although the Liverpool Biennial made efforts to document its mediation work through evaluations and reports, much of the relational knowledge and affective labour generated in these contexts risks being lost. A promising counterpoint has been the biennial's partnership with the Special Collections and Archives at Liverpool John Moores University, which has created a space for ongoing access to and reflection on these materials. Yet the question remains: how can this experiential knowledge inform future practice if the structural conditions that produced it are not also addressed?

Kompatsiaris (2017) argues that the persistent gap between progressive discourse and institutional practice undermines the credibility of biennials as agents of change. The continued dependence on precarious labour – whether through short-term contracts, volunteerism, or under-recognised educational roles – exposes the contradictions of institutions that proclaim social justice while reproducing inequality. In this light, the critique of precarity becomes inseparable from the critique of the biennial form itself. It

is a call not just for better working conditions, but for a rethinking of how value is assigned, how labour is held, and how institutions are shaped through the people they often fail to support.



Figure 48 – Liverpool Biennial, *Beautiful world, where are you?* (2018), mediation session at St George's Hall. 17/10/2018. Personal archive.



Figure 49 – Liverpool Biennial, Beautiful world, where are you? (2018), mediation session at The Serving Library, Exhibition Research Lab (ERL-LJMU), John Lennon Art and Design Building. 20/10/2018. Personal archive.



Figure 50 – Liverpool Biennial, Beautiful world, where are you? (2018), members of the public filling in research forms about the impact of the Biennial, at The Serving Library, Exhibition Research Lab (ERL-LJMU), John Lennon Art and Design Building. 20/10/2018. Personal archive.

4.2 Biennial as Pedagogical Tools: A Critical Toolkit

The toolkit is the second research output of the thesis. It is both a conceptual proposition and a practical resource, designed to translate the trajectory of this research into a form that can circulate beyond the written thesis. Its rationale lies in the recognition that language plays a decisive role in shaping biennial studies, curatorial practice, and discursive pedagogy, yet the terms most frequently mobilised in these fields often remain under-examined. By reframing such terms into a critical taxonomy, the toolkit responds to a gap in both scholarly and professional discourse: the need for a flexible vocabulary that clarifies without fixing, and that invites reflection rather than imposing consensus.

The vocabulary that grounds the toolkit originates from annotations I made throughout the research process. These notebooks, used to capture observations, conversations, and reflections across case studies and fieldwork, revealed recurring words that appeared with intensity. Some terms circulated widely in curatorial statements and public programme descriptions, while others condensed the pedagogical or affective tensions I encountered in practice. In revisiting my notes, I compiled an initial list of 140 terms. From this, I selected those that held the strongest potential for contextual elaboration, theoretical depth, and pedagogical resonance. The act of re-reading, distilling, and working through these words became a way of translating practice into conceptual language, while at the same time resisting closure.

Methodologically, the toolkit extends the autotheoretical and practice-based orientation of the thesis. It operates as a meta-exercise, feeding back into the research by transforming the vocabulary of my notes and case studies into an instrument of critical engagement. To be able to write the thesis with clarity, I found it necessary to interrogate these terms more deeply, exploring both their historical layers and their resonance within contemporary art and biennial discourse. The toolkit crystallises this iterative process:

words move between lived experience, institutional practices, and theoretical frameworks, and are returned as fragments open for reuse. In this sense, the toolkit does not stand outside the thesis but embodies its methodological arc, offering a reflexive synthesis of practice, research, and writing.



Figure 51 – *Civil Rights and Freedom Fights*, produced by Re-Dock with the educational team of the International Slavery Museum, National Museums of Liverpool, and their community of young people. Date not informed. Personal archive.

The development of the toolkit was shaped by several key references. The publication *Critical Kits and How to Use Them* (Re-Dock, 2017) provided an important precedent in demonstrating how toolkits can be conceived as conceptual and practical devices, ranging from high-technology platforms to simple hand-made assemblages. Hwa Young Jung's practice as both an artist and a collector of toolkits was particularly influential, underscoring the value of open-endedness, adaptability, and user transformation. Equally formative was my return to Roland Barthes's *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*

(1978). Its fragmentary organisation, structured as an index of concepts that can be read in isolation or in constellation, offered a compelling model for a non-linear and non-hierarchical lexicon. These influences shaped my understanding of the toolkit as something situated between taxonomy and speculation: neither a dictionary nor a manual, but a resource that prompts dialogue.



Figure 52. *The Experimental Policy Design Method Pack* by Policy Lab. Illustration by Toby Melville-Brown UK Government 2022.

The process of developing the toolkit involved several stages. My first idea was to create a board game that would allow participants to evaluate processes and progress according to chance or instruction. Yet this format quickly revealed its limitations, as it inevitably introduced competition and hierarchy, a process that made me uncomfortable, like winning, losing, and the accumulation of points, which ran counter to the collaborative ethos of the project. The second iteration was to build a website. While this offered possibilities for accessibility and distribution, it risked reproducing the isolating effects of screen-based interaction, which I considered to limit the dialogical and pedagogical ambitions of the research. The final iteration, and the one that has been realised, is a

card-based format. Portable, adaptable, and tactile, the cards are designed to support face-to-face encounters, while still allowing for individual reading and reflection.

The structure of the toolkit is deliberately simple. Each card presents a selected term, accompanied by contextual elaboration, “notes to self,” and questions intended to open dialogue. The cards can be arranged as a fragmentary dictionary or deployed collectively in workshops, planning sessions, or research discussions. Their function is not to provide definitive explanations but to create a common ground for dialogue, enabling users to situate themselves in relation to shared concepts while also recognising their contested and evolving meanings. In this sense, the toolkit is not an instrument of instruction but of conversation, one that embraces speculation, adaptation, and even abandonment as legitimate forms of use.

The intended audience of the toolkit includes curators, educators, researchers, and practitioners working in contexts where collaborative projects are initiated. Its primary function is to provide a vocabulary through which common ground can be established before projects begin, thereby clarifying expectations and opening conceptual space. The cards can be used flexibly: in structured workshops, as reflective prompts in individual practice, or as generative tools in institutional planning. Their adaptability allows them to function across academic, curatorial, and pedagogical contexts, without being prescriptive.

As a research contribution, the toolkit advances knowledge in three intersecting fields: biennial studies, curatorial practice, and discursive pedagogy. Within biennial studies, it introduces a new method of examining the recurring terms that shape curatorial and educational discourse, emphasising their affective and political dimensions. Within curatorial practice, it offers a resource that enables practitioners to articulate and

negotiate the language through which projects are conceived and communicated. Within pedagogy, it demonstrates how vocabulary itself can be a site of learning, critical reflection, and collective negotiation. In all these ways, the toolkit embodies the essence of the thesis: it is both a conclusion and an opening, a critical device that crystallises the research while extending its life beyond the text.

Notes from the use of the toolkit in Tallin

This year's Para-Educational Studies presentation was known to be special. I centred my presentation on the toolkit I developed. It was also one of the first occasions that the group met outside of Hamburg—this time in Tallinn. The EKA School hosted us for the first days of June, providing a new context for exchange and learning.

Sharing this toolkit with the Para-Educational Studies group, which I have been part of since 2019 under the coordination of Nora Sternfeld and Julia Stolba, was a surprisingly playful experience. Initially, I planned a structured exercise with two groups enquiring about each other through selected cards. However, as we moved collectively to the rooftop for cakes and a break, I flexibilised it, proposing participants each choose a card and sought to persuade others to exchange, creating spontaneous and open-ended dialogues. Some formed smaller groups to discuss their cards in depth, while others experimented with tarot-style readings to imagine the future of their writings. The toolkit was frequently accessed to clarify concepts and guide participants through challenging themes, reinforcing its role as a dynamic resource rather than a fixed instructional tool.



Figure 53 Tryptic of pictures of the Para-Educational group using the Toolkit cards, June 2055, Tallinn - Personal archive

This moment was especially meaningful to me as a way of sharing the final stage of a journey that this group has accompanied since the early stages of my PhD research. The process highlighted the toolkit's potential to promote exchange grounded in curiosity and care, offering space for speculation and collective meaning-making.

Two contributions from the group came forward showing some of their experiences: Nora Sternfeld reflected that "what I liked in your suggested use of the toolkit is the economy of an exchange that is based on the idea of becoming more. To share knowledge is to know more, and to exchange words is a way to go on together." Simon Schultz added:

"The toolkit is a great resource to engage in informal discussions that develop critical knowledge on art exhibitions and their use. Its ludic approach interweaves theory and cheerful curiosity. A perfect method to share knowledge for groups interested in philosophy, theory, and history of art biennials."

4.2.1 Introduction to the Toolkit

The toolkit has two parts. The first is a critical taxonomy, organised as a structured vocabulary that emerged from my annotations, fieldwork, and case studies. These terms recurred with intensity across curatorial statements, public programmes, and my own reflective notes, condensing the pedagogical, affective, and political tensions I encountered. From an initial set of 140 terms, I selected those 57 terms that carried the strongest potential for theoretical elaboration and pedagogical application. Each entry in the taxonomy is composed of three elements:

- Quotes: definitions and reflections from authors, artists, and curators that situate the term historically or conceptually.
- Note to Self: a short text drawn from my annotations and lived experience.
- Questions: prompts designed to open discussion and suggest ways the term might be applied in practice.

The second part is a set of cards, each carrying only a single word or expression drawn from the taxonomy. Unlike the structured entries, the cards are deliberately minimal. They are designed to be movable and playful, enabling users to arrange, combine, or exchange terms as a way of generating dialogue and speculation. While the taxonomy anchors the research in precise references and critical reflection, the cards extend it into a more open and adaptable mode of use.

The toolkit is therefore intended to function as both an archive of concepts and a catalyst for practice. It is non-linear and non-hierarchical, and its contribution lies in providing a structured yet flexible resource for planning and evaluating discursive programmes in biennials and related contexts. While the current version is presented as a closed set for submission, the structure of the toolkit allows for expansion. In principle, new terms could be added by those who use them, enabling it to develop as a growing repository of

concepts. This potential could take the form of an online, collaborative resource that extends beyond the thesis, with the intention of being shaped and expanded by others in practice.

By distinguishing between the structured precision of the critical taxonomy and the open-ended potential of the cards, the toolkit brings together analysis and application. What follows is a description of how the toolkit can be used, highlighting the different modes of engagement it supports and the contexts in which it may be activated.

How to Use the Toolkit

The toolkit is designed to be both structured and adaptable, offering two complementary modes of engagement.

The critical taxonomy can be read as a reference work. Each entry presents a selected term accompanied by quotes from authors and practitioners, a short *Note to Self* drawn from my research annotations, and a set of open questions. The taxonomy provides conceptual grounding and methodological precision, enabling users to examine how recurring terms operate within biennial studies, curatorial practice, and discursive pedagogy. It can be used as a cumulative resource for research, teaching, and programme development.

The cards carry only the word or expression drawn from the taxonomy. They are deliberately minimal, designed to be handled, rearranged, and combined to prompt dialogue and speculation. The cards function as a mobile vocabulary, offering a playful and participatory extension of the taxonomy.

Users may engage with the toolkit in multiple ways:

- Individual reflection: select terms from the taxonomy to deepen theoretical analysis, or draw a card at random as a prompt for writing or reflection.
- Group discussion: distribute cards among participants to spark conversation; use the questions in the taxonomy as a framework for collective debate.
- Project planning: lay out cards to map vocabulary when conceiving new programmes; use the taxonomy entries to clarify alignments, tensions, and possible directions.
- Evaluation: return to the taxonomy and cards at different stages of a project to reflect on how concepts such as participation, precarity, or sustainability have been enacted or challenged.

The toolkit is not prescriptive. Users are invited to annotate, rearrange, or discard terms, generating their own constellations of meaning. In this way, the taxonomy provides precision and depth, while the cards enable flexibility, play, and co-creation. Together, they form a resource that can be applied in biennial contexts and beyond, supporting critical reflection, collaborative planning, and dialogical pedagogy.

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‘In particular, in exhibitions of design and the aesthetics of material culture, both the intellectual and the affective faculties work commensurately as modes of cognition.’ | Marie Laurberg and Margriet Schavemaker, *Between the Discursive and the Immersive: Curating Research in the 21st Century Art Museum*, 2015

‘In essence, it says the following: all group sentiments that involve a strong sense of group identity, of we-ness, draw on those attachments that bind small, intimate collectivities, usually those based on kinship or its extensions. Ideas of collective identity based on shared claims to blood, soil, or language draw their affective force from the sentiments that bind small groups.’ | Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalisation*, 1996

‘How might these cases embody and (re)territorialise the externalisation of an expanded field of art’s affects through education? Or of education through the most radical form of art – being poetic, political, and pedagogical? In this way, the pedagogical project is realised through a commitment to the multiplication of voices in their various meanings and agencies.’ | Diana Kolker, in Helguera & Hoff, *Pedagogia no campo expandido* [Pedagogy in the expanded field], 2011

‘As the naive perception of the world is overcome through critical reflection, the oppressed begin to engage with their praxis in a more affective manner.’ | Paulo Freire, *Pedagogia do oprimido* [Pedagogy of the Oppressed], 1970

Note to self

Affectivity expresses our relation not only to people but also to memories, objects, and spaces. People sometimes feel more comfortable openly expressing their affectivity toward objects and memories than toward other individuals. For example, as alien women migrate from the South to the North, public displays of affectivity shift dramatically. I contain myself more than before, having to express verbally any signs of affectivity, especially if it is physical. What might be disrespectful in the North could be

more openly expressed in the South, where boundaries between care and imposition blur.

However, the affective dimension is crucial in creative or collaborative work regardless of location. It supports artistic processes and can profoundly influence a community's positive outcomes. Recognising and addressing affectivity in projects can make a profound difference to both personal and collective engagements.

Questions

Are there spaces of affectivity that remain inaccessible or exclusive?

What is the limit of affectivity in our everyday lives?

How does affectivity counterpose professionalism? Is it possible to integrate both effectively?

How does affectivity reshape how we interpret and engage with art?

‘The alienation of man from the world is sometimes attributed to the modern subjectivity of the individual. However, the loss of the world, the most dangerous form of alienation, always occurs when alienation from the earth becomes complete.’ | Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 1958

‘Alienation becomes a critical tool in the avant-garde: a means of waking the audience from complacency to confront the conditions of modernity.’ | Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century*, 1996

‘The more one invests in the hope of connection, the more one dreads the threat of disconnection.’ | Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, 2000

‘Overcoming the oppressor-oppressed contradiction, which entails the disappearance of both as antagonistic poles, is the liberation of all.’ | Paulo Freire, *Pedagogia do oprimido* [Pedagogy of the Oppressed], 1970

Note to self

Alienation is a multifaceted phenomenon; it works as both a symptom and a response to external forces. And it is not always a passive condition but often an active choice – a means of self-preservation and resistance for some. Communities and individuals may choose alienation to safeguard something sacred, whether it is a way of life, cultural identity, or autonomy.

For instance, indigenous groups who remain isolated despite repeated invasions demonstrate alienation as a form of protection. This deliberate detachment parallels the alienation individuals experience when they distance themselves from modes of society to retain their authenticity or avoid commodifying their experiences.

In art, alienation can become a powerful critique of modernity or a tool to address interpersonal disconnection. Some forms or methodologies of art-making, like socially engaged art practices, challenge alienation by creating conditions of collectiveness and

new ways of promoting connection. However, this balancing act often reveals the fragility of hope in an increasingly disconnected world.

These layers of alienation - whether protective, critical, or imaginative - demonstrate their dual nature: they are both a withdrawal from the world and an opportunity to reimagine our engagement. Art becomes a space to confront alienation, to either embrace it as a critical lens or seek to overcome it through dialogue and connection.

Questions

How can alienation serve as both a protective mechanism and a tool for resistance?

In what ways does art critique or mediate the alienation present in capitalist societies?

When does alienation become empowering, and when does it risk harmful isolation?

Can alienation in artistic practices encourage audiences to confront uncomfortable truths without alienating them further?

How might alienation as a concept evolve in the context of digital interactions and virtual art spaces?

What are the ethical implications of choosing alienation as a form of cultural or personal preservation?

‘This mixed panorama of socially collaborative work arguably forms what avant-garde we have today: artists using social situations to produce dematerialised, anti-market, politically engaged projects that carry on the modernist call to blur art and life.’ | Grant Kester, *The One and the Many: Contemporary Collaborative Art in a Global Context*, 2011

‘Game is a vital tool for engaging people in unconventional ways. The YKON Game merges fiction, rules, and playful interactions to create new tools for critical thinking and designing practical utopias.’ | YKON Game, *Project Summary*, 2003–present

Note to self

Play is often underestimated, dismissed as mundane, or regarded as secondary to serious political or social interventions. However, playing has a subversive power. It disrupts the rigid structures of everyday life, allowing us to imagine alternative possibilities and speculate about forms of engagement that transcend formalised discourse.

Playing has proven to be a dynamic tool for challenging hierarchies and encouraging collaboration in arts practices. It introduces an element of experimentation and unpredictability that can dismantle traditional notions of power and control. Artists working with play create spaces where participants are no longer passive but can actively reshape their environments and narratives.

While play might have some sort of lightness, its ability to activate critical reflection and reimagine systems is profound. It is not an escape from reality but an alternative way to inhabit it, challenging us to think critically while engaging our curiosity and joy.

Questions

How does playfulness challenge or engage with social and political issues?

In what ways can playful art practices empower communities or inspire social change?

How can playful approaches resist commodification while promoting meaningful connections?

How does playfulness disrupt traditional hierarchies and power structures in art and society?

How can playfulness balance utopian imagination with the practical realities of problem-solving?

What unique opportunities does playfulness create for addressing systemic challenges and inequalities?

How can embracing playfulness transform relationships between artists, audiences, and institutions?

‘The commitment of contemporary artists to social change waxes and wanes unpredictably. Sometimes, the impetus is obvious, such as the international movement against the war on Vietnam. Sometimes, a similar impetus, such as the war on Iraq, has less effect than might be expected. While artists are never the vanguard of political movements, once they are swept into action, they can be valuable allies.’ | Lucy Lippard, *Time Capsule*, in Bradley & Esche, *Art and Social Change: A Critical Reader*, 2007

‘The Politics of Contemporary Art Biennials approaches these questions by focusing on the sites that are (or declare to be) at the forefront of a process of claiming a new socially relevant role for art within contemporary societies.’ | Panos Kompatsiaris, *The Politics of Contemporary Art Biennials*, 2017

‘The Bienal also functioned as a platform for research and promotion at a time when artists from the “peripheries” (most of the world) were unknown beyond their local contexts.’ | Gerardo Mosquera, *Havana Bienal*, 2011

‘The self-reflective, open and dialogical exhibition form, now hegemonic in biennials, is inseparably bound up with questions of social engagement that draw on post-colonial, minority, and anti-capitalist critique brought about through the rhetoric of experimentation, interdisciplinarity, and flexible forms.’ | Panos Kompatsiaris, *The Politics of Contemporary Art Biennials*, 2017

Note to self

Art has the potential to act as a powerful catalyst for social change, creating spaces for dialogue, critique, and action. It challenges entrenched power structures by elevating marginalised voices and highlighting perspectives often excluded from mainstream discourse.

Biennials, particularly in the Global South, exemplify this role by positioning themselves as platforms for cultural resistance and empowerment. They challenge the dominance of Western art institutions and provide opportunities for artists to engage with pressing

social and political issues. At their best, these spaces try to create genuine collaboration and transformation, reflecting the values of grassroots movements and amplifying anti-capitalist and postcolonial critiques.

