From the Global to the Local (and Back)

Curatorial Strategies in Biennials and

Small Visual Arts Organisations

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SVAOs and Biennials

The 1990s witnessed the rise and the increasing propagation of two distinct but ultimately kindred curatorial phenomena. On the one hand, this decade saw the worldwide proliferation of large-scale, international and perennial exhibitions models, also known as biennials.[[1]](#footnote-1) On the other hand, simultaneous to the biennialboom, the same interplay between the local and the global that provided the conditions for the emergence of exemplarily large-scale exhibitions led to the emergence of an ostensibly diametrically opposed and less-studied phenomenon, namely Small Visual Arts Organisations (SVAOs), spaces that operate at a significantly smaller scale than the traditional art institution. SVAOs are a curatorial phenomenon that has received substantially less scholarly attention than biennials, but one that through its capacity to negotiate between the local and the global in contemporary art nonetheless has the potential to shed light on current debates regarding the exhibitionary complex.

The term ‘small visual arts organisation’ was first suggested to me by Emily Pethick, director of The Showroom (London, UK) in 2014, when I asked her in an interview whether she would describe The Showroom as an ‘alternative’ institution.[[2]](#footnote-2) ‘Common Practice’, a group advocating for the recognition of the small-scale visual arts sector in London, also refers to like-minded organisations as ‘small-scale organisations’ or ‘small visual arts organisations’.[[3]](#footnote-3) However, their definition is somewhat broader as it includes organisations such as Afterall and Mute Publishing. SVAOs, as I shall use the term here, are small spaces in which exhibition-making and the production and dissemination of contemporary art are still at the heart of their programming.

Biennials are, par excellence, the large-scale exhibitionary platforms that are dedicated to, among other things, the creation and dissemination of international contemporary art. Most significantly, they have become a dominant curatorial model that is sustained, as Paul O’Neill argues, by its two leitmotifs: the *glocal* and the contemporary,[[4]](#footnote-4) the former being a neologism that Thierry de Duve describes as ‘a conflation of the local and the global’.[[5]](#footnote-5) This conflation takes place as the biennial situates itself as a platform in which ‘intercultural dialogues’ unravel, as suggested by Charles Green and Anthony Gardner, who critically extrapolate two of the main characteristics of these events. On the one hand, they argue that biennials provide exposure to local artists by bringing them into contact with presumably ‘globalized networks’ of economic support and artworld awareness. Additionally, biennials have served to promote cities or entire regions that were previously considered ‘peripheral’. On the other hand, Green and Gardner ask whether these events have become ‘handmaidens’ to the proliferation of ‘transnational capital and imperialist politics associated with globalized neoliberalism’,[[6]](#footnote-6) a question that has been raised more than once. Both of these characterisations, built on the grounds of exposure and proliferation, are closely linked to visibility, that is, the ability to see and be seen, or the extent to which something or someone has drawn widespread attention. As we shall see throughout this article, most discourses and narratives that account for the biennial’s *globality* rely almost entirely on visibility. Given the impact of these events on the production and dissemination of contemporary artistic practices, this idea of visibility has abrasively permeated discourses of contemporary art, and most specifically it is frequently present in discourses surrounding exhibition-making. What would happen if we remove visibility, if only for a moment, as a key component of our articulation of the glocal in contemporary art? Despite the relative neglect of the role of SVAOs in debates about the mediating role of curatorship in the glocal, I will argue that a critical analysis of these lesser-known institutional experiments enables a reshuffling of these debates, which are usually focused on large-scale visible exemplars.

In what follows I will discuss both the common and the contrasting elements in these two exhibitionary models with the aim of showing that they have more in common than first appears. More specifically, I will focus on their shared interest in addressing both the local and the global, while keeping in mind their dissimilar scales, temporalities, infrastructure and, mainly, their divergent modes of addressing their publics. In biennials, I argue, the global localises itself by entering into a dialogue with a given location or, from a more pessimistic perspective, the global incorporates the local into is hegemonic logic. Inversely – for better or for worse – SVAOs’ artistic activities look to globalise themselves through modes of addressing that emerge in, and explicitly thematise, the local.

