

The Biennial Form and the Narration of History

Thinking through “The Ghost Ship and the Sea Change

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Abstract

Exhibitions are powerful tools for the staging of historical narratives. Since the 1960s, historiography through exhibition-making has undergone a re-conception through artistic and curatorial practice. Contemporary art biennials and other large-scale periodic exhibitions have provided important platforms for artists and curators to experiment with historical narration in ways distinctly different from historical museums, often placing an emphasis on context-specificity and the relationship between suppressed histories of the past and the political present. This article explores the potential of the biennial as a site of historical narration, using the curatorial process behind the 2021 edition of Göteborg International Biennial of Contemporary Art, *The Ghost Ship and the Sea Change*, as a case study. Proposing that the biennial form be used as a situated and poly-vocal countermodel to the master narrative of the historical museum, it argues for artistic and curatorial practices to be seen as continuations of ways of telling about the world preceding the modern discipline of History and the imperial boundaries between past and present, and fact and fiction.

Introduction

Exhibitions are powerful tools for the staging of historical narratives. The canonical site for such undertakings is the historical museum, from its chronological configuration in the late nineteenth century to contemporary examples of critical museology. Since the 1960s, however, the practice of historiography through exhibition-making has undergone a re-conceptualisation through artistic and curatorial practice. Over the last two decades, the gravitation of the contemporary art field towards re-formulating hegemonic narratives of the past has increased to the point of being theorised as a “historiographical turn”.^[1] Contemporary art biennials and other large-scale periodic exhibitions across the globe have provided important platforms for artists and curators to experiment with historical narration in ways distinctly different from the historical museum, often placing an emphasis on context-specificity and the relationship between suppressed histories of the past and the political present.

Through reflecting on my curatorial process leading up to the 2021 edition of the Göteborg Biennial of Contemporary Art, titled “The Ghost Ship and the Sea Change”, I explore how the biennial form—characterised here as situated and polyvocal—can contribute to the diversification of historical narration through public exhibitions. As this text is written six months before the biennial is due to open, it focuses on the preparatory curatorial thinking rather than the final outcome and soon-to-be-exhibited artworks.

The underrepresentation of Sweden’s colonial past and its contemporary consequences is a starting point for the forthcoming biennial. The project will be staged as a counter-narrative to the official celebration of the 400th anniversary of the founding of the city of Gothenburg that will take place at the same time. Using the historical harbour of Gothenburg as an anchoring point for the biennial narrative, the project is an attempt at de-linking from the expectation of a biennial to be a spectacular display of “art from elsewhere”, and instead show how the past and present of the city is intimately interwoven with other parts of the world.

History?

Modern Western history, writes Michel de Certeau, essentially begins with the differentiation between the past and the present.^[2] He locates this foundational ontological rift to the moment in the fifteenth century when the Europeans set foot on the continent they would eventually call the Americas. Through this encounter, the perception of the world was split into two: geographically between the “old” and the “new” world, and temporally between past and present. Tellingly, the fifteenth century was also when the separation in the English language between the meaning of the words “story” and “history” occurred; whereas these terms had previously been used interchangeably, from the fifteenth century onwards, story was used to account for imagined events and history to describe real events situated in the past.^[3]

In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries—a time of intense colonial expansion—history’s claim to “truth” was reinforced through its establishment as an academic discipline. Historical narration, as formulated in and by the old world, was used as a tool for gaining and maintaining power; in Europe, as part of the establishment of nation-states, as well as in conquered territories elsewhere. In the nineteenth-century museum, historical master narratives were staged by way of a chronological approach, illustrating a progressive accumulation of time, knowledge, objects and power. Artefacts representing different historical eras and degrees of civilisation were fixed within the tomb-like environment of the museum, which, as Michel Foucault expressed it, constituted a “place of all times” that was itself “outside of time and inaccessible to its ravages”.^[4] Although the concept of the historical museum has undergone a number of revisions since, and the discipline of history has been widely recognised as a practice of crafting narratives as much as assembling facts,^[5] the foundational separations between past and present, and between story and history, are largely maintained within public discourse.