However, the potential for art to drive meaningful change often encounters barriers. The commodification of art, the institutional limitations of biennials, and the risk of performative activism can dilute their impact. The challenge lies in balancing art's aesthetic, political, and social dimensions to create sustained and impactful interventions.

Questions

How can art elevate marginalised voices and create spaces of cultural resistance?

What are the limitations of biennials in creating genuine social transformation?

How can art institutions align themselves more closely with grassroots movements?

What is the role of art in sustaining long-term cultural and social transformations?

‘More than ever, nature cannot be separated from culture, and we must learn to think “transversally” about the interactions between ecosystems, the mechanosphere, and the universes of social and individual reference.’ | Félix Guattari, *As três ecologias* [*The Three Ecologies*], 1990

‘Art’s engagement with ecology does not simply aim to depict environmental degradation but to enact new ways of thinking and being about the world around us.’ | T. J. Demos, *Against the Anthropocene: Visual Culture and Environment Today*, 2017

Note to self

Art and ecology intersect in ways that extend beyond representation. Artistic practices can reimagine our place within the natural world, challenging anthropocentric perspectives and advocating for more sustainable systems. Art is not merely a tool for activism but a lens through which to explore the complexities of our relationship with the environment.

Biennials and public art projects addressing ecological themes often act as platforms for experimentation, inviting communities to participate in envisioning alternative futures. However, these engagements must resist superficial gestures that aestheticise environmental issues without addressing their root causes.

Ecology in art raises fundamental questions about responsibility, sustainability, and the impact of human actions. It demands a rethinking of economic, social, and cultural systems that perpetuate environmental degradation. In this sense, art becomes a practice of care and connection, advocating for new modes of coexistence between human and non-human entities.

Questions

How can art promote deeper connections between communities and ecosystems?

What role does art play in addressing the systemic causes of ecological crises?

How can artistic practices balance aesthetic expression with ecological responsibility?

In what ways can art and biennials promote a collective reimagining of sustainable futures?

What are the challenges and possibilities of integrating ecological concerns into the global art system?

‘The artist as an ethnographer adopts a role that mirrors anthropological methodologies, engaging deeply with communities to explore cultural practices and social structures. This practice is inherently collaborative, seeking to represent collective experiences rather than individual visions.’ | Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century*, 1996

‘The artist’s role is transformed into that of a mediator and researcher, working within the relational spaces of community engagement. This approach challenges traditional hierarchies of artistic production by prioritising participation and shared authorship.’ | Grant Kester, *The One and the Many: Contemporary Collaborative Art in a Global Context*, 2011

‘Ethnographic art practices seek to foster mutual understanding and co-creation, aligning themselves with methodologies emphasising reciprocity and ethical representation.’ | Félix Guattari, *Lines of Flight: For Another World of Possibilities*, 1995

Note to self

The concept of the artist as an ethnographer reframes how we think about the role of art in society. This approach emphasises the importance of participation, shared authorship, and a deeper understanding of cultural contexts. By engaging with communities, artists can uncover layers of meaning that extend beyond the aesthetic, embedding their practices within lived experiences.

This methodology raises critical questions about ethics, power dynamics, and representation. The notion of the artist as an ethnographer also challenges traditional ideas of artistic genius or singular vision, pushing art toward collaboration and collective meaning-making.

Ethnographic art practices require careful navigation of the relationship between the artist and the community. At their best, such relationships produce reciprocal and

transformative work, revealing the conditions of the community and the broader social systems that are part of their experiences.

Questions

How can artists ensure that their work reflects the voices of the communities they engage with rather than imposing their narratives?

How does the artist as ethnographer navigate the balance between representation and collaboration?

What ethical frameworks are necessary for artists to engage with communities respectfully?

In what ways can ethnographic methodologies in art challenge power structures and amplify marginalised voices?

How do relational and participatory practices redefine traditional ideas of artistic authorship?

What are the potential limitations of ethnographic approaches in art, and how can they be addressed?

‘Contemporary art frequently merges practices and discourses from various fields, from science and technology to activism and craft, producing works that are interdisciplinary by nature and transformative in impact.’ | Suzanne Lacy, *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art*, 1995

‘The fusion of artistic practices reflects a dynamic cultural ecosystem, where cross-pollination between disciplines not only enriches creativity but also redefines the purpose of art in society. | Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 1994

Note to self

Artistic fusions embody the intersections of disciplines, cultures, and ideas, creating spaces where traditional definitions of art are deconstructed and reimaged. These practices often emerge from collaboration, reflecting the shared values and conflicts that drive creative innovation.

Fusions occur not only between disciplines but also between the personal and the political, the local and the global. This hybridity allows new narratives to emerge, challenging dominant frameworks while opening possibilities for dialogue and transformation. However, fusion has challenges. The merging of disciplines can disengage structured intentions and methodologies, creating tensions between the roles of art, science, activism, and other fields. Nonetheless, the potential for these intersections to produce new ways of understanding the world makes them vital to contemporary artistic practices.

Questions

How do artistic fusions challenge traditional definitions and boundaries of art?

In what ways can cross-disciplinary approaches create more inclusive and transformative narratives?

What tensions arise in merging artistic practices with other fields like science or activism?

How do cultural and historical contexts influence the nature of artistic fusions?

Are art institutions ready to work with artistic fusions and what they entangle?

What is the role of collaboration in enabling hybrid artistic forms?

‘In the indeterminate quality of being “baldio” - public/private, uncultivated/cultivated, used/abandoned - there lies a rich potential for experimental art practices, new forms of collectivity, and community cooperation. These wastelands are less defined by ownership and more by the possibilities of transformative use.’ | Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 1984

‘The presence of the wasteland, or baldio, forces us to rethink what constitutes productive land. It reminds us of the value of what has been overlooked or discarded - both in physical spaces and cultural narratives.’ | Fred Evans, *The Multivoiced Body: Society and Communication in the Age of Diversity*, 2009

‘The artist-accomplice dissolves distances, radicalises proximity, and engages with the excluded or invisible content of history, science, and hegemonic theories of art. This approach creates a space for recognising the richness of forgotten, abandoned places - territories of memory and transformation.’ | Carlos Vergara, *Sudarios: Utopias ao rés do chão*, 2014

Note to self

The concept of *baldios* - wastelands or unused spaces - opens a dialogue about the potential of what is overlooked, abandoned, or dismissed. These spaces challenge traditional notions of ownership, value, and utility, becoming fertile grounds for artistic exploration and community engagement.

Artists like Carlos Vergara illuminate the richness of *baldios*, transforming them into spaces of collective memory, participation, and ethical inquiry. By engaging with these ‘wastelands’, art can uncover forgotten histories and propose alternative narratives, challenging the centralisation of cultural and historical discourse.

However, the idea of *baldios* is not just about physical spaces; it also reflects cultural and social ‘gaps’- those moments of indeterminacy that allow for experimentation,

transformation, and resistance. These spaces provoke questions about responsibility, care, and our relationships with our environments.

Questions

What potential lies in the spaces society considers 'wastelands'?

How can art practices activate *baldios* to foster collective memory and social transformation?

How do *baldios* challenge conventional ideas of ownership, productivity, and value?

What role do artists play in revealing the unseen or forgotten histories of *baldios*?

How can *baldios* serve as metaphors for cultural and social experimentation?

‘The body is the primary site of perception, a medium through which we experience and engage with the world. It is not a passive object but an active participant in shaping our understanding of reality.’ | Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 1945

‘The body is a place where power is exercised and contested. In its vulnerability and strength, the body becomes both a subject of control and a site of resistance.’ | Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punishment*, 1975

‘Embodiment is a process of making visible the invisible, whether through physical gestures, performances, or collective action. It is the intersection of materiality and meaning, sensation and sociality.’ | Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 1993

‘The body becomes a canvas and a site of experimentation in performance art, reflecting its vulnerabilities, strengths, and the social inscriptions it carries.’ | RoseLee Goldberg, *Performance Art: From Futurism to the Present*, 1979

‘Through her art, Marina Abramović explores the boundaries of the body, testing its limits as both a personal and universal medium for understanding endurance, pain, and transformation.’ | Marina Abramović, *Walk Through Walls: A Memoir*, 2016

‘The body is not just represented in art; it is enacted. It performs, connects, and creates, becoming a locus for negotiating identity, power, and intimacy.’ | Amelia Jones, *Body Art: Performing the Subject*, 1998

Note to self

The body is more than a vessel; it is a dynamic and expressive entity that mediates between the self and the world. Through the movements, gestures, and presence, the body transforms itself, the spaces it inhabits, the relationships it nurtures, and the systems it confronts.

Embodiment goes beyond physicality; it is the act of living through and within the body, navigating the boundaries of identity, power, and perception. The body is where societal norms are inscribed, but it is also where they can be resisted, reimagined, or transformed.

Art often turns to the body as a medium to explore these dynamics, from performance art that pushes the limits of endurance to installations that engage sensory perception. The embodied experience becomes a site of inquiry, dialogue, and resistance, addressing questions of autonomy, agency, and relationality.

Questions

How does the body act as a site of both vulnerability and resistance?

What role does embodiment play in creating shared experiences and fostering empathy?

How can art challenge societal norms and power structures through the body?

How does the concept of embodiment expand our understanding of identity and agency?

What are the ethical implications of using the body as a medium in artistic practices?

‘Biennials of contemporary art inevitably have cultural and geopolitical ambitions. They seek to be nationally and even internationally significant by putting forward particular and supposedly incomparable local characteristics, what we might call “locality”.’ | Hou Hanru, ‘Towards a New Locality: Biennials and “Global Art”’, in Vanderlinden & Filipovic, *The Manifesta Decade: Debates on Contemporary Art Exhibitions and Biennials in Post-Wall Europe*, 2005

‘I do not use the term intersectionality as much as you people because, to me, imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy was the knitting together of parts. So, that intersectionality for me was more abstract. You can say, what parts are being knitted together? You can say, let us see what parts are being knotted together. You can say it is racism and sexism, homophobia and sexism, but to me, imperialist capitalist patriarchy and white supremacy had it all there. This is where I live, and where do I place myself? I always thought that was this line: I must interrogate myself and say, “Where am I in this line?” Because in some of those isms, I am more likely to be a victim, and in other parts of that scale, I can be a person of power with the ability to dominate others. And it has been a beneficial term for me.’ | bell hooks, as cited in *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity*, 2004

Note to self

Tangible and conceptual borders are at the heart of cultural and artistic discourse. In the context of biennials, borders signify geopolitical boundaries and delineations between local identities and global influences. Hanru’s reflection on ‘locality’ points to how biennials attempt to represent the unique cultural identities of their host regions while seeking international significance. This navigation of borders usually demands a reconciliation between authenticity and marketable global relevance.

On the other hand, bell hooks's exploration of intersectionality challenges the question of how borders within identity – formed by race, gender, class, and more – define experiences of power and oppression. Intersectionality, as hooks conceptualises it, interrogates how these dimensions 'knit together' and invites an analysis of where one stands within these overlapping systems. This perspective urges us to question the rigidity of borders.

Applying this framework to biennials, we might ask whether the borders between locality and globality are similarly negotiable, blurred, or rigid. Intersectionality, focusing on fluid and overlapping systems, might provide a lens to critique how biennials navigate and represent the multi-layered identities of artists and audiences. However, the challenge remains: how can cultural institutions ensure these borders, whether physical, conceptual, or systemic, foster dialogue rather than exclusion?

Questions

How do biennials balance local cultural identity with global artistic trends?

Does the notion of locality inadvertently impose a border that limits interpretation? Or does it serve as a counterpoint to global hegemony?

What strategies can biennials employ to preserve local characteristics in the face of global influences?

If borders are lines of demarcation, how does one negotiate their place within these lines?

How does the emphasis on locality affect the international perception of a biennial?

How can the concept of 'intersectionality', as described by bell hooks, inform our understanding of the power dynamics at play in biennials and other cultural institutions?

‘Ambiguity is constitutive, to an extent, of all art institutional efforts to coordinate conflicting rationales. Through its attempts to reconcile the destructive and elitist ethos of avant-gardism with the pacifying and popular taste of the general public, the biennials represent a dynamic contemporary articulation of this process.’ | Panos Kompatsiaris, *The Politics of Contemporary Art Biennials: Spectacles of Critique, Theory and Art*, 2017

‘Biennials are, crucially, exhibition events, as distinct from displays of the kind exemplified most clearly in the permanent collection rooms of a modern art museum ... and from temporary exhibitions in such museums.’ | Chin-Tao Wu, ‘Biennials Without Borders? Landmark Exhibitions Issue’, *Tate Papers*, 2009

Note to self

Branding is not simply a matter of visual identity or promotional strategy; it is deeply intertwined with how meaning is communicated, interpreted, and reshaped within the cultural sphere. In the context of biennials, branding functions as a lens through which these events are framed, influencing how they are understood by artists, curators, audiences, and funders alike.

Branding inevitably introduces a layer of tension. On the one hand, it allows biennials to carve out a unique identity in a competitive cultural landscape, ensuring recognition and relevance. On the other hand, branding can risk reducing the complexity of artistic narratives to digestible themes or slogans driven by the demands of visibility and marketability.

Biennials are inherently transient and multifaceted. This poses a challenge for branding, as these events must convey a coherent identity while embracing diversity, fluidity, and experimentation. The brand, therefore, becomes a dynamic entity - a reflection of the biennial's ability to adapt to shifting cultural, social, and political contexts.

How do biennials navigate the tension between maintaining an avant-garde image and appealing to a broader audience?

What role does branding play in the success and global recognition of biennials?

How can biennials develop a brand that aligns with their artistic goals and economic necessities?

How does branding influence curatorial choices and the types of artists or works selected for biennials?

What strategies can biennials employ to ensure their branding reflects the depth and diversity of the cultures and practices represented?

‘Care is not the imposition of help but the fostering of conditions where solidarity and transformation can emerge through mutual respect and vulnerability.’ | Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung, *The Delusions of Care*, 2021

‘Care is both action and reflection; it exists in small, embodied gestures that reveal a commitment to the other and the shared spaces we inhabit.’ | Carol Gilligan, *Artists Consider the Concept of Care*, 2023

‘Contemporary curatorial practices that foreground care focus on transforming relationships between institutions, artists, and communities. Care is not merely a subject of representation; it becomes embedded in collaboration, repair, and accountability processes.’ | Jacqueline Millner, *Care Ethics and Contemporary Art*, 2024

Note to self

The care concept serves as a critical framework for rethinking relationships - between individuals, communities, institutions, and the environment - within the context of art and its processes. Beyond paternalistic or transactional models, care offers an ethical grounding that centres on interdependence, shared vulnerability, and responsibility.

In contemporary art, care operates as both a subject and a methodology. It resists the neoliberal demands for productivity and autonomy, emphasising slower, relational practices prioritising repair, solidarity, and mutual respect. This reorientation toward care shifts values away from commodifiable outcomes, instead promoting collective well-being and sustainable relationships.

Within the context of biennials and curatorial practices, care becomes a means of challenging exploitative systems and hierarchies. Feminist and participatory approaches to care require intentional structures that address power, equity, and accountability complexities. Care is not passive - it demands active, ongoing engagement that resists

superficial gestures and seeks to transform systems through small, embodied acts that ripple outward.

Care also brings forward tensions. It acknowledges precariousness: the systemic inequities that artistic labour, communities, and ecologies face. However, it confronts the paradox that sustaining life involves harm, imbalance, and toxicity. Rather than avoiding discomfort, care asks us to remain attentive, embracing imperfect systems while envisioning more just and interconnected futures.

Ultimately, care in art challenges us to rethink how we listen, respond, and act. It expands beyond the individual to relational, ecological, and collective processes, transforming art into a conduit for connection, resistance, and healing.

Questions

How does care reframe the role of artists, curators, and institutions in promoting equitable and sustainable relationships within the contemporary art world?

What challenges arise when practising care at large-scale projects such as biennials, where power imbalances and economic pressures persist?

In what ways can care serve as both a creative methodology and a political stance, particularly in the face of ecological and social crises?

What tensions emerge when care is framed as a transformative ethic yet risks being appropriated by neoliberal systems?

What does it mean to practise care in contexts marked by systemic inequities, precarious labour, and environmental degradation?

How can art-making and curatorial practices navigate the paradox of care - sustaining life while engaging with imperfection, harm, or imbalance?

In what ways can art embody care as a relational act, creating spaces for connection, resistance, and transformation?

‘Every exhibition is a map. As such, it not only separates, defines and describes a certain terrain ... but also depicts the ground according to a projection method.’ | Bruce W. Ferguson, Reesa Greenberg, and Sandy Nairne in Barbara Vanderlinden & Elena Filipovic, *The Manifesta Decade: Debates on Contemporary Art Exhibitions and Biennials in Post-Wall Europe*, 2005

‘It is necessary to draw a cartography that greatly exceeds the limits of the individual: but by expanding the territory of the subjective towards the impersonal machines regulating sociability, Guattari can summon “re-singularization”, overcoming the traditional notion of ideology.’ | Nicolas Bourriaud, *Estética relacional [Relational Aesthetics]*, 2008

‘Biennials act as containers of aesthetic experience by updating and reshaping art as a field of activity.’ | Panos Kompatsiaris, *The Politics of Contemporary Art Biennials: Spectacles of Critique, Theory and Art*, 2017

‘Maps are love letters written to times and places their makers had explored.’ | Peng Shepherd, *The Cartographers*, 2022

Note to self

Cartography, when considered in the context of biennials, is a metaphor for the deliberate and strategic mapping of the art world. Through their curated selections and thematic frameworks, biennials demark the evolving landscape of contemporary art, influencing perceptions and dialogues. This cartographic function identifies the power of biennials to delineate cultural narratives, highlight emerging trends, and navigate the complex intersections of local and global artistic expressions. Reflecting on this, one might consider how mapping within biennials can profoundly illuminate and obscure, including and excluding, shaping the art world’s terrain.

Questions

How do curatorial decisions in mapping exhibitions influence cultural narratives?

What are the implications of cultural cartography in shaping global art discourses?

How can cultural cartography evolve to challenge dominant frameworks and embrace multiplicity?

What responsibility do cultural cartographers have in addressing the omissions and biases inherent in their work?

How can literal or metaphorical maps be used to create spaces of dialogue and transformation?

‘The new, post-1990s biennial consists of an effort to reach out and approach new social subjects, extending from activists and new social movements to disenfranchised communities and contemporary social theorists.’ | Panos Kompatsiaris, *The Politics of Contemporary Art Biennials: Spectacles of Critique, Theory and Art*, 2017

Note to self

Collaboration redefines the boundaries of artistic and curatorial practices by prioritising shared creativity and collective ownership over individual authorship. Socially engaged art offers a means of decentralising power and enhancing inclusivity, shifting away from the commodification of culture toward exchanging ideas, labour, and resources. This approach disrupts traditional economic models while challenging entrenched hierarchies in artistic production.

Collaboration operates on multiple biennial levels: between curators and artists, across cultural contexts, and among economic stakeholders. These relationships highlight the dual nature of collaboration as both a creative practice and an economic strategy, embedding social and economic structures into artistic processes. While collaboration offers opportunities for inclusion and innovation, its success depends on intentional structures that ensure equity, transparency, and mutual benefit for all participants.

Collaboration is not inherently egalitarian. Without fairness and respect, power imbalances can undermine its potential. When designed thoughtfully, however, collaboration enriches artistic outcomes and contributes to sustainable and equitable cultural practices.

Questions

How do collaborative practices challenge the traditional hierarchies of authorship in art?