Parallel Histories: Biennials and SVAOs, the 1990s

Biennials are characterised by their large budgets and the high number of works on display. Together with the biennial-related events, they take place simultaneously in different venues across the host city or town for the duration of the mega-exhibition. The large number of national and international visitors is another significant characteristic of these perennial events. For instance, the visitor numbers rose to over a million when the Sao Paulo Biennial stopped charging an entry fee in 2002.[[7]](#footnote-7)

SVAOs are also dedicated to the production and dissemination of contemporary art but, in contrast to biennials, are structurally small, non-profit art spaces. Their buildings rarely exceed 1,000 m2 of floor space.[[8]](#footnote-8) They often have few staff members and very limited budgets, which does not allow them to manage and store permanent collections, although some of them have physical or digital archives and libraries.[[9]](#footnote-9) They are characterised by their interest in the local community in which they are located, as well as in diverse urban issues ranging from new technologies to social art practices in their cities.

Despite these structural differences, there are parallels in the conditions under which both biennials and SVAOs emerged. Elena Filipovic describes how some biennials arose either as a response to weak or non-existing art institutions or as an alternative to those institutions dedicated to collecting and to preserving, namely museums.[[10]](#footnote-10) Beral Madra, to give an example, describes different transformations in Istanbul’s contemporary art scene, where, during the 1980s, the city experienced a failed attempt to open a modern or a contemporary art museum due to the ‘lack of interest from the state and the private sector’.[[11]](#footnote-11) In light of this failed attempt, the so-called ‘Turkish Avant-garders’ were active in organising exhibitions, and artists in Istanbul started embracing international art language.[[12]](#footnote-12) This artistic effervescence, together with Istanbul’s eagerness to become a global capital aiming to enter the European Union, gave birth to The Istanbul Biennale, inaugurated in 1987 and curated by Madra, local art critic and curator.

‘Peripheral biennials’ or ‘biennials of resistance’, as Oliver Marchart calls them, partly emerged in the spirit of giving visibility either to their local artistic production or more generally to unrepresented contemporary art.[[13]](#footnote-13) A paradigmatic example is the Havana Biennial, which was initially created in 1983 to ‘present art from the so-called Third World, ie from the global South’.[[14]](#footnote-14) By its second edition in 1986, fifty-seven countries were being represented by around 690 artists.[[15]](#footnote-15) In this manner, biennials launch artists into the international art scene and allow them to enter the market by giving them greater visibility. Wilfredo Prieto, one of the most renowned Cuban artists, achieved notoriety with his critically acclaimed work *Apolitical*,[[16]](#footnote-16) was presented for the first time in the Havana Biennial in 2001.

In a manner similar to the history of some biennials, the majority of SVAOs emerged after the 1990s as a response to different challenges that artists and publics were facing in relation to artistic production in different parts of the world. Some of them developed due to the lack of art institutions or artistic education in their regions, such as Khoj (Delhi, India), established in 1997, or the Nairobi Arts Trust/Centre for Contemporary Art of East Africa (Nairobi, Kenya), established in 2001. Others evolved from artist-run spaces that needed a different organisational structure in order to be able to apply for funding, such as ruangrupa (Jakarta, Indonesia), established in 2000, or Para Site (Hong Kong), founded in 1996. In other places, especially where art history and art institutions had a stronger presence, they developed as alternatives to mainstream museums and galleries. They often saw themselves as spaces that escaped commercial values and supported emerging artists. Examples of this are The Showroom (London, UK) and lugar a dudas (Cali, Colombia), established in 1983 and 2005 respectively. Organisations such as Casco (Utrecht, The Netherlands) from 1990 or TEOR/éTica (San José, Costa Rica) from 1999, have mainly been invested in creating spaces for critical thinking with respect to contemporary art as well as society at large. In some cases, SVAOs were created as an opportunity to give unknown artists a space to make their work visible or to promote their work beyond regional boundaries by connecting them to a larger international art community. Such is the case of Theertha (Colombo, Sri Lanka), created in 2000, Ashkal Alwan (Beirut, Lebanon), created in 1993, and Pool (Seoul, Korea), created in 1999.

Several of these spaces offer emerging or unknown artists the opportunity to host their first solo shows, at times connecting them to the international art scene and eventually allowing them to enter the international art market. Examples of this are Sangdon Kim, now an award-winning international artist, who had his first solo show in Pool in 2004; and The Otolith Group, an artist-led collective founded by Kodwo Eshun and Anjalika Sagar nominated for the Turner Prize for their project *A Long Time Between Suns*, who first presented at Gasworks and The Showroom both in London, UK (2009).

