

Biennial art and its rituals: value, political economy and artfulness

Panos Kompatsiaris 

School of Media, National Research University Higher School of Economics, Moscow, Russian Federation

ABSTRACT

The visual art of the last decades privileges, explicitly or implicitly, social rather than art historical or aesthetic issues. In sites ranging from university classrooms and journals to museums and biennials, the emphasis is usually put on how effectively art handles the social issues of the day while questions of aesthetic value are often treated as suspicious and ideological. Given this anti-art character in these contexts of mediation, the insistence to perceive the objects as artistic objects constitutes a paradox that has been rarely discussed in sociological terms. This article draws on ethnographic research in order to explore “biennial art” that is to say the art that displayed in contemporary art and international platforms of showcasing. These platforms struggle to maintain a concept of art as social practice while at the same time nurture an exclusive and highbrow environment in which “artfulness” is key. I call this quality artfulness so as to both underline its artificiality as well as the inventiveness and skills required for its production. Artfulness in these sites is enabled through various formal or informal rituals of valorization, including guided tours, curatorial statements, media promoting activities and artist talks. These rituals, positioning certain objects within the sphere of art and producing them as objects meriting aesthetic interpretation, resemble the politics of publicity found in aesthetic capitalism at large.

KEYWORDS



Contemporary art; aesthetics; biennials; politics of art; Rancière; conceptual art; ethnography; art and value

Introduction

The production, circulation and interpretation of the visual art of the last decades in sites ranging from university classrooms and journals to museums and biennials, privileges, explicitly or implicitly, social rather than art historical or aesthetic issues (Roose, Roose, and Daenekindt 2018). It does so to the point that contemporary art’s modes of operation are called “aesthetophobic” (Mackay, Pendrell, and Trafford 2013, 3). This privileging has been the historical outcome of a shift in emphasis in relevant debates, from art’s opticality, or the visual effects that the work produces, to the work’s *social function* within distinct or overlapping contexts of meaning. The denouncing of sight-based apprehension as a modality of art valuation comes both from artistic and theoretical fronts. Indicatively, conceptual art and institutional critique sketch the gallery space as ideological (O’Doherty 1999; Alberro 2003), critical postmodernists portray formalism and expressionism as fostering capitalist and elitist world views (Foster 1983) and art sociology understands the disinterested aesthetic gaze as a constructed and class-based affair (Bourdieu 1984; Wolff 1983; Inglis and Hughson 2005). Moreover, the disinterested gaze of traditional aesthetics reinforces gender, race and class hierarchies by assuming the white, middle-class Man as its ideal viewer (Mulvey 1989; Berger 1972). Given this presumed militantly anti-art character of contemporary art, the insistence to perceive its

products as artistic objects, distinct and – crucially – above ordinary reality, constitutes a paradox that has been hardly discussed in sociological terms.

This paper focuses on the ways this paradox is performed and encountered in the so-called “biennial art” that is to say the art displayed in large-scale international exhibitions, platforms that customarily repudiate formalism and aesthetic elitism in favour of socially engaged questioning. Chosen here as strategic research sites, biennials typically reject what Bourdieu calls an aesthetic or “pure” gaze that demands that the work of art is apprehended “in itself and for itself, as form and not as function” (1987, 202), they are supposed to be looking outwards into the world, they are open-ended, informed and interventionist. Despite this socially exploratory outlook, this paper argues that their “anti-art” ethos assumes artfulness¹ (i.e. exceptionality and mystification) through field-specific rituals conversing with artistic political economy. The latter’s modes of valuation produce fresh patterns of distinction between the “expert” and the “lay” while performing a reconfigured capitalist ethos in which creativity, counterculture and controlled subversion are increasingly capitalized in advanced economies (Boltanski; Chiapello 2005; Mould 2018). The argument here is that despite their persistent denunciation of the ideology of art (and its bourgeois implications), contemporary biennials realize an environment that is equally privileged, exclusive and highbrow. The political economy of artfulness upon which

CONTACT Panos Kompatsiaris  panoskompa@gmail.com  School of Media, National Research University Higher School of Economics, Pokrovka 4, Moscow 101000, Russian Federation

This article has been republished with minor changes. These changes do not impact the academic content of the article.

© 2019 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

these institutions rely refers to the valorization of genius, originality and uniqueness while its rituals to institutionalized formats and language, descriptive labels, guided tours, curatorial statements, display techniques, publicity events, design methods as well as the interpreting, cataloguing, naming and authorizing of art objects.

I advance this argument in light of a recent revitalisation of aesthetic discourse in critical art theory partly motivated by the work of the renowned French philosopher Jacques Rancière.² Succinctly Rancière (2004, 2007, 2009a, 2009b, 2013), and the literature around his thesis (e.g. Malik and Phillips 2011), argues against the delegation of aesthetics to the domain of the “enemy” of critical discourse, promoting instead the idea that modern art grapples with political questions precisely through aesthetics or what he notably calls its aesthetic regime (Rancière 2004, 2013). This concept refers to the rise of a historically defined arrangement/assemblage of “perception, sensation and interpretation of art” (2013, x), emerging with the French Revolution, whose subject is the “people” (2009a, 37), rather than the aristocracy, and which welcomes the prosaic, the vulgar, the unworthy and the ordinary as tropes of artistic experimentation (Rancière 2009a, 36, 2013, x). Art in biennials is then identified *as* art in the context of this regime. The very *specificity* of art amidst the elevation of anything(ness) to potential artistic material relates precisely to its capacity to alter the familiar in a way that dislocates and *alternates* our very perception of this familiar. The ideal non-retinal art piece, the readymade, to take an extreme yet telling example, performs an “alteration of resemblance”³ since it alienates an ordinary object from its typical appearance and invites us to see it in another appearance (Rancière 2007, 6). For Rancière then, alteration, discrepancy and dissemblance of (what appears as) the real, rather than direct opposition to its regularities is then what makes art *art* (Rancière 2007, 7).

