

# Lea Catherine Szacka, Voices (Towards Other Institutions) #1



John Hejduk, Perspective for Cemetery for the Ashes of Thought (1974-1979) John Hejduk  
fonds, Canadian Centre for Architecture

## When Postponing is not Enough

In 2017, the most photogenic and talked-about work at the 57th International Art Exhibition of the Venice Art Biennale was Lorenzo Quinn's monumental sculpture, *Support*. The piece, two very large white hands raising from the Canal Grande to reinforce Ca' Sagredo, addressed the ability of humans to make a change and re-balance the world around them—environmentally, economically, and socially. While *Support* suggested saving Venice from its inevitable death, it also, paradoxically, symbolized the capability of humankind to destroy the world around them.

Three years later, and in the midst of COVID-19's global outbreak, Quinn's sculpture can be interpreted as an invitation to rethink the ethical role of Biennials and Triennials in regard to cities and territories. How can these institutions implement slowness as a way to reconnect with our cities? How can we, to use the words of

French philosopher Bruno Latour, see the pandemic as a dress rehearsal, a preparation for what is yet to come in terms of climate change?(1) In other words, how can we fundamentally rethink the Venice Biennale, rather than just postponing it?

In 1968, The Venice Biennale, one of the most prestigious cultural rendez-vous in the world, was criticized and challenged by angry demonstrators who deplored the institution's structural backwardness and disconnection from everyday life and politics. The protests led to endless debates questioning the role of the Biennale in regard to society. The result was a drastic reform followed by the so-called "laboratory years" (1975 to 1979), a quadrennial during which, under the directorship of Vittorio Gregotti, the short-lived art and architecture Biennale extended its range of action to the entire territory of Venice and the Veneto: saving buildings for demolition, triggering militant and political actions, and activating civic spaces. Yet, too soon, the commercial logic of the institution regained importance and the Biennale continued to grow bigger and bigger every year, whilst Venice, following the unprecedented *acqua alta* of 1966, continued to sink under the weight of too many tourists.

Today, as the Venice Art and Architecture Biennials are postponed, and the future of many Biennials and Triennials around the world is uncertain, it is the right time to call for an alternative position, and to rethink the role of these institutions in the age of slowness. Fuelled by the logics of globalization, mass tourism, and spectacularization, Biennials and Triennials frantically produce cultural capital, while too often losing meaningful contact with their territories.

What if artists and architects could act together and be the protagonists of urban transformations? The Biennale could become not only a space of presentation and representation, but a space for production, militant action and ethical responsibility, a space where the ephemeral becomes permanent. In Venice, the Biennale has become more and more interwoven with the city over the years, exploring areas beyond the Giardini. Yet these interventions could and should activate the city beyond the

transitory spectacle and truly rethink the relation between the Biennale and the territory. And while the Biennale extends into all parts of the Laguna, Venetians should gain free and continuous access to the Giardini, a space that was once public and has become subsumed to the private logic of commercial exhibitions.(2)

Like Quinn's hands rising from the water, the International Art and Architecture exhibitions could unite forces and come up with new strategies to engage, meaningfully and permanently, with the territory of Venice, the Veneto and beyond.

*1. See Bruno Latour, "Is This a Dress Rehearsal?", Critical Inquiry, 26 March 2020. Originally published in French in Le Monde, 25 March 2020.*

*2. For more on these ideas, see the debate "Ripensare la Biennale", with Emanuele Piccardo, Vittoria Martini, Davide Tommaso Ferrando and Lea-Catherine Szacka, 22 May 2020.*

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