





# Culture in the pandemics era?

## Examining the growth of art biennales, 1895 - 2019

*Cultural Analytics Lab* | Elsewhere project | Biennales analysis

*Research and dataset:* Alise Tifentalle

*Text, data analysis and data visualization:* Lev Manovich

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The current **COVID-19** pandemic is affecting the world economically, socially, and culturally. In March and April 2020, all cultural events that involve lots of people gathering in physical places for have been cancelled. For the rest of 2020 and 2021, museums, art centers, concert halls and other cultural facilities were sometimes closed and sometimes open. According to The Art Basel and UBS Global Art Market 2021 Report,<sup>2</sup> “an analysis on 365 global art fairs in 2020 revealed 61% were cancelled, 37% held live events, and the remaining 2% of fairs held hybrid, alternative events.” In early December 2021, Oxford University Professor and one of the AstraZeneca vaccine creators Professor Dame Sarah Gilbert warned in her lecture that the next pandemic “could be worse. It could be more contagious, or more lethal, or both.”<sup>3</sup>

**Global culture is entering a new period**, and we don't know yet what it will be. But regardless of what may happen, having quantitative knowledge of **long term cultural trends** will help us better understand the future when it arrives.

This report presents one such analysis. We look at the growth and diffusion of *international art biennales*. To the best of our knowledge, this is *the first quantitative analysis of art biennales history*. Below we discuss our findings including **the effects of 2008 global financial crisis on biennale growth**. (This work is a part of a larger *Elsewhere* project where we investigate the growth of global contemporary culture after 1990 using data science and AI methods.)

We created a dataset of all biennales **that had editions in 2017 or 2018**. Many new arts biennales that started in the last decades had only a few editions and did not continue. We decided to include only biennales that keep going, so the latest edition in 2017 or 2018 was our criteria for inclusion. (It is possible that even after a few months of research, we were not able to find some international biennales that fit our criteria - so if you see omissions in our dataset, please let us know.)

Number of unique biennales: **200**

Number of countries: **174**

Number of cities: **81**

The list of all **200** biennales sorted by first edition year appears in the next two pages.

## Cultural Analytics Lab

Biennale name	First edition	Biennale name	First edition
La Biennale di Venezia	1895	Manifesta	1995
Carnegie International	1896	Shanghai Biennale	1996
Arizona Biennial	1948	Alberta Biennial of Contemporary Art	1996
Sonsbeek	1949	Kaunas Biennale	1997
Bienal de São Paulo	1951	Bienal del Mercosur	1997
Ljubljana Biennial of Graphic Arts	1955	Biennial of the Possible Image	1997
Documenta	1955	KölnSkulptur	1997
Oktobarski Salon	1960	Blickachsen International Sculpture Biennale	1997
ARS	1961	Florence Biennale	1997
International Biennial of Graphic Design Brno	1963	Vladivostok International Biennale of Visual Arts	1998
MTG International Print Triennial	1966	Busan Biennale	1998
Tallinn Print Triennale	1968	Central American Biennale	1998
Sculpture Quadriennial Riga	1972	Berlin Biennale	1998
Whitney Biennial	1973	SIART	1999
Biennale of Sydney	1973	BIECTR Biennale Internationale D'estampe contemporaine de Trois-Rivières	1999
Jakarta Biennale	1974	Louisville Photo Biennale	1999
Jamaica Biennial	1977	Chobi Mela	2000
Skulptur Projekte Münster	1977	Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennale	2000
EVA International	1977	Seoul Mediacity Biennale	2000
Bienal de Arte Paiz	1978	Manif d'art	2000
Cerveira International Biennial of Art	1978	SCAPE Christchurch Biennial of Art in Public Space	2000
Baltic Triennial	1979	Yokohama Triennale	2001
Contemporary Art Biennial Sesc_VideoBrasil	1983	GIBCA Göteborg International Biennial for Contemporary Art	2001
FotoFest International	1983	Guangzhou Image Triennial	2002
Mediterranea Young Artists Biennale	1984	Socle du Monde Biennale	2002
Videonale	1984	Survival Art Review	2003
Rauma Biennale Balticum	1985	Moscow International Biennale of Contemporary Art	2003
Biennale de l'Image en Mouvement	1985	Experimenta	2003
Varna International Print Triennial	1987	Beaufort Triennale	2003
Biennial of Young Artists	1987	Contour Biennale	2003
Istanbul Biennial	1987	Turku Biennale	2003
Biennale Jogja	1988	Brighton Photo Biennial	2003
International Biennial of Sculpture	1988	Biennial of Young Artists	2004
Cuenca Biennial	1988	Liverpool Biennial	2004
Thessaloniki Photo Biennale	1989	Songzhuang International Photo Biennale	2005
WRO Biennale	1989	Bi-City Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture	2005
Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art	1990	Bucharest International Biennial for Contemporary Art	2005
Lyon Biennale	1991	Vancouver Biennale	2005
Dak'Art Biennale de l'Art Africain Contemporain	1992	Performa	2005
Taipei Biennial	1992	Ballarat International Foto Biennale	2005
Bienal FEMSA	1992	Biennale für aktuelle Fotografie	2005
Bienal de Artes Mediales	1993	Athens Digital Arts Festival	2005
Sharjah Biennial	1993	Glasgow International	2005
Asia Pacific Triennial	1993	LAM 360° Land Art Mongolia Biennial	2006
Curitiba International Biennial	1993	Singapore Biennale	2006
Rencontres de Bamako Biennale Africaine de la Photographie	1994	Daegu Photo Biennale	2006
Bermuda Biennial	1994	Sinopale	2006
Moscow Photobiennale	1994	TarraWarra Biennale	2006
International Graphic Triennial Bitola	1994	Sequences	2006
Gwangju Biennale	1995		