Here I would argue that, although poignant, this renewed discourse around aesthetics may overlook art’s relations of production as well as the inequalities, distinctions and labour forms these relations harbour. To start with, the alteration of reality in biennials and other contemporary art spaces does not come about organically; instead, it depends on the aforementioned rituals and the staging of an apparatus of communication that should provide valid justifications about the fact that an artwork indeed performs this alteration. In turn, this communicative apparatus (what Rancière elsewhere calls “exegetical discourse”, hinting to the near religiosity characterizing the field [2007, 29]), can be “properly decoded” by the cultured milieus and their gatekeepers and further used as symbolic capital in conversations, presentations and other “performances of the self” (Van Dijck 2013). The valorization of art *as* art then follows patterns of valuation found in the aesthetic economy at large in which the practice of “staging” atmospheres or milieus assumes paramount importance (Böhme 2003, 2013). As part of aesthetic

work, staging consists of “activities aimed at giving things, human beings, towns and landscapes an *appearance* or *look*, endowing them with a *radiance* or *glow*, an atmosphere, or producing an atmosphere within ensembles” (Böhme 2017, 20). Paying attention to this apparatus of alteration and the atmospheres it creates can reveal how rituals of production in these sites inform the ways through which biennial art is performed as a productive activity.

I draw on material from the ethnographic research I carried out in contemporary art biennials in Europe from 2010 to 2017. During this time a rising anti-neoliberal structure of feeling in Europe and beyond often forced biennials to assume an even more political and anti-art role.⁴ I conducted around 30 interviews with biennial participants (artists, curators, volunteers) in 2 exhibitions, in the 3rd Athens Biennale (2011) and the Berlin Biennale (2012), and was present in numerous informal discussions and various modes of socializing with art professionals with informed or less informed public taking place in openings, talks and personal interactions of many other biennials within that period.

The umbrella term “contemporary art biennials” signifies international, periodical and group exhibitions of contemporary art which are recurrently taking place in a specific city or locale and are expected to show the latest cutting-edge art in the global arena. These exhibitions, immensely proliferating in the past 25 years all over the globe in diverse ways, largely differ in their ambitions depending on their funding, location, credibility and reputation. Despite differences, a biennial is regularly ran, administered and curated by graduates of major international art schools trained to group and conceptualize objects by varyingly performing the “new” in contemporary art; the “new” in terms of ideas, works, directions, debates, themes as well as design and promotion practices. Biennials are thus chosen as strategic contexts of mediation for tackling the question of the “contemporary” in contemporary art, sites in which the various actors comprising them engage in everyday rituals in order to make valuable what may appear as non-evident to outsiders.

In the first section of this paper, I present a relevant ethnographic “moment” followed by a discussion on artistic value and exceptionalism from a post-Bourdieuian framework. This discussion departs from the dominant constructionist tradition of cultural sociology favouring a turn to questions of affect and aesthetics from a more grounded angle than Rancière’s philosophical aesthetics (e.g. Born 2010; De La Fuente 2007; Fox 2015). This approach, the “new sociology of art” (De La Fuente 2007), I will argue, is better accustomed to provide analytical insights on the ways that art objects are valorized and move us (partly) via this valorization. In the next two sections, I explore the rituals of alteration of objects from “non-art” to “art” in recent (overtly politicized) art biennials as well as the political economies and

signs of distinction these rituals inform. I conclude by arguing for paying more attention on the ways that biennials and similar spectacles relate to aesthetic capitalism as platforms of visibility, PR, self-branding and networking.

Exceptionalism and the valuation of art

In an afternoon of late 2011, Mirto, a tour guide volunteering in the 3rd Athens Biennale was trying to convince her audience that a conceptual art piece was indeed art rather than another everyday object. The work's "artfulness", insisted Mirto, was to be found in the value of the idea, rather than on the tangible, visual qualities of the object itself. The idea, here, was a series of instructions that the artist Liam Gillick gave to assistants and volunteers of the Biennale; he ordered them to draw stripes on one of the exhibition's walls in the hue of Coca-Cola colours without having consumed the beverage for the past 48 hours. Commenting on the transferability and intangibility of contemporary artworks, Gillick conceived *Inside Now We Walked into a Room with Coca-Cola Coloured Walls* in 1998 and presented it in this manner in many exhibitions around the world. For conceptual art then, the tour guide continued, it is most principally the "idea" that matters; one needs to grasp it in order to appreciate it as art. Yet her audience, consisting of members of the public with little prior exposure to conceptual art, was not entirely convinced by this justification; art for them was something that you appreciate by seeing and by admiring some kind of palpable skill or technique that constitutes it as such.

