

And the Award Goes to.....: The Venice Biennale and the Construction of Global Art History

Amy Bruce, MA Art History

Awards! That's all they do is give out awards, I can't believe it. 'Greatest Fascist Dictator: Adolf Hitler'.¹

A line from Woody Allen's 1977 classic movie *Annie Hall* sums up the proliferation of awards for all manner of cultural achievements that exist today. In the art world, the highest honour goes to the recipient of the *Leone d'oro for Best Artist in the International Exhibition (Leone d'oro)* awarded at the Venice Biennale. As the oldest biennial, the Venice Biennale maintains its air of esteem not only for its historical standing, but also for its ability to situate an artist in the international art world. Every two years, the city of Venice is transformed into a hub of artistic innovation, displaying the world's most pioneering contemporary art. Since its inauguration in 1895, the Biennale has taken an international format, with participating countries that elect an artist

or artists to represent their nation. A large exhibition of international artists is also organized in the central pavilions held at the Giardini and Arsenale. The ultimate honour of artistic and cultural importance is imparted to the artist distinguished with the *Leone d'oro* grand prize. Without a doubt, for an artist, exhibition at the Venice Biennale suggests not only their international recognition in the art world but also worldwide attention for artistic achievement.

Since the foundation of the festival, some form of a grand prize has always been present; although prizes were briefly suspended in 1968, they returned two decades later in a similar form in 1986. The current manifestation of the grand prize was established in 1995, when the Venice Biennale introduced the *Leone d'oro for Best Artist in the International Exhibition*. Throughout the history of the award and

¹ Woody Allen, *Annie Hall*, directed by Wood Allen, 1977, MGM/UA Home Video, 2000.

the various manifestations it has occupied, a historical preference has been established of awarding European and American artists. As such, there have been only two Biennale editions, or rather three instances, when the award was given to an artist from outside these Western countries. More specifically, the award has consistently honoured artists residing in historical “art centres”, namely, Paris, New York City and Berlin. Although the Venice Biennale was conceived of as an international platform for the enrichment of the world and for shared ideas on national artistic trends, I argue that the Venice Biennale works as a Western institution within the confines of such Euro-American art history. As a site of international artistic exchange, the Venice Biennale has the ability to influence canonical conceptions of art history through the promotion of selected and included artists in the international pavilions. In this essay, I explore the Venice Biennale’s influence in constructing the art historical narrative, to suggest that the Biennale can be seen as forwarding a more global art historical perspective as achieved by individual curatorial efforts. In order to

make this argument, I explore how the global art perspective in the curatorial direction of the 48th and 52nd Biennale editions, curated by Harald Szeemann and Robert Storr respectively, were occasions where non-Western artists won the *Leone d’oro*. This was an act of preliminary judgement, whereby the jurors were influenced to select a non-Western artist to win the *Leone d’oro*.

In 1893, Italy was newly-united and the city of Venice wanted to establish a grand-scale exhibition for this celebration. The larger cities of the nation-state were already taking part in various celebrations through national fairs, which resulted in the desire for a unified national assertion in the artistic realm.² Unlike the festivities taking place in other Italian cities, Venice was strictly concerned with art. As further impetus, the city decided to honour the silver wedding anniversary between the king and queen, Umberto I and Margherita di Savoia, by way of a humanitarian and cultural contribution of an international exhibition of the arts.³ The site chosen for this festive event was a generously sized public garden, beyond the mouth of the Grand Canal,

² Vittoria Martini, “A Brief History of I Giardini: Or a Brief History of Venice Biennale Seen from the Giardini,” in *Art and Education*, (Actar: Barcelona, 2009), accessed September 23, 2013, <http://www.artandeducation.net/paper/a-brief-history-of-i-giardini-or-a-brief-history-of-the-venice-biennale-seen-from-the-giardini/>, no page.

³ Lawrence Alloway, *The Venice Biennale, 1895-1968: From Salon to Goldfish Bowl* (Greenwich: New York Graphic Society, 1968), 31.

where the Biennale is still held today. The venue for the exhibition, the Giardini, became a new modern centre for the city, contrary to the ancient and traditional centre of Saint Marc's Square.⁴ Due to the sizable amount of work involved with the organization of such an event, it would not be until two years later that the royal couple would attend the opening on April 30, 1895. At this time, the event then called the *Esposizione Internazionale d'Arte della Citta de Venezia*, was ultimately declared as a resounding success due to the high quantity of visitors.⁵

The model for the biennial format was based on the universal expositions held in the early nineteenth and twentieth centuries. London's 1851 "Great Exhibition" was a profound inspiration, as it highlighted the cultural variations in the increasingly interconnected world through the presentation of national groupings of industrial design products.⁶ The effects of this display are demonstrated by the fifteen other expositions that were soon

thereafter established throughout Europe and America to showcase industrial innovation and cultural diversity.⁷ Only a few artworks were displayed in the "Great Exhibition", but subsequent expositions contained major art exhibitions. Adding to the European exhibition schedule, another notable proto-type was the "Exposition Universelle". Organized in Paris in 1855, it offered the first major international exhibition of art of the day. With the "Great Exhibition" propagating mercantilism, the "Exposition Universelle" instead espoused for tourism, characterising the event as "a palace for the people",⁸ a concern echoed by the Biennale due to the isolated location of Venice. In the context of artistic trade and competition, visual similarities could be drawn from the salons held in Paris, but rather than emphasizing individual creators, the "Exposition Universelle" focused on national production.⁹ Moreover, the idea of a large exhibition covering current artistic achievements was conceived

⁴ Martini, n.p.

⁵ Martini, n.p.

⁶ Bruce Altshuler, "Exhibition History and The Biennale," in *Starting from Venice: Studies on the Biennale*, ed. by Clarissa Ricci (Milan: Et al., 2010), 19.

⁷ Altshuler, 19.

⁸ Alloway, 38.