SVAOs have hybrid curatorial agendas that constitute their public offer. A hybrid curatorial agenda means that none of these spaces are dedicated solely to exhibition-making; instead, all engage in the combination of various forms of artistic mediation, which is another element they share with biennials.[[17]](#footnote-17) In addition to art exhibitions, most SVAOs host artist residencies, screenings, symposia, workshops, concerts, performances, open studios and NGO-like initiatives, among other things. A crucial difference from biennials has to do with scale and the fact that SVAOs’ offerings are mainly inspired by their local surroundings and not directly or necessarily by global concerns. For instance, projects and ideas developed in ruangrupa are often inspired by the life in Jakarta itself, such as their publication *Stiker Kota* (Indonesian for ‘City Stickers’). *Stiker Kota* refers to small stickers (of around fifteen centimetres) that one can find across the streets and in vehicles for public transport in several Indonesian cities. They are popular and inexpensive and have been produced mainly in small Indonesian villages since the 1970s, though they are mainly consumed in the bigger cities, especially in Jakarta. These stickers certainly bring about a very specific visual knowledge in relation to past and present urban local issues. *Stiker Kota*, published in 2009 by the SVAO ruangrupa, explores, documents and analyses the changes that the city underwent during the last forty years by investigating the production and dissemination of these stickers. Most significantly, the publication identified the strong analogies between this form of street art and the challenges of urban daily life in Jakarta. The publication of this book exemplifies the commitment that ruangrupa and other SVAOs have to their cities or their local surroundings.

In addition to SVAOs’ commitment to the cities or neighbourhoods where they are based, these spaces share an interest in process-based artistic practices, in research and arts education, and in fostering strong levels of engagement with their publics – the last of these being another crucial aspect of the efforts made to articulate their relationship to the local. Furthermore, all SVAOs belong to at least one network that connects them with other like-minded spaces in different countries, which is in turn crucial in articulating their relationship to the global.

It is not my intention to position SVAOs as rivals to their bigger glocal counterparts. As demonstrated by events such as the 31st Sao Paulo Biennial 2014 or the Gwangju Biennale 2002, which invited SVAOs and other independent groups from Asia and Europe to participate, biennials have the potential to incorporate the ethos of SVAOs into their agenda. Moreover, the nature of biennials allows them to offer, at minimum, what SVAOs are able to offer to their artists and their publics: exposure, the commission of new works, taking the risk of showing new artists with little or no commercial value, activities such as discussions, workshops, symposia, or publications, encounters with contemporary art, and international projection and visibility (as seen in the cases of Sangdon Kim in Pool and The Otolith Group in The Showroom). Thus, I will not dwell on what the biennial already can and indeed does offer, but instead will look at what SVAOs can offer that the biennial cannot due to its transitory and large-scale nature. Timescales and organisational structures are key components in an analysis of the ways in which SVAOs deal with the glocal in a spirit that is different to the biennial, and are significant in relation to SVAOs’ modes of addressing and creating a public. In other words, SVAOs’ distinctive timescales and organisational structures offer a unique curatorial perspective when negotiating with the local (the place and the public).

Modes of Addressing: On Becoming Local

Biennials are, more than any other curatorial project, under constant critical scrutiny. Criticisms include the charge that they are the embodiment of late capitalism, that they are merely tourist sites or points of encounter for art-worldly jet-setters, that they recycle artists or privilege Western artists,[[18]](#footnote-18) or that they made the white cube into a global standard.[[19]](#footnote-19) Most significantly for the purposes of this article, biennials are criticised for addressing the local merely as a place and with making ‘little or no lasting impact on the inhabitants or cultural life of their host cities’.[[20]](#footnote-20) Along these lines, biennials have also been accused of seeming ‘less engaged with considering the experience of individual viewers before specific works of art than with constructing a global profile’.[[21]](#footnote-21) Events such as the 2004 Liverpool Biennial and the 9th Istanbul Biennial showed an increasing awareness of this limitation by commissioning works to be created as a response to the cities and their communities.[[22]](#footnote-22) In a change from other editions, the 9th Istanbul Biennial did not use historic (touristic) buildings as hosts, but rather spaces connected to everyday life, including abandoned warehouses or apartment blocks. This included the installation of a ‘Hospitality Zone’ where local art spaces showed work, where an international student workshop was set up, and to which a local magazine moved its offices. These efforts, however, were dismissed by Jörg Heiser (co-editor of *Frieze*) as a gesture that seemed ‘strategic rather than heartfelt’,[[23]](#footnote-23) especially as he pointed out that other art installations across the city that were not linked to the biennial ‘made fewer claims but actually allowed one to engage with the city environment more’.[[24]](#footnote-24) In spite of the efforts made at the 9th Istanbul Biennial, Heiser’s criticism (whether fair or not) targets not the activities of the organisers, but instead attempts to call attention to the inherent limitations of such ambitious events.

