

# Big and Small: Understanding International and Regional Biennials

Every two years, a preparatory chaos engulfs multiple exhibition spaces in the city adding an air of anticipation and optimism to the environment. The visuals are of an art biennial taking shape preparing to host a huge traffic of art admirers for the oncoming few months.

Biennials play into many facets of urban strategic development — tourism, economic influx, local arts and culture, political visibility — given their city-spanning nature. Specifically for the arts, biennials offer dispatches of the latest, mostly urgent, discourses from the contemporary art world. In many ways, biennials have been innovative not for arts alone but for local and global mobility within the arts. This diversity, from logistical to creative, could only be enabled by the philosophy of an exhibition structure that allows itself time to take new shapes periodically. A biennial is backed by prolonged curatorial research and it is not seduced by the idea of churning out frequent and rushed art exhibitions. It then becomes important to encourage biennials by critiquing and challenging them in both individual and institutional capacities (Silvertown, 1983).

For understanding biennials at a regional level, Kochi-Muziris Biennale serves as an optimal case, especially with the manoeuvres and setbacks of its latest edition that spanned from December 2022 to April 2023. It is also interesting to trace the disparity within biennial structures to understand the challenges faced by biennials pushed out in the Global South. Venice Biennale, given its invention of the biennial format of the exhibition, offers itself as the perfect comparative tool to study the informally set standards other biennials of the world are constantly chasing.

## Venice: Development of the Biennial Structure

Biennials often surface as chroniclers of events from the realm of contemporary art over a two-year window. Between two of its consecutive editions, a biennial functions as an accidental art historian. Over the years, more than three hundred biennials have been birthed across the world paving the way for regional biennials, triennials, museum biennials, architecture biennials, and cinema biennials amongst many such renditions (Manghani, Patel, & D'Souza). Founded in 1895, the Venice Biennale pioneered the concept of biennials and what gradually followed was an inclusive

expansion of this exhibition structure. As of today, the global itinerary of biennials is overwhelming and packed to the seams but the city of Venice remains swarming every summer hosting massive audiences for the arts or architecture biennale alternately.

Following its initiation in 1895, the biennial functioned mainly for exhibition and sale of local arts unaware of its potential for hosting a globalized temperament. Since the referendum of 1946 that abolished monarchy and reinstated a democratically elected government in Italy, the Venice Biennale included more and more countries as pavilions for exhibition at the biennale. The said inclusion showed a pattern that mirrored the global political situation, or tried to break away from its oppressive facets at the least.

Initially established as a salon for Italian art, the Venice Biennale soon grew to earn prestige within the global fine arts circle. During the years following 1928, Italian dictator Mussolini extensively employed the Venice Biennale to serve the changing propaganda needs of his regime. The Royal Decree of July 1938 made the Biennale's Administrative Board a full apparatus of the state which meant artistic representation and global inclusion were not priorities for the Biennale. As a result, the period between 1938 and 1942, witnessed largely a showcase for Axis, Axis-occupied countries, and neutrals which led to a conscious elimination of several voices and talents during the WWII period. Many equate the return of a democratically elected government with the sudden increase in the number of nations exhibiting at the Venice Biennale. From 1948 to 1964 alone, these statistics more than doubled from only sixteen countries to thirty-four (Jachec, 2007). The Venice Biennale has been mirroring the political highs and lows of Italy in its operation.

The biennial structure is now being widely critiqued and dissected amongst the art circles. It was only in the 1980s that other parts of the world started replicating the biennial structure within a more local context to support heritage and contemporary arts in a more individualistic manner.

Two recent years of contemporaneity of art being squeezed into one exhibition sometimes can be a bite-sized archive of the latest shifts in arts but could also be adopted with poor execution due to the specific time crunch. While debates and research soar on the topic of biennials, the discourse is always difficult to streamline given the varying magnitudes of biennials happening across the world. There are global celebrity biennials — Venice, São Paulo, Berlin — and then there are biennials that align more with their regional identity — Istanbul, Havana, Kochi-Muziris. Hence, any examination of the biennial structure cannot be done outside of its residential specifications. It is also this spatial politics that makes biennials an essential structure to grasp the disparities of the art world.