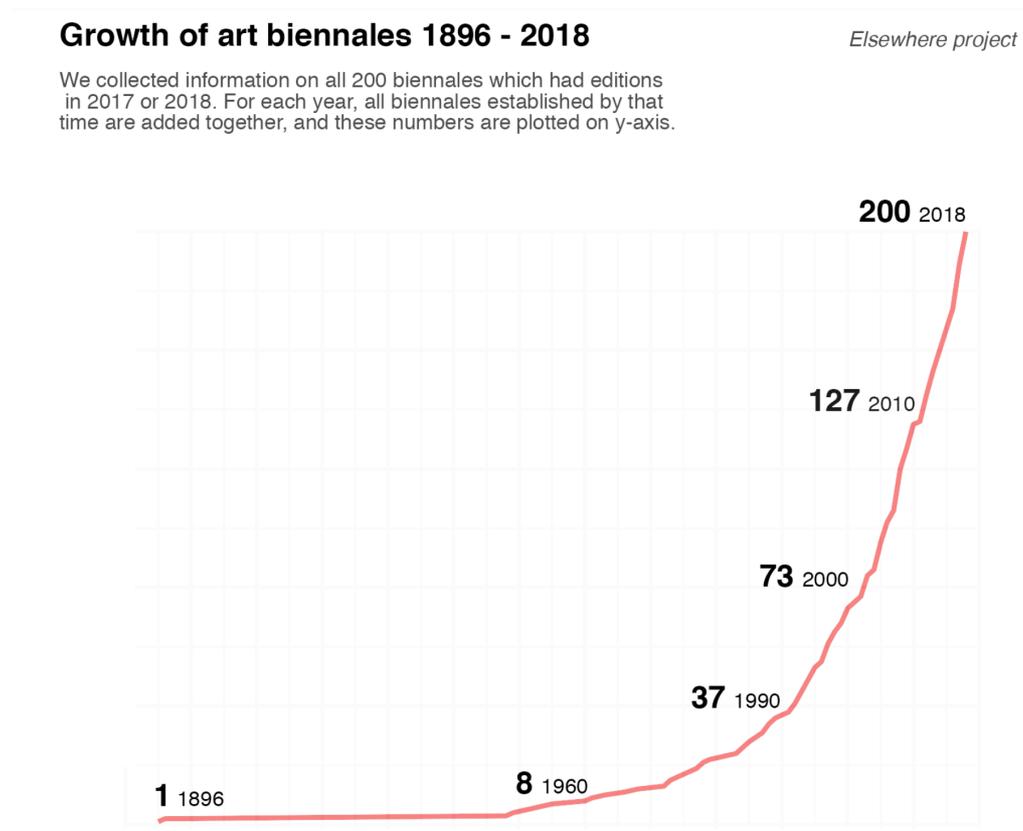
Biennales database, part 1: 1896-2006

*Elsewhere* project: Art Biennales, 1895-2019

Biennale name	First edition	Biennale name	First edition
Sequences	2006	PAM Public Art Munich	2013
Whitstable Biennale	2006	Screen City Biennial	2013
SUD Salon Urbain de Douala	2007	Kampala Art Biennale	2014
Asian Art Biennale	2007	Antarctic Biennale	2014
Athens Biennale	2007	Beijing Photo Biennial	2014
Thessaloniki Biennale of Contemporary Art	2007	OFF-Biennale Budapest	2014
Lubumbashi Biennial	2008	Art Safari	2014
Taiwan Biennial	2008	Frestas Triennial of Arts	2014
Kuandu Biennale	2008	MKH Biennale	2014
Mediations Biennale	2008	Art Encounters	2015
Moscow International Biennale for Young Art	2008	TRIO Bienal Three-dimensional International Biennale	2015
Transborder Biennial	2008	Kabul Photo Biennale	2015
Çanakkale Biennial	2008	Biennial Internacional Andorra Land Art	2015
Prospect	2008	Vienna Biennial	2015
Shimmer Photographic Biennale	2008	Bruges Triennial	2015
Art li Biennial	2008	Biennale des photographes du monde arabe contemporain	2015
Les Ateliers de Rennes	2008	Yinchuan Biennale	2016
Borås International Sculpture Biennial	2008	Okayama Art Summit	2016
OpenART Biennale	2008	Riga Photography Biennial	2016
Folkestone Triennial	2008	Bienal Fundación Medifé Arte y Medio Ambiente	2016
Kathmandu Triennale	2009	Something Else: Off Biennale	2016
Ghetto Biennale	2009	Larnaca Biennale	2016
Survival Kit	2009	Biennale de la Céramique de Villefranche de Rouergue	2016
BiCeBé Bienal del Cartel Bolivia	2009	Lagos Biennale	2017
New Museum Triennial	2009	International Print Biennale Yerevan	2017
Chianciano Biennale	2009	Chennai Photo Biennale	2017
Momentum	2009	Oku Noto Triennale	2017
Aichi Triennale	2010	Kuala Lumpur Biennale	2017
