

# On the Biennale's Ruins? Inhabiting the void, covering the distance\*

## Marco Baravalle

Too much love and friendship connect me to many people working for and around Venice Biennale. Too much admiration connects me to many that thanks to La Biennale made Venice a place to come back to instead of a "once-in-a-lifetime tourist destination. Not light-heartedly these pages will go down as an exercise of speculation and critique. I am participating in the uncertainty of those people risking to lose their jobs, watching their business fail, not getting their contracts renewed, being unable to access the already miserable existing welfare measures. Considering the earnings in monetary terms: room attendants, janitors, technicians, workers, freelancers, researchers, teachers, journalists, tourist-guides, artists, architects, curators, performers, etc. will – more or less – lose something due to a possible (yet hopefully unlikely) cancellation or postponed events programmes linked to the various departments of La Biennale.

Today Venice Biennale appears as a lifeline for the whole city's financial situation. It must be acknowledged that the Venetian art Foundation did not react to this crisis as some important U.S public art institutions did, firing part of their staff or erasing their educational department. The Venice Biennale Foundation did not cancel any of its planned events: at present everything is postponed to September. Good news indeed! Yet facing Covid19 pandemic could be the chance for a radical rethinking of the social role of the arts and art institutions instead of the mere desperate attempt to hold on.

Populist neoliberal mayor of Venice Luigi Brugnaro, for his part, responds to the pandemic following the well known recipe of the shock economy: once the emergency is over, the motto will be "as before, more than before", meaning: more tourism, more hotels, more cruise ships, more cuts to public services, more events to make up for the the time lost.

I cannot predict the future, I don't know if anything will ever be as before. For sure something will definitely change. In two, three or four years – maybe once Covid19 vaccine is available – things will go back to "normal" at least for a while until "the next big one", the

next global epidemic. "Normal" meaning: more than half a million visitors largely flying in to Venice from all over the world, territorial branding, real estate rents parasitizing the art sector and the collective symbolic capital of the city, blue chip art galleries influencing artistic choices with their financial firepower, frenetic networking at overcrowded poor-quality-drinks parties, crazy deadlines making it impossible for workers to meet safety standards, massive use of unpaid or underpaid labour, etc. I do not know if we'll get back to normality. Yet, if that is the normality, I hope we won't.

Reflecting on a different Venice Biennale is no easy task. La Biennale is a complex machine the International Art Exhibition together with the Cinema Film Festival being only the most visible moments of the overall activity of the Foundation organised in seven departments: Art, Architecture, Cinema, Theatre, Dance, Music and the ASAC (the historical Archive for contemporary art).

Even if my main object analysis here is Venice Biennale – specifically referring to the International Art and Architecture Exhibitions – at the time of the present crisis I want to highlight some issues that could be relevant in rethinking large scale exhibitions in general, or at least for those situated in small and medium size cities. The former not being a Eurocentric position, it is actually based on the fact that the diffusion of the format of the neoliberal art event is common to many cities in the era of rampant globalization – as largely analyzed in the last decades –<sup>1</sup> Venice being the first of its kind only. The last twenty years of Venice Biennale almost all under the presidency of Paolo Baratta, are considered as a kind of leftist management masterpiece. In a nutshell: Baratta and his team were able to lift La Biennale out of both a financial and positioning crisis. They did it not following blindly the classical neoliberal recipes. Actually they alternated between cuts and recruitments. For example: in 2009 La Biennale decided to outsource a few dozens of workers mostly employed as room attendants, while in recent years it developed a policy of massive recruitment bringing its full-time staff to the considerable number of 111 employees. Doing so between 2009 and 2016 La Biennale got rid of older, less

qualified, unionized workers, making space for younger, more flexible, more qualified and not unionized labor force. It did so updating the tasks of some traditional professional roles: room attendants were partly replaced by the so called “active catalogues” – workers in the function both of overseers and cultural mediators. Furthermore, to avoid the generalized use of illegal employment by many national pavilions, La Biennale invited all National Participations to meet at least Italian labor-rights standards or better.