Within the frame of the contemporary art biennial, however, these distinctions are frequently blurred. When discussing the specific mode of dealing with history that biennials and other large-scale periodic art exhibitions such as Documenta engage with, Nina Möntmann describes it as a “plunging out of chronology into a multiplicity of temporalities” that “enable[s] us to reread history not as given sequence of completed entities, but as a complex net of open-ended threads and polychronic narratives, which can still be diverted in different directions.”^[6] In difference to the constructed coherence of the museum, the contemporary art biennial, which is usually dispersed throughout several venues and public spaces across a city and includes artists from different cultural and geographical backgrounds, appears non-linear and polyvocal.^[7]

Through situating artworks in direct relationship with both historical sites and the flux of contemporary life, the narrative form of the biennial seems very much the opposite of the immobilised and timeless museum, placed at a distance from the real events it claims to represent. Although the contemporary art biennial's global outlook could be compared to the ambition by the museums and world fair exhibitions of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to "make the whole world available"^[8]— and indeed the original biennale, in Venice, whose history goes back to 1895, had such ambitions—it does not order its diverse content under one totalising frame, at least not spatially. And even though the logic of the biennial still hinges, like the archaeological and ethnographic museum, on the representation of otherness—the otherness of art, the otherness of art from elsewhere, of alternative histories, of subjects not usually represented in public space, and so on—this otherness is not framed as subordinate to the hegemonic gaze, but rather as a potential resistance to it.

Just like the museum, however, the biennial is a product of its historical circumstances. If the nineteenth-century museum was constructed as an extension of the processes of imperialism, Enlightenment and nation-building, the contemporary art biennial is seen as an expression of global society emerging after 1989, enmeshed with neoliberal capital and the idea of a never-ending, "post-historical" contemporaneity. Proliferating across the world over the last thirty years, the art biennial has been instrumental in the globalisation of contemporary art as well as the art market, while being used for city-branding and the accumulation of cultural capital in an increasingly competitive economy of attention. Seen in this way, the biennial looks less like an alternative structure, and more like a new way of narrating the same expansion of transnational capitalism that the nineteenth-century museum was an earlier example of.^[9] Its dispersed character and lack of overall historicising frame appearing to mirror the decentred power mechanisms of late capitalism.

But the biennial "cannot simply be read as an ideological reflex to economic globalization", it is also a site for critically reflecting on this condition.^[10] Okwui Enwezor proposed this potential of biennials in his seminal text "Mega-Exhibitions and the Antinomies of a Transnational Global Form" (2003–04), suggesting that although "mega-exhibitions have adopted the notion of the global from the perspective of imperial and colonial modes of differentiation and homogenization" biennials,^[11] and particularly those located "in the periphery"—referring to biennials taking place in cities such as Havana, São Paulo and Johannesburg—are "a possibility of a paradigm shift in which we as spectators are able to encounter many experimental cultures, without wholly possessing them."^[12] An approach he had already developed in the Second Johannesburg Biennial (titled "Trade Routes: History and Geography", 1997) and documenta11 (2002). Far from being a celebration of the arrival of global culture, the biennial is here re-cast as a critical exploration of the global connections that were foundational to its own coming into being.

When attempting to read the biennial form through the question of how historical narratives are made public, it does appear to provide a different framework to that of the museum. The curatorial practice of assembling and juxtaposing a variety of perspectives and temporarily situating them in the middle of society is one such example. Together with the artists, various forms of telling are produced that do not need to submit wholly to the established facts validated by hegemonic discourse, but can approach the past from other angles that generate alternative ways of seeing.

Perhaps such practices should not be called "history" at all, but rather be understood as part of ancient and ongoing forms of storytelling, existing long before the idea of history was formulated. In her essay "Novel and History, Plot and Plantation" (1971), Sylvia Wynter proposes that the literary novel could be seen as a site of resistance to the master narratives of history. She compares the novel to the individual plots of land given by Caribbean plantation owners to the enslaved labour force to cultivate their own food, pointing out that it was

from these small parcels of land that the uprisings against the plantation system were eventually launched. Although the plots were originally intended to maximise the plantation's profits, they also generated the possibility to cultivate traditions and values associated with the homelands of the enslaved. If the plantation was the superstructure of civilisation, writes Wynter, the plot gave space to the roots of culture. Whereas the myth of history was used by the plantation owners to safeguard their power, the plot had its own form of narrating past events, expressed in song and ritual. The literary novel, argues Wynter, performs a similar function, as it is developed and expanded by its authors to critique the very historical process and market society that brought it into being.

Visual art practice, like the writing of novels, could be seen as a space of resistance from where other ways of narrating the world can be heard. In terms of making such forms of telling public, the biennial can be used as a polyvocal counter-model to the master narrative of the historical museum. Making spaces across a city for the ongoing cultivation of languages and modes of narration other than prescribed by history, the "historical turn" of biennials should perhaps not only be understood as a desire to reformulate hegemonic narratives of the past, but as a way to simultaneously refuse the demands of "the new" as prescribed by the neoliberal condition of a never-ending present. Put to use in this way, the biennial format is not simply a mirror of globalisation, but has the potential to become an agent of different kinds of translocal and transversal narrations, addressing the global connections it engages with through re-reading the ways their histories are continued as and in our present.

