

Journal of Curatorial Studies
Volume 14 Number 1

© 2025 Intellect Ltd Book Review. English language.

https://doi.org/10.1386/jcs_00123_5

Published Online September 2025

BOOK REVIEW

***LA BIENNALE INTERNATIONALE DES JEUNES ARTISTES – PARIS (1959–1985)*, ELITZA DULGUEROVA (ED.)**

Paris: les presses du reel Institut national d'histoire de l'art (2023),
656 pp., p/bk, ISBN: 978-2-3789-6392-7, €34.00

Reviewed by Anita Orzes, Université Toulouse II Jean Jaurès

The Paris Biennial was an ambitious yet unstable biennial – an event devoted to young art, in which the very notion of ‘youth’ changed along with it. An exhibition that went beyond the exhibition space, reaching radio and television. A biennial that sought to position itself within the orbit traced by Venice, São Paulo and documenta. An event in which, depending on intellectual networks, geopolitical dynamics and organizational strategies, the geography of the art on display was subject to change. An exhibition that even organized exhibitions of itself. Ultimately, Paris was a biennial unafraid to put itself at stake, even going so far as to make bold but risky decisions for its own existence. Such is the portrait that emerges from *La Biennale internationale des jeunes artistes – Paris (1959–1985)*, edited by art historian Elitza Dulguerova.

This book forms part of the research project 1959–1985, au prisme de la Biennale de Paris, directed by Dulguerova at the Institut national d'histoire de l'art (2017–21), and presents the outcomes of the debates and investigations developed within that framework. Structured in three sections – ‘Les débuts de la Biennale de Paris (1959–1969)’ (‘The Beginnings of the Paris Biennial [1959–1969]’), ‘Les éditions expérimentales (1971–1977)’ (‘The Experimental Editions [1971–1977]’) and ‘L’heure des bilans (1977–1985)’ (‘A Time for Assessments [1977–1985]’) – the volume showcases the work of 29 scholars who have conducted significant research in the archives and libraries housing the documentation produced by (and surrounding) the Paris Biennial. This research has provided them with valuable primary sources through which to rigorously examine multiple histories of this biennial.

Delivered by Intellect to:

Anita Orzes (33369828)

IP: 77.141.120.15

On: Tue, 07 Oct 2025 06:18:24

1. Following the protests of 1968, Venice and São Paulo biennials began a process of critical reassessment of the traditional exhibition model.

Indeed, the range of research assembled in this book reveals that Paris does not possess a single history. Rather, there are multiple narratives – for instance, the history of national participation, as illustrated by Irina Genova and Magda Predescu's contributions on Bulgaria and Romania; the history of specific artistic practices, such as performance, explored by Clélia Barbut, or sound art, addressed by Anne Zeitz; or the history of architecture, examined by Hélène Jannière. At the same time, the diversity of analytical perspectives adopted by the contributors underscores that a biennial can (and indeed should) be studied through a multiplicity of lenses. These include the historical approach, exemplified by Justine Jean's study of the Biennial's founding; the geopolitical perspective, addressed by Julie Sissia in relation to the participation of East and West Germany; and the curatorial viewpoint, illustrated by Pauline Chevalier in her analysis of the 1985 edition.

In this overview of the 26 years of the French Biennial, the 1970s emerge as a pivotal moment. This is, first and foremost, because Paris joined the race to transform the exhibition model of biennials,¹ implementing significant changes to its orientation and international projection. Chief among these was the adoption of a model that, based on collaboration between international correspondents located across the globe and a central commission in Paris, centralized the curatorship rather than delegating it to participating nations. While Federica Milano addresses the origins and development of this model, the contributions from Juliane Debeusscher, Annabella Tournon Zubieta, Caroline Bodolec and Estelle Bories (among others) examine its direct consequences. This involves, for instance, the inclusion of new geographic regions (accompanied by the disappearance of others) or greater freedom in the selection of works and artists – albeit not without, in some cases, political and diplomatic tensions and therefore curatorial 'compromises'.

The 1970s are also of considerable significance because, for the first time, the Biennial reconceptualized the qualifier of 'youth' while simultaneously emphasizing its reflective character. Regarding the first point, youth ceased to be understood solely in terms of age (the participants were required to be between 20 and 35 years old) but became a quality attributed to artistic practices themselves, associated with notions of novelty and experimentation. As for the second point, as Dulguerova explains, this reflective dimension manifested not only in the public sharing of reflections on the biennial but also in the organization of exhibitions devoted to its own history (510–14, 547–48). It is Dulguerova herself who reconstructed the lights and shadows of the 1977 Paris retrospective, which was followed by a second act in Tokyo in 1979 – a second retrospective that, studied by Françoise Nicol, extended the chronological arc of the first one, thereby incorporating some of the more recent editions.

Another aspect that deserves particular attention is the ongoing comparison of the Paris Biennial with Venice, São Paulo and documenta – a comparison made both internally and externally. In fact, if on the one hand the French capital closely observed these other artistic events, on the other, participating countries situated them within a hierarchy of value. For instance, in her analysis of Spain's participation, Paula Barreiro López highlights how Spanish authorities showed greater interest in the Venice and São Paulo biennials than in that of Paris. Moreover, the text in which Jean-Marc Poinot recalls and analyses the second meeting of young art critics (1970) reveals how, in the midst of the biennial model's reformulation, Paris was observing both the Venice Biennial and documenta with keen interest. Thus, although this

Delivered by Intellect to:

Anita Orzes (33369828)

IP: 77.141.120.15

On: Tue, 07 Oct 2025 06:18:24

volume focuses primarily on the Paris Biennial, the way these other international large-scale exhibitions 'appear' on the scene serves to underscore the importance of not isolating the particular history of one biennial from the collective history of such exhibitions.

Finally, it is worth noting that the book includes a series of interview-testimonies with prominent figures associated with the Paris Biennial (Catherine Millet, Alfred Pacquement, Caroline Bissière, Alanna Heiss and Jean-Hubert Martin), which serve to complement and enrich the portrait of the event constructed through the theoretical contributions. Their recollections and reflections help to situate the closure of the Biennial within a complex web of factors, in which the emergence of new artistic institutions on the Parisian scene and the policy of decentralization in France play a significant role. In doing so, they identify the Lyon Biennial as the direct successor to the Paris Biennial while also revealing the relationship between the latter and the exhibition *Magiciens de la Terre* (1989).

La Biennale internationale des jeunes artistes – Paris (1959–1985) has the merit of bringing to light a biennial that, until now, had received little attention within the field of biennial studies. Through rigorous archival research, a range of analytical perspectives and the inclusion of first-hand testimonies, the volume offers a nuanced and multifaceted portrait of this exhibition. Moreover, the questions it raises and the avenues of research it opens up make it a valuable resource for scholars interested not only in the exhibition's history but also in the intersections of art, politics and institutions in the second half of the twentieth century. Ultimately, this book represents a significant contribution to biennial studies and a fertile stimulus for continued reflection on the Paris Biennial and its place within the broader landscape of international large-scale exhibitions.

Contributor details

Anita Orzes is a research assistant at the Université Toulouse II Jean Jaurès. Her research focuses on the transformation of the biennial model and the transnational networks between biennials in Latin America and Europe during the Cold War. She has published on these topics in edited volumes and journals such as *OnCurating*, *Artl@s Bulletin*, *Index Journal* and *MODOS: Revista de História da Arte*.

E-mail: anitaorzes@gmail.com

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5169-9304>