What mechanisms can ensure fairness and mutual benefit in collaborative art practices?

How can biennials balance collaboration's artistic and economic dimensions to create meaningful and sustainable partnerships?

How do collaborations with non-traditional actors, such as social movements or disenfranchised communities, expand the impact and relevance of artistic projects?

What challenges and opportunities arise from transnational collaboration in the art world, and how can these be addressed to increase inclusivity and equity?

‘Memory is not something that one can grasp; it is not an object, but it is also not solely an idea; it is something in-between – a milieu that sustains the relationships between the past, present, and future.’ | Maurice Halbwachs, *La mémoire collective* [*The Collective Memory*], 1950

‘Collective memory is a space of negotiation. It is not just about retaining the past but actively reshaping it to fit the present needs.’ | Luis Jacob, *Communities Between Culture-by-Mouth and Culture-by-Media*, 2006

‘Art’s role in collective memory involves engaging with the complexity of historical contexts, finding ways to represent trauma, joy, and resistance while maintaining critical distance.’ | Terry Smith, *Thinking Contemporary Curating*, 2012

‘In its efforts to present “universal truths”, public memory often disregards local narratives. This disconnect highlights the tension between institutional representation and living memory.’ | Nina Möntmann, *New Communities*, 2010

‘Biennials contribute to a public memory of art practices, embedding local narratives within a global framework and creating recurring events that function as markers of collective history.’ | *OnCurating*, no. 32, ‘In This Context: Collaborations and Biennials’, 2016

‘The work of art, because it is made of the same substance as social exchanges, occupies a particular place in collective production.’ | Nicolas Bourriaud, *Estética relacional* [*Relational Aesthetics*], 2008

Note to self

Collective memory is a complex interplay between what is remembered, forgotten, or reinterpreted. In the context of art and biennials, this notion invites reflection on how histories are curated and whose narratives are prioritised. Unlike personal memory,

collective memory is constructed and mediated, influenced mainly by institutional and cultural dynamics.

As cyclical events, biennials serve as vessels for collective memory, recording artistic trends and societal dialogues while shaping public perception of art's role in history. However, this also poses challenges in archiving and negotiation of what is retained and what is erased.

The concept of public memory extends this discussion by considering how art inhabits shared spaces and engages audiences in reimagining historical events or creating new forms of cultural continuity. This aligns with the idea that memory, while inherently tied to the past, is actively reshaped to serve present needs and envision future possibilities.

Questions

How do biennials balance local histories and global narratives to build collective memory?

How can institutions ensure that collective memory remains inclusive and critical rather than perpetuating dominant narratives?

How can collective memory make space for inclusivity while avoiding the erasure of marginalised voices?

What role does public memory play in connecting art with its audiences across cultural and temporal divides?

How can biennials and other art events serve as platforms for reinterpreting and challenging official histories?

What ethical considerations arise when artists or curators use collective trauma to shape public memory?

How does the materiality of art intersect with its capacity to represent and preserve collective memory?

‘In 1931, he conducted Experience No. 2, in which he walked in the opposite direction of a Corpus Christi procession, wearing a hat, to study the reaction of the religious crowd.’ | Flávio de Carvalho, *Experiência n.º 2*, 1931

‘In 1956, he carried out Experience No. 3, parading through the streets of São Paulo in a male outfit designed for the tropics, defying the social norms of the time.’ | Flávio de Carvalho, *Experiência n.º 3*, 1956

‘His actions stemmed from the artist’s anarchic stance and were intended to investigate the psychology of the masses.’ | Magalhães Gouvêa, *Flávio de Carvalho*, n.d.

‘Experience is that which happens in us, to us, which touches us. Not which happens or touches. Each day, many things happen, yet at the same time, nothing ever happens to us. It could be said that everything that happens is organised so that it does not happen to us.’ | Jorge Larossa Bondía, *Notes on Experience and the Knowledge of Experience*, 2002

‘Recognition is not cognition. It is what the word implicitly conveys: re-cognition, not in the sense that an act of cognising is repeated, but in the sense that it is a reminder of the meaning in which a former experience terminated and which may be used as an acceptable clue in further activities.’ | John Dewey, *Experience and Nature*, 1925

‘Learning is elicited through participation, where the experiential aspects of artistic practices foster collective and transformative meaning-making processes. These experiences generate confidence and social bonds among participants, revealing art as a platform for engagement and education.’ | Eunji Lee, *Art as Pedagogical Experience: Educational Implications of Three Participatory Socially Engaged Art Projects*, 2020

Note to self

Collecting experiences as practice can parallel the collection of objects. This shifts artistic engagement toward intangible, transformative moments, emotions, and interaction

spaces. This approach reframes art as a possible immersive and participatory process, where the process itself – what happens *to* and *within* participants – holds more value than a possible static final product.

This perspective challenges traditional notions of spectatorship and authorship, inviting audiences to become co-creators in producing meaning. Experience *happens to us*, as Larossa Bondía suggests. Intensive relational and affective aspects reveal the capacity of the collective to provoke, educate, and connect. This focus also raises questions about value, memory, and permanence.

In the context of biennials, prioritising experiences aligns with their site-specific and ephemeral nature. These events usually create interactions that transcend boundaries, highlighting art's relational and pedagogical potential. The experiences generated are not only individual but also collective, cultivating social connections and shared knowledge that reverberates beyond the confines of the artwork itself.

Questions

How does focusing on experiences rather than objects transform art into a space for collective learning and connection?

How can ephemeral, participatory art challenge established value, authorship, or ownership systems?

How can experiences – intangible and transformative by nature – be preserved, shared, or remembered without reducing their meaning?

What are the ethical implications of participation, particularly in projects that engage vulnerable or diverse social groups?

How do biennials engage with new forms of cultural, educational, and social engagement by emphasising site-specific and relational works?

‘Community produces a paradox of belonging: it exists only as a relation yet claims to offer a singular sense of unity. This coexistence of difference and shared experience defines the limits and potential of communities.’ | Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, 1991

‘Communities can no longer rely on essentialist identities or geographical boundaries. Instead, they are formed through relationality, shared responsibilities, and coexistence with differences.’ | Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*, 1993

‘A new notion of community emerges when artists and collectives address themes of solidarity and belonging while navigating globalisation and political realities. These works critique traditional frameworks and propose alternative models of collective experience.’ | Nina Möntmann, *New Communities*, 2005

‘In contemporary art, the concept of community engages specific cultural and social contexts as a site for production. This practice challenges the universal ideals of modernism by embracing locality, specificity, and dialogue with the community itself.’ | Gisele Ribeiro, *Comunidade, Arte, Utopia, Ideologia* [Community, art, utopia and ideology], 2011

‘Artists and institutions have reinvented community through socially engaged practices, aiming for direct interaction and shared authorship. However, neoliberal structures often co-opted these practices, reducing participation to measurable outcomes rather than fostering long-term relational change.’ | Andrea Phillips, *Community Arts? Learning from the Legacy of Artists* (Social Initiatives, 2016)

Note to self

Community is not a fixed entity but a dynamic process brought through relations, interactions, and shared experiences. It operates as both a site of possibility and tension, offering a sense of belonging while embracing difference. In art contexts, the community

as an aspect or characteristic challenges the hierarchies of production and spectatorship, inviting participatory and collective approaches that centre locality and dialogue.

This relational perspective on the community resonates within socially engaged art practices, where co-creation and interaction with specific communities become as significant as the outcome. However, it also reveals tensions: Community participation can be instrumentalised or reduced to superficial processes, mainly when framed within institutional agendas.

Biennial community engagement highlights the dual challenge of fostering meaningful local participation while addressing global audiences. Successful engagement requires ethical structures prioritising long-term impact, equity, and shared authorship while acknowledging the complexities of difference and relationality.

Questions

How does the concept of community challenge traditional hierarchies of artistic production and spectatorship?

What tensions arise when institutional or economic agendas co-opt community participation in art practices?

How can socially engaged art foster sustainable and ethical community relationships without reducing participation to measurable outcomes?

In what ways do biennials balance global visibility with meaningful engagement rooted in local communities?

How does a community's relational and dynamic nature contribute to transforming art as a participatory and collective process?

‘Healing the forest, healing the earth, healing the body.’ | Idjahure Kadiwel, *Affective Alliances for an Ancestral Future*, 2023

‘Care and healing must move beyond appropriations of colonial frameworks to embrace decolonial practices, rooting their methods in equity, justice, and cultural specificity.’ | Oliver Mutanga & Tendayi Marovah, *Southern Theories*, 2024

‘Through artistic practices and ancestral connections, healing emerges not just as physical mending but as a holistic restoration of relationships between people, histories, and landscapes.’ | Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, *Affective Alliances for an Ancestral Future*, 2023

Note to self

Healing goes beyond physical recovery, representing restoration, reconciliation, and transformation processes. These processes intersect with art and culture as mediums for addressing harm, promoting collective repair, and envisioning futures rooted in justice and ecological balance.

Healing within indigenous frameworks involves restoring harmony between humans and non-human entities. This holistic view challenges Western medical paradigms, which frequently separate individuals from their community and environment. Healing thus becomes relational, a practice of repairing fractures in social, spiritual, and ecological systems.

Art has a unique capacity to engage with healing, serving as a method and metaphor for reparation. For instance, participatory and decolonial art practices facilitate collective reflection and repair processes. These works address historical injustices and create community spaces to reimagine connections and build resilience. However, the concept of healing must contend with inherent complexities. As an active and ethical engagement, healing demands accountability, mutual respect, and an openness to discomfort.

How can healing serve as a methodology in contemporary art and curatorial practices?

What does it mean to heal within systems that perpetuate harm? How can art offer genuine restoration without appropriating or aestheticising struggles?

How can art engage with systemic and historical traumas, offering spaces for repair and reconciliation?

How does the concept of healing challenge dominant narratives of productivity, autonomy, and commodification in art?

What role does healing play in recovering connections between people, communities, and ecosystems in a globalised world?

How can healing practices in art navigate the tension between addressing personal wounds and engaging with collective justice?

How can biennials and large-scale art events embed healing practices without reducing them to simple performative gestures?

What does it mean to imagine healing not as a return to the past but as an active creation of more equitable and sustainable futures?

‘Debates, especially in liberal democracies, should operate under an ideal of public reason, where discourse prioritises legitimacy over strategic interests, recognising the plurality of perspectives.’ | Jürgen Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms*, 1996

‘Artistic practices that foster debate do not aim to resolve differences but to illuminate the conditions under which these differences arise, offering spaces for critical awareness and transformation.’ | Terry Smith, *Thinking Contemporary Curating*, 2012

‘Dialogue grounded in critical pedagogy is not merely an exchange of ideas but a dynamic process of understanding the self about the other, encouraging reciprocity and open-ended reflection.’ | Mikhail Bakhtin in Helguera, *Art as Pedagogical Experience*, 2011

Note to self

Debates are central to artistic and cultural practices, acting as spaces where ideas intersect and challenge each other. They create a space where differences are acknowledged and actively engaged, pushing the boundaries of collective understanding. Within biennials and contemporary art, debates become vehicles for addressing power imbalances, cultural narratives, historical legacies, and even artworks.

The nature of debates shows their potential to transform individual perspectives into collective insights, where the exchange between identities and cultures moves into a speculative but possible transformation. However, debates also require structures of accountability and equity, ensuring that all voices are heard and valued rather than reinforcing hierarchies of power or exclusion.

Artistic debates, on the other hand, go beyond exhibitions, influencing cultural and political dialogues. They resonate with Habermas’s ideal of public reason, which seeks to establish legitimacy through open and inclusive discourse. In this sense, debates are not only moments of contention but also opportunities to envision more equitable systems of representation and understanding.

How can biennials and art institutions create spaces for meaningful and inclusive debates that confront historical and cultural inequalities?

What is the role of debates in shaping collective memory and influencing cultural narratives within the art world?

How do power dynamics and cultural differences affect the nature and outcome of artistic and curatorial debates?

In what ways can debates in contemporary art serve as catalysts for broader social and political change?

What are the limitations of debates as a mode of engagement, and how can these be addressed to promote more equitable dialogue?

How do public debates in art reflect or resist neoliberal frameworks of competition and commodification?

‘Modernity and coloniality are two sides of the same coin. The idea of progress, celebrated by Western civilisation, is inseparable from the colonial oppression and exploitation that enabled it.’ | Ramón Grosfoguel and Walter Mignolo, *Intervenciones Descoloniales: Una Breve Introducción*, 2008

‘The Bienal was conceived as a largely open space for contemporary artists, critics, curators, and scholars from Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, Latin America, and the Middle East, including immigrants to Europe and North America, to meet and become acquainted with each other’s works and ideas beyond ideology or sheer politics.’ | Gerardo Mosquera, *Bienal de La Habana: An Experiment in South-South Art*, 2011

‘Decoloniality requires delinking from Western narratives and relinking to local modes of knowledge. It is not enough to criticise colonialism; we must affirm the existence we want to preserve and invent.’ | Walter Mignolo, *Coloniality Is Far from Over, and So Must Be Decoloniality*, 2017

‘Decolonial processes are about unsettling power hierarchies and rewriting histories from marginalised perspectives. Art becomes a medium through which forgotten stories are retold, and dominant narratives are questioned.’ | Nkule Mabaso and Jyoti Mistry, *Decolonial Propositions*, 2021

Note to self

The concept of decolonisation processes is part of the effort to dismantle colonial power structures that persist in contemporary societies despite the end of formal colonisation. These processes are not limited to political independence but extend into cultural, social, and epistemological areas. They aim to challenge Eurocentric or Westernised worldviews and prioritise alternative narratives and knowledge systems that have been historically marginalised.

Decolonisation processes invite us to think critically about how systems of power shape art, education, and culture. It is not solely about erasing colonial legacies but finding and

reimagining spaces and relationships that permit multiple ways of knowing and existing. The effort to dismantle dominant paradigms creates openings for dialogue, reflection, and, also, invention.

At their core, these processes push for a redefinition of what is valued, who is heard, and whose knowledge is legitimised. Art becomes an incredibly potent medium for enacting this redefinition – transforming spaces where histories are contested, linear narratives are disrupted, and new possibilities are created.

Questions

How can we continue to invent and preserve decolonial spaces without falling into tokenism or superficial gestures?

How can contemporary biennials continue to support decolonisation processes in art?
Are they colonial instruments themselves?

What tools should we provide to discuss decolonial practices within our projects?

‘The boundaries of imagined communities are finite, though elastic; they define who belongs and who does not, shaping shared perceptions of identity and inclusion.’ | Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, 1983

‘The act of delimiting is not merely about drawing boundaries but about defining relationships - between power, cultural expressions, and communal identities.’ | Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, 1991

‘In the construction of space, the notion of limits functions not as static borders but as transitional zones where exchange, negotiation, and transformation take place.’ | Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, 2004

Note to self

Delimitation highlights how boundaries are markers and a dynamic political process in which relationships are negotiated. In the context of contemporary art and curatorial practices, delimitation becomes an instrument for questioning inherited structures and creating spaces for new possibilities. By interrogating the identity and location of boundaries, who established them and who they constrain, art enables dialogue that challenges what is fixed, proposing transitional zones in which exchange and transformation occur instead.

The paradox of delimitation lies in its dual role as both a tool for inclusion and a mechanism for exclusion. Boundaries, while essential for defining spaces and relationships, can reinforce power imbalances and marginalisation. This complexity invites us to think of delimitation as a process accommodating multiplicity and shared agency rather than enforcing rigid separations.

In artistic practices, delimitation asks us to consider who has the authority to set these limits and for what purposes. Postcolonial and feminist theories often challenge the inherited hierarchies that underpin acts of delimiting, advocating instead for radical

inclusivity and decentralised spaces of dialogue. Delimitation, when viewed as a dynamic process, provides a framework for reimagining the spaces of art and participation.

Questions

How does the act of delimiting shape how we understand community and belonging?

How can art challenge the limits imposed by political, social, or cultural frameworks?

What role does delimitation play in curatorial practices, and how can it create more inclusive and transformative dialogues?

How can delimitation help us navigate tensions between inclusion and exclusion in artistic and social practices?

What ethical considerations emerge when delimiting spaces for dialogue, participation, and representation in art?

‘Dichotomies are artificial constructs that simplify complex realities. The world, in its multiplicity, resists being confined to binaries.’ | Édouard Glissant, *Poétique de la Relation* [*Poetics of Relation*], 1990

‘Thinking in dichotomies - rural and urban, self and other - limits our imagination capacity. These are relational concepts, not opposites. They shape each other.’ | Édouard Glissant, *One World in Relation*, 1990

‘The urban and the rural are not fixed categories but transitional zones where hybrid cultures and economies emerge.’ | Félix Guattari and Suely Rolnik, *Micropolítica: Cartografias do Desejo* [*Micropolitics: Cartography of Desire*], 2007

‘Binary thinking is a form of control that imposes rigid boundaries on a fluid reality. The “I” and the “Other” exist not as opposites but as a constant dialogue.’ | Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, *Affective Alliances for an Ancestral Future*, 2023

Note to self

Dichotomies seem like a convenient structure for organising thought but they are also profoundly limiting. One such example is the framing of rural and urban as opposing categories, as proposed by Rolnik, where we reduce the richness of their interdependence to a false opposition. Similarly, the notion of ‘I’ and ‘the Other’ presented by Cusicanqui appears to be not fixed but relational - a space of negotiation where identity is constantly shaped and reshaped. The rural sector depends on the urban sector for sustenance and vice versa. Identity relies on recognising the Other, which exists only through the Self’s gaze. The interplay between these supposed binaries is where the most interesting dynamics unfold. And this in-between space is where transformation happens.

Questions

What happens when we stop thinking in dichotomies altogether?

Is dichotomy a failure of logic or imagination?

Perhaps the goal is not to dissolve dichotomies; but then how can we recognise the spaces they create for dialogue and exchange?

‘How can abstract art be political? It messes with you. It convinces you that what you think is not it at all. It challenges you to understand that the way that other people think can be equally good as yours, that in difference and sometimes adversity, in opposition to what you believe ... If this is your tradition, what do you think of figures as art? You do not understand anything about art. Just because the figure represents something that reminds you does not mean you know what they are. So, why not to open up?’ | Sam Gilliam, in an interview by Christian Lund for the Louisiana Channel, 2018–19

‘Difference is not just a condition but a possibility. When we recognise the difference, we create space for new ways of seeing, thinking, and acting.’ | Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, 1987

‘Difference is not opposition but coexistence. The invention of a space where otherness is not excluded but integrated as an essential part of identity.’ | Édouard Glissant, *Poétique de la Relation [Poetics of Relation]*, 1990

‘Difference is not something to be overcome but the foundation for transformation. It is where invention arises, where creativity and change occur.’ | Félix Guattari and Suely Rolnik, *Micropolítica: Cartografias do Desejo [Micropolitics: Cartography of Desire]*, 2007

‘Difference does not lie in being other but in the capacity to relate in another way to the other and the otherness.’ | Nicolas Bourriaud, *Estética relacional [Relational Aesthetics]*, 2008

Note to self

Difference is usually seen as a problem – a divergence that must be resolved or reconciled. But if we understand difference as the foundation for creativity, growth, and transformation, then, as the subtitle of this section suggests, inventing difference actively creates spaces where multiplicity and diversity thrive, not in opposition but as intertwined possibilities.

It strikes me that difference is not the same as opposition. Opposition implies conflict and exclusion, but difference suggests coexistence and potential. This shift in thinking is liberating. It allows us to see divergence as a force that disrupts stagnation pushes boundaries, and invites new ideas to emerge.