⁹ Altshuler, 20.

from the French *Salon* held annually or bi-annually at the Louvre in Paris.¹⁰ These large exhibitions became a platform for historical retrospection and artistic canonisation. The then mayor of Venice, Riccardo Selvatico, looked to these other art expositions as direct competitive emulation, but more specifically to the rise of international football for the basic aims of the Biennale.¹¹ Alert to this growing trend, Selvatico felt that if tourists would fill a city for international football competitions, then why not for an international art competition?¹² It is from these Western models of cultural exposure, ideals of progress, status, and competition that the Venice Biennale emerged. As a site for the art world to converge, perhaps the Venice Biennale was already claiming an interest as a forum for global art history. To show the global scope of globalisation, the paintings and sculptures displayed would be categorized in national groupings as representatives of each nation. Similar to the industrial products showcased in the other European expositions, the artworks competed

against each other for various awards.¹³ These industrial models, as well as international sporting events, shaped the specific forms and valences of the Biennale as an arts competition.

The termination of awards at the Biennale in the 1960s was the result of the political and social events of this decade. Tensions between countries such as the residue from Cold War politics were played out in the art world. During this time, the exhibitions were thought to have been influenced too greatly by critics, with the political dynamics overpowering the display of art. An example of this was at the 31st edition in 1960, where it was believed by many that the rise of the French art movement *L'Informel* was the direct result of critic influence, resulting in the grand prize being awarded to French artists Jean Fautrier, Hans Hartung and Italian artist Emilio Vedova [all of whom are key figures of the movement].¹⁴ The watershed moment occurred at the 1964 exhibition when scandal arose over the American Pop artist Robert Rauschenberg's triumph of the grand prize, after his much negotiated

¹⁰ Altshuler, 20.

¹¹ James F. English, *The Economy of Prestige: Prizes, Awards and the Circulation of Cultural Value*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts; London, England: Harvard University Press, 2005), 252.

¹² English, *Economy of Prestige*, 253.

¹³ Altshuler, 19.

¹⁴ The Venice Biennale, "The 1960s," accessed November 30, 2013, <http://www.labiennale.org/en/art/history/60s.html?back=true>

inclusion into the international pavilion on the part of the American curator Alan Solomon. This event highlighted the political fighting that occurred between nations produced by the Biennale's system of awards.

The eruption of activist movements that began in the 1960s did not leave the Venice Biennale unmarked. Indeed, tumultuous 1968 student protests resulted in the temporary closing and postponing of the awards. These demonstrations were initiated by a group of art students protesting their conservative training¹⁵ and the increasing institutional capitalisation of art.¹⁶ Consequently, the Biennale became a significant, albeit secondary, target due to its "historical context of declining capitalism from which it emerged".¹⁷ Attacked as another arts organization appealing to a limited bourgeois audience, artists displayed solidarity by withdrawing their artworks, or by covering up or turning

their works over.¹⁸ Leaving their mark on the Biennale, the protests resulted with the abolishment of the grand prize and the elimination of the sales office, both of which were considered tools for the commercialisation of art. The residue of the protests would also be demonstrated through the use of more thematic exhibitions, which temporarily replaced the celebratory nature of monographic exhibitions,¹⁹ and could be viewed as more democratic.

The reinstatement of a grand prize was initiated by art historian and curator Maurizio Calvesi in 1995. At that time, the *Leone d'oro for Lifetime Achievement* and *Leone d'oro for Best Pavilion* were also established. Perhaps the revival of and introduction of these awards was part of the greater proliferation of major international prizes and awards that occurred since the 1970s.²⁰ For literary scholar James English, the institutional function of prizes was in its claim to and an

¹⁵ Alloway, 25.

¹⁶ Martini, n.p.

¹⁷ Alloway, 25.

¹⁸ Alloway, 27.

¹⁹ The Venice Biennale, "The 1970s," accessed November 20, 2013, <http://www.labiennale.org/en/art/history/1970s.html?back=true>.

²⁰ English, *Economy of Prestige*, 84.

assertion of authority.²¹ It could be said that the revival of awards at the Venice Biennale was an effort to reassert its cultural authority in the art world. The prestige of an award is tied to the historical date of establishment and its presence throughout history, and the Biennale could rely on this heritage to regain the award's prestige. By reintroducing this symbol of prestige, the festival was thereby able to reclaim its position as a conveyor of artistic cultural validation.

The spread of biennials and awards throughout the world is going through the process of globalisation, which involves the interchanging and exchanging of ideas around the globe. Globalisation refers to our increasingly interconnected world by ways of technology, travel, media, economy and ideology as theorized by social anthropologist Arjun Appadurai's use of the suffix 'scapes'.²² For the discipline of art history, this has raised questions concerning the validity of Art History as a

global discipline and whether or not this is necessary or even possible. To this extent, various art historians have suggested that globalisation is art history's most pressing concern in contemporary discourse.²³ Providing useful clarification on terms, art historian Hans Belting distinguishes between the definitions of *world art*, the heritage of the art of the world and *global art*, a phenomenon of contemporary art.²⁴ Although these terms are often used synonymously, for Belting the idea of world art is a historical term, based on modernist thought of universalism. World art ascribes Western notions of art to different cultures, as a result often "othering" art-making from modern mainstream art.²⁵ Alternatively, global art is not just 'contemporary' in a chronological sense, but also symbolically and ideologically. No universal aesthetic exists with global art indicating a "transnational" context, blurring the borders surrounding mainstream art.²⁶ Accordingly, the study

²¹ English, *Economy of Prestige*, 51.

²² Arjun Appadurai, "Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy," *Theory, Culture and Society* vol. 7, 2 (1990): 295-300.

²³ James Elkins states that "the most pressing problem facing the discipline is the prospect of world art history" in "On David Summer's Real Spaces," in *Is Art History Global?*, ed. James Elkins (New York ; London : Routledge, 2007), 41.

²⁴ Hans Belting, "Contemporary Art as Global Art: A Critical Estimate," accessed November 20, 2013, <http://www.globalartmuseum.de/media/file/476716148442.pdf>, 1-2.

²⁵ Belting, 4.

