

New Media, Politics and the 1968 Venice Biennale

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Introduction

My paper explores the way new media art and politics affected the Venice Biennale in the late 1960s and the legacy of 1968 for the Biennale as an art institution engaged in rethinking the notion of art. In particular, the paper aims at exploring the crisis related to the continual recuperation of supposedly radical art in the Venice Biennale in the mid 1960s and 1970s. To analyse this I will consider the Biennales of 1966, 1968 and 1974, which are not directly connected with each other but show how, after the dissolution of radicalism at the Biennale in 1968 similar gestures will be recuperated by the same institution over the years on different levels. I will then give some examples of how these tensions were played again in the following years, between the 1980s and 2001.

The 1968 Venice Biennale

1968 represent a pivotal node in the history of the Venice Biennale, when categories and grand prizes were abolished by the institution's Charter.

During this year, both in Europe and in the States, numbers of student activists, intellectuals and workers formed movements to demonstrate against capitalism and the bourgeoisie. These protests deeply affected Italy and Italian cultural structures. Many academies and universities were occupied by protesting students. The Venice Biennale and other art institutions such as the Milan's *Triennale* were conceived as symbols of the bourgeois culture and therefore boycotted. The opening of the 34th Biennale in the summer 1968 took place in a climate of tension that followed the heated uproars of spring 1968. On 18th June a riot culminated in Piazza San Marco where a crowd of students and intellectuals gathered in order to assault and occupy the Biennale. A police squad intervened on the protesting crowd (Figure 1) and occupied the Giardini, where the



Figure 1

Biennale *vernissage* was about to take place. Because of the presence of the police to such a cultural event, most of the artists participating to the Biennale refused to open their pavilions, others in sign of protest turned their canvases towards the walls (Figure 2). Eventually and slowly the strain decreased, the pavilions re-opened and the award of the prizes postponed.



Figure 2

The abolition of Prizes from the Biennale's charter was one of the first palpable results of the 1968 revolts. A series of debates on the future of the Biennale took place in Venice during the winter, and the institution took into consideration the idea of re-writing the Biennale's charter in order to reflect the needs of contemporary art and society.

Another reason that led the Biennale to change the original charter was the crisis related to the medium specificity brought to the art scene by the new experiments in art and technology of the early 1960s. The Biennale reflected this change in 1966 when the idea of subverting the conventional categories was mooted by kinetic and optical artists.

Julio Le Parc and the Venice Biennale 1966

In 1966 Argentinean artist Julio Le Parc presented his kinetic works to the Biennale. The role of the artist, according to Le Parc, was to revolutionise the art world and to "open people's eyes" by offering the spectator a variety of elements that can be altered and animated by their dynamic participation. The works presented by Le Parc at the Venice Biennale showed this intention. With such works Julio Le Parc won the Biennale's Painting Prize. The award of such a prestigious prize to an artist who encouraged the spectator to 'play' with his works rose considerable criticism among art critics and the press. The judgments on Le Parc and his art found in specialist academic art journals were mainly negative. Some other comments reflected mixed feelings, such as the one of amusement and surprise, but also perplexity and confusion over a 'best painting prize' given to an artist whose works 'do not have any paint on it at all'. The notion of art was undermined and categories in the visual arts became pointless. The disembowelment of the categories that followed Le Parc's gesture encouraged the institution to take into consideration the discussion over a new charter. From the 1968 edition the Biennale abandoned the traditional division of art categories.

The 1974 Venice Biennale, *Freedom to Chile*

The 1966 crisis and the 1968 collapse of the Biennale's organisation prefigure what happened in 1974.

First, the new Biennale's charter, approved in July 1973, was adopted. New laws regulated the entire Biennale's organisation in order to give the institution, which still remained a public organisation, a more autonomous status. More responsibilities were given to the Steering Committee and more freedom and independence was given to the Director.

Second, as a response to the military coup of 1973 that led to the killing of Salvador Allende and Pinochet's dictatorship, the President of the Venice Biennale, socialist Carlo Ripa di Meana, dedicated the entire event to Chile. The theme *Freedom to Chile* inspired exhibitions, documentaries, concerts and conferences. Salvador Allende's widow, Ortensia Allende, gave the Biennale's inaugural speech and exiled Chilean mural artists gathered together to form the *Brigada S. Allende* in order to paint murals all over Venice with the aid of local artists and students.

This highly politicised connotation made the political act at the Biennale the actual spectacle. Society has changed and the Biennale wanted to reflect such a transformation. It was an attempt of the Biennale to find a new relationship with the public, and to give a more democratic perspective to a cultural institution founded on promoting contemporary art to all classes of society.

These tensions brought up in the mid 1960s were played again in the following years when radical gestures and the notion of art in an expanding field were recuperated by the Biennale on different levels.

Conclusion

Despite the strong impact that politics had on the Biennale in the late 1960s and early 70s, which caused the immediate re-writing of the institution's charter, the long-term effects were by contrast minimal.

The big turmoil surrounding the opening of the Venice Biennale during the summer 1968 ended up soon leaving no big traces in the Biennale's internal structure. Le Parc's victory and the 1968 revolt casted light on the crisis of categories in art linked to the discourse of medium specificity, and they led to the disembowelment of categories and the official abolition of categories from the Biennale's charter in 1970.

Six years later the attempt of the Biennale to make a more radical and meaningful contribution to the art scene showed how politics could be used as the actual spectacle. What happened at the Biennale in the 1970s was an attempt to address to the society's changes and to modify the institution to allow the masses to access culture with the consequent spectacularisation of politics.

What kind of consequences did the 1966 crisis introduce to the Biennale? How did new media art affect the art institution? How to interpret social radicalism and new media art in the context of the Venice Biennale, particularly after 1968? How did the Venice Biennale come to terms with the concept of democratization of art?