By attempting to win over the audience's distrust, Mirto's descriptive statements (of "what is conceptual art" and "how it should be viewed") displayed, at the same time, a strong performative aspect. She suggested to a lay public a different modality of thinking about art and thus implied that, in order to appreciate art, this public needs to be able to grasp the concept in its context; to think, perhaps, like a sociologist, albeit with less epistemic rigour. Apart from presenting the exhibition and its works then, this guiding performance embarked on staging both a ritual of valuation, a ritual of convincing the public that what they see is exceptional, valuable, worthy and meriting investigation or contemplation, as well as a mode of aesthetic appreciation that privileges the intellect rather than the eye.

Later, in a personal talk, Mirto praised the exhibition for being "engaged" and being "within the collapse" – meaning the socio-economic collapse of the country brought about by the financial crisis – instead of simply showing beautiful objects. Mirto's reading of the show is symptomatic of a larger tendency within contemporary art milieus in which art has to intervene in the public sphere as a form of social practice. Biennials should grasp the moment, intervene and make statements rather than

be self-referential. Proposing an identity for the new biennials founded in the 1990s and 2000s (such as Athens Biennale, Berlin Biennale, Istanbul Biennale, Bucharest Biennale, Liverpool Biennale and many others), Manifesta, a mobile European biennial, assured to the public in its first edition in Rotterdam in 1996 that "you will not find paintings or monumental sculptures, you will not see a traditional presentation, it will not be a form of art involved only with itself".⁵ A year later, *documenta X* was the first blockbuster show to institutionalize this mode of address, sought to engage in open, exploratory formats inspired by Marxism, post-colonial literature and feminism rather than art history or aesthetics. In these attempts the exhibition is conceived as a site of dialogue and unorthodox pedagogies which are conceived and facilitated by the curators and the assistance of philosophers, social scientists, anthropologists, sociologists, political activists, historical figures and the militants.

Repeating the concerns raised earlier, one may ask then why these sites are still called art exhibitions and not social forums or gatherings, or what differentiates them from these other activities? How is the traditional category of art that refers to exceptional objects made by gifted individuals communicated within these environments? And, to refer back to Rancière, how are the alterations to reality that these exceptional objects produce perceived as such and by whom?

Cultural sociology, dominated by the "father-figures" of Raymond Williams, Pierre Bourdieu and Howard Becker, typically regards the exceptionalism of art objects upon which aesthetic valuation relies a historical invention, constructed and socially mediated, rather than as an intrinsic quality of the objects themselves (Wolff 1983; Maanen 2010; Inglis and Hughson 2005). The effect of exceptionalism can be produced, for instance, through an array of display and design methods (Geismar 2001), coordinated efforts of the commercial art system (Velthuis 2013), milieus of critics (Baumann 2007), or other, formal or informal, technologies of valuation (Lamont 2012). In the field of visual arts, the very act of *display* can generate the exceptional status of objects (and therefore institutional legitimation) as well as the contexts within which this display takes place having to do with their respective status, prestige and reputation. This can be traced back to the progenitors of the modern art museum. The cabinet of curiosities, for example, is a precursor of the value regimes associated with the modern art museum both in its display techniques as well as in the organization and classification of objects as parts of larger collections (Putnam 2009, 36). The displayed objects become exceptional by being displayed, they convey the qualities of novelty, rarity and oddity (something that haven't been seen or said before) and, as parts of specific histories, are expected to inform the audience, whether in terms of beauty, goodness or morality.

The emphasis of sociology and art theory on the constructed character of this exceptionalism has been recently challenged from within art sociology (albeit more for its socio-political relevancy rather than its methodological rigour). First, Georgina Born (2010) (and others, such as De La Fuente 2007; Fox 2015) argue that art sociology cannot afford ignoring the ways that art objects “move” us in certain ways, staging affective and creative possibilities to the users and publics. Criticizing Bourdieu for reducing the artistic field to a series of power games, Born draws on Alfred Gell’s anthropological account that stresses the forms of agency and affect that these objects unleash in our encounters with them. In a similar vein, although from a different viewpoint, Dave Beech (2016) argues that the consistent effort to debunk art’s exceptionalism in the humanities and social sciences resembles in many ways the ways that neo-classical economics strip art of its aesthetic value and reduce it to economic affairs. Beech then argues that art *is* exceptional and distinct from other spheres of life in capitalism insofar as the labour expended for its production is not entirely subsumed to the capitalist wage labour.

These critiques are better accustomed to inform questions of affect than their counterparts in philosophical aesthetics. They do so *from within* the idea of art as an invented and privileged field of practice, pointing to the need to consider the multifaceted ways that objects legitimized as art enables forms of life by thinking through the different temporalities of their production. Yet biennial art adds another layer in this discussion as by being so intimately linked to academic discourses, it not only takes the task for itself to repudiate art’s exceptionalism as a bourgeois affair but derives cultural capital precisely for this repudiation. This staging then becomes a form of *ideology* insofar as it obscures itself behind a self-reflexive and experimental rhetoric.