Baratta renewed the formula of the International Art and Architecture Exhibitions: he increased the use of the Arsenale space, imposed annual alternation of International Art and Architecture Exhibitions, intensified the activities of the Foundation and reduced what were not *national participations* or *collateral events* to a single curator's exhibition. Doing so Baratta was able to dramatically improve the Foundation's financial performance. At the same time he programmatically insisted on two main strategies. First, he rejected any easy managerial rhetoric to the point of suppressing the marketing department. La Biennale, for example, defines its audience as “visitors” to convey the highly individual and unique experience of a visit as opposed to its events being reduced to mere products. This attitude though, despite presenting itself as anti-managerial, is in reality a very common marketing strategy. Second: Baratta proudly reaffirms the complete intellectual autonomy both from the State and from the commercial art circuit for the institution he represents together with the chosen curators or department directors. It could definitely be discussed to what extent this autonomy does exist. Nevertheless the main point in the hands of the Foundation remains its growing financial autonomy due essentially to La Biennale's exponential growth as an event. Like this assuming a good market performance immediately translates into intellectual autonomy. Not to be too ideological, in a country like Italy – where politicians are not shy about using the culture as an opportunity for cronyism and consensus building – such a point has its own weight. If a relatively effective independence from the state interference may be true for what concerns the curators' exhibitions – Italian participation still being often damaged by direct ministerial management – when referring to Biennale's autonomy from the market one could argue that although La Biennale is not a fair, the production money of global commercial galleries, and the millions of euros raised by the selected curators coming from different donors, do have a direct impact on what is shown in the end. The point is: if not

now, then when should we try to push for a radical transformation of art institutions? If not now, then when should we try to abandon the paradigm of growth attached to the neoliberal concept of the event? I have already made the attempt to articulate a critique of the *neoliberal event* as opposed to the event conceived as a radical rupture of linear temporality.<sup>2</sup> The negative effects of a typical neoliberal art event – some of them briefly mentioned above questioning the “normality” of large scale exhibitions – were already evident enough before Covid19 crisis to desire something different. The pandemic simply accelerates the need for a structural challenge to this paradigm.

In the next few years, tourism, mobility, art logistics will radically change. How do we want to transform what Gregory Sholette refers to as our *bare art world*?<sup>3</sup> We should not leave neoliberalism free to operate its own adjustments, we should not permit it to go back and operate in favour of the business and the markets: an endless spiral of accumulation at the expenses of hyper-mobile crowds, with privilege, exploitation, precarity and poverty cohabit and overlap. Now we can think of something new!

Do we really want to move towards the nightmare of a rarefied scenario made of online auctions, where art objects prices rise together with their status of safe-haven assets; online art schools with same fees and debts yet easier discipline under the slogan of innovation + individualization; where the contemplation *dispositif* of the white cube shifts from the ritual to the medical becoming in the name of social distancing a space even more exclusive than before: the reassuring sanitized space ready to welcome the rich global elite of potential buyers.<sup>4</sup>

This pandemic is but the current precipitation of a larger and older crisis that makes this about capitalism as a peculiar ecological regime.

Years ago David Quammen wrote epidemics are becoming more and more frequent because of the increasing pressure on the ecosystem and the increasing violence of extractivism.<sup>5</sup> A violence that grew parallel to the development of neoliberal globalization. This implies several considerations. First: the need to claim for a process of global art system degrowth is not a consequence of Covid-19 outbreak, as something deeply connected to the need of putting an end to extractivism dynamics as recently expressed by millions of people marching in the streets for climate justice.<sup>6</sup>

Second: we are facing the uncomfortable task of embarking in a critique to globalization and art globalization that does not end up by fueling a nationalistic or neo-reactionary rhetoric together with its aesthetic companion, provincialism. At the same time we can not accept the simplistic idea of going back to local, to small homogeneous communities, to the dream of an Arcadic proximity that could not be reached if not at the expense of the vast majority of human and non-human beings.

Nonetheless, it is time to recognize that the late 90's "great leap forward" in the art world – whose advantages even some of us may have enjoyed too with its utopian image of a world as an interconnected archipelago of dialoguing differences like for example the powerful assemblage Glissant-Obirst-Utopia Station – was indeed realized. Yet this achievement was the result of a plan based on the nature of capitalism where – borrowing Maurizio Lazzarato's expression in a recent public talk and insisting on the metaphor of the archipelago – "a few Islands of abstract labor are surrounded by an ocean of exploitation" and – I my add – extractivism.

We need a social, political and financial shift.

We also need new narrations.

We need art spaces to be inhabited by new epistemologies.