I wonder about the limits of difference and the point at which celebrating difference becomes an aesthetic gesture. Or is it enough to acknowledge differences and then go further to invent new forms of relating, structures, and ways of being together, assuming these differences?

The difference is not static. It is active and alive and demands that we somehow assure each other of the qualities inherent to each one and what we can change in each other.

Questions

How can we move beyond acknowledging differences to invent new ways of relating and coexisting?

What does it mean to see difference as a source of transformation rather than a challenge to overcome?

How can art create spaces where difference is represented and actively integrated into its processes and forms?

In what ways does recognising and inventing difference disrupt traditional hierarchies and binaries?

What are the limits of difference, and how can we navigate the tensions between celebrating divergence and promoting shared understanding?

‘The structure of many biennials allows for a multiplicity of voices, often leading to the emergence of dissenting perspectives that challenge dominant narratives in the art world.’ | Bruce Altshuler, *Biennials and Beyond: Exhibitions That Made Art History*, 2012

‘The logic of dissensus consists in the demonstration of a certain impropriety which disrupts identity and reveals the gap between poiesis and aisthesis.’ | Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, 2010

‘By indirections, find direction out. Taking this as our cue, we frequently find it immensely fruitful to cover the well-mapped ground of histories again, navigating by uncharted routes and unlisted landmarks, prising up secret lodes of knowledge ... The detour is a productive trope of digression, self-interrogation and re-dedication.’ | Nancy Adajania, *Detour: Five Position Papers on the Republic*, 2009

‘Dissent occurs where consensus has suppressed the potential for different modes of being, thinking, and acting. It reveals the cracks in the dominant order and creates space for new forms of visibility.’ | Jacques Rancière, ‘A comunidade como dissentimento’ [The Community as de-sentiment], in Peixe Dias & Neves 2010

‘Dissent is a crucial element in our social practices manifested in the ability to be different and to create from that difference.’ | Nicolas Bourriaud, *Estética relacional* [*Relational Aesthetics*], 2008

Note to self

Dissent becomes a critical force that disrupts established orders of consensus, offering space for alternative voices and perspectives. It is not merely about opposition but creating a new language and framework that challenges dominant narratives. Unlike agreement, which seeks closure and harmony, dissent is pushed toward being open-ended, requiring reimagination of possibilities beyond what is already accepted.

Dissent is particularly relevant in cultural and artistic spaces as a process that resists the homogenisation of voices. As a term paralleling plurality, it allows for knowledge production as a collaborative and contested process. This dynamic interaction usually leads to unexpected outcomes, revealing the cracks in the dominant framework and giving rise to alternative ways of thinking and acting.

What strikes me most about dissent is its capacity for transformation. It is not inherently destructive but intensely creative. The capacity to carve new intentions and subjectivities, communities, and possibilities redefines existing paradigms. Art becomes a possible space for dissent when it challenges boundaries, opens itself to different perspectives, and resists co-optation into dominant ideologies.

Questions

How can dissent function as a generative force for creating new frameworks of thought and visibility?

What roles do artistic and cultural institutions play in creating or suppressing dissent?

How can dissent challenge dominant narratives and their underlying structures of power?

What happens when dissent is absorbed or neutralised by the systems it seeks to oppose?

How can we promote dissent in collaborative spaces without reducing it to conflict or opposition?

'In the creative act, the artist goes from intention to realisation through a chain of totally subjective reactions ... The result of this struggle is a difference between the intention and its realisation ... this difference ... is the personal "art coefficient" contained in the work.' | Marcel Duchamp, *The Creative Act*, 1957

'Since Duchamp, there is no longer any difference between an object one produces oneself and one produced by someone else - both have to be selected to be considered artworks.' | Boris Groys, *The Manifesta Decade: Debates on Contemporary Art Exhibitions and Biennials in Post-Wall Europe*, 2005

'For the first time, with Duchamp, art no longer consists of translating the real with signs but of presenting the real as such.' | Nicolas Bourriaud, *Estética relacional* [*Relational Aesthetics*], 2008

Note to self

This concept offers a lens to explore the dynamic interplay between the artist's intent, the process of creation, and the ultimate reception of their work. It acknowledges that the essence of art lies not solely in the object itself but in the interaction between the artist's vision, the limitations or surprises of the creative process, and the interpretations brought by viewers. Duchamp's legacy challenges traditional notions of authorship and opens the door to understanding art as a collaborative process where meaning is co-constructed.

The tension between intention and realisation resonates beyond art, suggesting that the most interesting outcomes often emerge from the unexpected. Reflecting on this encourages embracing uncertainty as a vital creation component, shifting focus from perfection to exploration.

How does acknowledging the gap between artistic intention and realisation influence how art is experienced?

How might this concept shape our understanding of creative processes beyond visual arts?

What role does the audience play in completing the creative act, and how does this redefine traditional ideas of authorship?

Does recognising unpredictability in the creative process encourage a more experimental approach to art-making?

How might ideas about selection and the 'art coefficient' inform debates about originality and authorship in contemporary art?

‘Biennial art, emphasising ritual and value, reflects contemporary art’s broader political economy dynamics. It grapples with issues of exclusivity, market systems, and the role of aesthetic production in global economic structures.’ | Panos Kompatsiaris, *Biennial Art and Its Rituals: Value, Political Economy and Artfulness*, 2019

‘Wages were remarkably high, and energy was remarkably cheap in eighteenth-century Britain. This combination of factors drove the industrial innovations that defined the British Industrial Revolution and set the stage for modern economic growth.’ | Robert C. Allen, *The British Industrial Revolution in Global Perspective*, 2009

‘Art products are objects of intense financial speculation; cultural productions are top hit-makers in the jackpot end of the New Economy. Cultural districts are posited as the key to urban prosperity, embraced as the anchor of regional development by governments worldwide.’ | Zoran Erić and Stevan Vuković, editors of *OnCurating*, no. 16, ‘Precarious Labour’, 2013

‘Participation in country policy generates new opportunities but also carries risks of commodifying cultural expression and increasing pressures on cultural workers to conform to market logics.’ | Center for Economics and Business Research, *Contribution of Arts and Culture to the UK Economy*, 2015

‘Economic conditions determine not only the context of artistic production but also the possibilities of its reception and the variability of its meanings.’ | Nicolas Bourriaud, *Estética relacional* [*Relational Aesthetics*], 2008

Note to self

Economic condition, as a concept, explores the material and infrastructural processes that define society and cultural production. It is a prospect through which we can understand the intersections of art, labour, and value, particularly in contexts where cultural production becomes part of economic systems.

The arts, for example, have historically played a dual role: as a reflection of socioeconomic conditions and as a tool to challenge or reinforce those conditions. Biennials and cultural events are increasingly intertwined with global economic systems in contemporary contexts. These events generate capital and embody symbolic economies where cultural prestige and financial value come together.

The economic condition somehow exposes the blurred tension between creation and commodification. The commodification of cultural expressions, creativity, and art-making reduces artistic value to the logic of the market. However, there is also room for resistance - spaces where cultural workers and institutions negotiate these pressures and redefine what economic value means in the context of art.

Questions

How do economic conditions influence the production, dissemination, and reception of art and culture?

In what ways can biennials and cultural events serve as spaces for resisting the commodification of artistic expression?

How do global economic systems shape the value attributed to artistic and cultural production?

What alternative models can be developed to support cultural production without succumbing to market pressures?

How do we balance economic viability with artistic integrity?

Can the economic condition of art shift from profit-driven models to systems that prioritise collective and cultural well-being?

‘The struggle against the author’s figure is understood as a struggle against an undemocratic system of arbitrary privileges and unfounded hierarchies ...’ | Boris Groys, in Vanderlinden & Filipovic, *The Manifesta Decade: Debates on Contemporary Art Exhibitions and Biennials in Post-Wall Europe*, 2005

‘The Havana Bienal’s use of state resources and networks highlights the complex interplay of power relations in the organisation and execution of large-scale art events. While the Bienal aimed to democratise art and provide a platform for marginalised voices, it also operated within the broader context of state power and geopolitical interests, reflecting the dual nature of art as both a tool for empowerment and a product of existing power structures.’ | Gerardo Mosquera, *Bienal de La Habana: An Experiment in South-South Art*, 2011

Note to self

Empowerment is directly connected to power dynamics. It defines who can or cannot, who can make choices, and who must obey them. This process shapes relationships between artists, institutions, and audiences within the art world. It is about redistributing authority and creating spaces where voices previously excluded from dominant discourses can be heard. However, empowerment is dubious as it navigates the delicate balance between providing agency and maintaining control.

The concept of empowerment in the context of biennials and art institutions becomes relevant when examining their potential to serve as sites of resistance and community-building. These spaces can challenge hierarchical power relations and promote collaboration, yet they are also embedded into a more complex power system, where significant economic and geopolitical powers complicate their role.

Artists and institutions deal with the precarity of empowerment, which requires them to challenge established norms while remaining viable within the art world’s frameworks.

Thus, empowerment is not just an outcome but a continuous negotiation process that redefines how power is distributed and exercised in artistic and cultural contexts.

Questions

How do power dynamics shape the creation and reception of art within the broader art world?

How can biennials and cultural institutions empower marginalised voices without reinforcing existing hierarchies?

What challenges arise when balancing empowerment and autonomy in state-sponsored or institutional art?

How can empowerment in artistic and cultural practices avoid tokenism and contribute to substantive systemic change?

‘The artist’s creative energy not only transforms matter but reconfigures the entire relational field it inhabits.’ | Nicolas Bourriaud, *Estética relacional* [*Relational Aesthetics*], 2008

‘Energy is the lifeblood of industrial and post-industrial societies, shaping economies, geopolitics, and cultural production. Its forms, costs, and availability determine material conditions and the imagination of possible futures.’ | Robert C. Allen, *The British Industrial Revolution in Global Perspective*, 2009

‘Cultural practices often reflect the energy systems that sustain them. From the monumental works of coal-powered modernity to the emergent art of ecological sustainability, energy underpins the conditions for creation and critique.’ | Panos Kompatsiaris, *Biennial Art and Its Rituals: Value, Political Economy and Artfulness*, 2019

Note to self

Energy is more than a material resource for culture; it is a metaphor for what unleashes artistic and cultural creation. Historically, the availability and cost of energy defined the scale and ambition of human reach. In the art world, it has both literal and symbolic meanings: as a factor in the production of monumental works, the logistics of global art events, and the sustainability of cultural practices.

The shift from fossil fuels to renewable energy sources also implies more significant cultural and ideological shifts, with artists and institutions negotiating the implications of this transition. Energy is also relational. It connects people, materials, and ideas, fuelling economies and collaborative and innovative processes. Its examination opens questions about the sustainability of current systems and the possibilities for imagining alternative futures.

How do energy systems shape the logistics and imagination of global art events like biennials?

How does an awareness of energy transform our understanding of artistic production?

Does the present energy crisis demand a corresponding aesthetic and conceptual response?

How might energy scarcity or abundance influence artistic production and reception?

What role does energy play in connecting or dividing cultural systems across the globe?

‘Failure in relational art is not a limit but a starting point to reimagine the forms of interaction and human engagement.’ | Nicolas Bourriaud, *Estética relacional* [*Relational Aesthetics*], 2008

‘The transformation of the artwork into art documentation using its archiving also enables art today to employ in an artistic context the immense reservoir of documentation of other events and projects that our civilisation has collected.’ | Boris Groys, in Vanderlinden & Filipovic, *The Manifesta Decade: Debates on Contemporary Art Exhibitions and Biennials in Post-Wall Europe*, 2005

‘Failure is not the opposite of success, but part of a broader process of experimentation and learning. It destabilises expectations and opens pathways to new possibilities.’ | Félix Guatarri and Suely Rolnik, *Micropolítica: Cartografias do Desejo* [*Micropolitics: Cartography of Desire*], 2007

‘Failure could only have been marked by audience neutrality: it is remaining unaffected, in a traditional spectatorial mode of benign and detached contemplation.’ | Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*, 2012

Note to self

Failure is not the final point of a process but an important and definitive part of creative and social processes. In art, failure is part of the complexities of working with people, communities, institutions, and expectations and navigating unpredictable dynamics. Rather than being seen as a limitation, failure often provides insights into unexpected challenges and opportunities.

The concept of failure also challenges traditional ideas of what is successful by embracing the unresolved, the boring, or the unrealised. Failure becomes a tool for critique, permitting reflection on broader forms and being embedded into structures and our perspective of assumptions in art and culture.

How does the project address or embrace the potential for failure?

What lessons were learned from the aspects of the project that failed to succeed?

In what ways can the failed projects contribute to the broader understanding of art history?

How might failure be reimagined as a generative force in artistic and cultural practices?

‘Fiction acts as a counter-monument, challenging the permanence and singularity of traditional monuments by introducing narratives of multiplicity, temporality, and imagination.’ | James E. Young, *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning*, 1993

‘Fiction is not merely an artifice or falsehood but a way of configuring possible worlds, a tool for understanding what is not yet intelligible.’ | Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, *Sociología de la Imagen* [Sociology of the image], 2015

‘In fiction, the artist not only creates alternative worlds but also interrogates the structures of the present world. The power of fiction lies in its ability to open spaces for the unthought.’ | Édouard Glissant, *Poétique de la Relation* [Poetics of Relation], 1990

Note to self

Fiction is a powerful tool for reimagining reality, proposing alternative narratives and questioning the boundaries between truth and trickery. Cultural production offers frameworks that allow us to engage with possibilities beyond the present.

Fiction also confronts systems of meaning. It creates alternative realities that allow us to question the dominant ideologies and imagine new ways of being and thinking. It is both an act of resistance and a form of creation, making the unimaginable tangible and intelligible.

Questions

How does fiction serve as a tool for reimagining history and memory in contemporary art?

How can fictitious monuments challenge the permanence and authority of traditional monuments?

How does fiction bridge the gap between imagination and reality in cultural production?

What role does fiction play in questioning established narratives and proposing alternative frameworks of understanding?

Can fiction create spaces for collective engagement and transformation?

‘Food is not just sustenance; it is a language, a form of communication that conveys stories, identities, and connections.’ | Cristina Rivera Garza, *La comida como lenguaje* [Food as language], 2015

‘Food is a cultural artefact that carries migration, labour, and colonialism histories. Every dish tells a story of movement, exchange, and adaptation.’ | Krishnendu Ray, *The Migrant’s Table: Meals and Memories in Bengali-American Households*, 2004

‘Food is an expression of memory and resistance. Through food, people preserve traditions and build cultural bridges, even in contexts of oppression.’ | Belén Fernández, *Memória e resistência na culinária afro-brasileira* [Memory and resistance in Afro-Brazilian cuisine], 2018

Note to self

Food, as a concept, transcends its material form. It becomes a process that carries memory, identity, and exchange. Thus, every meal becomes a narrative, as it could encapsulate migration, colonisation, and cultural adaptation histories in one go. Food is deeply personal and inherently communal, connecting individuals to their heritage while creating dialogues across cultures.

Food becomes a medium for exploring belonging, displacement, and sustainability themes in artistic and cultural contexts. It also reminds us of the interdependence of humans and their ecological systems. Food production and consumption reveal much about global economic and environmental conditions and community power dynamics.

The preparation and sharing of food become acts of resistance. Food preserves traditions and transmits cultural knowledge in communities facing erasure or marginalisation. It becomes a bridge between generations and a tool for asserting identity in the face of change.

How does food function as a medium for exploring cultural identity and memory in art and society?

In what ways can food challenge and reframe narratives of migration, colonialism, and labour?

How do global food production and consumption systems shape cultural practices and traditions?

What role does food play in creating dialogue and building community across cultural divides?

Can food be a form of resistance, and how might this manifest in artistic and cultural practices?

‘Everything was forever until it was no more.’ | Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation*, 2005

‘The notion of “forever” is a paradox, rooted in permanence yet perpetually undermined by change. In art, forever often manifests as the tension between timelessness and ephemerality.’ | Riga Biennial of Contemporary Art, *RIBOCA 1, Conceptual Framework*, 2018

Note to self

Forever is a concept that embodies both permanence and impermanence, stability and transformation. It offers a way to explore how humans seek continuity in the face of constant change and inherent finite existence. In art and culture, the notion of forever is interrogated through themes of memory, legacy, and the ephemeral nature of existence.

The phrase ‘everything was forever until it was no more’ encapsulates the fragility of permanence. What feels eternal – political systems, cultural traditions, or personal connections – can dissolve abruptly. This tension is a driving force in art, as artists seek to capture the fleeting and transform it into something enduring.

In this sense, *forever* becomes a paradoxical space: a reflection on loss, continuity, and the human desire to hold onto the impermanent.

Questions

How do we reconcile our need for stability with the inevitability of impermanence in a world of rapid change?

How does the concept of forever manifest in cultural and artistic practices?

In what ways does art challenge or reinforce the idea of permanence?

How do artists navigate the tension between ephemerality and eternity in their work?

Can the concept of forever be a tool for exploring themes of loss, memory, and legacy?

How does life's ephemeral nature shape how we understand and create art?

‘Friendship is a form of politics destabilising usual hierarchies, creating relationships based on reciprocity and mutual respect. It is a practice of resistance and collective building.’ | Félix Guattari and Suely Rolnik, *Micropolítica: Cartografias do Desejo* [*Micropolitics: Cartography of Desire*], 2007

‘Friendship as a political process is inherently relational, involving constant negotiation and balancing individual and collective agency. This relational dynamic mirrors broader societal negotiations of power and resistance.’ | Nancy Adajania, *Detour: Five Position Papers on the Republic*, 2009

Note to self

Friendship becomes a political process when it highlights the importance of negotiation, trust, and mutual respect. As a relational process, friendship becomes both a methodology and a metaphor for collective agency and shared responsibility.

The political dimension of friendship in art challenges hierarchical systems, promoting equality and reciprocity. This perspective can propose an alignment with socially engaged art and collaborative practices, where the relational dynamic between artists, participants, and audiences becomes central to the work’s meaning and impact.

Friendship also operates as a form of resistance. Prioritising mutual respect and reciprocity disrupts traditional power dynamics and creates spaces for dialogue, exchange, and collective action. These processes reflect broader societal negotiations and highlight the potential of art to address and transform social structures.

Questions

How does creating art reflect the dynamics of friendship and negotiation between different perspectives?

In what ways can friendship as a political process challenge traditional hierarchies in the art world?

How does the relational aspect of friendship influence the reception and interpretation of art?

What role does friendship play in socially engaged art as a tool for addressing political and social issues?

How might the concept of friendship inform the development of more inclusive and equitable artistic practices?

‘Heritage is not just what we inherit; it is what we choose to preserve and how we shape the narratives around it. It is both a material legacy and an act of cultural negotiation.’ | David Lowenthal, *The Past Is a Foreign Country*, 1985

‘Heritage is the construction of collective memory. It is not what we receive intact, but what we shape over time to make sense of our lives.’ | Félix Guattari and Suely Rolnik, *Micropolítica: Cartografias do Desejo* [*Micropolitics: Cartography of Desire*], 2007

‘Cultural heritage is not just a collection of objects and traditions but a tool for building identities and projecting a sense of belonging into the future.’ | Arturo Escobar, *Territories of Difference: Place, Movements, Life, Redes*, 2008

‘The preservation of heritage is inherently political, as it involves choices about what to value and exclude. These choices reflect broader power dynamics and cultural priorities.’ | James Cuno, *Who Owns Antiquity? Museums and the Battle Over Our Ancient Heritage*, 2008

Note to self

Heritage is both a tangible and intangible concept. On one hand, it comprises artefacts, monuments, and buildings, and on the other, it is about practices that connect us to our past and serve as a foundation for constructing collective and individual identities. However, heritage is not static, as it is shaped by our active decisions about what and how to preserve and reinterpret it.