Curatorial Research Notes: "The Ghost Ship and the Sea Change"

In 2018, when I received the invitation to curate two editions (in 2019 and 2021) of the Göteborg International Biennial of Contemporary Art and somehow connect them to each other, I was also told that the 2021 edition would coincide with the city of Gothenburg celebrating its 400-year anniversary. Upon accepting the invitation, I decided to make these two features—the possibility of relating 2019 to 2021, and of addressing the 400 years connecting 1621 to 2021—my conceptual and methodological starting points.

In the 2019 edition of the biennial, titled "Part of the Labyrinth", the curatorial enquiry was centred around "inseparability"—as in the entanglement between past and present, as well as between genders, between species and between continents—which was made manifest through weaving the narrative of the biennial across four separate sites in the city in order to discuss how they are in fact deeply related.^[13] For the 2021 edition, I decided to let one of these sites, the so-called Franska Tomten (the French Plot) in the Gothenburg harbour, be the central driving force behind the entire biennial, letting the lines of enquiry emerging from that particular plot of land spread to all other parts of the project. This decision immediately led to a number of questions. In what way might using the material, historical and symbolic layers of Franska Tomten as a narrative starting point alter our way of thinking about the 400-year history of the city? What could this piece of land make visible to us that many public institutions and history books currently do not? Furthermore, how might departing from a plot of land affect the curatorial method and narrative form of the biennial?

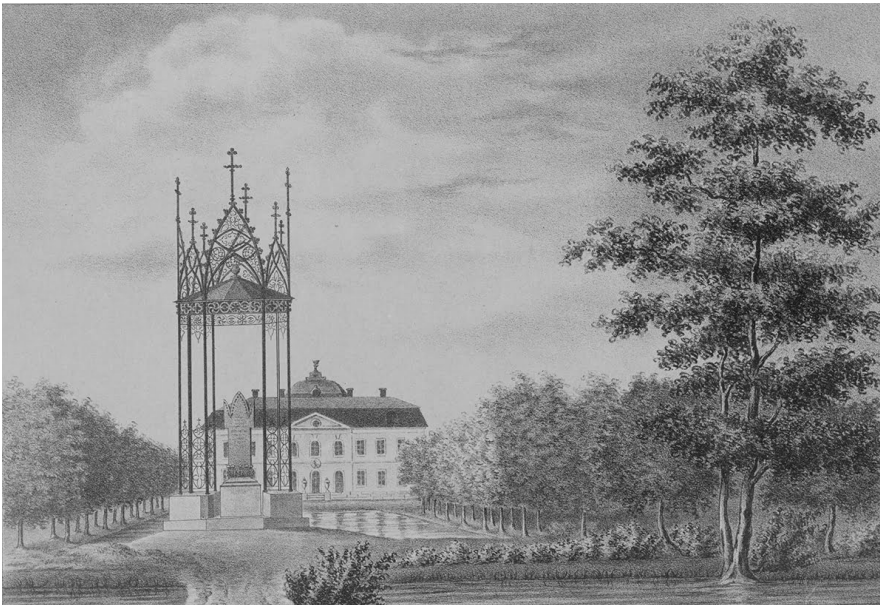
Franska Tomten: The French Plot

Franska Tomten, located on Packhusplatsen in the Gothenburg historical harbour and encompassing no more than a few city streets, received its name in 1784 when King Gustav III exchanged it for the Caribbean Island of Saint-Barthélemy as part of a trade deal between Sweden and France. While the French were given free trade rights in Gothenburg, Sweden took over the colonial administration of Saint-Barthélemy. This apparently

symmetrical exchange hides a set of deeply asymmetrical relations. Until 1847, Sweden's economic activities connected to the island were predominantly concerned with transatlantic slave trade. Enslaved persons were traded via the island on Swedish ships, as well as by other nations using the harbour as a free port. In 1878, some decades after the slave trade had been abolished and the Swedes were no longer able to profit from the island, the territory was sold back to France.