²⁶ Belting, 3.

of world art history refers to the old nineteenth century topic of worldwide knowledge and understanding in the Western discipline. World art would have been of concern for the first expositions and Biennale's interest in world artistic production. On the other hand, global art history attempts to raise questions outside of the Eurocentric narrative and origins, serving as a counter movement in which regionalist analysis of the place and time period of artistic production is considered within its own framework. Today, biennials have become the most important sites for the display of contemporary art.²⁷

The valuation given to particular recipients of these awards should be revisited to account for the role of the biennial in the construction of contemporary and global art worlds.

Art history, like history, is often written and thus understood as a linear narrative, with a beginning and an end, constructed by the relevant threads weaving various stories together. This narrative and ideological understanding creates a Universalist art historical outlook due to the dominance attributed to Western stories. Art history has always been interested in world artistic production, with art historians and ethnographers gathering examples of "art" from all over the world for its safekeeping and display, fabricating

what Hans Belting now regards as 'world art'. This has of course been criticized as over-sighted and culturally discriminatory, a methodology that neglects various distinctions, such as culturally specific production as well as ascribing meaning and value based on Western notions of authenticity and the *au courant* aesthetic of the time.

European artworks were viewed as superior, subordinating all other cultures' material production. The formation of a canon involves selected artists, artworks and artistic practices compiled together for their innovative favour. Certain individuals and artworks are elevated due to the perception of them, their artwork, or artistic method as innovative with other notable individuals and artworks following in sequence. These parts [artists, artworks and artistic practices] were constructed into a whole for their universal standard of quality. As far as 'global art' history is concerned, this is problematic due to the standardisation of the canon, which now largely consists of paintings, sculptures and architecture by European and other Western artists. As art historian Anne Bryzski notes, the canon has come to be acknowledged as a "mechanism of oppression, guardian of privilege, vehicle of exclusion, and a structure of

²⁷ Elena Filipovic, Marieke van Hal, and Solveig Ovstebo, "Biennialogy," in *The Biennial Reader*, eds. Elena Filipovic, Marieke van Hal, and Solveig Ovstebo (Bergen, Norway: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2010), 15.

class, gender and racial interests”.²⁸ As part of a modernist gesture in the mid-twentieth century, scholars transposed non-Western art production into the canon. A seemingly easy and complimentary gesture, this assimilation of artists and artworks into the canon, in actuality, often denies artists their creativity, innovation and style, failing to understand specific sensitivities and meanings. According to art historian Partha Mitter, the non-Western individuals included into the canon consequently “come off as bit players in the master narrative”.²⁹ Mitter further notes that the non-Western artists who are integrated are done so on the basis of their compatibility with the Western discourse.³⁰ To put it simply, all artists are not regarded as creative equals.

As international institutions, biennials operate in this global network, playing a crucial role in the dissemination of art from all over the world. The Venice Biennale is therefore in an elite position to affirm or reaffirm artists into the canon through artists’

official status in the art world. Arguably, biennials prompt constructive writing of global art history by way of their global presence throughout various cities and ability to disseminate art from all over the world. Such an argument would have to consider whether the biennial is a true expression of inclusion, transnationalism and non-hegemony in the first place.³¹ Scholar Marcus Verhagen believes biennials function in a world of contradictions. He notes that people visit the Biennale under the pretenses of a progressive model of globalisation, but in fact, an alternative manifestation of globalisation exists in these spaces which maintain prevailing centralized mechanisms of dominating ideology.³² With this observation in mind, if we look back at the historical winners of the Biennale’s grand prize, many of these artists are viewed today as canonical. Indeed, initially, award selection was biased towards Italian artists as a means of promoting the city of Venice.³³ Even after moving away from these touristic motivations,

²⁸ Anna Bryzski, ed. *Partisan Canons* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 8.

²⁹ Partha Mitter, “Interventions: Decentering Modernism: Art History and Avant-Garde Art from the Periphery,” *The Art Bulletin* 90, 4 (December, 2008), 531.

³⁰ Mitter, 531.

³¹ Filipovic, van Hal, and Ovstebo, 22.

³² Marcus Verhagen, “Biennale Inc.,” *Art Monthly* 287 (2005): 3.

³³ English, *Economy of Prestige*, 253.

historical winners from its inception, until the last award in 1968, are considered artistic “heroes”.³⁴ After the Second World War, the Biennale was motivated to reinstate prestige lost from the damage caused by Fascist associations. In a desire to reaffirm the original educative aims of artistic creativity and an open policy for exhibition, the Biennale presented a series of art historical exhibitions to restore its status, which cemented its links to canonical artists.³⁵ At this time, the Biennale showcased the “heroes” and movements of modern art. The Biennale made a point to award these established artists, simultaneously solidifying the artist’s canonisation and the Biennale’s ties to avant-garde movements, ultimately securing prestige for both the biennale and for the artists in question.³⁶

Of the past winners, the artists predominantly reside in traditional art capitals of the Western world. The way in which Art History has been written regards certain cities within Europe with greater artistic authority. Since the establishment of Royal Academies of art in the seventeenth and eighteenth

century, both Paris and London, respectively, have been marked as professional leaders of artistic production. As a means of offering reputable institutions for artistic training these institutions quickly gained official status from their support and initiation by the present-day monarchs. In conjunction with these academies, annual and bi-annual exhibitions at the Louvre’s *Salon* in France and England’s Royal Academy offered venues for critical acclaim and discourse. A platform to nurture artistic talent, as well as providing an arena for discussion, these cities began to surge with artistic interest. Art schools developed in Germany had already fostered an early relationship with the discipline of art history as many of the formative Art Historians were German scholars, such as Johann Joachim Winckelmann and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. Furthermore, German philosophical thought has often served as inspiration for artistic movements that swept across Europe. With the onset of industrialisation in the West in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries,

³⁴ These individuals include such artists as Max Liebermann, George Braque, Henri Matisse, Raoul Dufy, Max Ernst, Jean Arp, Jean Fautrier, Alberto Giacometti, and most controversially for his win, Robert Rauschenberg. Continuing with the award winners after the reinstatement in 1986, such artists include Jasper Johns, Ronald B. Kitaj, Antoni Tapies, Richard Hamilton, Marina Abramovic, and Gerhard Richter. The title of the Venice Biennale award has changed names several times over the years. The artists listed here have all been distinguished for their participation in the international exhibition, either as sole winners or winning for their chosen medium of painting or sculpture.