Setouchi Triennale	2010	Karachi Biennale	2017
Graphic Art Biennial of Szeklerland	2010	Jeju Biennale	2017
Ural Industrial Biennial of Contemporary Art	2010	Garage Triennial of Russian Contemporary Art	2017
Mediterranean Biennial Of Contemporary Art of Oran	2010	BIENALSUR International Biennial of Contemporary Art of South America	2017
Mardin Biennale	2010	Bonavista Biennale	2017
Long Island Biennial	2010	Desert X	2017
Barcelona Foto Biennale	2010	Honolulu Biennale	2017
LOOK Photo Biennale	2011	NGV Triennial	2017
Casablanca International Biennale	2012	AroS Triennial	2017
Kochi-Muziris Biennale	2012	Copenhagen Ultracontemporary Biennale	2017
Changwon Sculpture Biennale	2012	Anren Biennale	2018
Qalandiya International	2012	Shenzhen Art Biennale	2018
BIAN International Digital Arts Biennial	2012	Manila Biennale	2018
Fotofocus Biennale	2012	Bangkok Art Biennale	2018
Adelphi University Outdoor Sculpture Biennial	2012	Thailand Biennale	2018
Made in L.A.	2012	RIBOCA Riga International Biennial of Contemporary Art	2018
London Open	2012	Digital Art Biennial	2018
Pune Biennale	2013	Lahore Biennial	2018
Odessa Biennale of Contemporary Art	2013	FRONT International Cleveland Triennial for Contemporary Art	2018
Jerusalem Biennale	2013	Biennial of Tangible Image	2018
California-Pacific Triennial	2013	Strasbourg Biennale	2018
Wrong Biennale	2013		

Biennales database, part 2: 2006-2018

The first international art biennale took place in **1895** in Venice. There are **36** regularly occurring biennales by 1990, **68** biennales by 2010, and **200 by 2019**. The plot on the next page shows this growth. To create the following graph, we added the number of all unique biennales in each year that were active in 2017-2018.