La Biennale – despite being on an island – can't change for the best in absence of a complete overturn of national Italian and European answers to the present crisis. It will be almost impossible for La Biennale to engage in a serious process of degrowth and of re-imagination of its phenomenology and its relationship with the city and with the world if European institutions will once again opt for austerity measures and strict fiscal impositions. In other words if Europe *will fail again*, if it will not abandon the logic of debt to reinforce welfare measures towards a universal basic income we will have likely terrible outcomes in terms of spread of poverty and reinforcement of nationalist rhetoric. We need an overturn out of austerity measures, that could also allow La Biennale to be less dependent on the influence of private capitals. Because the revenues – especially those of the International Art Exhibition and the Cinema Festival – are too important to keep the whole machine running. Because even if the International Architecture Exhibition has considerably grown

through time, its accounts are still structurally in red, and its sustainability is granted by the impressive International Art Exhibition's financial performance. Because royalties are important. Because more *national participations* and more *collateral events* imply more hype, more rent, more work, more job opportunities. In the last twenty years young labor force was able to build a life project around the big event of La Biennale: an army of freelancers, small business, cooperatives of room attendants, technicians, workers, deputy curators, location managers etc.<sup>7</sup> In Marxian terms this should be the time for this technical composition to turn into a political composition, time to claim for quarantine income<sup>8</sup> and universal basic income, to avoid a catastrophic race to lowering prices. For this reason European policies are crucial to determine if art workers will be forced to an individual competition/struggle for the survival – not having time or energies to struggle for a radical change of art institutions – or if they will be given the basic conditions to organize themselves to open up the crisis of the neoliberal apparatus and not to be doomed to sink with it.

More public investments in contemporary art is not enough. Money should also be invested in a different way.<sup>9</sup> If in the next few years La Biennale will have to face a forced or – less likely – chosen degrowth, in a climate of austerity the army of freelancers will be the first to pay its cost while the shameful group of Venice based space-renting agencies under disguise of a cultural institutions will probably survive through a drastic cut of the cost of labour in the wait for better times to come.

While we all should be working in the direction of a general shift outside of the neoliberal model, it is yet urgent to start a collective reflection on how La Biennale and other institutions in the global art circuit should radically be transformed.

Few years ago in one of my articles I addressed the issue of what I defined as alter-institutionalism. I divide *alter-institutions* in two main categories: *governmental alter-institutions* – often temporary and created by artists – and *autonomous alter-institutions* – founded by artists together with other people during social movements outbreaks often in occupied urban spaces, abandoned institutes or old archives. I also tried to list a series of challenges towards alter-institutionalism isolating seven key problems: capture, subjectivation, governance and juridical structure, political geography and decolonization, binarism between slowing down

and acceleration, queering, radical (imaginary) economy.<sup>10</sup> And even if also official art institutions – at least the public ones – with various degree of success or failure can deliberately choose to trigger processes of self alter-institutionalization (i.e. L'Internationale, a confederation of European museums) it is no time to rely on those institutions' goodwill. For example: La Biennale considerably developed its educational activities (large part of the audience being school pupils visiting the exhibition during the fall), it created a certain temporal continuity of activities (i.e. Biennale College or the Carnival for Kids) and at the same time it invested some energies in promoting projects in Venetian mainland most of the time considered less appealing than the charming territory of the islands. We have the picture of an institution that is certainly not dogmatically for-profit or event-oriented, especially in its effort to meaningfully interact with the city and the regional school system (granting very democratic access standards). Yet, paradoxically, the same reformist nature of its governance makes it work as an important ideological function in the neoliberal Venice territory, providing to it a critical extension, a space where art is free to express its critical subjective potential in a progressive corporate environment, while at the same time avoiding any direct role and real attempt to criticize tourism extractivism. Quite a good (public) company, in a very bad city (!)