*Figure 1: View from the Arsenale venue of the Venice Biennale (c. August 2023).*

At present time, the gradually expanding list of pavilions of different countries at the Venice Biennale gives one hope. Inclusion and representation have been taking shape at the Biennale over the past few decades and it has shifted the focus from Eurocentric conversations of art. Cecelia Alemani was widely celebrated by critics for the inclusivity in her curatorial decisions for the 59th Venice Biennale in 2022. With the record-breaking presence of women artists, the 59th edition is popularly deemed as one of the most curatorially successful editions of the Venice Biennale (Nayeri, 2022).

The Biennale witnessed an expansion as Niger and Panama participated for the first time in the latest 2023 edition of the Venice Architecture Biennale. Russia, in the light of its attack on Ukraine, was not included in the Venice Biennale since 2020 and the country will not be present in the upcoming 60<sup>th</sup> edition either. Often, the list of participating countries of the Venice Biennale reads like a textbook on the political situations, stances, and relations of certain countries.

Within the context of biennials alone, it is interesting to observe how these exhibition structures are impacted by the state apparatus and political systems and tendencies at local, national, and sometimes global levels. Art is political and more so is its exhibition.

## **Kochi: Challenges for Small-Scale Biennials**

Back in 2012, the Kochi-Muziris Biennale (hereby referred to as KMB) unfurled with a great narrative and an honest ambition to put South Asia on the map of contemporary art conversations. All five editions of KMB have witnessed an artist functioning as the main curator. The main brains behind KMB claim that an artist-curator understands the struggles of being an artist more closely than a conventional curator. There is a global sentiment towards curators which establishes that sometimes curatorial responsibilities encroach on the artist's freedom of expression. Hence keeping 'freedom of expression' sacrosanct in its philosophies, KMB took an unconventional approach, especially for a small-scale biennial in its initiation phase. What made KMB stand out internationally was its central narrative regarding the curatorial position. This approach had been working well for the organization until the very recent edition damaged KMB's decade-long reputation.

In December 2022, KMB returned after a four-year hiatus citing the pandemic as the rightful cause of its no-show in 2020. Whilst its audience expected a largely successful return after the long break, KMB carried some unpleasant surprises for the audience and also for itself. Two days after the postponed opening of KMB's recent edition, the entire art world across was shaken up by an e-flux note that made its way into people's inboxes. This open letter from the participating artists and curators of the 2022-2023 edition was eloquent in its distress. In the letter, the fraternity detailed the lack of preparedness for the exhibition and management's late acknowledgement of the same. An analysis done in solidarity instead of spite, a strong sense of artistic solidarity comprised the language of this pointers-laden extensive note. The letter dissected the 'imaginary of an ideal Biennale' despite the dwindling resources in terms of financial, political, and creative support. Many such misled patterns were highlighted with several suggestions on reflections and reparations (Various, 2022).



*Figure 2: Audience at the Aspinwall House Venue of Kochi-Muziris Biennale (c. February 2023)*

Amongst many of its crises, KMB had begun its recent edition under a financial debt of 4.9 crore rupees which roughly amounts to \$600,000. The figures were revealed to *The Week* by Bose Krishnamachari, co-founder and president of the Kochi Biennale Foundation (Thomas S. A., 2023). The edition was postponed by ten days right before its originally scheduled opening. There were loud murmurs of disappointment against the mismanagement and what followed was an endless discussion about what went wrong. Despite facing bad press and other challenges, the biennale opened its gates on the new date and continued to function without many hiccups.

As this compromised edition of KMB is discussed, it would be an incomplete and insincere critique if one were to place the onus of the debacle on the organization alone. A biennial, as a structure, does not exist in isolation. To survive, it depends on several bureaucratic apparatuses, audience support, and philanthropic assistance. The political climate of India over the recent years has seen an acceleration of religious extremism that panders to the Hindu majority of the country. As a result, curbing of freedom of speech, violation of fundamental human rights, and execution of pogrom-like attacks on minorities have become alarmingly commonplace. India follows a federal

system that divides the administrative responsibilities between the state and central government. The state of Kerala is home to the Kochi-Muziris Biennale. Kerala has managed to dissociate from the growing extremism in the country given its current ruling party's association with egalitarian philosophies. Moreover, the communism-laced history of Kerala strays far from pro-Hindu fascism. Away from the central ruling body nestled in the north of India, the southern state of Kerala has an environment within which education flourishes, secularism survives, and freedom of thought and ideas does not face intense threats.