Heritage is also the lens through which many histories can be revisited and reimagined in artistic and cultural contexts, inviting reflection on authenticity, ownership, and representation. It plays a crucial role in engaging with a sense of belonging and continuity, and is inherently political, reflecting power structures and cultural priorities.

How does heritage shape collective and individual identities across different cultural contexts?

Whose heritage is being preserved? Who decides what is valuable? What role do power dynamics play in determining what is preserved or excluded as heritage?

How can artists and cultural practitioners engage critically with the concept of heritage to challenge dominant narratives?

In what ways does heritage act as both a connection to the past and a tool for imagining alternative futures?

What ethical considerations arise in preserving and representing heritage in a globalised world?

‘The concept of hybridisation is central to understanding the transformative impact of biennialisation. Biennials serve as sites of cultural exchange and critique, where the intersection of diverse cultural practices generates new, hybrid forms of artistic expression. Through transcultural dialogues, biennials foster environments where cultural boundaries are blurred, creating dynamic and fluid cultural identities.’ | Simon Sheikh, *The Global Proliferation of Biennials: Sites of Cultural Exchange and Critique*, 2016

‘The new localities being generated are definitively impure, hybrid, and innovative.’ | Hou Hanru, ‘Towards a New Locality: Biennials and “Global Art”’ in Vanderlinden & Filipovic, *The Manifesta Decade: Debates on Contemporary Art Exhibitions and Biennials in Post-Wall Europe*, 2005

‘The forms and messages drawn from popular culture, and even the use of the established channels of consumer society, are used to disseminate activist actions.’ | Ana Maria Guasch, *Arte y Activismo en la Era Global* [Art and activism in the global era], 2006

Note to self

Hybridisation belongs to the space in which cultural practices, artistic forms, and social structures merge and blend, becoming a central theme for any art-making process in contemporaneity. Hybridisation, as intersectionalism, disposes of the idea that different perspectives, opinions, and methods can and should come together, preventing tokenism, giving space to diverse voices and traditions, and making room for innovation and generative forms of cultural production.

In biennials, hybridisation is a core theme as these platforms bring together art exhibitions, promote dialogue and critique, and propose the reconfiguration of identities. The hybridisation process blurs local and global boundaries, creating spaces where cultures intersect, merge, and evolve. As a dynamic concept, it diversifies the worldwide art scene and challenges traditional and static definitions of cultural identity. However, it presents challenges such as the risk of diluting local traditions, constructing new

hierarchical models, or even perpetuating unequal power dynamics if the structures won't accept it.

Questions

In what ways do biennials encourage the creation of hybrid cultural identities?

How can biennials ensure that cultural hybridisation does not lead to the dilution of local cultures?

What are the potential benefits and drawbacks of cultural hybridisation in the context of biennials?

How do artists use hybrid forms to merge activism and art, and what challenges arise from this approach?

What role does the process of hybridisation play in shaping contemporary global art practices?

‘Ignorance is not a lack of knowledge but a political choice. It is a system that reinforces power by rendering certain histories, experiences, and ways of knowing invisible.’ | Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *Epistemologies of the South: Justice Against Epistemicide*, 2014

‘Ignorance is, at times, the space of creation. Not knowing allows questioning, imagining, and constructing beyond the limits of what is already known.’ | Félix Guattari and Suely Rolnik, *Micropolítica: Cartografias do Desejo* [*Micropolitics: Cartography of Desire*], 2007

Note to self

In its paradoxical constitution, ignorance can be both a limitation and a resource. It is usually framed as the absence of knowledge, but in practice, it reflects systems of power that determine what is considered valuable or valid. In this sense, ignorance is deeply political, shaping who has access to knowledge and whose perspectives are marginalised.

Ignorance can also be a fertile ground for discovery in art and cultural contexts. The act of not knowing creates room for curiosity, exploration, and reimagination. Artists often use ignorance as a tool to confront the unknown, push boundaries, and question established narratives.

Ignorance challenges us to consider how we value knowledge and who gets to define it. In a globalised world, the coexistence of multiple epistemologies demands recognition of ignorance – not as a deficit but as a starting point for dialogue, critique, and growth.

Questions

How does ignorance function as a mechanism of power in cultural and artistic contexts?

What role does ignorance play in shaping artistic practices and creative processes?

How can ignorance be reframed as a productive force for dialogue, critique, and innovation?

In what ways does ignorance challenge or support the coexistence of multiple knowledge systems?

How do biennials and other cultural institutions perpetuate or confront ignorance in their practices?

‘Indigeneity is defined as more than just arriving on land. It is about connectedness and relationality with the land, humanity, and life.

‘That’s why I suggested we define Indigenous and Colonizer by another criterion rather than their order of arrival on a given land. The Eurocentric notion of the nation-state has been imposed on the world reasonably recently, implying that only one rightful group can occupy land and all the others are illegitimate. And because of this nation-state bias, we tend to assume that the first group to arrive on the land = the only indigenous = the only rightful to the land.

‘But those assumptions are steeped in Western centrism. That’s not how most people have lived in humanity’s history. And that has nothing to do with indigeneity. Because the indigenous group is not simply the ones with the first dibs on the land. The settler coloniser is not the only one who came there second.

‘A group can arrive first and behave like a coloniser. A group can come after the native people and now occupy the niche of indigenous, like black people in the Caribbean, for instance.

‘Instead of only looking into it in terms of power and hierarchies, which are colonial obsessions, if we look in terms of relationality and connectedness, we begin to see that the order of arrival does not define coloniality; coloniality is the severance of connections to one’s humanity, to that of The Other, to centrality and the land to exploit, extract, and dominate it.

‘So, what defines a coloniser is not only the fact that they invade the land; it’s the mindset and actions that aim to extract, exploit until exhaustion, and subjugate not only the people but also the land, nature, and all its resources.

‘The coloniser only thinks about the other in terms of power and hierarchy. On the other hand, the Indigenous are the one who believes in terms of connections and who feels like

the caretakers of the land and environment. Instead of entitlement and ownership of it.’
| Joris Lechene, 2024, Instagram Reel

Note to self

Indigeneity is not a fixed identity but a dynamic relationship with the land, culture, and history. It embodies values of care, reciprocity, and connectedness, which contrast sharply with colonial frameworks of ownership and exploitation. This perspective challenges Eurocentric notions of the nation state and land entitlement, offering a relational view of humanity’s place within the environment.

In the arts, indigeneity presents an opportunity to reimagine narratives, highlighting voices and perspectives that are sometimes marginalised or erased. The participation of the Mbya Guaraní people in biennials is a testament to how Indigenous cultures navigate modernity while preserving their traditions. Exhibitions like *We Live Like Trees* further demonstrate the power of art to communicate Indigenous philosophies and practices in ways that resonate universally.

At the same time, incorporating Indigenous practices into global art events raises questions about appropriation and representation. How can institutions engage meaningfully with Indigenous communities without perpetuating exploitation or misrepresentation?

Questions

How can art institutions engage with Indigenous cultures in ways that prioritise authenticity and reciprocity?

What role does art play in preserving and amplifying Indigenous narratives in a globalised world?

How do Indigenous philosophies challenge conventional notions of identity, land ownership, and cultural production?

What lessons can contemporary art learn from Indigenous practices of relationality and connectedness?

‘In the contemporary art field, intersectionality becomes a crucial aspect in addressing inequality by amplifying marginalised voices and fostering inclusivity within curatorial practices and exhibitions.’ | Decolonial Approaches in Large-Scale Contemporary Art Exhibitions, 2022, p. 3

‘Care ethics, with its emphasis on shared vulnerability and collective responsibility, offers a way to address inequalities by reconfiguring value systems that traditionally privilege autonomy and individualism.’ | Millner, *Care Ethics and Contemporary Art*, 2024, p. 104

‘The arts sector remains deeply stratified, with access and representation reflecting broader systemic inequalities in class, race, and gender, perpetuated by precarious working conditions and limited mobility for underrepresented groups.’ | Panic: Social Class, Taste and Inequalities in the Creative Industries, 2022, p. 15

Note to self

Inequality in the arts reflects broader societal structures and entrenched disparities in access, representation, and opportunity. These disparities manifest not only in the unequal participation of marginalised groups but also in the systemic undervaluing of their contributions. In recent years, the curatorial field has begun to address these imbalances by prioritising inclusivity and creating spaces where multiple narratives can coexist.

The concept of intersectionality is particularly significant in tackling inequality. By acknowledging the interconnected nature of social categorisations such as race, class, and gender, curators and artists can create projects that highlight inequities and propose new frameworks for representation and engagement. However, these efforts face resistance, as they challenge deeply embedded hierarchies and traditional gatekeeping mechanisms within the art world. Reflecting on inequality also raises questions about the responsibility of biennials and other large-scale art events in perpetuating or mitigating these disparities.

How can these platforms move beyond tokenistic inclusion and promote genuine equity?
And what role does the audience play in challenging or reinforcing these inequalities?

How can intersectionality be better integrated into curatorial practices to address systemic inequalities in the arts?

What measures can be implemented within biennials to ensure equitable representation and participation?

How can the art world disrupt existing power structures to foster inclusivity and accessibility for underrepresented groups?

‘Events like contemporary art biennials, initiated by local authorities to promote the position of locales on the global map, are then global events by nature, while they claim to be locally meaningful and productive in terms of new localities.’ | Hou Hanru, ‘Towards a New Locality: Biennials and “Global Art”’ in Vanderlinden & Filipovic, *The Manifesta Decade: Debates on Contemporary Art Exhibitions and Biennials in Post-Wall Europe*, 2005

‘Innovation in contemporary art is not limited to new aesthetics but involves rethinking the structures and hierarchies of the art world itself. Biennials act as laboratories for experimenting with alternative curatorial practices and frameworks that challenge established norms.’ | Panos Kompatsiaris, *The Politics of Contemporary Art Biennials*, 2017, p. 42

‘Innovation in art does not arise from nothing; it is the result of a constant confrontation with the past and an attempt to transform dominant narratives.’ | Néstor García Canclini, *Culturas Híbridas: Estrategias para Entrar y Salir de la Modernidad*, 1990

‘Innovation is not just creating something new; it is also preserving what is valuable by reinventing its relevance in the present.’ | Félix Guattari and Suely Rolnik, *Micropolítica: Cartografías do Desejo [Micropolitics: Cartography of Desire]*, 2007

‘Our sense of existence within the art system closely relates to what Francisco de Quevedo once described as “presents successions di difunto” – present successions of dead people; in the art world, in our insatiable search for the new and the meaningful, we live among present successions of soon-to be passed art.’ | Pablo Helguera Art Scenes, *The Social Scripts of the Art World*

Note to self

Innovation in contemporary art and biennials is usually connected to local traditions and global influences. Biennials challenge conventional hierarchies as experimentation sites and encourage new curatorial and artistic practices.

This innovation is not limited to aesthetics but extends to rethinking the cultural and social frameworks within which art operates. Hou Hanru and Panos Komatsiari highlight how biennials function as laboratories for innovation, merging local significance with global narratives to redefine the boundaries of contemporary art.

However, innovation is not without its tensions. It requires a delicate balance between the new and the established, the local and the global. It raises questions about sustainability, representation, and accessibility, particularly when innovation risks alienating local audiences or reinforcing systemic inequalities.

Biennials must critically engage with these challenges to ensure that their focus on innovation aligns with broader goals of inclusivity and equity while creating genuine artistic experimentation and dialogue.

Questions

How do biennials facilitate innovation in contemporary art practices?

What challenges do artists face when navigating the local–global dynamic within biennials?

How can biennials ensure their focus on innovation remains inclusive and accessible to local audiences?

What role does the concept of innovation play in redefining the relationship between tradition and modernity in the arts?

‘Exhibitions are fictions of a particular kind, and they can be both celebratory and critical by turn. Who is participating, why, and on what terms need careful examination.’ | Ferguson, Greenberg, and Nairne in Vanderlinden & Filipovic, 2005, p. 49

‘Contemporary art institutions have increasingly taken on roles that transcend traditional curatorial and exhibition practices. Through experimental programming and collaborative frameworks, these institutions have emerged as sites of critical knowledge production, challenging established epistemologies.’ | Carolina Rito and Bill Balaskas, *Institution as Praxis*, 2020, p. 12

‘Curatorial practices are not just about exhibition-making but involve crafting spaces for speculative and experimental approaches that integrate public engagement and co-production.’ | Carolina Rito, *Institution as Praxis: What is the Curatorial Doing?* 2020, p. 47

‘The aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis highlighted the role of cultural institutions as spaces of resistance and innovation, offering new models of collaborative research and public engagement that intersect art, academia, and activism.’ | Bill Balaskas, *Networked Media and the Rise of Alternative Institutions: Art and Collaboration After 2008*, 2020, p. 183

Note to self

The concept of ‘institutions as social sculptures’ embodies the transformative potential of cultural institutions to act as dynamic, participatory platforms for community building and social critique. These institutions are no longer static entities preserving heritage but active players shaping discourse and action. Integrating curatorial research with public engagement highlights their evolving role as spaces for knowledge production, transcending traditional academic and cultural boundaries.

This shift also raises questions about balancing institutional autonomy and responsiveness to public needs. The tension between financial sustainability and cultural

experimentation remains a pressing challenge. By embracing a praxis-oriented approach, institutions can navigate these complexities, ensuring their relevance and impact in an increasingly interconnected world.

Questions

How can institutions promote genuine collaboration and co-production with their audiences?

What mechanisms can balance financial sustainability and cultural experimentation in institutional programming?

In what ways can institutions as social sculptures redefine the relationship between art, academia, and activism?

‘The Bienal was conceived as a largely open space for contemporary artists, critics, curators, and scholars from Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, Latin America, and the Middle East, including immigrants to Europe and North America, to meet and become acquainted with each others’ works and ideas beyond ideology or sheer politics.’ | Gerardo Mosquera, *Bienal de La Habana: An Experiment in South-South Art*, 2011

‘In the emergence of the interstices – the overlap and displacement of domains of difference – the intersubjective and collective experiences of nations, community interest, or cultural value are negotiated. The representation of difference must not be hastily read as reflecting pre-given ethnic or cultural traits set in the fixed tablet of tradition.’ | Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 1994, p. 2

‘Just as the minority stands doubly within and across the national boundary, individual and group stand at the hybrid intersectionality of rights; the psyche has an agonising rendezvous with history.’ | Homi K. Bhabha, ‘Commentary on Minorities: Cultural Rights,’ in *Radical Philosophy*, no. 100, 2000, p. 5

Note to self

Interethnicity highlights the richness of cultural exchanges that occur when distinct groups come into contact. It is not merely about coexistence but engaging in meaningful dialogue that allows mutual transformation. This process is inherently dynamic, inviting a constant negotiation of identities, values, and practices.

In reflecting on interethnicity, I am struck by its potential to challenge fixed notions of cultural belonging. It suggests that identities are not static but evolve through interaction and shared experiences. The idea of intersectionality plays a role here, revealing how interethnic relationships can also intersect with broader social dynamics such as class, gender, and power.

However, ‘interethnicity’ is not without its challenges. The exchange process uncovers tensions related to representation, equity, or historical legacies of exploitation. This

makes me wonder how we can promote environments that embrace difference as a source of strength while ensuring that no single narrative dominates.

Questions

How can the concept of interethnicity inspire new ways of understanding cultural identity in an increasingly globalised world?

What does genuinely embracing difference in collaborative spaces mean without reinforcing existing power dynamics?

In what ways can interethnic exchanges serve as models for reimagining broader societal structures and relationships?

‘The act of listening is not passive; it requires engagement, interpretation, and a readiness to be changed by what is heard. This process creates a shared space where multiple perspectives can coexist and inform one another, making listening a form of collaborative knowledge production.’ | Caroline Woolard, *Listen Process*, 2017

‘Listening is not only about the act itself but also about creating environments where diverse voices feel empowered to speak and be heard, thus transforming the practice into a political and social tool for inclusion and dialogue.’ | Júlio Lira, *Escuta na Cidade, Ruído na Bienal Escuta na Bienal, Ruído na Cidade*, 2012

‘The symbolic presence of exercises in enunciation, speech, and listening transits this biennial, fostering a geopoetic dialogue and breaking the dictatorial silences of visual arts spaces.’ | Rika Burnham and Pablo Helguera, *Geopoetic Pedagogy in the Expanded Field*, 2012

Note to self

Listening is often mistaken for a passive or secondary act, when in fact it is an embodied, ethical, and transformative process. In the context of biennials and socially engaged art, listening becomes a practice of encounter – of attending not only to what is said, but to what is withheld, interrupted, or difficult to hear. It demands time, care, and the possibility of being changed by the other.

To listen is also to make space. It is a curatorial and pedagogical gesture that counters extractive or performative inclusion. Rather than amplifying pre-selected voices for institutional gain, listening asks us to create the conditions for mutual recognition and sustained dialogue. It is a methodological tool as much as a political stance, particularly in projects shaped by multiplicity, dissent, and relational practices.

Yet, listening is not neutral. It is shaped by power – who is allowed to speak, whose listening is recognised, whose silence is ignored. This makes the ethics of listening especially relevant in postcolonial, feminist, and decolonial frameworks. Listening might

fail. But when practised with openness and accountability, it can repair, reconfigure, and co-create knowledge in ways that exceed traditional exhibition formats.

Questions

What structures and practices enable deep, transformative listening within contemporary art and biennial contexts?

How does listening challenge conventional notions of authorship, spectatorship, and curatorial control?

In what ways can listening act as a political practice – especially in contexts of exclusion, trauma, or historical silencing?

How can we differentiate between extractive listening and relational, reciprocal listening?

What are the limitations of listening as a tool for dialogue, and how might they be acknowledged without abandoning the practice?

How does listening shape the ethics of participation and co-creation in socially engaged projects?

‘Decolonial theory emphasises the lived experiences of indigenous people, arguing for methodologies that challenge colonial frameworks by centring relational and communal perspectives.’ | Andrea Riley Mukavetz, *Decolonial Theory and Methodology*, 2018, p. 126

‘Artistic research methodologies provide spaces for creative exploration that combine traditional research with multimodal, participatory, and arts-based methods.’ | Helen Kara, *Creative Research Methods: A Practical Guide*, 2020, p. 45

‘*Asia as Method* shifts the focus of knowledge production from Eurocentric paradigms to alternative frameworks that reimagine the epistemological process, advocating for deimperialized and context-sensitive methodologies.’ | Kuan-Hsing Chen, *Asia as Method: Toward Deimperialization*, 2010, p. 211

‘The installation is thus not an alternative to the image, but precisely the extension of the concept of the image that is lost if this extension is ignored and the traditional image is readopted.’ | Boris Groys in Vanderlinden & Filipovic, *The Manifesta Decade: Debates on Contemporary Art Exhibitions and Biennials in Post-Wall Europe*, 2005

Note to self

Methodology is not simply about tools or techniques; it represents a deeper framework for questioning and understanding the world. Artistic methodologies, especially within biennials, have the potential to transcend traditional research by integrating lived experiences, participatory models, and experimental practices.

The act of designing a methodology becomes a creative practice in itself, blending context, intention, and form. It can disrupt established norms, centring alternative epistemologies that challenge colonial, hierarchical, or exclusionary systems. This flexibility is particularly evident in decolonial and artistic research methods, which privilege relationality and local knowledge.