Under this perspective Venice Biennale appears as an exception in relation to its context: the city of Venice being undoubtedly socially impoverished by forty years of neoliberalism is today perceived as a mere beneficiary of Venice Biennale's presence more than its serious possible interlocutor. Nonetheless I consider Venice social impoverishment – the progressive flight of its inhabitants and their homogenization in terms of class and race – as the main reason for re-imagining a possible relationship of La Biennale within the context of the city. It would be too simplistic to reduce Venice to a city contended on the one side by a reactionary profit-oriented lower class mostly employed in commerce and tourism, and on the other side the petty bourgeoisie of the left nostalgic of its declining prestige. If it is true that – from a social point of view – the last years were marked by episodic and week social attempts to correct La Biennale's policies (i.e. in 2009 with the protest against the externalization of a few dozens of room attendants, and in the more recent years, the campaign against La Biennale monopolistic use of Arsenale); it is also true that the image of La Biennale as an oasis in the desert of the city seems to

me pretty much informed by a neoliberal gaze. A gaze recognising almost total agency to corporate subjects, denying it to civil society; a gaze refusing to acknowledge what Venice is still able to express in terms of social movements, self-organization and resistant forms of life.

Only a social mobilization will be able to modify this institutional mentality. The revolution of art institutions could only be initiated by, and will only march parallel to a much wider revolution. A revolution able to make significant steps forward on different yet interconnected grounds: the achievement of a universal basic income and new housing rights; a serious commitment on climate justice towards the end of extractivism; the reconstruction of a democratic health-care system damaged by decades of privatizations; the end of gender, race, class and species asymmetries; all elements that structure and permeate the current social, financial and political order.

As art workers we must be aware that we have a role to play, yet this is not a challenge to be faced from within the short horizon of art professionalism. That being said, the question is: in what direction should we push to open up the crisis of the neoliberal art event to the point that it will turn into something different? I'd like to suggest a few points trying to start answering this question focusing on the two cases of Venice Biennale International Art and Architecture Exhibitions – with absolutely no ambition of completeness and with no illusion of universality.

## 1. The Context.

### From the creative to the caring city

We all know how misleading the “creative city” definition is just another name for the old neoliberal city. Here the subcategory of art, in a mono-dimensional way, is understood as a booster for financial growth. Extensive literature proves that the trickle down effect does not really work and Venice is no exception. As mentioned above Venice Biennale represents an important professional opportunity for thousands of resident cultural workers, yet the ones who benefit the most from it are landlords or private foundations renting spaces to a plethora of “collateral events”. Though allowing some people to resist in the historical city centre, La Biennale is actually attracting are not new residents, but new capitals and it represents much of a bigger opportunity for real estate rent than for labor. Despite its cultural character, Venice Biennale's underlying logic is no different than other tourism-based events, for example in the way it increases tourist

apartments causing the loss of houses for residents. The result is a unique marvelous city with a lot of art and a very little life: the perfect context where to base private art foundations linked to global capitals – as it usually happens.

Covid19 pandemic invites us to rethink art institutions and art practices: not more boosters for uncontrolled financial growth, but useful aesthetic/political dispositifs to turn our cities into *caring cities*. The urge is to re-imagine forms of common life and of commonality out of the techno-authoritarian turn coming along with social distancing. Art must even more embrace the challenge to place at the center of the political scene the body - human, posthuman, non-human -. It can do so by abandoning the global gatherings of networking audiences that characterize large-scale exhibitions, big museums, international fairs, etc. I do not foster a return to classical avant-garde, nor do I intend the role of art as that of a possible guide for society. What I envision is imagination and critical speculation going together with a material process of transformation of the institutional art field: a process where both autonomy – as the subjective power of the encounter with an artwork – and heteronomy – as the process of erosion of art disciplinary borders into non-art and into the social dimension – are mobilized.

## 2. The Event.

### From Exhibition to Habitation

The Biennale should not think of itself primarily as an event centered around an exhibition. I love exhibition as a form of language, and I am not suggesting that shows should be taken out of the equation – it would be an absurdity and a loss. My question is: do we really need a machine attracting tens of thousands of people for the opening, and then having to work hard to create an audience for the remaining period of the event? Do we really think it essential to have such a large number of artists invited to produce pieces for the exhibition? Could we not rather think of a *Curator's Exhibition* where the curator invites the artists – even in smaller numbers – to intervene in and outside the main venues of the Giardini and the Arsenale with projects having a longer duration, i.e. two years? The idea far from wanting La Biennale turn into a huge residency project rather intends to shift attention from “*the showing*” to “*the inhabiting*” allowing a new space-time dimension for projects that want to engage with the context and that until now too often result in paternalistic and unattended social counseling. This model could also limit the influence of directly sponsored-by-private

galleries object-driven art – with no intention on my side to exalt any easy anti-object rhetoric. It could also favour the interactions between Art and Architecture participants. Following what La Biennale recently did for the International exhibition inviting the “national participations” to follow the themes proposed by the curators one could imagine inviting the Countries to think of long-term projects. The result would at least be a permanent use of the pavilions and of L'Arsenale spaces which at the moment remain closed and inaccessible for six months every year. This model, ideally, could also generate a labor force less obsessed by the frenetic deadline-fever of the neoliberal event – by its nature concentrated on *the vernissage* and *the finissage* – and it would generate professional opportunities distributed in time and open to encourage collaboration between local workers, architects, artists, curators, etc.