Today, the capital of Saint-Barthélemy—a French overseas territory characterised by luxury tourism—is still called Gustavia after the eighteenth-century Swedish King. But at Franska Tomten in Gothenburg there is no sign of the shared history of the two places or any official commemoration of its victims—similar to how Sweden's colonial involvement is not usually a part of how the history of the formation of the modern welfare state is narrated. The gains from the colonial trade, however, are most definitely part of contemporary Sweden. Like many other European countries, Sweden profited immensely from taking advantage of goods and labour from across the Atlantic. One such major economic factor was Sweden's export of iron. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Sweden was the biggest iron producer in the world. Swedish iron was used by other colonial powers, notably Great Britain and the Netherlands, as “voyage-iron” as well as to produce war ships, weapons, shackles and chains.^[14] Although mined and processed in other parts of the country, most of this iron was shipped out of the harbour in Gothenburg, a history commemorated at the centrally located Järntorget (the Iron Square) with the fountain named The Five Continents.^[15]

The export and expertise connected to the production of iron in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries laid the foundations of the Swedish industrial society and welfare state as we know it today—a state that is still one of the world's most prolific iron and steel producers and exports more weapons per capita than any other nation globally.^[16] But beyond the specific details of Sweden's involvement in the triangular trade and the role this history has played for contemporary Sweden, the main point to recognise is that the colonial project fuelled the growth of global capitalism as a whole, the system within which we live today.



From 1781 onwards, almost all iron produced in Swedish mines across the country was transported to Gothenburg to be refined and exported internationally. The image shows 'The Iron Monument', Österby ironworks, Uppland. Lithograph by Claes Tamm, ca 1840.

Photo: Jernkontoret

The Franska Tomten of 2021 is an anonymous piece of asphalted urban ground. But upon closer inspection, this

plot of land tells the story of how the events of the past 400 years are carried over into our own times. The former headquarters of the Transatlantic shipping company still occupies the site.^[17] A stone's throw away is the palatial building of another shipping magnate, Broström, that today houses the Court of Appeal for Western Sweden. Opposite this building you find the old harbour goods warehouse and customs house, shared by Casino Cosmopol and the museum Emigranternas Hus (the House of Emigrants).^[18] And behind that building is the sea, as infrastructure and biotope. These entities bear witness to a sequence of events spanning several centuries and geographies. Seen together, they form a fragmented map of the interrelated flows of goods, capital, bodies and ideology that have defined the last 500 years and continue to do so today. The writing of law is historically bound up with relations and regulations of international trade. The global mobility of goods and capital are connected to the flows of migration. And the slave labour of the past not only continues today in different forms through exploitative labour practices, but has produced structural inequalities such as institutionalised racism. Yet, nothing on site publicly acknowledges any aspect of this history.

What we do find, however, is a number of artworks that were commissioned by the transatlantic trading companies in the first half of the last century. These sculptural reliefs, many of which are based on racist stereotyping, visually express the colonial lineage and violent mindset of the trading companies, if not society at large at that time. The fact that they are still there today, uncommented on, says something about contemporary Sweden's tendency to ignore the country's long history and contemporary problems of structural racism. As these artworks appear to us in 2021, placed in-between the Transatlantic building and the Court of Appeal, they also remind us of the role played by trade and international trade law in institutionalising racism at a global level—the term “white” for example, first appeared in colonial law in the late 1600s—in order to preserve inequality and secure profits.^[19]



Installation view from Franska Tomten showing detail of a flagpole commissioned by one of the transatlantic shipping companies in the 1940s together with a detail of Ibrahim Mahama's work ABULAI KPATARGU GRC / ABULAI MARIAMA / ABULAI REHI LOCATION / AZARA SEIDU / BINTU ABRASIPU SEKONDI / KAMARIA KPATASCO GRC / KAMARIA/ SHAHARU ACCRA / MAMUNA AZARA LOCO, 2019–2020. Photo: Hendrik Zeitler for Göteborg International Biennial for Contemporary Art

Encountering this historically rich but conspicuously anonymous site during my curatorial research, it was clear that it needed a public re-reading. As the only explicit traces of the site's transatlantic past are artworks, it seemed logical to address it through the biennial and ask contemporary artists to respond to the consequences

of this history today.