This ideology often becomes a necessity for safeguarding artistic autonomy in the context of the hectic development of digital visual culture. To both question and expand on the idea of art as alteration found in Rancière then, we can argue that within a post-conceptual and post-digital universe, the production of artfulness becomes an almost urgent matter as uniqueness becomes less and less evident as a direct visual experience, as an experience of the immediacy of the eye (Joselit 2013; Groys 2006). Contemporary art then increasingly relies on rituals of valuation for explaining its uniqueness to the uninitiated, rituals that would convince the public that what they see is made by gifted individuals and that these objects have the power to say something new and novel about the world. These rituals, as argued here, ranging from tour guides, public talks, curatorial interventions, the production of visual material, design practices and social media promotion strive to uphold art’s specific aesthetic

regime in the context of art’s “primary commitment to the conceptual” (Zepke 2006, 157), not through an emphasis on the gaze but on the word; the structured argument, the cutting-edge language, the balanced phrasing, the educated statement that would imaginatively position works within contexts. The term “context” is key as the constant blending of highbrow aesthetics with popular culture taking place in these events has to be understood in its contemporariness, within temporal and spatial frameworks. The capacity to contextualize and make sense of this blending, to make sense of the “concept”, is then a principal sign of distinction. In other words, to return to Bourdieu (1980), as we shall explore below, the artfulness of a biennial has to be scripted and performed, and this performance has to be convincing in its claim that what we see is indeed art.

Biennials between art and anti-art

The tensions between the simultaneous repudiation and embracing of artfulness in biennials came profoundly to the foreground with the economic crisis of 2008 as well as the social movements (Occupy Wall Street, 15M, Indignados) that subsequently rose especially between 2010 and 2012. This was a time when contemporary art was dominated by what Day *et al.* call an “anti-neoliberal structure of feeling” (Day, Edwards, and Mabb 2010, 148), provoking the rise of art strikes, direct actions and protests against free labour and unpaid internships (for a detailed account of these practices see McKee 2016). The biennial scene was not left untouched by the rise of a new style of making art, the Occupy style (McKee 2016). It frequently got boycotted and castigated for its hypocritical and contradictory engagement with both activism and political and economic power (Kompatsiaris 2017). At the same time, as we shall see below, it produced some of its most “radical” exhibitions, bringing together art, activism and critical theory.

This left-leaning radicalisation was apparent in more than one way. Somewhat surprisingly, in the first General Assembly of the International Biennial Foundation in 2014, an organisation that promotes networking among professionals, the keynote speaker argues for the necessity to use these events as activist ventures by referring to left-wing or revolutionary thinkers, including Zygmunt Bauman, Michel Foucault, Antonio Gramsci and even Vladimir Lenin.⁶ Admittedly, not in many other professional fields, one could find a keynote speaker in high profile networking events using Bolshevik and communist thinkers to rationalise the field’s practice. The biennial, here, was not discussed through art historical references or the traditional aesthetic categories but in its capacity to intervene to social problems. To bring some recent examples of curatorial framings of biennials, the curator of the 2015 Venice Biennale Okwui Enwezor

suggested that the Biennale's aim is to "make sense of the current upheaval" through mobilizing "material, symbolic or aesthetic, political or social acts"⁷ (notice how the "aesthetic" is one adjective among others). One of the main events of this blockbuster show was the daily reading of the whole Marx's *Capital*, with Enwezor suggesting, by quoting Louis Althusser and Etienne Balibar, that "it is essential to read Capital to the letter", that we should "read the text itself, complete, all four volumes, line by line, to return ten times to the first chapters [...]"⁸ (2015). In 2017, in the 14th Documenta edition, the curator Adam Szymczyk announced that the aim of the exhibition is to make a "political statement" castigating the "neoliberal war machine" with its "neo-colonial, patriarchal, heteronormative order of power and discourse" (2017, 22–26). It is remarkable that these statements do not appear in some activist gatherings, social centres or squats, but in the most rich and prestigious art institutions in the art world that attract enormous flows of power and capital.

The two biennials that were the main subject of my research, as well as a number of other biennials, conceived themselves precisely as such activist incubators rather than aesthetic containers. The 3rd Athens Biennale opened in October 2011, in a particularly heated day where massive demonstrations against austerity of around 500.000 people took place in the city. Portraying this situation in desperate terms, the biennial promised to engage in forms of social protest and be a space of civic engagement where activists would organize and network. One Greek curator announced in the press conference that "this is not exactly the biennial, what we have done is that something that goes along with times" by mobilizing the figure of Walter Benjamin as the guiding figure of the show (since his thought was supposed to reflect the current failure of artists and intellectuals to engage with the realities of the crisis). In turn, the 7th Berlin Biennale, held in the spring and summer of 2012, staged a hyper-activist platform, involving the mobilization of Occupy activists and radical groups that camped in the exhibition space for its whole duration, expressing the desire to bypass the aesthetic (understood as reflection) and become real (understood as action) (Kompatsiaris 2014, 2017). The curator of this biennial rebuked the art establishment, as for him, "all art is now a spectacle", a depoliticized spectacle serving "the individual careers of the artists", promising that what is going to be pursued in this biennial will be an "effective engagement with material issues: unemployment, impoverishment, poverty" (Żmijewski 2012, 10–18).