One could argue this proposal's contradictions. For example one may say it would favour the diffusion of La Biennale's brand through the space-time matrix of the city as a sort of deeper and larger form colonization by a powerful cultural institution. Yet sadly this already happened, an emblematic example is that during the period of the Exhibitions the red lion of La Biennale looms on almost every door in the city. Its corporate colonization will only be over if the Biennale will acquire a totally different social function. In the meantime the International Art “*Habitation*” should limit the earnings linked to the real estate rent by regulating the market of hospitality spaces for the exhibitions. Hypothetically speaking imposing a limitation i.e. 100 square meters could not be rented for more than 1.500 euros per month. This would bring several results: on the one side the warehouse or building owners, often families, would still earn more than a standard two-years rent contract; on the other side, big private agencies and fake location managers disguised as cultural institutions would have less margin for their speculations and local activities would find more spaces to let at cheaper prices. Last but not least, cheaper location prices will allow access to the city to more independent organizations and would free resources to be directly invested in the projects. Two more points on this proposal. First point: would artists still be interested in coming to Venice? The way I see it, artists more than ever would, if La Biennale were able to lead a change of perspective to renew the intuition of its founders. After all, since we are facing a wider local-and-global crisis, wouldn't it be time to renew the criteria by which certain cities got outstanding on the



Kaya, *On the Biennale's Ruins?*, 2020

world's map of culture? Second point: Venice is a city with a small and quite homogenous population where social art experiments too often result as boring and empty rituals. Venice population is used to art and not so available to be the object of paternalistic aesthetic practices. So would the idea of an International Art Exhibition working on the more diverse and inhabited Venetian mainland be enough to save this project from long-term boredom and frustration or would it be destined to fail? This is indeed a real concern. To increase projects in Mestre and Marhgera would definitely be important but we should not miss the main point. The challenge would exactly be to create a different framework for social art and for art in general to push the Biennale – together with its artists, curators and organizations – out of its comfort zone. To push them out of the repeated schemes of social art as on-demand assistance to subaltern subjectivities, out of the idea of participation and dialogue as mediation between conflicting social actors. To push them out of the exotic search for local wonders. The challenge La Biennale should offer to the world of art could be to

invite some of its members to inhabit for two years the void caused by decades of neoliberal policies. To eventually acknowledge that this void is full of resistances, instead of trying to fill it up by creating stereotypical local figures to address to. Like many other touristic cities, before Covid-19 Venice was full of people and empty of life, now the people are gone and all we are left with is life regulated by social distancing. A title – or a program – needed today could be “Inhabiting the void, covering the distance”.

### 3. Mobility. From entrepreneurial nomadism to radical permanence

Radical permanence intends to be a critique to a certain regime of mobility. It sums together the right-to-move and the ability to collectively organize permanence, to build alter-institutions, to create autonomous cultural and democratic infrastructures in the places we live in. Today's art system is designed to incessantly move us from one place to the other and better by plane. Our ecological footprint as a community casts a shadow

over our cultural impact. The ecological un-sustainability of the art world alone should impose a change. Yet this is not the only problem. The majority of us move – or better – have no choice but to be moved. We recognize ourselves as a nomadic superficially sympathetic often ruthless international community of art workers. Besides the necessary consideration that many different art worlds exist with their different value systems, it is time to admit that our deterritorialized community model is part of the problem and not part of the solution. Some, thanks to the arts, are able to move away from countries and contexts where dictatorships and authoritarian regimes are in place, and that's a good thing. Still, as individualized entrepreneurs of ourselves while we move – to the next project, to the art school, to the residency, to that biennial or that museum – the old and new neoliberal art institutions together with policy-makers and highly-mobile financial capitals are able to design and dictate urban processes. A power capable of long-term transformations of the places we live in, capable of designing the development of physical territories permanently influencing the life of millions of people around the world through gentrification, real estate speculation, urban renewal. Despite the growing popularity and success of critical thinking, activist art and social practices, we lost – did we ever have it? – our grip on permanence. We stay for too short in far too many places. Our good intentions feed the apparatus of neoliberal governance: dialogical and relational practices accepted with enthusiasm to reduce participation to a mere mediation of the conflict. We need to participate in conflict instead, not to quell it. Things that require time, commitment, organization, care abandoning any paternalistic temptation. We do feel the tension towards society. Yet this tension is effectively realized only at the moment of the mass social movements' outbreak. We must rethink permanence, duration, mobility. We must rethink engagement with our context in political terms. Radical permanence is made of a different temporal matrix and of course it involves a different relationship to space, one that is both within and outside the borders of the protected space of the art, representing at the same time the affirmation of its autonomy and a threat to its existence.