Due to their small size and orientation towards local communities, SVAOs seem less intimidating to visitors than museums or mega-exhibitions, where even art lovers (like Heiser) – not to mention non-art-lovers – could feel alienated either by the event’s overwhelming ambition, by the expected codes of behaviour, or even by the invasive nature of large-scale events. In contrast to biennials, SVAOs have become spaces where more diverse members of the public have initiated and/or developed their artistic interests. Many of these visitors had little previous exposure to art or had not often engaged with other cultural institutions. These spaces connect with their local communities, mainly by investing in tailor-made projects. This is what curator Maria Lind, director of the Tensta Konsthall (Stockholm, Sweden), refers to as the spaces’ ‘radical specificity’, which means that often the neighbours become an inspiration to develop a new art project or idea: ‘everything we do is tailor-made… that’s a common denominator. We put a lot of care into shaping something in relation to local conditions.’[[25]](#footnote-25) These tailor-made projects allow SVAOs to connect with specific audiences that, due to feeling a sense of community, have increasingly developed a sense of caring and respect for the spaces and its other projects. Francis McKee, director of CCA (Glasgow, Scotland) told me during an interview how a taxi driver came to CCA for the first time because he was interested in a series of films related to the Easter Rising in Ireland. After his positive experience, he and his wife became frequent visitors to the café and to the venue’s art exhibitions.[[26]](#footnote-26)

The transient nature of large-scale exhibitionary models (not excluding the 9th Istanbul Biennial) is a significant impediment to the construction of long-term relationships with their publics, given that such relationships are based on engagement and collaboration. A significant advantage of SVAOs is that they are able to operate on a longer timescale, as building solid relationships with the local public could take months or even years. In 2010 the Slovenian artist Marjetica Potrč worked at Laboratories d’Aubervilliers (Aubervilliers, France) for some months in collaboration with RozO Architects in a research project called *La Semeuse*, which aimed at finding the links between the cultural diversity in Aubervilliers and plant biodiversity in the neighbourhood. A year later, in 2011, they were able to start collecting and archiving seeds and setting up a seed-trade project, in which workshops were planned to ‘share plants, knowledge, and questions related to urban gardening, creating relationships that connect one garden to another’.[[27]](#footnote-27) An exhibition was set up with the plans of the projects and artworks that were inspired by the project. It was not until April 2012 that a garden was installed, which was open to everyone in Aubervilliers. In 2014, the appearance of the garden was the result of co-operation between gardeners and the workshops organised throughout the project: ‘as part of the dynamic process of residents making the garden theirs, the shapes, plants, and techniques used will evolve, through the advice and knowledge that everyone shares’.[[28]](#footnote-28)

Time and patience have become allies when building stable relationships with local publics, allowing for a sense of stability and continuity, which in turn generates a sense of trust. Trust, and, in many cases, a community’s familiarity with its SVAO, has engendered in the local public more openness towards contemporary art, positioning arts organisations at the centre of this mediation. SVAOs, therefore, not merely address the local but create it, and seek to globalise themselves within it.

Mode of Address: On Seeking for the Global

Beyond time and scale, as mentioned above, there are significant curatorial similarities in the way in which SVAOs and biennials negotiate both the practices and the discourses that constitute our conception of the global in contemporary art.[[29]](#footnote-29) This section will focus on one particular aspect in which SVAOs operate on the basis of an inverse logic with respect to the relation between the local and the global when compared to the biennial. Both visibility and connectivity operate in diametrically opposed manners in these two curatorial models.