³⁵ Alloway, 133.

³⁶ Alloway, 139.

emphasis was placed on Paris, London and Berlin as artistic centres. With the onset of modernity, with so many artists coexisting in these centres, many of the so-called “great” movements of Western art were developed in these cities. Artists from all over sought out these cities as destinations for their artistic educations, technical training and engagement with current artistic trends. After the Second World War, New York City began to challenge European cities as the most valuable centre for artistic innovation. As a result of the war, many members of European avant-garde centres were displaced, deceased or financially despondent, allowing New York City to assume a new cultural prominence. Speculation was already beginning to stir in the early twentieth century as to the rising place of America in the art world. Demonstrated by an article published in 1902, “America to Be the World's Art Centre”, this article accurately prophesises America’s future supremacy as the world artistic centre, at which time it said that, “Europeans will flock [there] for study and ‘atmosphere’”.³⁷ In fact, the pronouncement of the “shift” from Paris to New York as the art world capital was most poignantly felt after Robert

Rauschenberg’s win at the Venice Biennale in 1964.

The historical legacy of these cities as art centres has fostered continued reverence for them as destinations for “study and ‘atmosphere’”. It is noted by sociologist Alain Quemin that:

when one starts to question the various actors and move beyond the basic scruples regarding the existence of leader nations and secondary or marginal countries, all more or less concur and present a list in which the US occupies the top position, followed by Germany and then by other countries such as Switzerland and the UK, or even France and Italy.³⁸

Due to the historical infrastructure, these larger cities have greater artistic resources: art institutions, galleries, dealers, and collectors tend to converge in major urban centres, which work to maintain their position as sites of artistic vitality. Artists are better able to take advantage of networks and infrastructures due to the larger art

³⁷ Frederick MacMonnies, “America to Be the World's Art Centre,” *Brush and Pencil* 10, 1 (April 1902): 55.

³⁸ Alain Quemin, “Globalization and Mixing in the Visual Arts: An Empirical Survey of ‘High Culture’ and Globalization,” in *International Sociology* 21, 4 (2006): 523.

markets, all in hopes of achieving international success from these cultural epicentres. The *Leone d'oro* award reinforces the sustained significance of these cities each time an artist working within one of these artistic centres is recognized by the award, and the sustained significance of these cities as nurturing artistic development is arguably reinforced. On the broader spectrum, the distinguishing of these artists and these cities further implicates the idea of Euro-America as the central producer of artistic innovation.

It has long been customary in society to award a selected individual for outstanding achievement and presenting them with a token for their excellence. James English suggests the rise of awards is tied to a “struggle for power to produce value, which means power to confer value on that which does not intrinsically possess it”.³⁹ Awards do not intrinsically possess any value, but are given such through the collective power in societal anointment. This struggle for

power operates as part of the “symbolic” economy,⁴⁰ to which awards are constructed within, to circulate in a system of exchange between the administrators, judges, sponsors, artists and other coterie members involved. Awards assist in the institutionalisation of art while simultaneously and ideologically affirming the notion of art as a separate and superior cultural domain.⁴¹ In a complex field of practices and engagement, English states that prizes are society’s most “effective institutional agents of capital intraconversion” by way of symbolic fortunes “cashed in” and economic fortunes culturally “laundered”.⁴² Awards therefore have an equivocal nature that embrace ideals and faith in the “special” quality of the arts, but are also part of a social system of competitive transactions by which they serve and produce cultural value.⁴³ As noted by English, “precisely because this notion of art and of artistic value requires continual acts of collective make-believe

³⁹ English, *Economy of Prestige*, 9.

⁴⁰ Prizes hold symbolic capital which is symbolic capital. James English notes that symbolic capital is to cultural capital what money is to economic capital in that it has value to culture in “Winning the Culture Game: Prizes, Awards, and the Rules of Art,” *New Literary History* 33, 1, Reconsiderations of Literary Theory, *Literary History* (Winter, 2002): 110.

⁴¹ English, *Economy of Prestige*, 52.

⁴² Prize winners reap economic benefits for being culturally distinguished for example through increased sales of their work; similarly economic endeavors can gain symbolic conversion through prize recognition. English, *Economy of Prestige*, 10-11.

⁴³ English, *Economy of Prestige*, 7-8.

to sustain it, there is a need for events which foster certain kinds of collective cultural (mis)recognition⁴⁴ to which prizes serve the purpose commendably. In his seminal work, *Mythologies*, the scholar Roland Barthes states that media coverage is used to serve the banal and social aspects of prizes, reinforcing the intrinsic value of artistic value.⁴⁵ Building on this concept, English theorizes that scandals, doubts and objections [however large or small] and the existence of prizes as legitimating cultural tools, actually helps to sustain the collective beliefs of art's existential value and creation as something special.⁴⁶ English states that there will inevitably be occasions for disputes over the accuracy in agreed upon value or how legitimately the judges claimed authority to deem the winning results. These kinds of interrogations only reinforce "faith in the symbolic economy of pure gifts".⁴⁷ Thus, it is arguable that the importance of awards is also demonstrated through complaints about how inconsequential or misrepresentative they can be. The

mark of an award to the "wrong" artist is as important as the mark of an award to the "right" artist. I would suggest that in this sense, we can question the prominence of the Western artists and their perpetual recognition of [and honour of] the *Leone d'oro*. The notable lack of non-Western artists as Venice Biennale winners obviously does not mark them as less important or lesser artists, but underscores their lack of visibility and the *Leone d'oro* bias towards Western artists.

For each edition of the Biennale, the director selects five international individuals to comprise the jury. Since the reputation of an award is upheld by the reputation of its judges,⁴⁸ the individuals chosen for the panel are invested in art and reputable members of the art world, typically international curators and art aficionados. These judges are bestowed a special power to recognize a higher quality of art that others may not be able to distinguish. Since the jury members have the power to appoint one artist, society's belief in the prize as a cultural tool becomes a

⁴⁴ English, *Economy of Prestige*, 53.