In reflecting on methodology, I am drawn to its dual role: as both a structured guide and an open-ended process. Methodologies evolve in response to the contexts and communities they engage with. Questioning methodology itself can lead to richer, more inclusive forms of understanding.

Questions

How do exhibitions function as methodological tools within contemporary art?

What role do curators and artists play in shaping methodological approaches in art installations?

What role does methodology play in reshaping the relationship between art and research?

How can methodologies incorporate relational and community-centred practices without compromising their rigour?

How might rethinking methodology open new possibilities for inclusivity and collaboration in artistic and curatorial processes?

‘Biennials have served and continue to serve as the principal nodes of engagement for the systemic structure I describe – not only through their exhibition functions but also through conferences, symposia, opening events, etc.’ | Joe Martin Lin-Hill, *Becoming Global: Contemporary Art Worlds in the Age of the Biennials Boom*, 2013

‘Networks created by events such as the Havana Biennale provide opportunities for cultural agents across the Global South to connect, share resources, and foster collective agency, which in turn decentralises the traditional Western dominance in the art world.’ | Miguel Leonardo Rojas-Sotelo, *Cultural Maps, Networks, and Flows: The History and Impact of the Havana Biennale*, 2009

‘The rise of digital technologies has transformed traditional art networks into fluid and decentralised systems, enabling artists and curators to form connections that transcend geographic and institutional boundaries.’ | Marc James Léger, *Don’t Network: The Avant-Garde After Networks*, 2019, p. 8

Note to self

Networks are not just connections but systems of exchange and influence. They shape how contemporary art is created, shared, and understood. In the context of biennials, networks serve as crucial infrastructure, linking artists, curators, institutions, and audiences across the globe. These connections are not always equal, reflecting broader social and economic power dynamics.

In reflecting on networks, I am struck by their double-edged nature. While they facilitate collaboration and dialogue, they also risk perpetuating inequalities by favouring those with access to resources and established institutions. How can networks become more inclusive and equitable?

Digital networks have added complexity to this landscape, enabling decentralised forms of collaboration and introducing new challenges around accessibility and surveillance.

The network is both a tool and a metaphor for contemporary cultural production - dynamic, interconnected, and usually tensioned.

Questions

How can biennials leverage their networks to create more inclusive and equitable spaces for artists and audiences?

What role do digital technologies play in reshaping the dynamics of contemporary art networks?

How might the network concept evolve to better address the social and economic inequalities within the art world?

‘Biennials have increasingly emphasised participatory practices, where the audience is not just a passive observer but an active participant in the creation and interpretation of art.’ | Marieke Van Hal, *The Biennial Reader*, 2010

‘The shift from spectatorship to participation in contemporary art redefines the relationship between the audience and the artwork, fostering a sense of co-creation and shared experience.’ | Claire Bishop, *Participation*, 2006

‘The participatory turn in art challenges conventional boundaries, turning artistic creation into a collaborative process that interrogates the social and political frameworks within which art is produced and consumed.’ | Michael Birchall, *Situating Participatory Art Between Rehearsal and Performance*, 2017

‘Participation requires more than physical involvement; it demands emotional and intellectual engagement, as participants contribute to meaning-making in ways that transcend the artist’s intentions.’ | Fernanda Corrêa, *Poder e participação*, 2012

Note to self

Participation in contemporary art represents a shift away from traditional audience roles. No longer limited to passive observation, audiences are invited to engage actively, blurring the lines between creators and viewers. This shift has been vital in redefining the purpose and impact of art.

Participatory practices amplify the sense of shared ownership and community at biennials and other large-scale exhibitions. This focus on collective creation opens space for dialogues on equity, inclusion, and the redistribution of power within the art world. However, participation is not without challenges. It demands trust, careful facilitation, and an awareness of the power dynamics between artists and participants.

Participation navigates the balance between empowerment and exploitation. As we embrace these dynamics, it is essential to question whether participation is truly inclusive or merely a tool for reinforcing existing hierarchies in art.

Questions

How does audience participation alter the dynamics of biennials?

What are the benefits and challenges of incorporating participatory practices in biennials?

How can biennials enhance participatory opportunities for diverse audiences?

How does participation redefine the relationship between the artist and the audience?

In what ways does participatory art challenge or reinforce existing power structures?

How can participatory practices in biennials create more inclusive and equitable platforms for engagement?

What are the ethical considerations of participatory art regarding representation, consent, and equity?

‘Art display here is part of a broader knowledge production, with lectures, seminars, publications, tour guides, and discussion platforms becoming the “main event” and performing a central, rather than supportive role to the show.’ | Panos Kompatsiaris, *The Politics of Contemporary Art Biennials: Spectacles of Critique, Art and Theory*, 2017, p. 45

‘There is no creativity without danger. There is no intellectual development without danger. For me, one of the most terrible things about education is that today, education is increasingly an education of the answer, of the reply – not an education of the question, because the question is fundamental.’ | Paulo Freire, quoted in clubedolivrodesign, 2023

‘The notion of the “discursive biennial” is a descriptive term I employ to refer to the post-1990s curatorial emphasis on the exhibition as a site of semiotic production, dialogue, conversation, exchange, education, pedagogy and open-ended encounters.’ | Panos Kompatsiaris, *The Politics of Contemporary Art Biennials: Spectacles of Critique, Art and Theory*, 2017, p. 39

‘The pedagogical turn in biennials, particularly in the Global South, often draws from Paulo Freire’s “Pedagogy of the Oppressed”, aiming to empower local communities through educational initiatives.’ | Marieke Van Hal, *The Biennial Reader*, 2010, p. 18

‘Education in the expanded field introduces methodologies where learning and artistic creation merge, challenging traditional separations between teacher and student, producer and consumer, and art and education.’ | Pablo Helguera, *Pedagogia no Campo Expandido*, 2011, p. 12

Note to self

Pedagogy is no longer confined to classrooms or formal educational settings. At contemporary biennials, pedagogy has expanded into the realm of art, turning exhibitions into platforms for dialogue, exchange, and learning. This shift highlights the increasing overlap between art and education, where biennials serve as critical spaces for exploring new ideas and fostering intellectual engagement.

Paulo Freire's ideas on education resonate deeply in this context. His emphasis on questioning rather than merely answering reflects the transformative potential of pedagogy in contemporary art. Biennials inspired by Freire's principles empower communities to engage in meaningful exchanges, challenging hierarchical models of knowledge dissemination.

Pedagogy in biennials also involves risks. How can such educational initiatives avoid tokenism or superficial engagement? The balance between promoting learning experiences and addressing the pressures of the art market requires careful navigation. Pedagogy as a critical practice can create spaces for shared knowledge and collaborative exploration while also challenging established power structures.

Questions

How can biennials balance their roles as spaces for both artistic display and education?

What pedagogical strategies are most effective in fostering meaningful audience engagement in contemporary art exhibitions?

How do biennials draw from Paulo Freire's principles to empower marginalised communities?

In what ways can transient pedagogies, as described by Adajania, reshape the educational focus of biennials?

How might biennials avoid the risks of tokenism or superficial engagement in their pedagogical initiatives?

‘The permeability of art institutions to external influences and the integration of multiple disciplines redefine the boundaries of contemporary art practice. This openness facilitates dialogue between diverse communities and fosters collaborative engagement.’

| Panos Kompatsiaris, *The Politics of Contemporary Art Biennials*, 2017, p. 39

‘Collage, in the most general sense of the term, is the principle of a “third” aesthetic politics. It mixes the strangeness of the aesthetic experience with the becoming-life of art and the becoming-art of ordinary life. The border is always there yet already crossed, highlighting the permeability between the world of art and everyday life.’ | Jacques Rancière, *Problems and Transformations in Critical Art*, 2010, p. 84

Note to self

Permeability in the context of art refers to the capacity of institutions, practices, and artworks to absorb, integrate, and adapt to external influences. This concept is deeply tied to the relational nature of art, which thrives on exchanges that transcend traditional boundaries between disciplines, cultures, and social structures.

In biennials, permeability manifests through interactions between local and global narratives and the integration of diverse artistic methodologies. These events become spaces where the rigid boundaries between art and other domains – be it politics, science, or community practices – are blurred, creating fertile ground for innovative dialogues and practices.

The challenge, however, lies in maintaining a balance. While permeability invites openness and inclusivity, it also raises questions about the potential dilution of artistic identity and the risk of cultural appropriation. It prompts a reflection on how boundaries can be crossed ethically and constructively without eroding the specificity and depth of individual perspectives.

How can biennials balance their dual role as both cultural institutions and sites of political action?

To what extent do biennials genuinely challenge political norms, and where do they reinforce existing power structures?

What does it mean for art to function as both a tool and a critique of political action within the biennial format?

How can biennials move beyond their own limitations to promote genuine political engagement and inclusivity?

What role does the audience play in transforming biennials from mere spectacles to active sites of political resistance?

‘What does it mean for a biennial to mobilise political energies, and for whom are they mobilised? How are these two spheres of action – art and politics – entangled, layered and performed by biennials and their participants?’ | Panos Kompatsiaris, *The Politics of Contemporary Art Biennials*, 2017

‘The logic of dissensus consists in the demonstration of a certain impropriety which disrupts the identity and reveals the gap between poesis and aisthesis. This form of politics challenges the inherent hierarchies in cultural and artistic domains.’ | Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, 2010

‘The paradox of biennials lies in their simultaneous denunciation of the aesthetic as bourgeois and their reliance on exclusive sociabilities to maintain relevance in political and cultural discourse.’ | Panos Kompatsiaris, *Biennial Art and Its Rituals: Value, Political Economy and Artfulness*, 2019

‘In Latin America, biennials often aim to redefine historical narratives and counter hegemonic influences, exploring the local and global intersections of art and politics.’ | Frederico Morais, *Reescrevendo a História da Arte Latino-Americana*, 1997.

‘Art and political action within biennials frequently engage in a pedagogical process that incorporates educational initiatives as part of the aesthetic experience.’ | Bruno Nogueira & Daniela Bracchi, *Diálogos entre Educação, Arte e Política Cultural no Brasil*, 2022

Note to self

Political action in the context of art, particularly biennials, operates at the intersection of theory, practice, and public engagement. Not merely the content of the artwork but also the format and programming of the biennial serve as acts of political discourse. This interplay invites reflection on whether biennials are agents of meaningful activism or symbols of commodified dissent.

The term further raises questions about inclusivity and representation. Who gets to participate in this 'political action'? Are these spaces inherently hierarchical, or do they succeed in challenging conventional norms? The focus on pedagogy in Brazilian biennials, as noted by Nogueira and Bracchi, suggests that education is a key facet of political engagement, a notion worth exploring further.

Additionally, Rancière's idea of dissensus provides a framework for viewing political action as the disruption of established orders, aligning art with politics' unpredictable, transformative power.

Questions

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‘Precarity refers to artists’ uncertain, unstable, and economically vulnerable position within the broader art world. This condition is not exclusive to socially engaged art; it affects artists across all forms of practice. Whether dealing with funding, institutional support, or the unpredictable nature of creative work, artists often navigate a landscape of economic and social precariousness. This concept also extends to the communities’ artists engage with, particularly in socially engaged art, where the precarious conditions of participants can influence the nature and outcomes of the work.’ | Alex Wilde et al., *A Balancing Act: Precarity in Socially Engaged Arts*, 2018

‘The general shift from manufacturing to services has also affected the field of visual art, changing the labour market for artists and curators. Their work has become much more unstable, short-term, and exploited, with the demands for mobility and flexibility contributing to extreme precarity.’ | Zoran Erić & Stevan Vuković, *Precarious Labour in the Field of Art*, 2013

‘The new forms of enslavement, subordination, are now sold to us as forms of freedom. You are a precarious worker (insecure worker), and you do not get more in many countries permanent healthcare. Ideology tells you, “Listen, this is wonderful! You are no longer fixed in one role; you can re-invent yourself yearly.”’ | Slavoj Žižek, *Philosophy of Existence*, 2023

‘Precarity is not simply an unfortunate side effect of neoliberal reforms but has become a defining feature of creative industries, reinforcing systemic inequality and exploiting workers.’ | Rosalind Gill & Andy Pratt, *Precarity and Cultural Work*, 2013

‘In Kind reveals the volume of unpaid labour, unseen efforts, and volunteer hours that enable arts festivals to take place. It questions the sustainability of this model and its implications for the precarity of artists.’ | Janie Nicoll & Ailie Rutherford, *In Kind Research Project*, 2018

‘What if, as I’m suggesting, precarity is the condition of our time – or, to put it another way, what if our time is ripe for sensing precarity? What if precarity, indeterminacy, and what we imagine as trivial are the center of the systemcity we seek? Precarity is the condition of being vulnerable to others.’ | Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the Worlds: One Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*, 2015

Note to self

Precarity highlights the systemic vulnerabilities inherent in creative and cultural labour. The concept embodies the economic instability artists and cultural workers face, with implications that extend beyond individuals to the institutions and audiences they engage with.

In socially engaged art, precarity intersects with the lived realities of the communities involved, compounding issues of inequality and exploitation. This dynamic raises questions about whether socially engaged practices can genuinely address precarity without perpetuating it.

The rhetoric of freedom and flexibility, as critiqued by Žižek, is a crucial lens for understanding how neoliberal ideologies disguise systemic exploitation as individual empowerment. Similarly, the contributions from Gill and Pratt identify that precarity is not an anomaly but a structural feature of cultural production under capitalism.

This reflection calls for a rethinking of economic models in art, urging a move toward sustainability, equity, and care within cultural institutions and practices.

Questions

How can artists balance their creative autonomy with the economic pressures of precarious labour?

What models or strategies can cultural institutions adopt to mitigate precarity among artists and participants?

In what ways does precarity shape the themes and forms of contemporary artistic practices?

How can socially engaged art address precarity without perpetuating the exploitation of participants and communities?

What role can governments and cultural institutions play in creating sustainable economic conditions for artists?

‘Organisationally, biennials employ hierarchical structures and lines of command. Despite their otherwise experimental and politically charged vocabulary, they maintain a customary division of labour ...’ | Panos Kompatsiaris, *The Politics of Contemporary Art Biennials*, 2017

‘Today’s curators develop mostly their art projects and involve the artists in these projects if these artists seem to be suitable for a task.’ | Boris Groys, in Vanderlinden & Filipovic, *The Manifesta Decade: Debates on Contemporary Art Exhibitions and Biennials in Post-Wall Europe*, 2005

Care ethics upends normalised hierarchies that unquestioningly accept that the powerful deserve their privilege, challenging the values of neoliberalism by emphasising our shared vulnerability and fostering solidarity. | Jacqueline Millner, *Care Ethics and Contemporary Art*, 2024

‘These cultural hierarchies, built into the organisational structures of biennials, often reflect broader capitalist frameworks where curators and artists navigate power imbalances inherent to cultural production.’ | Félix Guattari and Suely Rolnik, *Micropolítica: Cartografias do Desejo* [*Micropolitics: Cartography of Desire*], 2007

Note to self

Roles and hierarchies within biennials reveal the complexities of cultural production, where innovation frequently operates within traditional organisational frameworks. While biennials strive for inclusivity and progressive ideals, their reliance on hierarchical structures reflects the broader capitalist systems in which they exist.

The expanding role of curators as co-creators offers new possibilities for collaboration yet simultaneously challenges the autonomy of artistic practice. This shift reshapes the dynamics of authority and decision-making, redefining the artist–curator relationship in ways that require careful navigation.

Care ethics introduces an alternative perspective, advocating for relational interdependence over individual autonomy. This approach, centred on shared responsibility and mutual support, provides a framework for rethinking how hierarchies function within cultural institutions. By emphasising collective vulnerability and solidarity, care ethics suggests pathways for reconciling the demands of organisational structures with the aspirations of inclusivity and equity.

In acknowledging these dynamics, biennials can reflect the tensions of their internal roles and the broader societal conditions they aim to address. This understanding reinforces the potential for these events to model new forms of collaboration and organisation that transcend traditional hierarchies while creating creative and equitable engagement.

Questions

How do hierarchical structures within biennials affect their ability to achieve social change?

What alternatives to hierarchical organisation could biennials adopt to better align with their stated missions?

How does the evolving role of curators as creators of art projects influence the direction of contemporary art and their relationships with artists?

What strategies can cultural institutions implement to promote non-hierarchical, collaborative frameworks within their operations?

‘Sustainability in the arts goes beyond the ecological and touches on cultural and social aspects, offering a framework for rethinking resource use and intergenerational equity in creative practices. | Nelson Prado Barbosa, *Cultura y Sustentabilidad en Iberoamérica*, 2018

‘Biennials, as large-scale cultural infrastructures, rely on complex financial systems that influence their programming and accessibility. The precarious sustainability of these events often reflects broader socio-economic dynamics.’ | Anthony Gardner and Charles Green, *Making Biennials: South as Method*, 2015

‘The environmental footprint of biennials calls into question their sustainability as global events, pushing organisers to adopt more eco-friendly practices and rethink resource management in exhibition-making.’ | Panos Kompatsiaris, *The Politics of Contemporary Art Biennials*, 2017

Note to self

Sustainability in art extends far beyond environmental concerns. It encompasses cultural, social, and economic dimensions, highlighting the importance of creating art practices, institutions, and events that endure and remain impactful over time.

Biennials are potent platforms for addressing sustainability by fostering long-term engagement with local and global communities. However, this requires careful consideration of labour practices, financial models, and ecological footprints. The challenge lies in achieving sustainability without compromising ethical principles or artistic integrity.

Reflecting on sustainability also raises questions about how cultural institutions and artists can balance short-term projects with long-term goals. Sustainability is not a static concept but a dynamic process that involves continual reflection, adaptation, and engagement with diverse stakeholders.

How do biennials address sustainability in their programming and operations?

What role can artists and curators play in promoting sustainable practices within the art world?

How can biennials and other cultural institutions balance financial sustainability with cultural and social objectives?

What innovative models exist for integrating environmental sustainability into the production and presentation of contemporary art?

How can sustainability avoid reinforcing existing inequalities within the global art network?

‘Time is not linear but cyclical and layered; it collapses the past, present, and future into one simultaneous experience. This multiplicity of time is central to understanding how exhibitions engage with historical memory and project futures.’ | Shannon Jackson, *Quality Time: Social Turns in Contemporary Art*, 2012

‘Biennials exist within a unique temporal framework, cyclical and anticipatory. Their recurrence every two years positions them as markers of continuity and change, capturing the zeitgeist while remaining bound to the rhythms of their institutional histories.’ | Nato Thompson, *Contractions of Time: Social Practice in Contemporary Art*, 2010

‘Time in art is not only a chronological measure but a central element in constructing meaning. Temporality enables the constant reinterpretation of works, challenging linear narratives and proposing new readings.’ | Néstor García Canclini, *Culturas Híbridas*, 1990

‘Time in art is simultaneously fluid and fixed. It shapes perception, defines contexts, and transforms the way narratives are constructed and understood.’ | Félix Guattari and Suely Rolnik, *Micropolítica: Cartografias do Desejo [Micropolitics: Cartography of Desire]*, 2007

Note to self

In the context of biennials, time is deeply tied to the cyclical format of the exhibitions, creating moments of anticipation, reflection, and renewal. Biennials serve as temporal markers, capturing the shifting dynamics of global art and culture while linking traditions to future possibilities.

This cyclical nature positions biennials as sites of both continuity and disruption. They provide opportunities to revisit historical memory, interrogate present realities, and project speculative futures. Time becomes a curatorial tool, shaping the selection of works and the narratives that frame them.