The Plot

When starting to approach the site curatorially, the first thing that struck me was the double meaning of the English word “plot”—used to describe both a piece of land and a narrative device. Poised in the middle between the idea of a “site” and the idea of a “narrative”, a plot is a sequence of events as well as a spatial designation. If a “theme” is an overriding message, determined already at the outset of a story, a “plot” is how that message is played out over time through actions and events. What could working curatorially with Franska Tomten as a “plot” rather than a “theme” entail? For me, the word “plot” offers a possibility to think about what I am doing as a curator as “speaking from” rather than “speaking about”. The narrative of the biennial will not “be about” Franska Tomten, but rather *depart from* there. This is an important distinction for several reasons. Not least because the act of projecting a narrative *onto* a plot of land, no matter how much of a “counter history” one aims to tell, is a form of telling that in itself carries echoes of colonial and imperial strategies.^[20] By attempting instead to trace a narrative outwardly from Franska Tomten, starting from what is already there and following that plot to where it meets other voices and stories, I am hoping to narrate history in a more complex manner, through a multiplicity of voices and contexts rather than a singularly authored discourse or master narrative.

Benedict Singleton has written about the origins and uses of the word “plot” in his essay “The Long Con” (2015), which has been helpful for me in trying to understand the lineage of the term and what potential it could have for curatorial methodology.^[21] A characteristic of plot, Singleton points out, is that it reveals a gap between how the world was believed to be and how it actually is. When reading a thriller or a suspense novel, the first time we become aware of the underlying plot is usually when we, or one of the characters in the story, start to suspect that the narrative we have followed so far is in fact hiding another layer of meaning. A plot, writes Singleton, makes itself known in the distance, between the real and the represented, as it “indicates that our knowledge of the world is incomplete” and creates a desire in us to find out more.^[22]

At Franska Tomten this hidden layer of meaning is represented by the absence of the island of Saint Barthélemy; historically connected to the site but nowhere to be seen. Through installing contemporary artworks at Franska Tomten that address colonial histories, the city’s transatlantic connections are brought back into view.^[23] Elsewhere in the biennial the relationship between the seen and the unseen is used metaphorically to draw attention to many other such relationships between hegemonic and suppressed histories connected to the city.

Another aspect of “plot”, writes Singleton, is that the practice of “plotting” straddles both the past, the present and the future. He uses the example of a detective and the practice of forensically trying to figure out a sequence of events behind a crime committed in the past in order to prevent further crimes from happening in the future. The title of the biennial, “The Ghost Ship and the Sea Change”, reflects a similar intention to look backwards and forwards simultaneously. Through the different artworks, the biennial will both honour the ghosts and move beyond them, acknowledging the violence and beginning processes of repair.

The turn towards history in this case should not be understood as a fascination for what once was, but rather as a way to imagine what might happen next—all the while remembering that both “history” and “future” are much contested terms. Christina Sharpe, for example, questions the use of the term “history” when speaking of the slave trade: how is it possible to think of the transatlantic slave trade as being in the past when its consequences are still acting upon our present?^[24] Decolonial thinkers, such as Walter D. Mignolo, have pointed out that the discipline of History and its separation between “past”, “present” and “future” is itself a colonial tool, designated

to support the Western capitalist narrative of progress. Standing at Franska Tomten I am struck by how the buildings and artworks still present there show us that the past is not sealed off from the present, but continues in our midst. They are evidence of relations across time and space, telling us in the most concrete ways that exploitative actions elsewhere and elsewhere have lasting effects right here and now.

But the connections these concrete traces of an otherwise largely absent history make us see, are also offset by the equally striking presence of the many gaps on site. The empty spaces between the buildings become a metaphor for how the links between them are rendered invisible, and an image of the stories absent from the current historiography of the city. The reason these links are not publicly visible is partly because they are forged using labour, land and materials located elsewhere and deliberately kept out of sight to the northern European consumer-citizen. It is also because these links are left out of how the story of the Swedish welfare state and the city of Gothenburg is commonly told—we know about the global success of Volvo, but not about the colonial violence connected to the capital and infrastructure that made Volvo possible. In other words, at Franska Tomten we can see that today the Casino and the House of Emigrants are sharing the building of the former harbour goods storage, but nowhere is the link between historical global trade, speculative capital and contemporary migration clearly spelled out.

Saidiya Hartman writes in the essay “Venus in Two Acts” that the irreparable violence of the slave trade lies precisely in the gaps left by all the stories we cannot know and never will. She also discusses how, when narrating the time of slavery in and as our present, we must avoid “filling in the gaps and providing closure”.^[25] Only by leaving the gaps open are we reminded of what is not and never will be there. But a gap is not only a lack or a wound— as every practitioner of montage knows, it is also a space for action and additional meaning production. In the biennial, it is in the gaps—in-between the artworks, the buildings, the exhibition sites and the visitors—that other stories and ways of seeing can emerge. The fields of potential meaning provided by these gaps are unstable and porous. They change depending on who enters them and how. In the gaps lost connections can be made visible, links can be drawn speculatively and temporarily, without closing off the story for further interpretation.