In the large-scale event the global localises itself by choosing a given location and, in the best-case scenario (the 9th Istanbul Biennial, for instance), it enters into a dialogue with it. Furthermore, ostensibly, one of the main achievements of the so-called peripheral biennials (such as the Havana Biennial) has been that the local has come to decentralise Western artistic activity by offering visibility to contemporary art and artists from regions that were previously underrepresented, shaking the conception of the global that places the West at the centre.[[30]](#footnote-30) Thus, the local comes to disrupt a given understanding of what the global is or should be. Notwithstanding, the local (or the global, depending on how one sees it), reconstitutes itself in relation to a previous understanding of the global. Regardless of their site specificity, both peripheral and non-peripheral biennials can claim a global status due to their relationship to their publics. These events not only show international artists, but welcome international visitors. In this sense, the biennial presupposes an audience, as global and diverse as possible. The biennial, in theory, addresses everyone from everywhere (‘everyone’ being in practice those who can afford to attend): citizens, art lovers, non-art-lovers, people from here and people from very far away. Diversity in what is shown and to whom it is shown is part of the ethos and the nature of these events. Thus, the dialogue between the biennial and the global is largely a matter of visibility: not only are there biennials everywhere (now even in Antarctica)[[31]](#footnote-31) but, for a curatorial project, they also enjoy an incomparable number of national and international attendees, who in the best-case scenario will become recurrent visitors.

In SVAOs the primary aim is neither establishing a dialogue with a place, nor the disruption of given conceptions of the global through giving visibility to a previously invisible locality, though, as seen above, it often happens that artists that have their first solo show in SVAOs end up gaining international recognition. Instead, events that take place in these spaces do not intend to address everyone from everywhere. Pierre Bal-Blanc, once director of CAC Brétigny and now – ironically – co-curator of documenta 14, claimed that in CAC they had to ‘produce an audience for each project’.[[32]](#footnote-32) This is the case with the majority of SVAOs worldwide, *La Semeuse* being a representative example of the work conducted by these spaces. Unlike the biennial, SVAOs’ modes of addressing their publics rely neither on the accumulation of a presupposed international audience nor on international visibility. Rather, creating an audience for each project can result in low audience numbers, lack of public attention and, consequently, reduced public funding.

The reader must be wondering how, then, can the existence of these spaces shed light on current debates about the global in contemporary art? How can lack of visibility have a global impact? These questions are framed based on the assumption that the global is equivalent or closely linked to visibility, as has been the case with the biennial and its related scholarship. In SVAOs it is not the global that finds a location and makes it visible, but the other way around. SVAOs are like-minded spaces lacking global visibility and scholarly attention that aim to create a sense of locality through their tailor-made artistic practices. This tailor-made local approach is a shared concern of these spaces, which – like the biennials – are also present on every continent.[[33]](#footnote-33)

It is not merely their international presence that makes the existence of SVAOs significant when shedding light on current debates about the global in contemporary art, it is the unique way in which they have dealt with their lack of visibility, namely, through implementing a specific strategy for connectivity: network affiliations. Eyal Danon, director of the Israeli Center for Digital Art (Holon, Israel) described their situation as follows: ‘… we always felt that we were working in isolation – globally, but also in our region. So we needed different kinds of networks… it was all about trying to overcome this isolation.’[[34]](#footnote-34)

In the context of SVAOs, networks refer to the various platforms and projects that link these spaces together, in addition to acting as significant sources of funding. Networks support SVAOs with start-up funding, sponsorships for specific projects, both independent or in collaboration with other members of the network, or funding for SVAOs’ further development, growth and sustainability. Every network has its own agenda and specific interests, and all SVAOs belong to at least one of them.[[35]](#footnote-35) The most relevant networks include: CLUSTER, founded in 2011, which comprises eight SVAOs located in residential areas in the suburbs of European cities, and whose spaces primarily aim at engaging with their local surroundings;[[36]](#footnote-36) Common Practice, founded in 2009 with the aim of promoting the value of the small-scale arts sector, establishing dialogue between UK-based and other local, national and international organisations; and, most significantly, Arts Collaboratory, a translocal networkfounded in 2007, which connects, funds and supports over twenty-three different organisations across the globe, helping their associated artists and curators gain international visibility.[[37]](#footnote-37) One of Arts Collaboratory’s main aims is to share curatorial knowledge and strategies and to build financial and emotional support among organisations from Asia, Africa, Latin America and the Middle East. This network also works closely with Casco (Utrecht, Netherlands).[[38]](#footnote-38)