At the same time, time within the biennial framework challenges the linearity of history. It offers a space to juxtapose multiple temporalities, from ancient cultural traditions to contemporary art practices. It invites viewers to reconsider how time shapes our understanding of art, culture, and identity.

Questions

How does the biennial format engage with the concept of time in its curatorial practices?

What is the role of historical memory in biennials, and how does it influence the present?

How can time be used as a curatorial tool to explore the interplay between tradition and innovation in biennials?

What challenges and opportunities arise from the cyclical nature of biennials in time?

How might the concept of 'layered time' alter how audiences experience and interpret biennial exhibitions?

‘Transculturation is the process by which cultures interact, collide, and transform one another, producing hybrid forms and new cultural expressions. It reflects the ongoing negotiation of identities and histories in the context of colonialism and globalisation.’ | Nancy Adajania, *The Fluid Dynamics of Transcultural Art Practices*, 2010

‘Transculturation is not merely an exchange but a braided process of entanglement, creating spaces where seemingly binary identities are deconstructed and recombined into shared, transformative narratives.’ | Ranjit Hoskote, *Walking Through Mirrors? Reflections on the Spiritual Traffic Between India and Europe*, in Angelika Fitz, Merle Kröger, Alexandra Schneider, & Dorothee Wenner (eds.), *Import Export: Cultural Transfer, India, Germany, Austria*, 2005

Note to self

Transculturation highlights the dynamic and reciprocal nature of cultural exchanges. It resists static notions of influence or dominance, focusing instead on mutual transformation and hybridisation processes. This framework allows an understanding of artistic production as fluid, evolving, and interconnected.

In the context of biennials, transculturation exemplifies the importance of cross-cultural dialogue. These platforms provide spaces where diverse voices converge, challenging binary frameworks of local versus global and tradition versus modernity. The emerging hybrid forms reflect the complexities of contemporary identities and cultural narratives.

However, transculturation comes with tensions. Blending cultures can risk appropriation or the erasure of local specificity and operate within larger structures of global inequality. Biennials must critically engage with these dynamics to ensure that transculturation promotes ethical collaboration and inclusivity rather than perpetuating cultural or economic imbalances.

How can transculturation in art promote new ways of understanding and representing cultural hybridity?

What challenges arise in balancing local and global influences in transcultural practices?

How do biennials facilitate transculturation while avoiding the pitfalls of cultural homogenisation?

What role does art play in addressing historical injustices and creating spaces for shared cultural narratives?

‘Transition is not merely a movement between two states; it is the creation of a liminal space where transformation occurs. It is in these moments of transition that art finds its most potent expression, challenging the old and giving form to the new.’ | Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*, 1969

‘Cultural transition is a process of negotiation between the past and the future, where identities are questioned and reformulated.’ | Néstor García Canclini, *Culturas Híbridas: Estrategias para Entrar y Salir de la Modernidad*, 1990

‘Transition is the force that connects what was to what will be. It is both a rupture and a continuity, marked by discomfort and anticipation.’ | Félix Guattari and Suely Rolnik, *Micropolítica: Cartografias do Desejo* [*Micropolitics: Cartography of Desire*], 2007

Note to self

Transition is a space of uncertainty, possibility, and transformation. In the arts, it represents the process of moving between states – conceptually, socially, and materially. In these transitional spaces, new ideas emerge, boundaries are redefined, and innovation occurs.

Biennials embody the concept of transition as they reflect the shifting dynamics of culture, politics, and identity globally. These exhibitions are often situated at the intersection of the local and the global, the traditional and the contemporary. This duality shows the transitional nature of art itself, which resists static definitions and embraces evolution.

However, the transition also brings tension and instability. Artists and curators must navigate the challenges of creating meaning in a constantly shifting landscape, which raises questions about the transition’s role in artistic practices and institutional frameworks.

Can transition be a tool for critique and transformation, or does it risk becoming a perpetual state of flux without resolution? How does the concept of transition shape artistic and curatorial practices in biennials?

What role does transition play in redefining cultural identities and narratives?

How can the transition promote innovation and dialogue in the arts?

What challenges arise from the transitional nature of biennials and other large-scale exhibitions?

How can artists and cultural practitioners navigate the tensions between continuity and rupture in transitional spaces?

‘The unpredictability of artistic expression is evident here, as the chosen theme led to various artistic responses, some of which lacked depth or transformation. This highlights the challenge of predicting artistic outcomes in large-scale exhibitions.’ | Bruce Altshuler, *Biennials and Beyond: Exhibitions That Made Art History*, 2012

‘Unpredictability is the essence of creative processes. It disrupts expectations, opening space for experimentation and innovation, even as it challenges curatorial frameworks to remain flexible and responsive to unforeseen developments.’ | Hans Ulrich Obrist, *Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Curating*, 2011

‘Unpredictability in art is not a flaw but an inherent condition. It is through the unexpected that true innovation occurs, and established narratives are challenged.’ | Santiago Castro-Gómez, *La hybris del punto cero*, 2005

‘Unpredictability is not chaos but the meeting point between intuition and the unexpected. It is the force that keeps art alive, challenging conventions and creating new ways of seeing and feeling.’ | Félix Guattari and Suely Rolnik, *Micropolítica: Cartografias do Desejo* [*Micropolitics: Cartography of Desire*], 2007

Note to self

Unpredictability lies at the heart of artistic creation and curation. It resists control and defies expectations, making it both a challenge and a strength in the context of biennials and large-scale exhibitions. While curators and organisers may attempt to guide outcomes through themes or frameworks, the inherently unpredictable nature of art ensures that new, unexpected possibilities always emerge.

This unpredictability is a double-edged sword. On one hand, it fosters innovation, surprise, and genuine engagement. On the other hand, it can expose gaps in preparation or lead to uneven results. In biennials, unpredictability challenges curators to balance their vision with the freedom required for artists to explore and innovate.

Unpredictability also exposes the complexity of the global art scene, where diverse voices and cultural practices collide. By embracing unpredictability, biennials can become spaces of experimentation and transformation, where new narratives and perspectives take shape in ways that challenge and surprise both artists and audiences.

Questions

How does unpredictability in theme selection influence the overall impact of a biennial?

How can unpredictability be harnessed to enhance the artistic experience in global exhibitions?

What role does unpredictability play in challenging curatorial control and promoting innovation?

How does the balance between unpredictability and structure shape the outcomes of artistic and curatorial practices?

Can unpredictability be a tool for resisting homogenisation in global art exhibitions?

‘The value of art extends beyond monetary measures; it is tied to cultural enrichment, social critique, and the personal impact it has on individuals and communities. Yet, the fair payment of artists is often overlooked, raising critical questions about the economic and ethical structures of the art world.’ | Hans Abbing, *Why Are Artists Poor? The Exceptional Economy of the Arts*, 2002

‘Artists are workers, and their labour must be recognised as such. Fair payment is not just a question of justice but of acknowledging the fundamental role of art in shaping society and culture.’ | Carolina Rito, *On Art and Labour: A Manifesto for Fair Pay in the Arts*, 2015

‘The value of a work is not only in its market price but in its ability to question, challenge, and transform. However, economic precariousness remains a constant for creators.’ | Santiago Sierra, *Art, Work, and the Economy of Precarity*, 2008

‘Value is not only financial; it is cultural and symbolic. But for artists to continue creating, their payments must be fair and appropriate to the impact of their contributions to society.’ | Félix Guattari and Suely Rolnik, *Micropolítica: Cartografias do Desejo* [*Micropolitics: Cartography of Desire*], 2007

Note to self

Value in the arts is multifaceted, encompassing financial, cultural, and symbolic dimensions. However, the art world often prioritises market-driven definitions of value while neglecting the economic realities artists face. The idea of fair payment for artists demonstrates a more profound recognition of the labour, creativity, and critical contributions they bring to society.

This theme raises broader questions about how the art economy operates and the structural inequities that persist within it. Despite being central to cultural production, artists are frequently underpaid or expected to work for exposure rather than fair compensation. Addressing this imbalance involves redefining value in ways that foreground ethical and sustainable practices.

Fair payment is not merely a transactional issue; it reflects the broader societal recognition of the importance of cultural labour. It challenges the commodification of art and highlights the need for policies and practices that support artists as essential contributors to public discourse and social transformation.

Questions

How can the art world redefine value to prioritise fair payment for artists?

What role do cultural institutions play in addressing economic inequalities within the arts?

How does the value concept shape how art is produced, consumed, and appreciated?

What ethical considerations arise in the relationship between artistic labour and market dynamics?

How can artists and cultural workers advocate for sustainable and equitable payment structures?

‘Symbolic violence manifests not as overt force but as the subtle imposition of ideologies and practices that maintain unequal power dynamics. In the cultural sphere, it is present in the exclusionary practices and hierarchies that govern art production and reception.’

| Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, 1984

‘Violence is as much a physical act as it is a symbolic interruption; it is a way to confront and disrupt but also to transform and regenerate.’ | Santiago Castro-Gómez, *La hybris del punto cero*, 2005

‘Violence is not just destruction; it is also creation. It is the force that breaks old structures to make room for new possibilities.’ | Félix Guattari and Suely Rolnik, *Micropolítica: Cartografías do Desejo [Micropolitics: Cartography of Desire]*, 2007

‘This coercive new approach to participation is played out most vividly in the Ciclo de Arte Experimental ... to make the audience aware of, and to feel in their bodies, the violence they were living in.’ | Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*, 2012

Note to self

Violence operates on multiple levels in art and culture. It can be physical, symbolic, or structural, often catalysing disruption and transformation. Violence manifests as the tension between empowerment and autonomy in socially engaged art. Artists must distinguish between challenging norms and respecting participants’ agency.

The creative process itself can be violent. Artists confront societal norms, expose uncomfortable truths, and dismantle oppressive systems. This violence is not necessarily destructive and can be generative, opening spaces for dialogue, critique, and innovation. Viewing art can similarly involve a violent rupture, forcing audiences to confront new perspectives that challenge their assumptions and beliefs.

Violence emerges in the context of biennials through structural inequities, funding models, and symbolic hierarchies. These institutions can perpetuate exclusion and dominance even as they claim to embrace diversity and innovation. Addressing these dynamics requires a critical engagement with how biennials function and how they might inadvertently perpetuate harm.

Questions

How does the artwork engage with violence, autonomy, and emancipation?

What tensions or conflicts arise during the creation and presentation of the artwork?

How might the concept of structural violence apply to the critique of biennials within this context?

In what ways do biennials perpetuate or mitigate forms of symbolic violence through their practices?

How can biennials address the implicit violence in their organisational structures and funding models?

5 Conclusion

This thesis has examined contemporary art biennials as discursive and pedagogical infrastructures, understood here as overlapping modes of knowledge production and processes of lifelong learning that operate beyond the exhibition display. Centring the Mercosul Biennial (6th to 9th editions) and the Liverpool Biennial (2016 and 2018) as case studies, the research has explored how biennials construct, sustain, and name such practices, analysing their institutional, geopolitical, and educational dimensions. Through case study analysis, autotheoretical essays, and the development of a critical toolkit, the project has demonstrated that biennials function not only as sites of exhibition-making but also as infrastructures of mediation, education, and overall discursive and pedagogical practices.

The study was guided by four research questions. The first asked how discursive and educational programmes operate within biennials and how they shape institutional histories and contexts. Chapter One demonstrated, through an archaeology of the discursive, that such programmes emerged historically as improvised responses yet became integral to biennial infrastructures over time. Chapter Two extended this analysis by showing, through the MB and LB as case studies, that discursive and educational programmes are not peripheral but structurally constitutive of curatorial frameworks. They function as laboratories for meaning-making, opening space to rethink authorship, institutional responsibility, and the role of mediation in shaping public engagement. What this revealed is that these programmes are contingent and relational to their institutions, often arising as improvised structures in response to shifting political, social, and organisational conditions. Yet it is precisely through this contingency that they become decisive in shaping how biennials are remembered and valued. By bringing these practices into focus, the research advances the field by demonstrating that the sustainability and relevance of biennials cannot be understood without attending to their discursive and pedagogical dimensions. This raises a further question about recognition:

in what ways can mediators and educators be legitimised as co-authors of curatorial discourse? By tracing their decisive role in shaping institutional memory and public value, this research suggests that acknowledging mediation as a form of authorship challenges traditional hierarchies within the art world. Such recognition demands a rethinking of curatorial labour as collective and distributed, with implications for how institutions define authorship and responsibility.

The second question asked through what typologies and overlapping forms biennials generate discursive engagement. Chapter One traced how formats such as talks, catalogues, guided visits, workshops, and symposia, which appeared in early iterations of Venice, São Paulo, documenta, and Havana, gradually shifted from being improvised or supplementary activities into integral infrastructures of knowledge. In Venice, the establishment of people as ‘living’ catalogues in situ introduces a novel model of discursive framing. In São Paulo, the early need for facilitation of the public to modern art becomes the longest model of educational practices within contemporary art biennials. At documenta, from the 1970s onwards, symposia and lecture series formalised discursive practice as part of the exhibition itself, setting a precedent for institutionalised dialogue. In Havana, workshops and collective exchanges, often organised under precarious conditions, became central to its ethos of South–South dialogue and situated pedagogy. These examples illustrate how discursive formats did not emerge as separated or static models but as contextually driven responses, carrying pedagogical implications even before they were named as such. In a different register, the collection of essays in Chapter Three, *‘Biennials as...’*, developed as practice-based outputs of this research, examined more experimental modalities, including residencies, city-as-school models, and socially engaged practices. Together, these analyses revealed that biennials do not rely on fixed models but mobilise overlapping modalities that intersect in productive tensions. Mediation emerges here not as neutral transmission but as a political and creative practice of world-making, particularly when afforded time, trust, and autonomy. By conceptualising these forms as additional elements and

structurally generative, the thesis has contributed a new critical taxonomy of biennial typologies. This taxonomy reframes discursive engagement as a central measure of a biennial's significance, shifting scholarly and curatorial attention away from spectacle and display towards the infrastructures of dialogue, collaboration, and shared learning. A related issue concerns the long-term implications of inconsistent documentation of educational programmes. Without sustained records, their contributions risk being forgotten or undervalued in institutional histories. The toolkit developed in this thesis directly addresses this issue by proposing a flexible vocabulary for recording, reflecting on, and evaluating such programmes, and offering a method to strengthen institutional memory and support more robust critical reflection.

The third question addressed which theoretical frameworks account for discursive and pedagogical practices in biennials, and how these shape curatorial strategies and institutional forms. Chapter Two established the conceptual ground through critical pedagogy (Freire), the equality of intelligences (Rancière), and relational ethics and opacity (Glissant), and later extended this through Larrosa Bondía's reflections on experience as process. These frameworks were not treated as abstract models but were activated through the case studies, where mediation and education functioned as constitutive curatorial practices. The methodological orientation of 'South as a method', drawn from Gardner and Green, further grounded the research by resisting default reliance on Northern paradigms and recognising Southern innovations, such as Casa M, as methodological contributions (essay in 4.1.2, *From Casa M to Toxteth: Radical and Invisible Pedagogies, Counter-pedagogies at Large*) that informed later initiatives in Liverpool. In this way, pedagogy, relational ethics, and situated epistemologies emerge as logics of curating. The thesis thus reframes biennials as infrastructures of knowledge production, shaped by their geopolitical and epistemological conditions.

The fourth and final question asked how the insights developed through this research could be translated into practical tools for future use. This is addressed by the two practical outputs found in Chapter Three, *Biennials as...* and the *Biennial as Pedagogical Tools* toolkit. The essays tested conceptual propositions through an autotheoretical mode, while the toolkit consolidated a critical taxonomy into a card-based, dialogical format. Emerging directly from fieldwork notes, case study analysis, and lived experience, the toolkit demonstrates how vocabulary can be mobilised as a site of reflection, negotiation, and planning. It resists prescriptive closure by remaining fragmentary, adaptable, and open to re-use, whether in biennials, museums, or grassroots projects. By embedding practice into a tangible resource that circulates beyond the written thesis, the research translates theoretical insights into tools that others can adapt and expand according to their own contexts. In this way, the thesis not only advances scholarship but also generates a methodological contribution, reinforcing its dual role as both a study of biennials and a resource for their future practice.

Equally significant are the methodological implications. This thesis combines practice-based methods within an autotheoretical approach, demonstrating how embedded experience can generate conceptual and analytical insights that would not otherwise be available. The practice-based dimension lies not only in the collaborative projects themselves, but also in how they continue to shape my life and future decision-making, producing forms of learning that only emerged through lived experience. Working across roles as curator, mediator, and facilitator sharpened my capacity to read people, places, and ideas, and to adapt within shifting institutional and social conditions. This attentiveness became central to the methodology. Autotheory, meanwhile, provided the means to articulate an emotional and sensible voice, moving beyond the rigidity of autoethnography and avoiding the reductive labelling processes that often constrain academic research. Unlike autoethnography, which prioritises systematic cultural analysis, autotheory allows lived experience to operate as a site of conceptual development, integrating personal narrative with critical reflection. In this mode, lived

experience does not serve as an anecdote but as a critical lens through which to interrogate institutional frameworks, resonating with feminist traditions that unsettle boundaries between the personal and the political. The essays produced as part of this thesis exemplify how an insider position can generate insights that external observation would miss, while also exposing the challenges of navigating contradictions from within. Taken together, these methods offer a transferable model for future research in exhibition making and biennial studies, and potentially beyond, in museums, grassroots projects, and curatorial training, because it advocates for methodologies that embrace situated knowledge, reflexive writing, and fidelity to the research process as forms of legitimate and generative scholarship.

The conclusions of each chapter build towards this synthesis. Chapter One traced an archaeology of the discursive across Venice, São Paulo, documenta, and Havana, showing how improvised and experimental formats were gradually formalised into infrastructures that shifted biennials from platforms of display into platforms of knowledge production and public dialogue. Chapter Two examined the Mercosul and Liverpool Biennials as case studies, demonstrating how differences in scale, governance, and funding decisively shaped the scope and sustainability of pedagogical practice. Both positioned education as central, but in distinct ways: the Mercosul Biennial through expansive state-level infrastructures, and the Liverpool Biennial through targeted urban collaborations. Chapter Three presented the practice-based outputs of the research. The *Biennials as...* essays articulated conceptual propositions—biennials as utopian machines, as radical or invisible pedagogies, as school-making devices, as platforms of socially engaged practice, and as experiments in institutional precarity—while the toolkit translated these insights into a fragmentary, non-hierarchical vocabulary for critical and collaborative use.

This thesis contributes new knowledge to the intersecting fields of biennial studies, curatorial practice, and discursive art education by repositioning biennials as pedagogical

and discursive infrastructures rather than exhibitionary platforms alone. It extends biennial historiography with case-based evidence of mediation, education, and community collaboration, naming and theorising how the 'soft infrastructures', such as talks, workshops, friendships, and informal gatherings, sustain a biennial's public value beyond its exhibitions. It advances curatorial practice by articulating a pedagogical-curatorial paradigm in which educators and mediators are recognised as co-authors, proposing coalition-based and reflexive approaches attentive to labour conditions and internal tensions. It enriches discursive art education by demonstrating how the principles of critical pedagogy can be enacted in the exhibition spaces (and beyond classrooms), developing counter-pedagogies that are experimental, contextual, and rooted in collective experience, and calling for more ethical institutional orientations that align symbolic value with material support. Methodologically, the thesis develops from the autotheory as a method in the form of original contributions, showing how embedded experience and practices can generate transferable frameworks for analysis and practice. Finally, the critical taxonomy developed in *Biennial as Pedagogical Tools* raises the question of adaptability beyond biennials. The toolkit has potential application in projects beyond biennials, such as museums, grassroots projects, and other cultural infrastructures, where it could serve as a dialogical resource for planning and evaluation. Extending its use beyond biennials would test its flexibility while also revealing what might be lost when a tool grounded in biennial practice is translated into other contexts. At stake here is the possibility of reconfiguring how institutions of different scales and forms understand discursive and pedagogical work, and how they might adopt shared frameworks without erasing their situated specificities.

