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# THE TIME COMPLEX

*Time as Seen at the Time of Covid-19*

Sparse Notes on the Making  
of the I Yerevan Biennial



*The combination of super-technology  
and a super-crisis could throw humankind  
back into the dark ages.'*

Cixin Liu, *Death's End*,  
translated by Ken Liu, 2017<sup>1</sup>

The left side of the page features a dark, black background with various white and light grey geometric shapes scattered across it. These shapes include triangles, rectangles, lines, and irregular polygons, some of which are oriented in different directions, creating a sense of movement and complexity. The overall effect is reminiscent of a starry night sky or a collection of abstract architectural elements.

## Introduction

The title and overarching theme of the I Yerevan Biennial – *The Time Complex* – has become almost a prophecy in the light of the coronavirus pandemic. Attempting an exploration of time within the framework of the post-contemporary in the middle of this crisis could not be more relevant. Some people are already arguing that time, or the way we understand and experience the passing of time, will never be the same after this epochal event. What has happened or changed during this period of prolonged isolation? Is time not the same since the lockdown? And what was time, or what did it feel like before COVID-19?

To my understanding, the way we experience time is purely relational. As such, it is always – and never – the same. When our conditions change, it changes accordingly. Time is also a category intimately intertwined with space, as Albert Einstein demonstrated. On a personal level, during the lockdown, I felt that the relationship between time and space was proportionally inverse: whilst space shrinks when in confinement, time generally expands. Incarcerated in our domestic spaces, with too much time on our hands and too little to do, we became more perceptive and increasingly aware of the close connection between time and other categories of our ‘being’ in the world: the close relationship between time and freedom, for example. We can also clearly see how time is intrinsically bonded to other notions associated with freedom, such as power. To ask ourselves who has power over our time is not an insignificant question. In short, the very same physiology of time, its embodiment, feels different since the beginning of the pandemic. The meaning of time appears to have changed, as has its duration.

The impact that the pandemic has had (and is still having) on our collective psyche is such that we are already thinking of time (in historical, economic, sociopolitical and personal terms) as split between a pre- and post-COVID-19 era.

The world is longing for a return to a pre-pandemic normality, although some observers and commentators are suggesting that maybe it's precisely that normality that has brought us to the verge of collapse. And yet, we can't help thinking about the 'before' as a better and more joyful time.

In times of predicament, nostalgia is never good news. Like many others, I fear that the extremism and populism of the 20th-century's interwar period are once again on the rise. I wholeheartedly hope that COVID-19's legacy will not be a new wave of nationalism and fascism; it would be a terrible gateway into the future. However, we all know how history often repeats itself. We all fear that we shall have less – if anything at all – at the end of this crisis. And in scarcity there is generally less room for solidarity.

Of course, we are also witnessing remarkable acts of humanity and generosity during this emergency. Nevertheless, social distancing and isolation are putting more emphasis on the personal, the isolated 'I', than on the collective Self. The Other, including the virus, is intangible and invisible to us and, as such, is less urgent or important than us being confronted with our pending bills and regressing lifestyles.

We feel deprived at this difficult moment in time, and this sense of deprivation has huge leverage and cachet in the nationalistic agendas of the ultra-right. Indeed, the only thing that seems to abound right now is time. The downtime that we were desperately trying to find within our hectic working hours and manic schedules is now freely available. We have plenty of free time at our disposal, but now that we have it, we don't seem to appreciate it.

I suspect that one of the reasons why lockdown is so feared by neoliberal governments and global markets is the fact that the COVID-19 crisis is almost entirely reconfiguring our relationship to time. Priorities and value systems change radically when the line between productivity and leisure/relaxation blurs into a single time continuum. This is a significant challenge for a capitalist society centred on the desire to buy itself more time for enjoying the 'good things in life'. It's clear to me that time, or lack thereof, is a primary force and financial driver in a neoliberal economy. Now that we

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have time in abundance, it has little or no currency. "Time is money", they used to say, but obviously only if you don't have it. Time is not so valuable when there is an inflation of it.