When creating counter-histories, writes Hartman, one cannot rely only on facts but must also engage in critical fabulation. The reason for this is that facts invariably belong to power: it is power that decides what will count as fact, which facts to make publicly available and what should be added to history. Fiction, on the other hand, belongs to the realm of possibility. Through fiction, it is possible to speculate about what could have happened as well as what might. Counter-histories, then, can only be produced at the “intersection between the fictive and the historical”.^[26] It is precisely at this intersection that I would like the biennial to be placed. Starting from what can be seen at Franska Tomten—with historical evidence, with material facts—it invites different voices to continue the narration from multiple perspectives. These voices do not add up to one coherent story, history or discursive argument. In difference to conventional Western history and storytelling, the narrative of the biennial is not linear, progressive or conclusive, but multilayered, multivocal and multi-sited. Rather than plotting a continuous line between the fragments, the biennial will add more pieces, insisting they are part of the same plot.

Ursula Le Guin writes about open-ended forms of narration in her 1988 essay “The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction”. She uses the analogy of a carrier bag that can hold things of particular importance in no particular order. Thinking of a story, and indeed an exhibition, in that way leaves it open and unending, without fixed outcomes and heroes, and possible to tell in multiple ways through multiple perspectives. Furthermore, it suspends the linear logic of “past” as opposed to “present” and allows for protagonists both dead and alive, human and non-human, to continually shift their positions. Contrary to popular belief, however, speculative storytelling is not just

for science-fiction writers like Le Guin, or artists and curators, but also an essential tool within scientific disciplines such as archaeology. In my work with GIBCA 2021, archaeology has been an important reference. The concept of “multi-sited archaeology”, for example, has been helpful to understand my own attempts at exploring the history of Gothenburg through looking at the global connections exemplified by Franska Tomten.

The term “multi-sited archaeology” was coined in the 1990s in response to an increasingly globalised world.^[27] It describes a way for archaeology to deal with transnational economies, cross-cultural flows and diasporas that cannot be understood solely through single-site research. According to this approach, a place can only become legible through looking at other places. From the point of view of Franska Tomten, it makes sense to trace the “dislocated sets of relations” that have made themselves felt in that small plot of land, but could never be understood just from looking at that site.^[28] Some of the exhibited artworks will provide such potential links explicitly. Others tell stories that are not explicitly connected to Gothenburg, but make us understand the greater global conditions that made such cities possible.

Archaeology has also provided the starting point for the biennial’s exhibition architecture. As Scandinavia’s biggest port for hundreds of years, the history of Gothenburg can be told as a history of ships. One of the more well-known examples is the East India trader Götheborg, that sank outside the city in 1745 after returning from one of its trips to China. In 1984, the shipwreck was found by marine archaeologists. The find instantly became famous and eventually led to an exact and very expensive replica of the vessel being built and sailed along the same East Asian trading routes as the original ship with the purpose of drawing attention to the history of the city of Gothenburg and promoting Swedish business abroad. When not sailing in southeast Asia, the ship is moored in the Gothenburg harbour and functions as a tourist attraction.

Not so well known, however, is that the same marine archaeologists also found another ship— the Danish West India-bound frigate Havmanden, that had been on its way to the Caribbean colony of St. Thomas before experiencing mutiny on board, diverting its course and sinking outside Gothenburg in 1683. Some sources say the ship had previously been deployed in the triangular trade between Europe, Africa and the Caribbean, others that it was a former naval vessel making its first transatlantic voyage. On this journey, the ship was carrying convicts and colonial administrators to St. Thomas, after which it was set to continue to the Danish Gold Coast castles Carolusborg and Christiansborg—built and owned by the Swedish Africa Company until seized by the Danes in 1663—to purchase 300 slaves. Just as the Scandinavian involvement in the triangular trade remains largely suppressed when narrating the formation of the Nordic welfare states, this ship was never dug up, publicly displayed or replicated. On the contrary, after it was found it was buried under protective sheeting, thus pushed even deeper out of sight.^[29]

Together with the artists, the biennial will dig—albeit discursively—until this ship comes back into view. The exhibition architects Kooperative für Darstellungspolitik have been commissioned to stage a metaphorical replica of this Scandinavian ghost ship, still buried in the sands outside Gothenburg. The gesture mirrors the city’s own attempt at connecting its past to its future through the East India Trader Götheborg, but with one important difference: in our replica, the fragments will not be combined into a whole. On the contrary, there will be no attempt at closing the gaps and joining the dots into a comprehensible form. Presented in fragments, just like the actual ship’s ruin, the exhibition architecture will represent the incoherent and unknowable past that nevertheless frames our present. The walls produced by the ship will certainly be uneasy ones—their purpose is not to create the perfect conditions for the display of artworks, but to be part of the telling of a difficult story.