⁴⁵ English, "Winning Culture," 116.

⁴⁶ English, "Winning Culture," 189-196.

⁴⁷ English, *Economy of Prestige*, 53.

⁴⁸ English, *The Economy of Prestige*, 127.

belief by proxy; substituted from the jury members' own belief in the artist's work and the prize.⁴⁹ As far as the selection criteria, an individual artist is chosen upon standards of "excellence and innovation that his [or her] practice has brought, opening the field of artistic disciplines".⁵⁰ As described in an interview with past 2011 Venice Biennale juror, art critic and curator Carol Yinghua Lu, the judging process occurs over several days of visiting the international exhibition and pavilions, which results in group deliberations. She states, "Throughout the process all of the judges got to know the others' tastes and the angle from which they viewed the works as well as their basis for judgement."⁵¹ Lu's statement is indicative of the personal artistic preferences each judge holds in the judging process. Unlike a sporting

competition such as speed skating or track and field events where an athlete will definitively cross the finish line first, evaluating the intangible qualities in art is much more subjective. It becomes ever more important for an array of judges with varying global perspectives to be included in the panel for the shift concerning global art history at the Venice Biennale.⁵²

The Venice Biennale's *Leone d'oro* is not an open competition award in the sense that there are no individual nominations, but rather the jurors are constrained to the artists included in the international exhibition. The exhibitors and artists included in the Giardini and Arsenale therefore limit the scope of the judging, with the curators acting as the preliminary judges. In this sense, the preliminary judging is made by the curator by way of their curatorial theme,

⁴⁹ English, *The Economy of Prestige*, 127.

⁵⁰ This is from the 2013 announcement of criteria for the win by Tino Sehgal awarded the Leone d'Oro. The Venice Biennale, "Official Awards of the 55th International Art Exhibition," accessed November 30, 2013, <http://www.labiennale.org/en/art/news/01-06.html>.

⁵¹ Liu Ding, "Judging Venice Biennale: How is the Golden Lion selected? Panellist Interview," in *Art Radar Asia: Contemporary Art Trends and News from Asia and Beyond* (August 24, 2011), accessed November 21, 2013, <http://artradarjournal.com/2011/08/24/judging-venice-biennale-how-is-the-golden-lion-selected-panellist-interview/>.

⁵² For the 48th edition's international jury, the members were comprised of Zdenka Badovinac, curator and writer, who has served since 1993 as Director of the Moderna galerija in Ljubljana, Okwui Enwezor, a Nigerian-born, German-based curator and recently named the 2014 Director of the Venice Biennale, Ida Gianelli, the soon to be former Director of Exhibitions at the Castello di Rivoli Museum of Contemporary Art, Yuko Hasegawa, Chief Curator of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo, and Rosa Martinez, an independent curator and art critic, who also curated the 51st Venice Biennale. As for the 52nd edition, the jury members were Manuel J. Borja-Villel, director of the Reina Sofia Museum, Iwona Blazwick, director of the Whitechapel Art Gallery, Ilaria Bonacossa, an independent curator and art critic, Abdellah Karroum, an independent curator, publisher and artistic director, and finally, José Roca, the Estrellita B. Brodsky Adjunct Curator for Latin American Art at Tate, London and the Artistic Director of *FLORA ars+natura*.

who ultimately exercises “more definitive power of decision than the judges that are part of the public face of the prize”.⁵³ To this extent, it is important to note that the curatorial direction of the two Biennales in which non-Western artists won the *Leone d’oro* were premised on thematic exhibitions with global art history in mind: the 48th edition curated by Harald Szeemann and the 52nd edition curated by art historian Robert Storr. For both of these Biennale exhibitions, the curators were mindful of a global art historical spectrum and the international role of the Venice Biennale, and their exhibitions reflected that. Therefore, the artists in the pool of contenders for the *Leone d’oro* were more likely to be non-Western artists.

Swiss curator and art historian Harald Szeemann, who would also curate the following edition of the Biennale in 2001, framed the 1999 international exhibition with the title *d’APERTutto*, which translates to “all open” in English. Szeemann’s democratic premise promised “hybridity of cross national collaboration”,⁵⁴ including both established and emerging

artists in the exhibition from various nations from across the globe. Including a poem for the exhibition text, he states that:

Aperto: Over All” “is
Majestic Splendor/is inside
and outside/is the gateway
to the Orient/is raising the
question of national
pavilions/is wishful thinking
now/is a gigantic narration/
is love for spaces/is other
breath/is freedom from the
obligation of prefacing/ is
welcome to countries with
or without a pavilion/is
welcome to the A Latere
shows/and wishes
everybody a marvelous
passeggiata through its
Self.⁵⁵

Through his poem, Szeemann asserts that although the Biennale does construct a master narrative, Szeemann hopes to open the exhibition wider as countries organize simultaneous exhibitions beyond that of the Giardini and Arsenale venues throughout the city.

⁵³ English, *Economy of Prestige*, 135.

⁵⁴ In Carolee Thea’s article “Venice Biennale, 1999,” where she is making reference to the historical view of art of non-Western cultures was eroticized as “other” in *Sculpture* 18, 8 (October 1999): 85.

⁵⁵ Harold Szeemann, A Latere is a common Latin phrased used in Italian. From my understanding, it means “next” as translated from WorldReference.com, “A Latere,” accessed November 30, 2013, <http://forum.wordreference.com/showthread.php?t=524543>. Similarly, passeggiata is Italian, translating to “stroll or walk” as translated from WordReference.com, “Passeggiata,” accessed November 30, 2013, <http://www.wordreference.com/iten/passeggiata>. In *d’APERTutto: The 48th International Art Exhibition La Biennale di Venezia* (Venice: Marsilio, 1999), xx.