It seems to me that the acceleration of time that we witnessed before the pandemic might actually have been a strategy for maintaining the existing state of affairs. Everything seems to be moving around us, but ultimately most things remain unchanged. Capitalism, for example, is one of those forces that resists any opposition or alternatives. Like Mark Fisher, when he quotes Fredric Jameson and Slavoj Žižek, we could say that "it is easier to imagine an end to the world than an end to capitalism."

Fast-forward – at the speed of 'progress' – and we appear to be going far when in fact we're not moving at all, trapped in a system that continuously morphs in order to perpetuate itself. As the Italian writer Giuseppe Tommaseo di Lampedusa poignantly observed in *The Leopard* (published posthumously in 1958) sometimes "everything must change in order for everything to stay the same." What ultimately matters is the illusion that we're going somewhere, someplace better, to a land with greater opportunities. A happier place. But do we actually know where exactly humanity is going at this maximum speed? Observing the consequences of climate change and the impact of our Anthropocene age on the environment, the final destination doesn't look very promising.

But let's go back to thinking about the speed of time. When time goes quickly, there's never enough of it. I suspect that I'm not the only one to often feel short of breath under 'normal' circumstances, as if there were too many things to keep up with on too many fronts. I'm under the impression that we're kept continuously busy on purpose and that when confronted with our sociopolitical inertia or procrastination this chronic lack of time is one of the main justifications behind which we are hiding. In this fast-paced scenario, where advancements are quickly taken for granted and novelties rapidly become obsolete, there is hardly any time left for reflection. Not even the coronavirus has managed to slow us down enough to find stillness.

In this frenzy – a vortex filled with distractions – it’s hard to think about radical alternatives to the present-day scenario. Pacified by the many comforts that advanced and globalised consumerism can provide, we have long embraced a new form of determinism centred on the myth of perpetual growth and its inevitability. Is this truly the case or are we instead paralysed by a fear of the unknown?

During this period of profound revision and thorough reconsideration of our lives, I am undertaking the difficult task of setting up a brand new biennial exhibition in a country that is not my own. I live everyday moments of exhilaration and discomfort. However, I am grateful to have an important project ahead that keeps my mind busy and puts my critical and analytical abilities to work. And yet I feel that Yerevan is drifting away and becoming more distant. My personal horizon is shrinking. Looking outside the window, my gaze reflects like a mirror on the building opposite and turns back at me in introspection.

*Are we instead paralysed  
by the fear of the unknown?*



## A New Biennale: Timely Choice?

In the middle of the COVID-19 crisis, within the digital pages of *Frieze*, Pablo Larios proposed a critique of the contemporary art sector that vocalises a common thought.<sup>2</sup> Could this pandemic be an opportunity for interrogating and revisiting what we do, the way we do it, and why we do it? And, more broadly, can a better and wiser society emerge from this time of suspension and temporal hiatus? Is this not the perfect occasion for (re)thinking the world we live in? As I've argued in the introduction, the one thing that the coronavirus has unquestionably and unexpectedly offered us is time, or a slower time. If we cannot monetise it, what else can we do with it?

Corporate interests and capitalist gains, galvanised by a financial euphoria that we now understand as unattainable and unsustainable, have fuelled the misconception that society needs constant growth in order to survive. The time acceleration imposed by the idea of continuous growth is now clashing violently with the immobility imposed by the COVID-19 crisis. Some politicians were (are?) even willing to cynically sacrifice the vulnerable and elderly in order to save the market economy and to “not stop the country”. This is how far neoliberalism is willing to go to perpetuate itself and its systems.

We are all daily expected to produce, achieve, perform, consume, etc. Without this pressure, we are lost in the vacuity of our actions. Maybe we needed an event like the pandemic to find a voice and to distance ourselves from the dynamics and logic that rule the world and its markets, including the contemporary art sector. Maybe COVID-19 is a portentous reminder. Why do we do what we do? Why do we love it so much? Why is it relevant? Like Anaïs Nin, we could maintain that: “We do not escape into philosophy, psychology and art — we go there to restore our shattered selves into whole ones.”<sup>3</sup> Now is probably the time to do just that.