In line with its title, the biennial will change during the duration of the project. Unfolding in stages, artworks will

be added over the months, further breaking apart and opening up the exhibition architecture at Röda Sten Konsthall. As the narrative expands to include more exhibition sites, the plot of “The Ghost Ship and the Sea Change” will weave its way across the city; in-between the past and the present, the real and the represented.

Conclusion

Perhaps it is a form of epistemological disobedience to attempt to dissolve the boundaries between past and present, and between story and history.^[30] In some ways, an art exhibition is an inversion of a historical museum display. Rather than being under pressure to adhere to the official narrative of what verified facts tell us about what *has been*, art and curatorial practice have the privilege and critical possibility to also imagine what *should* have been, *could* have been, or might still be. The polyvocal and dispersed biennial form can spread a multifaceted story across a whole city, allowing for encounters with a certain issue from many different perspectives and in many different contexts. This offers the possibility to show how a problem, a question, or a historical process permeates an entire society and cannot be confined to a single location or perspective. Whereas museological narration tends to make explicit connections between objects, ideas and geographies for pedagogical reasons, the curatorial narrative of an art exhibition tends to operate implicitly, in the background, as an undercurrent that suggests certain perspectives, but makes sure to leave them open for contestation and questioning. This open-endedness is emphasised by the tensions between the curatorial narration and the individual artworks, and the artworks and the exhibition sites. In this form of telling, the gaps and empty spaces are just as important as the works and sites themselves: they serve as physical reminders of everything we do not and cannot know, of how the story of history is always incomplete, and make space for the viewers to enter with their own perspectives and knowledges.

Exploring the potential of the contemporary art biennial as a site of historical narration is not to undervalue the critical and self-critical work being done within the disciplines and museums of history and archaeology. It is also not to suggest the art biennial as a replacement of historical institutions. It is, however, an attempt at articulating how biennials can contribute to historical consciousness through being public sites for insisting on, and experimenting with, the co-presence of different temporalities and ways of knowing.

Footnotes

1. See, for example, Roelstraete, Dieter. “The Way of the Shovel: on the Archaeological Imaginary in Art”. *e-flux Journal*. No 4. March 2009.
2. Certeau, Michel. *The Writing of History*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press. 1988 [1975]. p.2.
3. Williams, Raymond. *Keywords, A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*. Revised edition. New York, NY: Oxford University Press. 1983 [1976]. p.146.
4. Foucault, Michel. Quoted by Bennet, Tony. “Introduction”. In *The Birth of the Museum*. New York, NY: Routledge. 1995. p. 1.
5. See, for example, White, Hayden V. “The Burden of History”. *History & Theory*. Vol. 5. No. 2. 1966. pp. 111-134.
6. Möntmann, Nina. “Plunging into the World. On the Potential of Periodic Exhibitions to Reconfigure the Contemporary Moment”. *OnCurating*. Issue 33. June 2017. p. 13.