However, both these events had to stage themselves as something exceptional and different than the "real world" (and when they failed to do so they were suspiciously viewed by the art world). First, the objects in their premises had to be inserted within the political economy of art, meaning that the works in display, in catalogues or

in other promotional material, were accompanied by labels with the artists' names and often their biographies; they were attributed to singular creators who would put them in their CVs and (possibly) in their gallery catalogues. They were then presented as clearly individualized, marketed objects rather than collective or activist creations. As a case in point, a participant working in the Berlin Biennale told me that the main curator of the show, in a possible crisis of self-reliability, willing to distance himself from the usual, aestheticized shows, decided to remove all labels next to the works before the opening. However, after receiving strong pressure from the institution, which had a reputation to defend, the curator had to reverse his decision and insert back the works into the aesthetic economy through which the audiences (and collectors) can make sense of art. To refer to the *Capital's* reading above in Venice Biennale, this was not set up by some radical reading group but organized by the artist Isaac Julien and communicated in reviews and other sites as Julien's artwork, a performance by the title *Oratorio*. This reading of Marx was inserted within the political economy of art and was traded as a currency in the artistic marketplace through which Julien's oeuvre will be appreciated in the future. Similarly, to bring the example of another recent oppositional work, Sanja Iveković's *Monument to Revolution* appeared in Documenta 14 in 2017 as homage to Rosa Luxembourg and a stage "for workers' rights, women's rights, and class struggle"⁹. However, the staging of class struggle was an artwork presented to an audience, perceived in reference to the poetic and political explorations of Iveković's past work, rather than some actual protest or strike.

Furthermore, in the biennials I conducted research, there was a concealing of the fact that the physical labour related to the artefacts exhibited in them may have been outsourced to professional design firms or taken place as a collective enterprise (Petry 2011). Openly revealing this information to the public would be embarrassing and would challenge the idea of the original work and the genius artist who is supposed to implement a unique, creative vision. None of the works would have a price tag next to them so that they appear as invaluable and beyond financial calculation, despite the fact that they are traded in higher prices precisely because of their display in these sites. For contemporary art milieus then this concealing functions as what the anthropologist Michael Herzfeld calls "cultural intimacy", involving "those aspects of a cultural identity that are considered a source of external embarrassment but that nevertheless provide insiders with their assurance of common sociality" (2014, 3). The conscious or unconscious sidestepping of this information constitutes a ritual of valuation, a ritual that reproduces the mythical status of art and the artist, or the belief in art as something exceptional in Bourdieu's terms.

However, while the price is not openly shown, value for the works and the participants is produced indirectly and many times behind the scenes. After the press conference of the 3rd Athens Biennale, the main Greek curator took for himself the role of guiding one of the wealthiest Greek contemporary art collector around the exhibition in an obvious effort to consolidate bonds with the special guest that could offer future symbolic and economic capital to the Biennale (or to himself). Or, when an artist friend was invited to perform in *Documenta 14*, she informed me that two of her works were immediately bought by collectors, who would expect that her work's value increase in the future as a result of her participation in this prestigious event. In the above senses, although repudiated, there is a latent political economy of the aesthetic, of works of art being perceived as unique objects and artists as geniuses, regulating the workings of these "anti-aesthetic" shows.

This type of ritualistic valuation is often revealed through its absence. To bring another example, during a public talk in *Documenta 14* in Athens in 2017, members of the audience complained against the curatorial decision to not use descriptive labels which could both briefly describe and interpret the works. Without these labels, the works seemed incomprehensible and could hardly be appreciated (note the paradox here) aesthetically as art objects. Again, the loss of immediacy and self-evidence that they eye could ensure requires rituals (e.g. in this case writing descriptions and appropriate framings of the objects) which would convert the common to its alteration. While the curatorial decision to not use these labels privileged a return to the "visual", this was perceived as an empty gesture insofar as the visual was not a sufficient explanatory device in respect to the artfulness of the work. Again here, the visual encounter cannot produce the uniqueness of the object. This is not to say that the exhibited works lost their value because of the absence of descriptive material (in the end they were exhibited in *documenta*) but to emphasize the mediations expected and required to compensate for what the eye alone could not ensure.

Activism as art

The main project of the 7th Berlin Biennale was to invite social activists that were involved in the Occupy movement to camp in its premises. The activists would use the infrastructure, equipment and symbolic capital of the Biennale and the KW – the art centre organizing the show – for organizing international networking and resistant actions against austerity, nationalism and neo-liberal politics. This invitation was meant to radically challenge the role of the Biennale as aesthetic container and turn it into a space that would produce real effects in society. This was the desire of the activists themselves who by being aware of the danger of the public viewing them as a kind of "living work of art", they hanged

a huge banner above their tents telling to the audience that "*this is not a museum, this is your action space*". Yet this very invitation could not avoid conversing with the artistic political economy from which the Biennale depends and upon which it capitalises. One Occupy participant confessed to me that although they were planning to subvert their prescribed roles as entertainers of the visitors, eventually, before the opening, she and the others in the Occupy team "were in a kind of stress", wondering what they were going to show to the art crowds flocking by hundreds, curious to investigate the latest aesthetic proposition of the Berlin Biennale. The art experts entering the space at the opening night would perceive the social movement as a work of art in itself and would attempt to contextualize it within the recent art-world trends, the city of Berlin or the current political condition, involving austerity and the social movements.