SVAOs construct what it means to be global through artistic practices that emerged in the local context, which is a shared characteristic of these spaces. Their affiliation to international networks materialises their interest in seeking to have a global impact by enhancing their strong individual links with their location and their publics. For example, ‘Minga: Exploring Utopia’ is an ongoing project organised by Arts Collaboratory in which twenty-one SVAOs are asked to explore the concept of ‘utopia’ in their local context. The project was launched by publishing a manifesto showing the diverse local perspectives and understandings of the concept by the various participants.[[39]](#footnote-39) The intention of the project was to create a working methodology that enabled SVAOs from different parts of the world to collaborate without ignoring their individual and local interests. Some SVAOs selected artists to work with them on the project. For instance, TEOR/éTica (San José, Costa Rica) invited artist Lucia Madriz to work with writer, interior designer and manager Paula Piedra (cultural producer in TEOR/éTica). They conceived a project called *Verde: The Experiment.* The experiment comprised a blog and a guide on how to become a better earthling. The artists then translated these practical ideas into artistic experiments. In the end, the experiment ceased to be merely an artistic project and the guide was internalised by TEOR/éTica. Piedra recalls how the project had an impact on their institutional behaviours, including recycling habits and use of paper. Other SVAOs preferred to do research-oriented workshops or events. The whole process was recorded and shared on the project’s website (mingautopia.net), which is intended to act as a news agency. The website still operates as an online platform that provides information about each SVAO, a map of utopias (in which, in the form of blog posts, participants can document different artworks, texts and research projects produced locally in relation to Minga), and, in the future, the intention is to launch a fictive film. The website is simultaneously a space within which different SVAOs can see and comment on what is happening locally elsewhere, and at the same time communicate with one another. Furthermore, the website operates as an open platform where members of the public worldwide can see the local artistic outcomes that emerge when working on the shared concept of utopia. This project illustrates how SVAOs deal with visibility and connectivity in a different way from the biennial. The small-scale work that focuses on the local understandings of a given concern is only made visible at a global scale through connectivity and collaboration.

Whereas in the large-scale international event global artists are in dialogue with a particular site-specific audience and try to express themselves locally, in the small-scale space artists create a sense of the locality and then come to express themselves globally through their networks, which are globally motivated by a common interest in the local surroundings.

Conclusion

SVAOs and biennials are two curatorial models dedicated to the creation, presentation and dissemination of contemporary art, both of which proliferated across the world in the 1990s. The same interplay between the local and the global that provided the conditions for the emergence of exemplarily large-scale events led to the emergence of what is ostensibly a diametrically opposed phenomenon in the form of Small Visual Arts Organisations, which operate at a considerably smaller scale. The significant scholarly and – generally speaking – public attention that the biennial has received since its worldwide dissemination has contributed to shaping current debates regarding the exhibitionary complex as a negotiator between the local and the global in contemporary art. SVAOs, however, complicate and call into question the limitations of discussing the glocal in curatorship dominant within this large-scale framework. Considering the divergent modes of addressing the public of these two curatorial phenomena, both must play a key role when articulating future debates.

*La Semeuse*, a project representative of the ways in which SVAOs relate to their public, demonstrates the importance of time and patience when building solid and stable relationships with local surroundings, a strategy not possible in the context of the transitory and large-scale nature of the biennial. By means not only of addressing the public but also of creating a sense of locality, SVAOs position themselves as mediators that prompt a new openness towards contemporary art. Therefore, I have argued, the work of these spaces is becoming increasingly significant and deserves both public and scholarly consideration.

‘Minga: Exploring Utopia’ is a project representative of the ways in which SVAOs articulate their relation to the global, which largely depends on their prime strategy for survival: developing a sense of connectivity through their networks. ‘Minga: Exploring Utopia’ demonstrates that an account of the global that merely relies on either global presence or visibility, as in the case of biennials, is not sufficient. The disassociation between the visible and the global that I propose here seems rather counter-intuitive, since our ability to identify something as global often relies on our ability to see it, to point out when and how it occurs and, most significantly, to record how it repeats itself in space, how it conquers spaces. Removing visibility, if only for a moment, as a key component of our articulation of the global in contemporary art might help us to reconfigure not only our understanding of the global, but our ways of behaving in relation to it. It is perhaps a counter-intuitive approach to the global that is needed in order to engage with the spaces and its people, rather than continuing to rely on the logic of visibility through the conquering of the exhibitionary space. It has been my intention to show how the study of SVAOs unveils a battleground for curatorship that negotiates between contemporary art and the global in a unique manner. Networks such as Arts Collaboratory have enabled productive modes of address that embrace both SVAOs’ lack of visibility and their global presence, yet without failing to acknowledge the unique dialogue that each of them fosters with their local surroundings.