7. Not all contemporary art biennials use this dispersed form. The São Paulo and Gwangju biennials, to name two high-profile examples, are more or less single-site projects. Although it is beyond the scope of this essay to also consider the difference between single- and multi-site biennial models, it is worth noting that even though a unifying architectural frame may evoke the totalising apparatus of the historical museum, the different temporalities and diversity of speaking positions usually included in these biennials do not.
8. Bennet, Tony. "The Exhibitionary Complex". *New Formations*. No. 4. Spring 1988. p. 79.
9. Osborne, Peter. "Existential Urgency. Contemporaneity, Biennials and Social Form". *The Nordic Journal of Aesthetics*. Issues 49-50. March 2016. p. 180.
10. Marchart, Oliver. "The Globalization of Art and the 'Biennials of Resistance': A History of the Biennials from the Periphery". *OnCurating*. Issue 46. June 2020. p. 22.
11. Enwezor, Okwui. "Mega-Exhibitions and the Antinomies of a Transnational Global Form". *Manifesta Journal*. No. 2. Winter 2003-spring 2004. p. 118.
12. *Ibid*, p.115
13. The sites were the re-purposed industrial building of Röda Sten Konsthall, the purpose-built white cube of Göteborg Konsthall, the Gothenburg Museum of Natural History, and Franska Tomten in the old harbour.
14. "Voyage iron" was a transatlantic slave trade currency with a profound impact on the economic geography of West Africa. See, for example, Evans, Chris and Rydén, Göran, "'Voyage Iron': A Transatlantic Currency, its European Origins, and West African impact". *Past & Present*. Vol. 239. No. 1. May 2018. pp. 41-70.
15. The fountain (1927) by Tore Strindberg represents each continent with a naked female figure, depicted according to ethnic stereotypes.
16. The past and present of Swedish iron mining, as well as Swedish industrial modernity at large, has been the subject of two of my most recent curatorial projects before GIBCA: "Extracts from a Future History" (various sites across Luleå, produced by Public Art Sweden in 2017) and "The Society Machine: The Industrial Age from the Perspective of Art" (Malmö Konstmuseum, 2016-17). My research following the translocal traces of Swedish iron mining was also what led me to dig deeper into the country's colonial relations.
17. Rederi AB Transatlantic, active between 1904 and 1994, was not involved in the slave trade. It was a shipping company, founded by some of the wealthiest families in Sweden, transporting goods and passengers between Sweden and America, South Africa and Australia.
18. The Emigranternas Hus moved out of these premises in March 2021.
19. Diangelo, Robin. *White Fragility*. London: Allen Lane. 2019. p. 17. For a further discussion of how the ideology of unequal races was created to justify the exploitation of labour and resources, see Coates, Ta-Nehisi. *Between the World and Me*. New York, NY: Spiegel & Grau, 2015.
20. The decision to let the biennial narrative depart from Franska Tomten also led to a process of self-questioning. As a white Swedish curator, what does it mean for me to focus the biennial on colonial relations? How does my identity affect the narration of this ongoing history? How can my curatorial work avoid reproducing the construction of a master narrative that closes off other perspectives through conceptual framing? The attempt to "speak from" rather than "about" seems to offer a possibility to be clear about my own situatedness and starting point, proposing the history of a particular site as a point of departure rather than an overarching theme and leaving it open to the artists where to take the story from there.
21. Singleton, Benedict. "The Long Con". In *When Site Lost the Plot*. Edited by Robin Mackay. Falmouth:

Urbanomic. 2015. pp. 105-120.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 111.
23. The biennial started this process in 2019, commissioning a new work by Eric Magassa for the site as well as installing Ayesha Hameed's sound piece *Transatlantic Periodic Table* (2019) there. In 2020 this process was continued with Ibrahim Mahama, leading up to the 2021 edition of the biennial including an onsite installation of NourbeSe Philip's poem *Zong!* (2008) as a public text work.
24. Sharpe, Christina. *In The Wake: On Blackness and Being*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press. 2016
25. Hartman, Saidiya. "Venus in Two Acts". *Small Axe: Caribbean Journal of Criticism*. Vol. 12. No. 2. June 2008. p. 12.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 11.
27. Witmore, Christopher. "(Dis)continuous Domains: A Case of 'Multi-Sited Archaeology' in the Peloponnesus, Greece". In *Of Rocks and Water: Towards An Archaeology of Place*. Edited by Örmür Harmansah. Oxford: Oxbow Books. 2014. pp.213-241.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 214.
29. There is nothing in the documentation of the find indicating that this was done for reasons other than conservational.
30. Walter Mignolo describes decolonial thinking as epistemological disobedience through delinking from European models of knowledge as represented by the university, the museum and the church. In the essay "Thoughts on Curatorial Practices in the Decolonial Turn" (*OnCurating*, Issue 35), Ivan Muñiz-Reed discusses how curatorial practice and authorship is part of the colonial matrix of oppressive hierarchies of knowledge constructed from Western imperial categories, pointing out that when operating "through European-generated categories, they construct a 'Eurocentric critique of Eurocentrism'... Decolonial thought on the other hand, is not constructed from or in opposition to European grand narratives, but rather from the philosophical, artistic and theoretical contributions that originate from the Global South." Although I strongly support decolonial thinking and practice, I must recognise that I speak from a northern European context. Several of the artists in GIBCA 2019-2021 practice from decolonial perspectives, however. In light of this, I hope that thinking of curatorial agency as being part of a conversation, rather than creating a totalising frame, offers the possibility of reading the position of the project and its treatment of colonial history complexly, as inevitably being an entanglement of *both and* rather than modelled on modernity's false dualism of *either or*.