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In this sense, a new biennial seems a perfect place from which to start rebuilding fragmented selves and creating a new sense of communality after months of isolation. A biennial can infuse and boost a sense of togetherness and cohesion in people, both at the individual and collective level. More so after a crisis that has kept us trapped indoors for a long time. I believe that it is of crucial importance to now have a collective goal, something to aim at, something to take pride and joy in, a project to work on collaboratively, a celebration. Biennials are centred on ideas of sociability and now, after months of confinement, what we need most is to reclaim the public sphere and find opportunities to experience it together.





## What Is a Biennial?

Despite the fact that I'm talking to you from the digital pages of the website of a brand new biennial, it would be a mistake to assume that every reader knows what a biennial is. The simplest definition of a biennial is 'a contemporary art festival', but biennials resist being classified as such. It's possibly the association with the term 'festivity' or 'festive' that creates some discomfort, as biennials take themselves so damned seriously. Like museums, they aim to have gravitas and authority and notwithstanding how hard they try to be popular without being populist, they sometimes exude a sense of cultural or intellectual superiority. Maybe this is something we should change as we come out of this crisis.

Conventionally, a biennial is a periodical art exhibition that often connects multiple venues or institutions under an overarching theme or umbrella. If the exhibition is regularly held in one venue, ie a museum, it features some elements that are unique and which stand out from the rest of the annual programme in terms of research, investment, participation, scope and breadth, influence and impact, ambition and complexity, etc. Biennials are generally associated with a specific locality, most commonly a city or – as in the case of the Whitney Biennial in the US – an institution. Despite their geopolitical specificity, biennials claim or aspire to have a wider reach and relevance than other exhibitions: they are global events even when addressing very specific audiences.

Once established, biennials become an integral part of the local cultural offering and in the most successful cases they also become tourist attractions and brands that have cachet and a monetary value. Biennials are generally marketed as momentous and timely celebrations of what is relevant in art and culture today. Both in their episodic singularity and as part of a series, biennials are a sign of our times. Furthermore, from its inception

the biennial model incorporated, almost as its *raison d'être*, a sense of marvel: the promise to surprise the audience with novelties – the unknown coming from far away – as in the case of the archetypal Venice Biennale which was itself modelled on the global expos and international trade fairs of the 19th century.

A biennial is (in its best intentions) a celebration of contemporary creativity and a vibrant document of today's society. It's the place where the seeds of positive change can be planted and where critical thinking can be collectively exercised. At its worst, a biennial is an empty self-referential statement that only speaks to the 'initiated': an echo chamber that exercises a powerful gravitational force and excludes anything that does not gravitate around its orbit. For this reason, recently established biennials (because of their international dimension and episodic nature) are often opposed by groups of local artists and curators particularly if they feel alienated or under-recognized by the institution. This almost 'ancestral' resentment is commonly associated with a chronic lack of funding and opportunities for local practitioners, who would rather see the resources necessary for setting up these complex cultural machines redirected and invested in support of their work. Unfortunately, without the narrative and rhetoric underpinning 'the case for a biennial' in a city, that money will never be available to individual practitioners or institutions.

One could argue that particularly in the case of biennials funded by national and local governments, money could be best spent directly in education or in strengthening an existing network of museums and other cultural organisations across the region. However, the level of investment and resources necessary for reforming the educational system of a country, for example, or structurally supporting the entire cultural sector is not comparable with the funding necessary for running a biennial. It's a nice thought, but the argument has no legs in economic terms.

Many biennials are run with little to no funding and live in a continuous state of precariousness. For some of these institutions the idea that they might still be in operation over a two-year period for the following edition is more wishful thinking

than a certainty. Besides, the funding specifically raised for the establishment, management and delivery of biennials simply does not exist outside that scope of work and mandate. It pains me to say it, but that money will never benefit anybody else. In most cases, when a biennial project is terminated, it's just another missed opportunity: one thing less to look forward to in the cultural calendar. It is not generally replaced by anything else, leaving us with all our other needs unfulfilled.