This would necessarily turn the event into a platform upon which forms of cultural distinction are played out. The ones possessing the necessary cultural capital to grasp the concept to read the invitation to "occupy" aesthetically and connect it to prevalent art discourses or art practices of the past would be in a more privileged position to comment upon the show and convince the others for the legitimacy of their views. They would be the ones "seeing" art more accurately. Thus, the presence of the Occupy was communicated in the press as a curatorial gesture of some auteur-like significance. The gesture was read back in relation to the curator's past artistic work (he was an artist) and was judged accordingly as a "continuation", a "break" and so on. Thus, read in these terms, the show, for the overwhelming majority of the art critics and commentators, was aestheticizing resistance rather than making resistance real. The label of the "human zoo" was attached in a derogatory way to the exhibition from its first days, according to which the exhibition uncannily resembled early colonial shows of "human rarities". The activists were here the "savages", exhibited to middle-class, educated and bourgeois public. Thus, to bring one example among countless others supporting this narrative, the curatorial idea to invite the activists, according to one critic, "seemed to commit the usual mistake, namely, replacing the experience of a social struggle with its representation" (Kopernika 2013, para, 9). By a priori labelling the activists in the Biennale as a representation of social struggle, rather than a "real" social struggle, this and other critics distinguish themselves from the participants or the audiences who may "misrecognize" it as something actual or real. Similarly to those who had a "trained eye" in the past, the ones possessing the capacity of conceptual and contextual thinking are here the guardians of the cultural capital achieving forms of recognition as legitimate art commentators.

But cultural distinction was also performed in this Biennale in terms of class differentiation deriving from

unequal degrees of cultural capital. As an informant told me, the middle-class personnel of the KW, which was used to work with artists and other creatives, was terrified when they heard that activists from Spain and other places will be camping inside the venue for almost three months. As a case in point, towards the end of the show, some activists, newcomers from Spain, sprayed an artwork because they mistook it for a corporate advertisement. The artwork, a huge banner put on display by the curator himself, was, in fact, a real advertisement of the Egyptian mobile company *Mobinil* praising the 2011 Egyptian revolution. During the revolution, the same company cut off its service following government orders. The curators displayed this advertisement not for promoting the company but for the exact opposite reason: for reminding its hypocritical and opportunistic role to the public in its attempt to capitalise on the revolution after it happened. Not able to decipher this conceptual move, the activists mistook it as a real advertisement rather than a conceptual artwork and defaced it. The KW then wished to charge them with several thousand euros for destroying the work and one of the institution's external walls. Similar incidents of cultural distinction, between those who could grasp the concept and those who could not, were made obvious because of this Biennale's inclusion of several communities which were uninitiated or indifferent to the rituals of contemporary art (such as the Palestinian community in Berlin, the Brazilian taggers and so on).

The tensions between reality and its representation culminated in the last days of the show as the curator got involved in an open conflict with the institution organizing the exhibition. As the curator remarked in a personal talk, the KW could not afford "reality" entering the space of representation as its art-world vested interests were at stake. Indeed, the next Berlin Biennale edition toned down this rhetoric and practice in an effort to possibly forget the violent intrusion of reality within the institution's artfulness.

Concluding remarks

At least in the realm of contemporary art, the capacity of art to be an alteration of what we perceive as real is not given. The communicative apparatus of artfulness has to take into account how the mainstreaming of conceptual art strategies creates a logical gap that needs to be filled; the immediacy of the eye has to be replaced by words and other communicative means. The dematerialization of the art object and the subsequent rearrangement of the techniques and skills required to produce it is a process that goes hand in hand with the development of modern visual art since the nineteenth century. This "logical gap" however referred to above was nowhere more obvious than in the rise of conceptual art and its anti-aesthetic and anti-retinal objects, where "politics of publicity" had

to grow as art's necessary supplement (Alberro, 2003). Conceptual art emerged at a moment of advanced capitalism where advertising and media appeared as dominant cultural mediators and when the "new economies of aesthetic value" they informed were conversing with politicized counter-cultures of the 1960s (Alberro 2003, 3). Thus, by being incorporated into the artistic mainstream through biennials and other "serious" artistic sites the conceptual art ethos is both triumphant and failed.

Peter Osborne refers to another failure, that of the "absolute anti-aesthetic" dimension of conceptual art, and more specifically of the program of pure conceptualism associated with the group *Art and Language* in the 1960s (2013, 49). Rather than being a failure in the sense of producing nothing in the field of art, the pure anti-aesthetic makes visible a limit that art cannot surpass unless it wants to abolish its institutional status. While this (Hegelian) interpretation of failure as being dialectically constructing art's self-awareness may be useful for another discussion, this paper, drawing on ethnographic material, focused on how the rituals of uniqueness, genius and authenticity are performed in sites that typically embrace social engagement and an anti-art ethos. The paratextual mechanisms of these rituals strive to preserve both the political economy of artfulness as well as forms of cultural distinction.

Unless one ultimately keeps a firmly idealist approach to art, however the splitting of the world into art and non-art does not come about organically. Why, to go back to the example with Mirto the tour guide, a painted wall in some random stripes should be seen as an object providing a vantage point through which "reality" is viewed in a different way? To claim that this object is an alteration of reality, meriting investigation through an inspective and reflexive gaze, more than, say, an internet meme is, is not evident; it has to be argued for. This argumentation, implicitly or explicitly, performs a form of work in the context of the aesthetic economy, whose purpose is to explain, rationalize and create a stage, whose looks, appearance and atmosphere would convince the uninitiated that they are dealing with some highly intellectualized activity beyond "ordinary" understanding. This work is productive insofar as it recasts a system-specific rationality upon which artistic valuations and evaluations are performed. Consisting on acts of justification and rationalization of art's social function in respect to system-specific conventions (e.g. of genius, uniqueness, novelty), this productive activity is not a free-floating exercise but is grounded on a social and historically conditioned apparatus of communication and sense perception that goes under the label of art. And since it is productive work, in the sense of valorizing a field of practice and its objects, we can argue that before embarking on discussions about the exceptional character of art in political economy, one needs to consider

the mundane and ordinary ways through which art institutions perform this assumed alternation of ordinariness in the first place.