The study of SVAOs provides us with a different approach to the local that is not transient and large but stable and small. At the same time, these spaces maintain the connection – perhaps problematically – with the global by means of increasingly internalising the international art language and by investing so much in their networks. This internalisation is not only historical but operative, as its implosion feels so immediate that it is probably already changing its course as I write. This makes the creation of a discourse surrounding these spaces on the one hand necessary, but delicate and precarious on the other. As much as I consider it relevant to record – rather than merely to celebrate – how SVAOs can potentially articulate a different path when discussing the glocal in contemporary art (so far largely dominated by large-scale exhibitionary models), it is also important to become aware of how futile it would be to romanticise this phenomenon. This article is written in a decisive period for these spaces, whose practices are happening and constantly changing, here and elsewhere, which awakens my curiosity into *how* – rather than whether – SVAOs could be incorporated into the glocal history of exhibition-making.

1. Biennial, or Biennale, has become the most commonly used term to refer to these large-scale events independently of the frequency of their occurrence (for instance, documenta, which belongs to the Biennial Foundation, occurs only once every five years). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Emily Pethick, personal interview with the author, Colchester, 7 February 2014 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See Sarah Thelwall, *Size Matters: Notes towards a Better Understanding of the Value, Operation and Potential of Small Visual Arts Organisations*, commissioned by Common Practice, London, July 2011, available at: <http://www.commonpractice.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/Common-Practice-London-Size-Matters.pdf>, accessed 21 February 2018 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Paul O’Neill, *The Culture of Curating and the Curating of Culture(s)*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2012, p 53 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Thierry de Duve, ‘The Glocal and the Singuniversal’, *Third Text* 89, vol 21, no 6, November 2007, p 682 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Anthony Gardner and Charles Green, *Biennials, Triennials, and Documenta: The Exhibitions That Created Contemporary Art*, Wiley-Blackwell, Chichester, 2016, p 3 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Sabine B Vogel, *Biennials: Art on a Global Scale*, Springer, Vienna and New York, 2010, p 107 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. There are some exceptions, such as CCA (Glasgow, Scotland). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. There are also a few exceptions. TEOR/éTica, founded in 1999 in San José, opened ‘TEORColeccionpermanente’ in 2008. This is a different space that hosts a permanent collection of mainly contemporary Central American Art. The collection has expanded to include some works by international artists through donations and exchanges. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. See Elena Filipovic, ‘The Global White Cube’, in Barbara Vanderlinden and Elena Filipovic, eds, *The Manifesta Decade: Debates on Contemporary Art Exhibitions and Biennials in Post-Wall Europe*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2005 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Beral Madra, ‘The Hot Spot of Global Art: Istanbul’s Contemporary Art Scene and its Sociopolitical and Cultural Conditions and Practices’, *Third Text* 90, vol 22, no 1, January 2008, p 105 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Ibid, p 106 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. I say partly because there were other social, political and economic reasons that played significant roles in the emergence of the different biennials worldwide. These factors are undoubtedly crucial in the analysis of the biennial as a curatorial phenomenon, yet at present they exceed the scope of this article. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Oliver Marchart, ‘The Globalization of Art and the “Biennials of Resistance”: A History of the Biennials from the Periphery’, *World Art*, vol 4, no 2, November 2014, p 267 [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Ibid [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. This piece reproduces flags from different countries in black and white, and has been presented in Dublin, Havana, Paris and Siena. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. A representative example is ‘Utopia Station’, co-curated by Molly Nesbit, Hans Ulrich Obrist and Rirkrit Tiravanija in the 50th Venice Biennial in 2003. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. These last two criticisms have been proven wrong by an investigation conducted by Dr Christian Morgner. His research demonstrates that eighty-five per cent of the artists in the sample used participated only in one biennial edition. Moreover, more non-Western artists than Western artists were shown across biennials. See Christian Morgner, ‘The Biennial: The Practice of Selection in a Global Art World’, *Empirical Studies of the Arts*, vol 32, no 2, July 2014, pp 275–282. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. See Filipovic, ‘The Global White Cube’, op cit [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Claire Doherty, ‘Curating Wrong Places… Or Where Have All the Penguins Gone?’, in Paul O’Neill, ed, *Curating Subjects*, Open Editions, London, 2011, p 102 [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Ralph Rugoff, ‘You Talking to Me? On Curating Group Shows that Give You a Chance to Join the Group’, in Paula Marincola, ed, *What Makes a Great Exhibition?*, Philadelphia Exhibitions Initiative, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 2006, p 47 [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Doherty, ‘Curating Wrong Places… ’, op cit, p 101 [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Jörg Heiser, ‘9th Istanbul Biennial’, *Frieze* 95, November? December 2005, available at: <https://frieze.com/article/9th-istanbul-biennial?language=de>, accessed 19 August 2016 [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Ibid [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Maria Lind, Pierre Bal-Blanc, Eyal Danon, et al, ‘How to Begin Living in the Trees?’, *e-flux journal* 53, March 2014, available at: <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/how-to-begin-living-in-the-trees/>, accessed 20 August 2016 [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Francis McKee, personal interview with the author, Colchester, 22 April 2016 [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. *La Semeuse*, Les Laboratories d’ Aubervilliers, Aubervilliers, France, <http://www.leslaboratoires.org/en/projet/la-semeuse>, accessed 20 August 2016 [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Ibid [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. This discussion exceeds the scope of this article; however, it is important to mention that SVAOs have been deeply influenced by the biennial’s modus operandi. Curators like Maria Lind, Christine Tohmé, Pierre Bal-Blanc and Ade Darmawan are not only extremely familiar with the discourses and practices surrounding SVAOs, but they are gaining experience in the curatorship of large-scale events. Tohmé, founding director of Ashkal Alwan, was appointed to be the curator of Sharjah Biennial 13 in 2016–2017; Lind, director of Tensta Konsthall in Stockholm, was the artistic director of the 2016 Gwanghju Biennial; Bal-Blanc, former director of CAC Brétigny, was one of the co-curators of documenta 14; and Darmawan, founding director of ruangrupa ,has been the artistic director of the Jakarta Biennial since 2013. Beyond the shared aspects of these two curatorial models that could be attributed to the involvement of these individuals, SVAOs themselves have participated in biennials. For instance, ruangrupa has participated in several biennials, including Gwangju, Istanbul, Sao Paulo, Singapore and the Asia Pacific Triennial in Brisbane. Moreover, Arts Collaboratory, the most significant network that links SVAOs together, has participated in the 56th Venice Biennale, the 31st Sao Paolo Biennial, as well as in the Kampala Contemporary Art Festival 2014. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Oliver Marchart, ‘The Globalization of Art and the “Biennials of Resistance”: a History of the Biennials from the Periphery’, op cit [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. The Antarctic Biennale was held in 2017 aboard international research vessels. See: http://www.antarcticpavilion.com/the-antarctic-biennale.html. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Maria Lind, Pierre Bal-Blanc, Eyal Danon, et al, ‘How to Begin Living in the Trees?’, op cit [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. With the exception of Antarctica. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Ibid [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Casco (Utrecht, Netherlands) belongs to six networks as of 2016. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Organisations that comprise the Cluster network are: CAC Brétigny, (Brétigny s/Orge, France), CA2M Centro Dos De Mayo (Madrid, Spain), Casco – Office for Art, Design and Theory (Utrecht, The Netherlands), Les Laboratoires d'Aubervilliers (Aubervilliers, France), Tensta Konsthall (Stockholm, Sweden), The Israeli Center for Digital Art (Holon, Israel), The Showroom (London, UK) and P.A.R.A.S.I.T.E. (Ljubljana, Slovenia). [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Some SVAOs also belong to other networks, such as CLUSTER, Circular Facts and Common Practice. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. See http://www.artscollaboratory.org/ [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Coincidentally, the manifesto was launched at the 31st Sao Paulo Biennial together with a performance. What was visible during the biennial was only an extract of an ongoing project that has required a long period of time to build. Moreover, the period has been constituted through ongoing communication between the participating SVAOs, which strengthens the argument of this article, as it would have been impossible to carry out the project by merely relying on the framework of the biennial. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)