Radical permanence does not mean absence of mobility. On the contrary, it is its essential feature: the right-to-move for everybody despite its race, class or gender. Mobility should be conceived from a totally different political point of view, an ecological one. No interest in following the art circus of privilege. Yet, in a moment where in some parts of Italy we are not allowed to cover

a distance of more than 200 meters away from our homes, we feel the urge to disobey social distancing restrictions. Radical permanence aims at building safe permanent spaces for bodies of all kinds to move together starting from within the same building, to the same block, to the neighborhood, to the city and so on.

Radical permanence claims for the legitimacy of democratic forms of life, rejects the permanence of the state of exception, rejects techno-authoritarianism and a life mediated by proprietary digital-technologies and moves towards the founding of new alter-institutions.

Radical permanence does not bow to the nostalgia for the local, nor does it embody primitivism of any kind. According to its name and program, accelerationism very quickly turned towards a neo-reactionary teleology. We think that creation and the use of free digital infrastructure is a key task. While forced digital mediation of the body is a political tragedy, the coding of digital space against global capitalist platforms should be taken very seriously. The digital infrastructure for radical permanence should be a tool to break the process of individualization of people, to make them gather and come together in the physical space, it should aim to organize political common encounters as opposed to tear us apart into the depoliticized isolations of individual time.

Can a Biennale do anything about it? For sure assuming the responsibility to solve this problem would really go beyond its prerogatives. Yet a Biennale could at least incorporate the concept of sustainable mobility where the exponential growth in the number of artists, national participations, collateral events and visitors would not equate success; it could hint certain kinds of art practices that engage on longer terms with communities not to keep on feeding real estate rent and, last but not least it could allow free access to all Venetian residents.

#### **4. The Archive.**

##### **From La Biennale's history to the histories for the Future Biennale**

Since the late 90s it has been impossible to resist the archival impulse. The end of socialism brought with it the end of history – a joke compared to the end of the conditions for history itself to be that comes with the current climate crisis. The archive has represented the narrative matrix to re-assert an epic of art beyond postmodern pastiche, neo-lyricism and the aesthetics of art as commodity. If history got disqualified then the archive helped artists to put back their feet on the fertile

ground of histories – in the plural – abandoning teleological violence and reflecting on the relationship between past, present and future.

The ASAC – the historical archive of contemporary art – is one of the departments structuring the Biennale's Foundation. It can count on different fonds documenting the history of La Biennale and a library. La Biennale has already affirmed its will to develop the ASAC adding a research section besides the chore archiving mission. Good news indeed, when also followed by important financial investments and the creation of a research team whose purpose goes beyond the present mere "valorization" of archived items and propaganda. During the last years the digitalization of the archive has accelerated, yet access is still regulated by rigid corporate standards. If La Biennale intends the archive to become a productive source of knowledge, new access criteria should be put into place starting with the possibility of free reproduction/use of documents in case of proven non-commercial use. The Archive being today the only department of La Biennale permanently open to the public represents the ideal interface for the Institution with both the academic world and with the city, since it preserves the precious memory of a relationship. Rich in history the Archive should become the source of counter-histories going beyond the ideological univocal narration of the neoliberal art institution: an archive as a untamed memory of an institution: no more the cornerstone of its identity, but a mutating virus mining its epistemological normality.