Notes

1. I have chosen to call this quality “artfulness” to both refer to its artificial character as well as underline that there are forms of labour, skills and systematic techniques required for its production.
2. We need here to add that this trend also draws on discussions around speculative aesthetics, posthumanism and the Anthropocene, that is to say issues and theoretical concepts that are little related to Rancière.
3. Elsewhere Rancière speaks about the “foreignness of aesthetic experience” (2009b, 47), “the metamorphoses, [...] the politics founded on the play of exchanges and displacements between the art world and that of non-art” (2009b, 51).
4. After its marginalization and contempt for reproducing hierarchies of class, gender and race in the wake of postmodernism and the subsequent rise of socially engaged art practices, recent art theoretical debates reclaim the notion of “aesthetics” in a more positive way (e.g. Osborne 2013; Beech 2013). Whether post-conceptual or speculative, aesthetics in such debates mostly refers to a type of “science” through which contemporary artworks can be read, analysed or gauged vis-a-vis the surrounding “social reality”. I would here argue how the maintenance of this “aesthetic look” is both a built-in mechanism of gallery display not only in its white cube guises (O’Doherty 1999) but also in its more experimental formats. This condition, the “aesthetic condition”, is bound with value judgements (this is art/or this is not art/this is valuable art and so on) and thus is performatively built through practices of repetition that generate belief (Bourdieu 1984).
5. This comes from the announcement of Manifesta 1 (June 9–19 August 1996, Rotterdam). The whole statement can be found at the following address: <http://www.manifesta.org/manifesta1/index.html>.
6. The full speech can be found at the following link https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XVO7T2_Bf3o.
7. <http://www.labiennale.org/en/art/2015/intervento-di-okwui-enwezor>.
8. *Ibid.*
9. <http://www.documenta14.de/en/venues/15303/avdi-square>.

Notes on contributor

Panos Kompatsiaris (PhD, University of Edinburgh, 2015) is assistant professor of art and media at the National Research University Higher School of Economics in Moscow. He has published on art biennials and politics in various journals and edited volumes, including a monograph titled “The Politics of Contemporary Art Biennials” (Routledge, 2017). He is currently co-editing a volume on the sociology of creativity (Springer) and a special journal issue on art and value (Journal of Cultural Economy).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

ORCID

Panos Kompatsiaris  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-2452-6109>

References

- Alberro, A. 2003. *Conceptual Art and the Politics of Publicity*. Cambridge MA: MIT Press.
- Baumann, S. 2007. *Hollywood Highbrow: From Entertainment to Art*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
- Beech, A. 2013. “Art and Its “Science”.” In *Speculative Aesthetics*, edited by R. Mackay, L. Pendrell, and J. Trafford, 9–20. Berlin: Urbanomic.
- Beech, D. 2016. *Art and Value: Art’s Economic Exceptionalism in Classical, Neoclassical and Marxist Economics*. Amsterdam: Brill.
- Berger, J. 1972. *Ways of Seeing*. London: British Broadcasting Corporation and Penguin Books.
- Böhme, G. 2003. “Contribution to the Critique of the Aesthetic Economy.” *Thesis Eleven* 73 (1): 71–82. doi:10.1177/0725513603073001005.
- Böhme, G. 2013. “The Art of the Stage Set as a Paradigm for an Aesthetics of Atmospheres” *Ambiances: Environnement Sensible, Architecture et Espace Urbain* [online]. <https://journals.openedition.org/ambiances/315>
- Böhme, G. 2017. *Critique of Aesthetic Capitalism*. Milan: Mimesis International.
- Boltanski, L., and E. Chiapello. 2005. *The New Spirit of Capitalism*. London: Verso.
- Born, G. 2010. “The Social and the Aesthetic: For a Post-Bourdieuian Theory of Cultural Production.” *Cultural Sociology* 4 (2): 171–208. doi:10.1177/1749975510368471.
- Bourdieu, P. 1980. “The Production of Belief: Contribution to an Economy of Symbolic Goods.” *Media, Culture & Society* 2 (3): 261–293. doi:10.1177/016344378000200305.
- Bourdieu, P. (1984) *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*.
- Bourdieu, P. 1987. “The Historical Genesis of a Pure Aesthetic.” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 46: 201–210. doi:10.2307/431276.
- Day, G., S. Edwards, and D. Mabb. 2010. “What Keeps Mankind Alive?: The Eleventh International Istanbul Biennial. Once More on Aesthetics and Politics.” *Historical Materialism* 18 (4): 135–171. doi:10.1163/156920610X550631.
- De La Fuente, E. 2007. “The New Sociology of Art’: Putting Art Back into Social Science Approaches to the Arts.” *Cultural Sociology* 1 (3): 409–425. doi:10.1177/1749975507084601.
- Enwezor, O. 2015. “‘Introduction’ in *All World’s Futures*. Contemporary Art Biennial: Venice.” Accessed 01 March 2019. <http://www.labiennale.org/en/art/2015/intervento-di-okwui-enwezor>
- Foster, H. 1983. “The Expressive Fallacy.” *Art in America* 71 (1): 80–83.
- Fox, N. 2015. “Creativity, Anti-Humanism and the ‘New Sociology of Art’.” *Journal of Sociology* 51 (3): 522–536. doi:10.1177/1440783313498947.
- Geismar, H. 2001. “What’s in a Price? an Ethnography of Tribal Art at Auction.” *Journal of Material Culture* 6 (1): 25–47. doi:10.1177/135918350100600102.
- Groys, B. 2006. “The Fate of Art in the Age of Terror.” In *Concerning War: A Critical Reader*, edited by M. Hlavajova and J. Winder. Utrecht and Frankfurt: BAK/Revolver, 88–103.