To provide scope to the curatorial choices, the exhibition included: French-American artist Louise Bourgeois, Swiss artist Dieter Roth, German artist Sigmar Polke, Chinese artists Chen Zhen, Ai Weiwei, and Zhang Huan, to name a few. The breadth of artists included in the exhibition by Szeemann showcased artists' engagement in global art practices, to which I would suggest situates them as global artists as termed by art historian Caroline Jones. Adopting Jones' notion of global artist, the art historical concern of globalisation is removed and interest is turned towards globality,⁵⁶ which has arguably stemmed from the growing scholarship on "multiple modernisms". Similar then to the theory of "multiple modernities", globalism is concerned with the numerous, "interstitial and molecular" and is as far reaching as globalisation.⁵⁷ As artists are currently more engaged in the rising theme of globality from the expanding regimes of globalisation, bringing about "shared references, against which he or she might pose the

strangeness, wonder, resistances, or irritation of local residues", art and art history now exists in the manifolds of temporalities across the globe.⁵⁸

Moving away from the nominal concerns of artists within national, international and regional categories engrained in art history, Jones believes that global art histories will only exist with a greater focus on art from beyond the dominating European and American discourse.⁵⁹ Embracing a global art history, Szeemann's international pavilion exhibition propagated a contemporary reflection of these globalist art world conventions. As a result, Szeemann's exhibition implied — much like Jones' assertion — that artists exist cohesively, borderlessly, and globally.

Three artists won the *Leone d'oro* at this Biennale edition. These artists were American artist Doug Aitken (b. 1968), Chinese artist Cai Guo Qiang (b. 1957) and Iranian artist Shirin Neshat (b. 1957). Aitken's work comprises of photography, films and video installations. Aitken's body of work is

⁵⁶ Caroline A. Jones makes use of the terms global, globalism, globality, globalization similar to the semantic differences between modern, modernism, modernity, and modernization. She states, "so we can use "globalism" to designate the artist's conscious reference to the condition of "globality" formed by ever-expanding regimes of "globalization". "Globalism/Globalization," in *Art and Globalization*, ed. James Elkins, (University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010), 134.

⁵⁷ Jones, 134.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Jones, 135.

described in the Biennale catalogue as “part of a generation that has come of age in an entropic world”,⁶⁰ as his work explores physical landscapes and the “the electronic flows of media”.⁶¹ With a similar interest in contemporary technology, Neshat was recognized for her compelling video productions that explore the complexities and contradictions of the social, cultural and religious codes of experienced in her homeland of Iran. Neshat often concentrates on the “‘other’ – female universe”⁶² and has also been honoured at the film portion of the Venice Biennale. Lastly, Qiang, who was previously represented at the international Biennale exhibition in the 1995 edition, focuses on Chinese traditions, narratives and medicinal customs.⁶³ All of these artists’ works move away from traditional canonised categories of painting or sculpture, perhaps an effort by Szeemann to further open definitions of art. The curatorial decision by Szeemann to include globally engaged artists places

these artists in a position for recognition at the Biennale. Szeemann is astute to the current trends of artists’ encounters and engagement with globalisation, highlighting such artists in his international exhibition. Positioning globalist contemporary art at the forefront of innovation, Szeemann is staking a place for artists working in globalist conventions in art history. It is notable that all of the artists who won this edition were emerging artists, marking them at the beginning of their career rather than belatedly at the end; many of the historical winners of the grand prize were honoured later in their career in a retrospective gesture once already holding prestige. The awarding of the *Leone d’oro* prize to these younger global artists could be seen as an effort by the jury to propel their careers into the forefront of the art world, which also works to further situate globalisms in the global art world. It is interesting that this edition resulted with multiple prizewinners, although it was not uncommon for the award to be

⁶⁰ Cecilia Liveriero Lavelli, “Shirin Neshat,” in *d’APERTutto: The 48th International Art Exhibition La Biennale di Venezia* ed. Harald Szeemann (Venice: Marsilio, 1999), 136.

⁶¹ Douglas Fogle, “Doug Aitken,” in *d’APERTutto: The 48th International Art Exhibition La Biennale di Venezia* ed. Harald Szeemann (Venice: Marsilio, 1999), 286.

⁶² Fogle, 286.

⁶³ Octavia Zaya, “Cai Guo-Qiang,” in *d’APERTutto: The 48th International Art Exhibition La Biennale di Venezia* ed. Harald Szeemann (Venice: Marsilio, 1999), 124.

shared between artists.⁶⁴ Perhaps countering this symbolic value is the fact that the award was also given to a Western artist, maintaining Western-centric supremacy, but such an argument negates the leverage of the win for Qiang and Neshat and all of the artists' engagement with globalist art conventions.

As the first American curator appointed in the history of the Biennale, Robert Storr envisioned the international exhibition at the Biennale in 2007 as an opportunity to display a mixture of that year's participating nations.⁶⁵ The theme of the international pavilion engaged various media and references, striving to encompass cognitive and sensory aspects of contemporary art. For Storr,

biennials are the places where a multiplicity of art worlds meet... [a] point of convergence where diverse perspectives intersect or overlap and where contrasting experiences of reality and different expectations of art are

intensified, sharpened and made more meaningful.⁶⁶

With Storr's belief that biennials are becoming democratic spaces for shared and new expectations and experiences, he requested visitors maintain an "appetite and a tolerance" for viewing contemporary art.⁶⁷ It became evident that there was an underscoring theme to the exhibition, which was made more prominent by a concurrently held international symposium. Seeking global artistic tolerance, Storr considered the presence of the Venice Biennale as a force in global art history. In his curatorial essay, Storr states that although abstract dichotomies, such as Western and non-Western, have served to sharpen our understanding for comprehending the world, they have consequently created "false hierarchies that cause us to mistrust or disparage one for the sake of another – or many for the sake of a handful – thus depriving us of the use of some of the means at our disposal for apprehending and

⁶⁴ The earliest instance of a shared prize was in 1897 between Emilio Marsili and Anders Zorn. Alloway, 158. The prize was shared again in 1920, 1926, 1932, 1934, 1995, 1997 and 2001. The Venice Biennale, "Awards Since 1986," accessed November 30, 2013, <http://www.labiennale.org/en/art/history/premi.html?back=true>.