In practice, when it comes to *realpolitik*, we know that the money made available to culture and education by governments is shrinking everywhere. For quite some time now we've been made to believe that cultural and educational institutions should be run as businesses and generate their own resources or catalyse private investment and that this is possible only on the condition that they are managed along the same lines as any other competitive business operating in the free market. What public institutions gain in terms of funding using this logic, they pay for in terms of freedom, autonomy, integrity and ethic.

Finally, I would argue that biennials are necessary only on the condition that they act as disrupting forces which periodically challenge the status quo by proposing new scenarios, by creating unexpected alliances, tackling uncomfortable truths, embracing risk-taking and even failure in pursuit of experimentation to the point of self-sabotaging, if needed. If biennials want to respond to and reflect our lived realities and experiences they should be in a permanent state of alert and ready to adapt quickly. Today, more than ever.



## Why a Biennial in Yerevan?

In the pre-COVID-19 era, setting up a new art biennial in Yerevan seemed a very good idea indeed. Armenia and its capital city were booming. All indicators suggested that the country would soon become one of the next ‘hot’ tourist destinations. At the beginning of the year (4/5 January), the *Weekend* supplement of the *Financial Times* had recommended Armenia as one of the top places to visit in 2020. Safe, still little known, rich with history, positioned at the intersection of many cultures, isolated but not too remote, Armenia offered the right conditions for the establishment of a cultural event with an international outreach that could act as a catalyst for investment in art and culture in the region.

Particularly in the aftermath of the Velvet Revolution in 2018, Armenia felt ready for systemic change. A revision of its policies and approach to culture and education was much needed, particularly in the visual and performing arts sector. With the exception of a few museums in the capital city, most notably the Matenadaran (Mesrop Mashtots Institute of Ancient Manuscripts) and the Yerevan History Museum, cultural institutions are not well attended. Most museums, including the prestigious National Gallery and History Museum of Armenia, are under-resourced and in need of serious reconsideration. Among the more successful institutions is the privately-owned Cafesjian Centre for the Arts situated inside the Cascade (one of the city’s most visited tourist attractions) although people seem to be more interested in the architecture and sculpture garden than in visiting its exhibition spaces; and the symbolically charged Tsitsernakaberd Armenian Genocide Memorial Complex. The Sergei Parajanov Museum, dedicated to the work and life of the late director and artist, is also well-attended mainly due to his international profile and acclaimed art and cinematic legacy.

In terms of contemporary art, when it comes to organising exhibitions or staging events, artists are more often than not

left to their own devices in Yerevan. There are several active grassroots organisations in the city, almost entirely run on a voluntary and self-funded basis. These are generally led by artists. A number of interesting projects have taken place over the years in the city and the wider region, but most of the organisations running these have ceased to exist. Currently, the longest running contemporary art programme in Yerevan is probably that of the Hay-Art Cultural Centre, whilst the most dynamic and consistent organisation in recent years has been the Armenian Centre for Contemporary Experimental Art (ACCEA/NPAK). The pop-up art gallery AYP has recently presented temporary exhibitions in diverse non-traditional art spaces. AGBU (Armenian General Benevolent Union) must also be credited as being one of the most active organisations in the cultural and not-for-profit sector, although their specific commitment to contemporary art has been intermittent. Among the organisations that have sought to establish an international dialogue, the Dilijan Arts Observatory, initiated by IDEA Foundation in collaboration with curator Clementine Deliss, and the Armenia Art Fair promoting modern and contemporary artists from Armenia and the region, stand out. Nevertheless, Armenia's art market on the whole is still under-developed with only a few commercial galleries operating professionally across the country.

Thinking more specifically about the biennial format, the Armenian Art Council launched *Standard: Triennial of Contemporary Art in Armenia* in 2017; currently the closest example of what the Yerevan Biennial is now seeking to be. In the same year, the First International Print Biennale, Yerevan was held at the ACCEA. Most recently, following the official announcement of the 2020 Yerevan Biennial, an artist-run Yerevan Biennale was announced; we're excited and curious to know what we can learn from this new platform.