- Herzfeld, M. 2014. *Cultural Intimacy: Social Poetics in the Nation-State*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Inglis, D., and J. Hughson. 2005. *The Sociology of Art: Ways of Seeing*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Joselit, D. 2013. *After Art*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Kompatsiaris, P. 2014. "Curating Resistances: Ambivalences and Potentials of Contemporary Art Biennials." *Communication, Culture & Critique* 7 (1): 76–91. doi:10.1111/cccr.12039.
- Kompatsiaris, P. 2017. *The Politics of Contemporary Art Biennials: Spectacles of Critique, Theory and Art*. London and New York: Taylor & Francis.
- Kopernika, O. 2013. "Administered Occupation: Art and Politics at the 7th Berlin Biennale." *ArtJournal*. Accessed 02 March 2019. <http://artjournal.collegeart.org/?p=3457>
- Lamont, M. 2012. "Toward a Comparative Sociology of Valuation and Evaluation." *Annual Review of Sociology* 38: 201–221. doi:10.1146/annurev-soc-070308-120022.
- Maanen, H. 2010. *How to Study Art Worlds: On the Societal Functioning of Aesthetic Values*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.
- Mackay, R., L. Pendrell, and J. Trafford. 2013. "Introduction." In *Speculative Aesthetics*, edited by R. Mackay, L. Pendrell, and J. Trafford, 1–6. Berlin: Urbanomic.
- Malik, S., and A. Phillips. 2011. "The Wrong of Contemporary Art: Aesthetics and Political Indeterminacy." In *Reading Rancière: Critical Dissensus*, edited by Paul Bowman and Richard Stamp, 111–128. London: Continuum.
- McKee, Y. 2016. *Strike Art: Contemporary Art and the Post-Occupancy Condition*. London: Verso Books.
- Mould, O. 2018. *Against Creativity*. London: Verso Books.
- Mulvey, L. 1989. *Visual and Other Pleasures*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- O' Doherty, B. 1999. *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Osborne, P. 2013. *Anywhere or Not at All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art*. London: Verso.
- Petry, M. 2011. *The Art of Not Making: The New Artist/Artisan Relationship*. London: Thames & Hudson.
- Putnam, J. 2009. *Art and Artifact: The Museum as Medium*. London: Thames & Hudson.
- Rancière, J. 2004. *The Politics of Aesthetics*. Norfolk: Gabriel Rockhill.
- Rancière, J. 2007. *The Future of the Image*. London: Verso.
- Rancière, J. 2009a. "Contemporary Art and the Politics of Aesthetics." In *Communities of Sense: Rethinking Aesthetics and Politics*, edited by B. Hinderliter, V. Maimon, J. Mansoor, and S. McCormick, 31–50. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Rancière, J. 2009b. *Aesthetics and Its Discontents*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Rancière, J. 2013. *Aisthesis: Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art*. London: Verso.
- Roose, H., W. Roose, and S. Daenekindt. 2018. "Trends in Contemporary Art Discourse: Using Topic Models to Analyze 25 Years of Professional Art Criticism." *Cultural Sociology* 12 (3): 303–324. doi:10.1177/1749975518764861.
- Suhail, M., and A. Phillips. 2011. "The Wrong of Contemporary Art: Aesthetics and Political Indeterminacy." In *Critical Dissensus: Reading Rancière*, edited by P. Bowman and R. Stamp, 111–128. London: Continuum.
- Szymczyk, A. 2017. "Iterability and Otherness-Learning and Working from Athens." In *Documenta Reader*, edited by A. Szymczyk, 17–42. Kassel: Prestel.
- Van Dijck, J. 2013. "'You Have One Identity': Performing the Self on Facebook and LinkedIn." *Media, Culture & Society* 35 (2): 199–215. doi:10.1177/0163443712468605.
- Velthuis, O. 2013. *Talking Prices: Symbolic Meanings of Prices on the Market for Contemporary Art*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
- Wolff, J. 1983. *Aesthetics and the Sociology of Art*. London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd.
- Zepke, S. 2006. "The Concept of Art When Art Is Not a Concept: Deleuze and Guattari against Conceptual Art." *Angelaki: Journal of Theoretical Humanities* 11 (1): 157–167. doi:10.1080/09697250600798052.
- Żmijewski, A. 2012. "Foreword." In *Forget Fear*, edited by A. Żmijewski and J. Warsza, 10–21. Berlin: KW Institution of Contemporary Art.

Copyright of Journal of Aesthetics & Culture is the property of Taylor & Francis Ltd and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.