⁶⁵ Philip Pregill, "Think with the Senses-Feel with the Mind. Art in the Present Tense," in *Landscape Journal* 27, 2 (September 2008): 321.

⁶⁶ Robert Storr, ed. *Think with the Senses Feel with the Mind Art in the Present Tense: The 52nd International Art Exhibition La Biennale di Venezia* (Venice: Marsilio, 2007), iii.

⁶⁷ Storr, iii.

transforming reality”.⁶⁸ In an effort to dispel some of these hierarchies, Storr attempted to empower peripheral countries by stepping out of the past and into a contemporary, interconnected landscape by means of an intuitive understanding of art.⁶⁹ By embracing the intuitive nature of art for the curatorial theme, the limitations imposed by nationality would be evaded by the transcendental power inherent to art. Some of these artists included in the exhibition were Ghanaian artist El Anatsui, Israeli artists Pavel Wolberg and Tomer Ganihar, Japanese artist Tomoko Yoneda, and Algerian artist Adel Abdessemed. As such, the theme at the Giardini and the Arsenale looked to the recent global art practices as espoused by art historians in order to move away from the construction of the Western canon.⁷⁰ The focus on regional art practices, or “multiple modernities”, offers various focal points for artistic innovation over universalist instances.

Typically believed to be a Western experience, the expansion of the definition of “Modernity” as by literary scholar Susan Stanford Friedman, whose strategic definition asserts modernity as a “rupture” from the past, no longer situates modernity in one specific time or place.⁷¹ By de-centring the West through the study of regional and individual instances over universal moments, art historical debates are focused on the particular and accompany their own culturally and geographically specific modernity.⁷²

With the concept of curatorial preliminary judgement in mind, Argentinian artist Leon Ferrari (1920-2013) has been the only other non-Western artist selected to win the *Leone d’oro* to date. He was also the only winner of this edition. A conceptual artist, Ferrari’s inclusion in the exhibition was declared for the “physical presence of his objects, collages and discursive text pieces [that] informs their critical

⁶⁸ Storr, iv.

⁶⁹ Lakshmi Kumar, “Art Goes Global, via Venice: Globalization, Art and the Venice Biennale,” in *Immediacy: Art and Activism*, accessed November 30, 2013, http://immediacy.me/immediacy/10/spring/projects_biennale.html.

⁷⁰ This is as suggested by James Elkins, who observes in *Art and Globalization* trajectories for scholarship for building accumulative art history. James Elkins, Zhivka Valiavicharska and Alice Kim, eds. *Art and Globalization*, (University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010), 263-283.

⁷¹ Susan Stanford Friedman, “Periodizing Modernism: Postcolonial Modernities and the Space/Time Borders of Modernist Studies,” *Modernism/Modernity* 13, no 3 (September 2006):433.

⁷² Friedman, 433.

purpose and meaning”.⁷³ Ferrari is now considered a seminal figure in the post-war Buenos Aires modernity, although his artworks greatly differ from his Western conceptual artist contemporaries. Giving rise to Argentina’s regional and varied version of modernity, for Ferrari, words became the medium of his artworks rather than the canonical conceptual artist’s use as a vehicle for ideas. Although non-Western modernisms are often viewed by scholars as derivative and unoriginal, in what Partha Mitter terms the “Picasso manqué syndrome”, cultural value was given to Ferrari through the *Leone d’oro* award. Utilizing Friedman’s re-evaluation of modernity in time and space, art history becomes more inclusive of an Argentinian modernity, for which it can maintain a claim to its originality outside of Western assertions of mimicking. The award to Ferrari enriches the discourse of multiple modernisms by announcing Argentinian modernism as valid while also asserting Ferrari as a relevant and original artist, equally important as his Western modernist contemporaries. As an institution with worldwide breadth, the Biennale can offer official status amongst other canonical artists, placing

Ferrari among them.

It is admittedly problematic that two of the three non-Western artists who have won the *Leone d’oro* no longer reside in their home countries, but rather, at one time or currently, reside in New York City. As the reigning artistic centre, these artists are engaging in the Western art world rather than their nationally affiliated artistic city centres. It is stated by sociologist Alain Quemin that “while more and more artists from peripheral countries are managing to gain international recognition, at least in the rankings of the *Kunstkompass* [Art Compass] or selections of biennials of contemporary art, most of these artists only *come from* those countries: they do not live there”.⁷⁴ Although artists have always occupied in a borderless existence, being born in one country but working in another country, the onset of globalisation and the borderless technology of the internet results in artists being even more unfixed to single national identities. Neshat self-identifies as a “contemporary ‘nomad’” “in a constant state of geographical and psychological shift” as she moves around the world.⁷⁵ In the *León Ferrari and Mira Schendel: Tangled Alphabets* catalogue, the director of the Museum of

⁷³ Storr, 94.

⁷⁴ Author’s italic. Quemin, 543.

⁷⁵ Shirin Neshat, “In Conversation with Shirin Neshat,” in *Youssef Nabil Website*, New York (June 2008) accessed November 30, 2013. http://www.youssefnabil.com/articles/in_conversation_with_shirin_neshat.html.

Modern Art, Glenn Lowry ends his forwarding statement by noting that, “art is a history of [the] diaspora, of the relocation, assimilation and transformation of forms, ideas, practices, and intellectual movements”.⁷⁶ Given this, the exact location of artistic practice does not seem as necessary, as it has always been the custom of artists to “relocate, assimilate, and transform” with their art serving as the embodiment of their experiences. Perhaps in this sense, we can adopt Jones’ strategy of globalism as an aesthetic practice.⁷⁷ This strategy of globalism permits globalist artists to exist in a global art world, straying from the ideologically delimiting concern over where an artist is from and where they practice.