Promises and failures of the Kochi-Muziris Biennale, or any art organization for that matter, cannot be read out of the political context within which it aims to survive. One of the several reasons for the postponement was the possession of KMB's main exhibition venue called Aspinwall House. The Kerala government intervened to acquire the space from the private owner DLF (Delhi Land & Finance), which is a real estate company popularly identified as a money-making machine within the country. Hence, the financial and logistical implications of the capitalistic mindset managed to alienate the lesser luxurious agenda of art and culture.

This growing stress of spatial logistics led to a high-pressure work environment and organizational inadequacies that the core team was not entirely prepared for. It would be, however, empathetic to acknowledge that an organization like the Kochi Biennale Foundation is relatively in its formative years at the age of only five editions.

For her closing talk of KMB during the last week of the recent edition, the curator Shubigi Rao recalled how the media chose to focus on adversities over resilience, institution over art, and noise over discourse. She openly addressed the challenges faced, and where the organization itself fell short. "As a bulwark against despair, the biennale as commons may seem an impossible idea", reads Shubigi Rao's curatorial note for the Kochi-Muziris Biennale 2022-23 edition. The 'biennale as commons' is the idea that runs deeply through KMB. Away from the elitist artspeak and gallery culture, KMB started with the humble dream to engineer a spotlight for the local underdogs of the art world. Although the recent edition happened to disappoint audiences locally and internationally, one needs to constantly look at the circumstances that led to its inefficiencies. This edition of KMB could be a lesson in understanding the regionalities and challenges that threaten the seamless functioning and presence of the small-scale biennials.

## Conclusion

The challenges of regional biennials do not limit themselves to the Global South. The dishevelled state of global peace and justice manages to carry the bigotry to art institutions. Within the scope of biennials alone, the already infrequent exhibitions have lately gone under political disquiet. The upcoming March 2024 edition of the widely celebrated German Photo Biennale was cancelled over the curator's political stance on the ongoing ethnic cleansing of Palestinians. Shahidul Alam, one of the curators, shared posts that were critical of the Israeli military and a press release by the German Photo Biennale claimed that it contained “content that can be read as antisemitic”. In another instance, the Front International: Cleveland Triennial for Contemporary Art has been completely dissolved as the organizers pulled support citing a financial crunch. Despite being one of the Midwest's most notable exhibitions, the triennial surrendered to the dwindling public and private funding. The founder Fred Bidwell claimed that raising funds has become more challenging with the rapidly changing political times and priorities. It is undeniable that the political climate is constantly changing but the subsequent unsettling weather of the arts fails to address itself as a big concern.

Over the past few years, the world has witnessed the blatant development of biennials further from the centre that Europe had inadvertently become since the very conceptualisation of biennials in Venice. Looking at the recent edition of Kochi-Muziris Biennale alone, it is safe to establish that there is a long multifaceted discourse that the biennial structure entails. Since the boom in the number of biennials happening across the globe, biennials are moving from the realm of ‘structure’ to ‘institution’. Now, more than ever, it is crucial for biennials — especially those at regional levels and of small scale — to be critiqued as they grow with every edition.

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## **Author's Bio**

Vaishnavi Singh is a Delhi-based writer, researcher, and art gallery manager.

She has worked with creative organisations across the UK and India such as Royal Albert Memorial Museum, Modern Art Oxford, Creative Informatics, and Kochi-Muziris Biennale. She recently pursued an interdisciplinary course at the School for Curatorial Studies, Venice where she co-curated an art exhibition for the Venice-based A plus A art gallery.

In her practice, she is deeply interested in making the artspeak and global art platforms accessible to communities that developed their art practice without any formal education or whilst dealing with socio-political conflicts.