**1** A recent example of the neoliberal framework structuring and (at the same time) threatening large scale exhibitions, is the case of Documenta 14 (2017). Its financial difficulties brought to light a double critique. First, the critique of the curator's idea to bring the exhibition to Athens as a way to increase the institution's cultural capital by "colonising" a city hit by austerity. Second, the curator himself and the CEO accused the City and the Hessian government of trying to use the bankruptcy as an excuse to reterritorialize Documenta in Kassel. Implicitly Szymczyk denounces the stakeholders preference towards an exhibition working as a tourism promotion agency rather than as a global critical tool.

**2** Marco Baravalle, *For a Critique of The Neoliberal Event. Picasso in the Dispositif of Urban Souvenir Formation*, in "Keep Reading Giving Rise. Rogelio López Cuenca", Museo Nacional Centro De Arte Reina Sofia, Madrid, 2019.

**3** "An art world where the interweaving of art and capitalism is self-evident". See Gregory Sholette, *Delirium and resistance: Activist art and the crisis of capitalism*. London: Pluto Press, 2017.

**4** See Brian O'Doherty's reading of the white cube as a ritualistic space for western bourgeoisie. Brian O'Doherty, *Inside The White Cube. The Ideology Of The Gallery Space*, Lapis Press, San Francisco, 1986.

**5** David Quammen, *Spillover*, W. W. Norton Company, 2013.

**6** In Venice, on September the 7th 2019, the activists of the Venice Climate Camp occupied for six hours the red carpet of the Venice Film Festival. The occasion was filmed and became part of Oliver Ressler's "Everything's coming together while everything's falling apart: Venice Climate Camp" (2019)

**7** We don't have clear numbers concerning how many art workers live in Venice, but in an historical city where more or less 50.000 residents are overwhelmed by more or less 30.000.000 of tourists per year, even a few thousand people make a difference, especially if they are not directly employed in the tourism industry.

**8** The Quarantine income is a campaign initiated in Italy by an independent union called ADL (Associazione Difesa Lavoratori) after the pandemic outbreak. It demands urgent welfare measures and has quickly gained national diffusion. Many workers from the art and entertainment business joined the campaign.

**9** If a prominent figure of the art system like Hans Ulrich Obrist recently advocated for an updated New Deal program to support the arts in this difficult time of ours (on a smaller scale, the Swiss curator's appeal could be compared to the recent letter by Mario Draghi, the former president of the ECB who, strong with his status of guardian of austerity, dared to ask for drastic war-socialism-style measures), public support should be addressed in the direction of a radical rethinking of the role of culture in contemporary society. It should also be noted that even if la Biennale's activities are largely supported by the different earnings resulting from ticket sales, sponsorships, royalties, etc. (for a total of €26.107.000, according to the official budget of La Biennale 2019) the institutional balance sheet also includes €19.192.000 of public contributions for the same year. So, if it is more than likely that earnings will drastically decrease in 2020, a further public financing of the institution would be acceptable on the condition of an overall recalibration of its purposes. First of all, the Venetian foundation should not cut its labor costs, calculated in 2019 around €7.000.000. Still this would not be enough as this sum only represents a partiality of the value of labor generated around the various events,



a labor whose costs are covered by dozens of organizations landing in Venice on the occasion of the different cultural activities. The official budget of La Biennale di Venezia is available online in the section “Trasparenza”, on the foundation website: <https://www.labiennale.org/it/trasparenza>

**10** Marco Baravalle *Alteristituzioni. Tra governamentalità e autonomia*. In *Opera Viva*. <https://operavivamagazine.org/alteristituzioni-e-arte>

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<https://instituteofradicalimagination.org/2020/05/02/on-the-biennales-ruins-inhabiting-the-void-covering-the-distance-by-marco-baravalle/>

The Institute For Radical Imagination, is a group of curators, activists, scholars and cultural producers with a shared interest in co-producing research, knowledge, artistic and political research-interventions, aimed at implementing post-capitalist forms of life. <https://instituteofradicalimagination.org/>

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**Marco Baravalle** is a member of S.a.L.E. Docks, a collective and an independent space for visual arts, activism, and experimental theater located in what had been an abandoned salt-storage facility in Dorsoduro, Venice. Founded in 2007, its programming includes activist-group meetings, formal exhibitions, screenings, and actions. In addition to managing the diverse programming at S.a.L.E. Docks, Baravalle is currently a research fellow at INCOMMON (IUAV University of Venice). His fields of research include the relationship between art, theatre and activism, creative labor, gentrification, and the positioning of art within neoliberal economics.