Also problematic, it is necessary to acknowledge the Venice Biennale as a Western institution, and therefore examine the extent to which the Venice Biennale should be held accountable for the construction of a global art historical canon. Indeed, should curators be consciously propelling a global art historical strategy to the forefront for

exhibition or should - or can - global art history exist in the background as an undercurrent that will undoubtedly affect its proceedings? The Venice Biennale occupies a unique position in that the exhibition is configured with an ingrained international scope. Moreover, as the most prestigious and oldest biennial, the Biennale occupies an even more elite position to announce global artists onto the international art world stage, thereby thrusting pertinent art historical issues to the fore. It has become ever more relevant as “grand shows” “of the twenty-first century must allow multiplicity, diversity and contradiction to exist inside the structure of an exhibition”,⁷⁸ as stated by the curator Francesco Bonami of the 50th edition of the Venice Biennale. Art historian Tim Griffon notes that “nothing in contemporary art speaks so directly” to globalisation as to large-scale exhibitions.⁷⁹ Such “grand shows” are endowed with a “transnational circuitry” taking up globalism through the various nations involved in the exhibition, as well as in the idea of globalisation.⁸⁰ As

⁷⁶ Glenn Lowry, “Forward,” in *León Ferrari and Mira Schendel: Tangled Alphabets*, ed. Luis Pérez Oramas (New York, New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2009), 7.

⁷⁷ Jones, 134.

⁷⁸ Tim Griffon and James Meyer, “Global Tendencies: Globalism and the Large-Scale Exhibition,” *Artforum International* 42, 3 (November 2003): 152.

⁷⁹ Griffon and Meyer, 152.

⁸⁰ Griffon and Meyer, 152.

such, Griffon argues that large-scale exhibitions alter the visibility of artists, which can ultimately initiate artistic discussions towards an all-encompassing art history.⁸¹ Whether it is explicitly or implicitly, it is clearly necessary that these large-scale art festivals initiate new negotiations for art history in an effort to reshape the canon and canonisation of the discipline.

It would be misleading to simply conclude that with a global art historical curatorial theme, the result will inevitably produce a non-Western prizewinning artist. This is made evident by examining other Biennale editions that have looked to a global art as a theme. A specific example is the 54th Biennale, entitled “Making Worlds”, which did not result with a non-Western artist winning the *Leone d’Oro*. This is not to suggest that every Biennale requires a non-Western winner to be viewed as globally inclusive. Rather it is more apt to state that by curating with global art history in mind, either blatantly or overtly, more international artists will be included into the exhibition and therefore be better able to be considered for the *Leone d’oro* award selection. The historical precedence on the Western art world is demonstrated through the perpetual distinguishing of Western artists, most notably living in Western art centres. By diverging from considerations of the art

world in terms of world art and nationality through an adoption of globalisation, we can explore art conventions rather than the constraints of nationhood. For better or worse, the system of awards distributed in society pronounces what is culturally valuable, taking note of what is being misrepresented by the prizewinners of the Venice Biennale’s *Leone d’oro* award. Awards function as credentials, marking an individual’s eligibility for more prizes. With the selection of artists preliminarily judged by the curators of each Biennale, the curators are in a privileged position of asserting artists’ into a place for worldwide recognition. As seen in the 48th and 52nd Biennales, the curatorial framework towards global art history by Harald Szeemann and Robert Storr arguably sought non-Western artistic acknowledgement. Non-Western artists are open for worldwide acknowledgment and more future prizes. As all of the artists honoured with the *Leone d’oro* are now internationally renowned for their artistic practice, including the few non-Western artists, these individuals will be cemented into the art historical canon. Along with the entire *Leone d’oro* award winners, Cai Guo Qiang, Shirin Neshat and Leon Ferrari have been internationally distinguished for their work, demonstrating their cultural value

⁸¹ Griffon and Meyer, 152.

in art history.

As the most prestigious and historical art biennial and institution in the world, the Venice Biennale offers, to use the words of art historian and curator Lawrence Alloway, “a confrontation with historical density”⁸² for studying art historical trends. Alloway further states that artworks should be viewed within the art world as “part of a communication system”⁸³ for a richer and more nuanced understanding of the art world at large. As a microcosm of the whole, the Venice Biennale is only one part in the system of communication. More specifically, it is a point of intersection for multiple art worlds. As one of the new fundamental components of the art world, the Biennale demands a revision of the construction of art history that moves away from autonomous art objects and individuals and alters the context that contemporary art is being presently assembled and displayed. Offering a poignant opportunity to examine how various art worlds converge transnationally, we can observe current negotiations developing in art history. With the reality of globalisation long set into artistic practices, scholars and curators alike are looking towards global art trends as they strive for greater inclusion into the standard Western

conceptualisations of the discipline. Building on Jones’ proverbial “tool box” provided by globalism, the epistemologies and subjectivity experienced under globalisation are no longer strictly restrained to Western art discourses. This lens of globalism is different than the kind typically displayed at the Venice Biennale, in which the scope is merely internationalism. Through the act of measuring cultural value vis-a-vis the *Leono d’Oro*, global artists are able to propel their artistic frameworks onto a global platform. Although it is problematic that art history is constructed with a Western concentration, scholars, institutions, and artists are labouring towards a more inclusive canon. As problematic as it is, the canon offers a point of reference for art history, and a framework, however linear, is necessary in order to ascertain the implicit Westernisation that has resided within its structure throughout history. Through critically analysing the existing canon we are able to understand its weaknesses, and we can work to deconstruct its foundational principles in an effort to reshape it towards a more inclusive, if not global, art historiography. What is clear through investigating the Venice Biennale is that art institutions, the tradition of award-giving, and the canon of art history are

⁸² Alloway, 89.

⁸³ Alloway, 14.

all inevitably flawed, and as a result the tentative solution is not to remove or disavow such instrumental figures, but rather to continually challenge, question and reconstruct these bodies of thought. By entering into a global consciousness in which a maintained self-reflexivity and a continual reappraisal of societal structures, let alone art institutions, is made requisite, perspectival change can surely arise. It is our responsibility to be patient and critical, understanding that while contemporary art privileges the new and the vanguard, dogmatic change is a much more contentious topic than the seemingly comfortable world of the art historical canon.

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