We expected that the graph would reflect some political and economic events - such as the end of Cold War and beginning of globalization around **1991** or global financial crisis of **2008-2009**. Instead, the graph shows very gradual acceleration of growth - leading to exponential growth. We don't see any sudden leaps forward or big temporary slow downs. (However, later we will plot the data differently and see that things are more complicated.)

It took 30 years to get from 8 biennales in 1960 to 37 in 1990. In the 1990s, global art world started to expand and grow. Between 1990 and 2000, their number almost doubles (197%). In the next two decades, the rates of growth are still high - but smaller than in the 1990s.

New biennales growth rates:

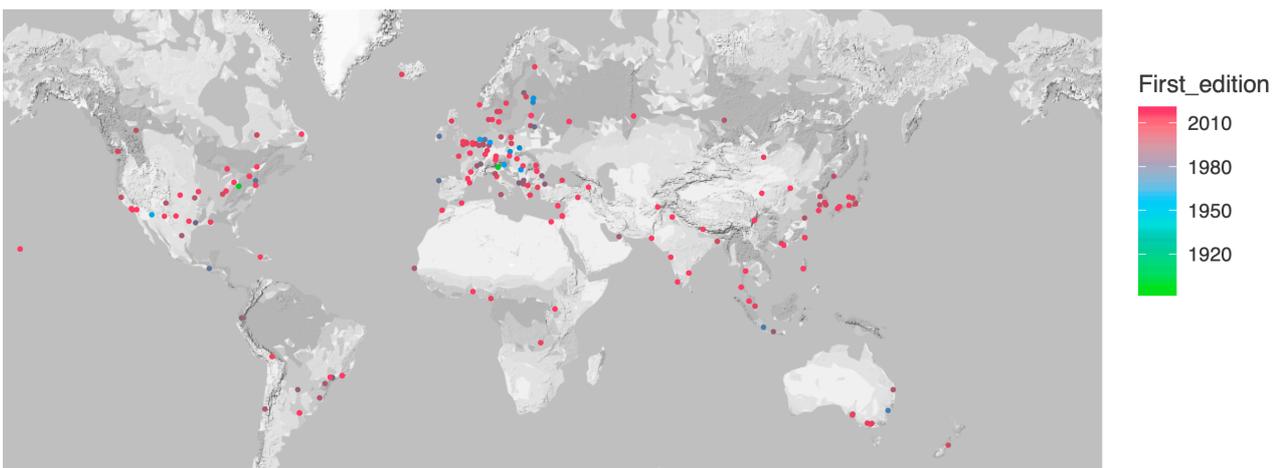
1990 - 2000: **197%**

2000 - 2010: **173%**

2010 - 2019: **145%**

Thus, the strongest expansion so far was during the 1990s. It is possible that the growth would have accelerated in 2000s and again 2010s if the world did not go through a financial crisis that started in 2008.

Let's now look at **biennale geography over time**. The map below shows all 200 biennale locations in our dataset, with **color indicating the first edition year** of each biennales. The first art biennales are established only in Europe and US (**green dots**). After WWII, we see a slow expansion of biennale geography (**blue dots**). After 2000, this expansion accelerates, with dozens of biennales being established in many countries (**red dots**).