While the scope of the research has been necessarily shaped by two in-depth case studies and the vantage point of an embedded practitioner, its findings open pathways for further inquiry. Comparative studies could test how governance and funding architectures shape the durability of discursive programmes and the conditions of cultural labour. Evaluation methods could be developed to capture affective and

relational impacts that resist metric quantification. The circulation of Southern practices among biennials could be mapped to build a fuller account of situated pedagogical ecologies. The toolkit could be trialled across multiple institutions to generate open protocols for its use. Further studies could also examine the ethics of mediation in relation to precarity, care, authorship, and refusal as infrastructures of discursive practice.

In sum, this thesis has shown that biennials are most consequential when they are understood not only as exhibitions but as infrastructures of learning, relation, and imagination. It contributes a historical and theoretical reframing, a practice-based methodology, and practical instruments that advance scholarship while equipping practitioners to design discursive and pedagogical programmes with clarity, care, and critical ambition. It concludes not with closure but with the recognition that endings are also beginnings. Just as biennials rehearse what might come next through each new edition, this thesis offers its conclusions as an opening for future practice and research.

Alongside this scholarly synthesis, I also propose an alternative conclusion in autotheoretical form. Written from the position of lived experience, it offers a parallel mode of reflection that complements the academic argument by returning to the personal, the affective, and the situated dimensions of this research.

Archaeology of self and auto theory: another conclusion

1

I am Gabriela Saenger Silva, a final-year doctoral student at the Liverpool School of Arts, Arts & Design, within the framework of the Exhibition Research Lab.

Today, I would like to share with you my thoughts on auto-theory and the archaeology of the self, both as a personal journey and as a process of change in my recent academic methodology.

Within the creative framework of academia, those who work with the creation of art objects or concepts can engage their work in a practice-based mode (at least in the UK). You produce something you are specialised in, research this practice, write about it, and then you have a thesis.

Of course, I am simplifying the process, which is much more complex than this. However, when considering data on those who create, we are concerned with how to collect the information we encounter every day, from early morning to the end of the day.

However, I like to say I am doing my PhD in reverse, which is a way of saying I am writing about things that happened to me but that I did not reflect on directly at the time they occurred. My PhD is about the things I have acquired through the accumulation of ideas and experiences that my work has given me. So, my thesis is practice-based, but it is written in a backwards manner. I understood that I could recall those collections of experiences, reflect on them, and turn them into theoretical and critical thinking.

However, to share part of this journey of change and explain why it happened, let us go back ...

2

Around 1984, I got my family into a storm. For months, I could only talk about a new friend. She was bright, kind, funny, and had nice toys. I would walk

through the city and show her places she would like to eat at, where her family used to live, and where her grandparents were. I could trust no one and believed only what she said. I could not accept things that she did not accept. She had a better relationship with her parents, and she could do things I could not do. All this would have been pretty manageable if she hadn't been just an imaginary friend.

3

During the 2016 Liverpool Biennial, the Seychellois Australian artist Danielle Freakley developed a long-term collective performance and installation titled Imaginary Friend. She would ask people visiting the Oratory, an old Catholic ritual site turned into a memorial, to fill out forms with reflections on life, love, and capitalism. They could choose whether to leave their contacts to participate further in the sessions. Three of the mediators that year became interested in the work and started training with the artist on the open dialogues for the work. I think it was only today that I fully understood the complexity of Freakley's proposal regarding how people's solitude and connectivity shape their meanings and beliefs.

4

Raethia was a province established from 15 BC to 476 AD. During the Roman Empire's heyday, it bordered the country of the Helvetii to the west, Noricum to the east, Vindelicia to the north, and Transalpine Gaul and Venetian et Histrian territories to the south. The capital of the province was Augusta Vindelicorum, nowadays known as Augsburg. The Raetian people had an Etruscan background and were relocated to this region after being expelled north from the Po Valley by the Gaul tribes. There are historical conflicts in trying to understand the significant shift in their language, as they abandoned the previous Etruscan-Venetian form when they left the region and adapted to it.

However, the central register of these changes was found near modern Padova, where three major shrines dedicated to the goddess Reitia reveal how Venetian-Etruscan people travelled to the region of the Po River to learn how to read and write, enabling them to create ex-votos. These shrines were places of healing, learning, and worship. Marcel Detienne interprets the name Reitia to mean 'the one who writes', comparing it to the Proto-Germanic word wreitan.

As I read through this, I am in disbelief. Raethia is the name of my imaginary friend.

5

I fiddle between the pages of Fournier's book when it arrives, still a bit shaken by my recent discovery. The delivery arrives on the same day, I discover that Raethia is a goddess, as evidenced by ex-votos – a goddess of writing.

'Autotheory indicates the battles in between politics, aesthetics and ethics in culture and the tensions of transactional and transnational feminisms into the advanced/late capitalism and neoliberal imperatives surrounding the "self."'

I return to my writings to understand whether they align with what the book proposes. Rather than placing them in an autoethnobiography, would this be an understandable shift?

Fournier suggests that autotheory can be applied to works that reflect through writing that exceeds existing genre categories or disciplines – that, beyond the first 'narcissistic' reading it might provoke, the 'self' can function as a strategy to recognise and implement theory.

6

We set the alarm, closed the door, and locked it correctly with the keys. We were to return over the coming days to empty the house, distribute materials, help the archive pack, and organise what remained. I was still a bit in shock, maybe slightly drunk, but certainly with tiredness aching through my body. I

looked up at Carla. She was tearing up. We hugged. We took a few steps up the road in silence until she said, 'We did it, my friend.'

Carla and I are now friends. For ten months, our friendship was forged through trust and collaboration on projects within Casa M. Although we had known each other before, this was a different experience. Casa M was a project that allowed us to experiment and experience things differently – partners of processes both outside and within – challenging the institution, gambling with possibilities, turning the street into a space of celebration between neighbours and as starting points for parades that took over the city.

There is a space between the realisation of these projects that will never be entirely captured: A culmination of the experiment that will remain only in the memories of those who participated and that will fade as we go. The unbearable history of the things we cannot preserve in archives or records. The ruins of what we cannot grasp. The invisible we feel, and we do not.

Because we are often disposed to preserve binary thinking – to trust the idea of one concept opposing another – I have been trying to understand the radical and the invisible as possible dualities: radical because it can be missed. Some things disrupt, discharge, shift, and change, yet they remain hidden, as if doing the same, but quietly. They are not different in outcome, but they move bodies in distinct ways – one from the outside in, the other from the inside out. Regardless of what we fill the reports with, friendship is what remains.

7

On my way to Venice, I decided to visit Este, where the ex-votos for the Reitia shrine are housed in the local historical museum. I walked two hours from the town of Miceles to Este in a kind of self-invented procession. I wanted to experience the shift in landscape from a slow, human perspective – following a side road, quietly absorbing the distance and the terrain.

At the museum reception, I asked questions about the shrines, specifically where precisely they had once been located in the city. When I finally entered the room, I felt an odd sense of curiosity. How had I come up with this name? I called my mother from inside the museum, showing her the small carved faces and the ex-votos. She mumbled, 'Oh my God, Gabriela, those look like your paintings and drawings.'

8

In the recap videos about the beginnings of the São Paulo Biennial's educational programme, 30xBienal, the art historian and curator Aracy do Amaral recounts how she joined the second group of monitors because some friends invited her. She was a journalism student at the time. She began gathering information when an art student friend told her about Pietro Maria Bardi's classes on art history, which prepared candidates for roles as public guides and mediators. It was 1953, and the first edition of the biennial showed the organisers that the public needed support to navigate the Museum of Modern Art Sao Paulo's spaces and engage with the artworks.

This proto-mediation school emerged even before the biennial moved to Ibirapuera Park, where it resides today, and before the foundation that currently organises it had even been created.

9

I never fully understood myself as an artist. Rather, I understand myself as someone artistic or capable of seeing between the visible things and the invisible ones. Being a monitor gave me the chance to perform and create dialogues. Being a producer brought me into contact with people and allowed me to learn the methodologies of various artists. In developing my tools, I was slowly shaping the means to walk forward together with those willing to share the journey.

All this is slowly being transferred into writing. Could this, in the end, be my way of learning how to connect with the goddess?

Maramo Trade Post was a deep learning exercise for the artist Daniel Bozhkov into the Mbya Guarani culture. Bozhkov is one of those open learner artists who tend to incorporate knowledge and people as part of a creative archive, taking those techniques, thoughts, and meetings into account in what is produced at the end of a journey. For this residency process, he asked me to stay for a specific period to help him acquire a couple of words and feel more independent. We brought food for him and the families. And then, he began learning about the threads, processes, and techniques of basket weaving.

This becomes the tree of life.

During the process of building the house in the exhibition space, Bozhkov wanted it to be made by Mbya Guarani hands. That is when Cirilo came on board. Cirilo is the chief of the Mbya Guarani, and a first talk with him made us understand the shock of borders for their nation and the relations embedded in the process of retaking the land. Daniel wanted everything, and Guarani and Cirilo agreed. The tekoá was incorporated in the making of a stick hut in the middle of the exhibition, all crafted by the Mbya people.

However, first, we needed to ask the spirits if they agreed.

So, we went to ask. We went to sleep in the tekoá, and early in the morning, we went to the field to talk to the spirits. Fire was made, we sat, and we remained in silence. Cirilo kept speaking in Guarani, opening the work and conversation with the entities around us. After a couple of minutes of silence, he asked Daniel, 'What would you like to ask?' The artist smiled and said he wanted to ask whether they were willing to let us take what we needed to do his work. And that he excused himself because the position might not be correct, but the intention was.

Seconds of silence and steadiness were broken by a decisive blow between the trees, causing everything around us and our bodies to lurch in surprise.

Cirilo said, 'I think this is a yes.'

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Appendix

6th Mercosul Biennial – The Third Margin

(Porto Alegre, Brazil, 2007)

Role

Producer, Mostra Três Fronteiras

Translator and facilitator within the Pedagogical Programme (symposia, artist meetings, and public activities)

Curatorial Team

Gabriel Pérez-Barreiro (Chief Curator)

Luis Camnitzer (Pedagogical Curator)

Alejandro Cesarco (Curator, *Conversas*)

Inés Katzenstein (Curator, *Zona Franca*)

Luis Enrique Pérez-Oramas (Curator, *Zona Franca*)

Moacir dos Anjos (Curator, *Zona Franca*)

Ticio Escobar (Curator, *Três Fronteiras*)

Dates

Pedagogical Programme initiated in 2006

Biennial held in 2007

Project Focus – Mostra Três Fronteiras

A residency-based exhibition developed at the Brazil–Argentina–Paraguay border region, bringing together four invited artists to produce new works responding to the cultural, political, and social complexity of the region.

7th Mercosul Biennial – Grito e Escuta

(Porto Alegre, Brazil, 2009)

Role

Support in the international selection process of the curatorial team

Coordinator of the Residency Programme (Artistas em Disponibilidade)

Coordination and implementation of residency-based pedagogical projects across multiple sites

Curatorial Team

Victoria Noorthoorn and Camilo Yáñez (Chief Curators)

Marina De Caro (Pedagogical Curator)

Roberto Jacoby, Artur Lescher, Mario Navarro, Laura Lima (Adjunct Curators)

Lenora de Barros (Radiovisual Co-curator)

Residency Programme Production Team (Artistas em Disponibilidade)

Gabriela Silva — Coordination

Adauany Zimovski — Producer

Ana Lúgia Becker — Producer

Júlia Coelho — Producer

Liane Strapazzon — Producer

Potira Preiss — Producer

Dates

Curatorial selection process initiated in 2008

Biennial held: 16 October – 29 November 2009

Pedagogical Programme (Selected Components)

Regional teacher training across Rio Grande do Sul (2008–2009)

Course for mediation training

Public lectures, workshops, and symposia

Free transport and access programmes for schools

Production and distribution of pedagogical materials and publications

Artistas em Disponibilidade (Residency Projects)

- Projeto REDE — João Modé | Santana do Livramento / Rivera; Aceguá / Acegua; Barra do Quaraí / Bella Unión; Quaraí / Artigas
- Oficina de Canções — Rosario Bléfari | São Leopoldo; Teutônia
- Clube do Desenho — Claudia del Río | Santa Maria
- História(s) da Arte – Dicionário de Certezas e Intuições — Diana Aisenberg | Porto Alegre
- Filosofia Política no Ginásio — Diego Melero | Porto Alegre; Canoas; Montenegro
- TDUEPURC #3 – Transposto de um estudo para um retrato comum — Francisco Tomsich; Martín Vergés | Riozinho
- Coleção Vicinal — Gonzalo Pedraza | Caxias do Sul
- Percursos Urbanos – Escuta na Cidade / Ruído na Bienal — Júlio Lira | Porto Alegre
- Projeto Areal – Histórias de Península e Praia Grande / Arranco — Maria Helena Bernardes; André Severo | Tavares; Chuí
- A Grande Troca – um projeto para desejos coletivos — Nicolas Floc’h | Porto Alegre
- Arquitetura Dobrável, laboratório de desenho — Nicolás Paris | Montenegro; Santa Clara do Sul; Estrela
- Você gostaria de participar de uma experiência artística? — Ricardo Basbaum | Pelotas

8th Mercosul Biennial – Geopotehic Reherasal

(Porto Alegre, Brazil, 2011)

Role

Operational Coordinator of the Pedagogical Programme

Coordination of pedagogical operations, including team management, public programme delivery, and institutional articulation

Coordination of projects within Casa M and the Cadernos de Viagem (Travel Notebooks) residencies

Coordination of pedagogical activations and the international seminar Pedagogia no Campo Expandido

Curatorial Team

José Roca — General Curator

Pablo Helguera — Pedagogical Curator

Alexia Tala, Cauê Alves, Paola Santoscoy — Adjunct Curators

Aracy Amaral — Invited Curator

Fernanda Albuquerque — Assistant Curator

Pedagogical Programme Team

Mônica Hoff — General Coordination

Gabriela Saenger Silva — Operational Coordination

Carina Levitan, Liane Strapazzon — Production

Júlia Coelho — Assistant

Teacher Training

Ana Paula Monjeló, Rita Coronel Ribeiro da Rosa — Production

André Rocha, Estêvão Haeser, Diana Kolker Carneiro da Cunha, Jorge Bucksdricker — Educators

Mediation Training

Ethiene Nachtigall — Operational Coordination

Juliana Costa, Karina Finger — Assistants

Rafael Silveira da Silva — EAD Coordination

Gabriela Bon — Technical Assistant (EAD)

Adriana Daccache, Carolina Mendoza, Cláudia Hamerski, Janaína Czolpinski, Juliana Peppl, Karine Storck — Tutors (EAD)

Scheduling and Access

Potira Preiss — Coordination

Márcio Oliveira, Milene Coelho — Supervision

Ana Francisca de Sá Sartori et al. — Scheduling Team

Mediation and Public Engagement

Ethiene Nachtigall — Operational Coordination

Gabriela Geier, Juliana Costa — Assistants

Carla Borba, Janaína Czolpinski, Karina Finger, Roger Prates — Educational Space Coordination

Pedagogical Programme (Selected Components)

Teacher training courses (27 in Porto Alegre; 15 across the state; 1,101 participants)

Mediation training programme (197 mediators)

Distribution of pedagogical materials (13,500 units)

Educational spaces and workshops across exhibition sites (129,177 participants)

International seminars and public debates

Casa M

Council - Alexandre Santos, Camila Gonzatto, Gabriela Motta, Jezebel de Carli, Léo Felipe, Neiva Bohns

Seminars:

- Ensaaios de Geopoética (Opening Seminar)

Focused on territory, geopolitics, and cultural narratives, bringing together international artists, curators, and theorists.

- Pedagogia no Campo Expandido (Closing Seminar)

Examined pedagogy as a relational and expanded field, addressing art, education, and institutional practice.

Participants included educators, curators, and researchers from international institutions.

9th Mercosul Biennial – Weather Permitting

(Porto Alegre, Brazil, 2013)

Role

Production Coordination within the Pedagogical Programme

Production of artist-led projects developed through the pedagogical framework

Coordination of project implementation in dialogue with artists, educators, and local communities

Curatorial Team

Sofía Hernández Chong Cuy — Artistic Director and Chief Curator

Raimundas Malašauskas — Curator of Time

Mônica Hoff — Ground Curator

Bernardo José de Souza — Space Curator

Daniela Pérez, Júlia Rebouças, Sarah Demeuse — Curatorial Cloud Fellows

Dominic Willsdon — Pedagogical Cloud Fellow

Pedagogical Programme Team

Mônica Hoff — General Coordination

Gabriela Saenger Silva — Production

Selected Programme Contributors

Luciane Bucksdricker — Production (Home Inventions)

Carina Levitan — Production (Open Call / School of Invention)

Francesco Settineri — Assistance

Potira Preiss — Networks Pollinator (Cloud Formations)

Diana Kolker Carneiro da Cunha — Mediators of Earth Training

Gabriela Bon — Mediators of Cloud Training

Juliana Peppl — Production

Liege Ferreira — Production

Regina Martins de Castro — Production

Andressa Duarte — Assistance

Fabício Sortica, Karine Storck, Helena Moschoutis, Cláudia Hamerski, Carolina Mendoza, Júlia Brandimiller — Tutors (Distance Learning)

Artistic Projects Developed through the Pedagogical Programme

Ana Laura López de la Torre

Aurélien Gamboni and Sandrine Teixido

Hope Ginsburg

Bik Van der Pol

Pedagogical Programme (Selected Components)

Artist-led projects developed as part of the pedagogical structure

Training programmes for mediators (on-site and distance learning)

Public discussions and field-based conversations (Field Conversations)

Collaborative educational projects such as Projeto Marés

Distributed pedagogical formats including School of Invention and Cloud Formations

Liverpool Biennial 2016 - Episodes

(Liverpool, United Kingdom, 2016)

Role

Mediation Coordinator

Coordination and management of the mediation programme across multiple venues

Coordinator of the City as a School programme

Dates

9 July – 16 October 2016

Leadership and Curatorial Team

Sally Tallant — Director and Co-Curator

Paul Smith — Executive Director

Rosie Cooper - Head of Programmes

Francesca Bertolotti-Bailey- Head of Production and International Projects at Liverpool Biennial

Polly Brannan — Education Curator

Curatorial Faculty

Sandeep Parmar

Steven Cairns

Raimundas Malašauskas

Francesca Bertolotti-Bailey

Francesco Manacorda

Dominic Willsdon

Rosie Cooper

Ying Tan

Joasia Krysa

Liverpool Biennial 2018 - Beautiful world, where are you?

(Liverpool, United Kingdom, 2018)

Role

Mediation Coordinator

Coordinator of the City as a School programme

Coordination of mediation across multiple venues and public sites

Dates

14 July – 28 October 2018

Leadership and Curatorial Team

Sally Tallant — Director and Co-Curator

Paul Smith — Executive Director

Rosie Cooper - Head of Programmes

Francesca Bertolotti-Bailey- Head of Production and International Projects at Liverpool Biennial

Polly Brannan — Education Curator

Curators

Kitty Scott — Co-Curator

Sally Tallant — Co-Curator