When it comes to formal education, contemporary art opportunities are limited. Future artists, art historians, curators, and other cultural operators are generally confronted with programmes and curricula that still use templates for methodology and pedagogical approaches that originate in the

Soviet era. The majority of the schools and academies offer a very traditional programme, mostly focused on painting as a medium, followed by sculpture, crafts, and graphic design. There is virtually no offer of professional courses or degrees in areas closely associated with exhibition production (project managers, registrars, exhibition designers, lighting designers, art handlers, etc). Consequently, the entire sector is somewhat underdeveloped. Although the country is solidly positioned in the field of digital and web development, there is no specific course or faculty that focuses on new media and digital technologies applied to the visual arts.

In short, Yerevan has already a lot to offer culturally (including theatres, music venues and a rich festival season) but much more can be achieved in order to foster a new informed and engaged generation of practitioners and audiences. The Yerevan Biennial Art Foundation aspires to contribute to the debate by developing and strengthening the local infrastructure and acting as an alternative provider of informal and formal education with a focus on the creative industries and culture, most notably in the contemporary art sector.



**Yerevan Biennial 2020**  
**Biennial Momentarily Without Its City**

Like many other arts organisations, we have had to decide how to respond to the critical situation that we find ourselves in. The difficulties and adversities that we're facing in preparation of a biennial exhibition in Yerevan seem almost insurmountable, despite the fact that lockdown has been eased in many countries. Funding is naturally one of the main issues, affected as it has been by the global impact of COVID-19 on financial and economic systems. We were only just recovering from the shellshock of the virus, when the Black Lives Matter protests highlighted vitally important issues – including discrimination, injustice, inequality and systemic and structural racism, against the backdrop of police violence and authoritarianism – with renewed force and urgency. In this climate, many organisations are struggling to hit their fundraising targets. In fact, given the circumstances, it's surprising that many institutions have even survived.

Travelling is still very problematic and risky, which obviously hinders the possibility of staging an international event in Armenia (or anywhere else) as both the invited international contributors as well as visiting international audiences are affected. In terms of the hospitality industry and tourism, there is naturally an urgent need to reactivate and re-energise the entire sector, however, in these challenging times the artistic community is probably more concerned with their immediate future and sustainability than hosting an international event. At the same time there is a desperate need for the positive signals and energy that a significant cultural event is able to achieve.

We very much hope that our collective circumstances will improve in the year to come and that we're able to finally add the word Yerevan to our biennial exhibition in 2021 which is now when we're planning to launch. To date, we've been unable to pursue any local project and are only now beginning to run

activities on-site in Yerevan. In a sense we are a ghost biennial, a biennial with no fixed abode, a biennial that is about to exist and one that risks not existing at all in these unusual times. We do not have a history, we do not have a legacy to defend, but we hope to have a future.

Our entire show is constructed around the notion of time and now, what's even clearer is that it's also about space. So, with this context in mind, we are launching our Digital Biennial exhibition, a platform designed for disseminating content and ideas beyond the present limitations. It is an exhibition that has no beginning and no end. It is fluid in its parameters. It is *The Time Complex*.

We're hoping to welcome you to Yerevan very soon. In the meantime, you can find us here, in the digital space.

#### Endnotes

- 1 I am grateful to Ruangrupa's Farid Rakun for sharing this text during the conference **Contemporary Art Biennials – Our Hegemonic Machines in States of Emergency (27–28 June 2020)** organised by On Curating. <https://frieze.com/article/why-covid-19-might-be-our-chance-reimagine-arts>
- 2 Anais Nin, **In Favour of The Sensitive Man and Other Essays**, Harvest Book, San Diego-New York-London

## Colophon

*Time as Seen at the Time of Covid-19*  
*Sparse Notes on the Making of the first Yerevan Biennial*

Written by Lorenzo Fusi

London, August 2020

[yerevanbiennial.org](http://yerevanbiennial.org)