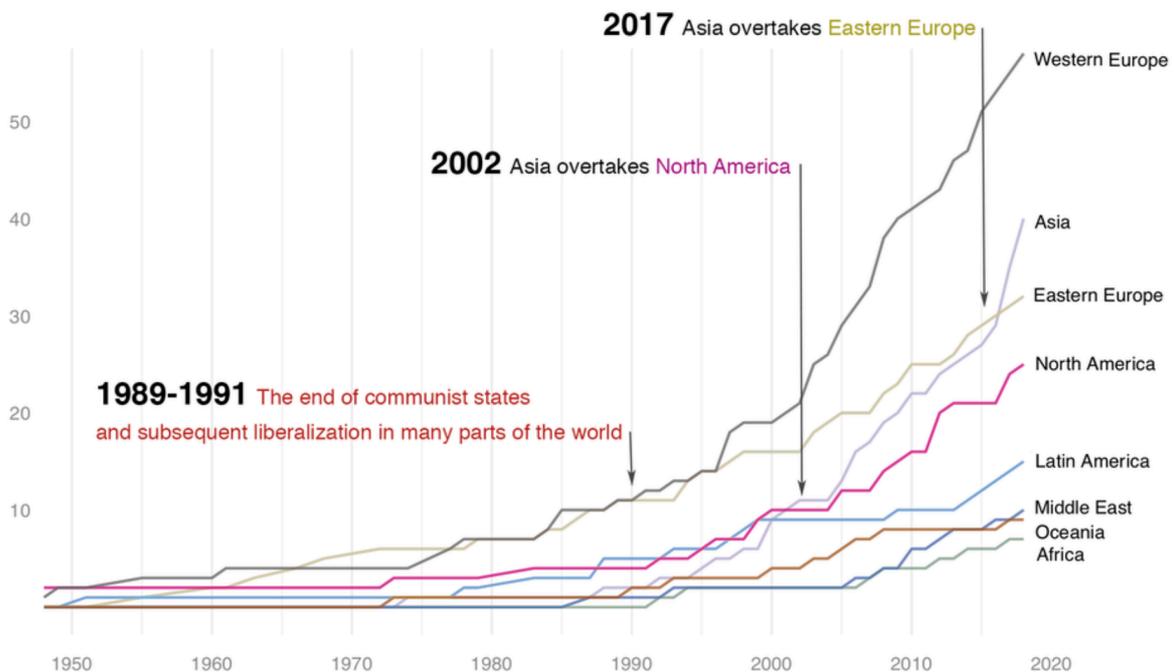


Next, we will look in more details at biennale growth over time in a few geographic regions. **In the 1960s and 1970s Eastern Europe** has more biennales than **Western Europe**. But after 1996, the two grow at different speeds. More new biennales emerge in Western Europe, and less in Eastern Europe, and this gap keeps getting bigger.

In Asia, growth at first is very slow but eventually it accelerates. **In 2002 Asia overtakes North America**. **In 2017 Asia leaps over Eastern Europe**. The grows rate of new biennales gradually accelerates in all regions.

### Comparing growth of art biennales in world regions, 1945 - 2018

For each year, all biennales established by that time in a particular geographic region are added together, and these numbers are plotted on y-axis.



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However, despite this growth, Europe still has most biennales by 2019:

WESTERN EUROPE - 57

ASIA - 40

EASTERN EUROPE - 32

LATIN AMERICA - 15

AFRICA - 7

CARIBBEAN - 3

**What countries and cities have most biennales?** Here we see something unexpected. The top countries in the art market in terms of sales are US, UK and China.<sup>4</sup> In 2020, US had 42%, while UK and US each had 20%. What about most important art world cities in terms of numbers of galleries, art museums and art fares ? My own intuition would suggest New York, London, Los Angeles, Tokyo, and Beijing. 2015 Artsy report listed the following cities:

01 New York  
02 London  
03 Miami  
04 Venice  
05 Paris  
06 Berlin  
07 Los Angeles

08 Basel + Zürich  
09 Hong Kong  
10 São Paulo  
11 Singapore  
12 Istanbul  
13 Beijing

But the geography of biennales does not correspond precisely to either art market sales or our beliefs about what cities are important for contemporary art. Looking at our dataset, these are the **countries** that had most biennales with editions in 2017-2018:

USA - 17

GERMANY - 9

AUSTRIA, CHINA - 8 each

BRAZIL, RUSSIA, UK - 7 each

CANADA, FRANCE, JAPAN, SOUTH KOREA - 6 each

And the list of **cities** with most biennales is even more surprising:

Moscow, Riga, Taipei - 4 each

Bucharest and New York - 3 each

Athens, Beijing, Buenos Aires, La Paz, Liverpool, Melbourne, Paris, Quebec,

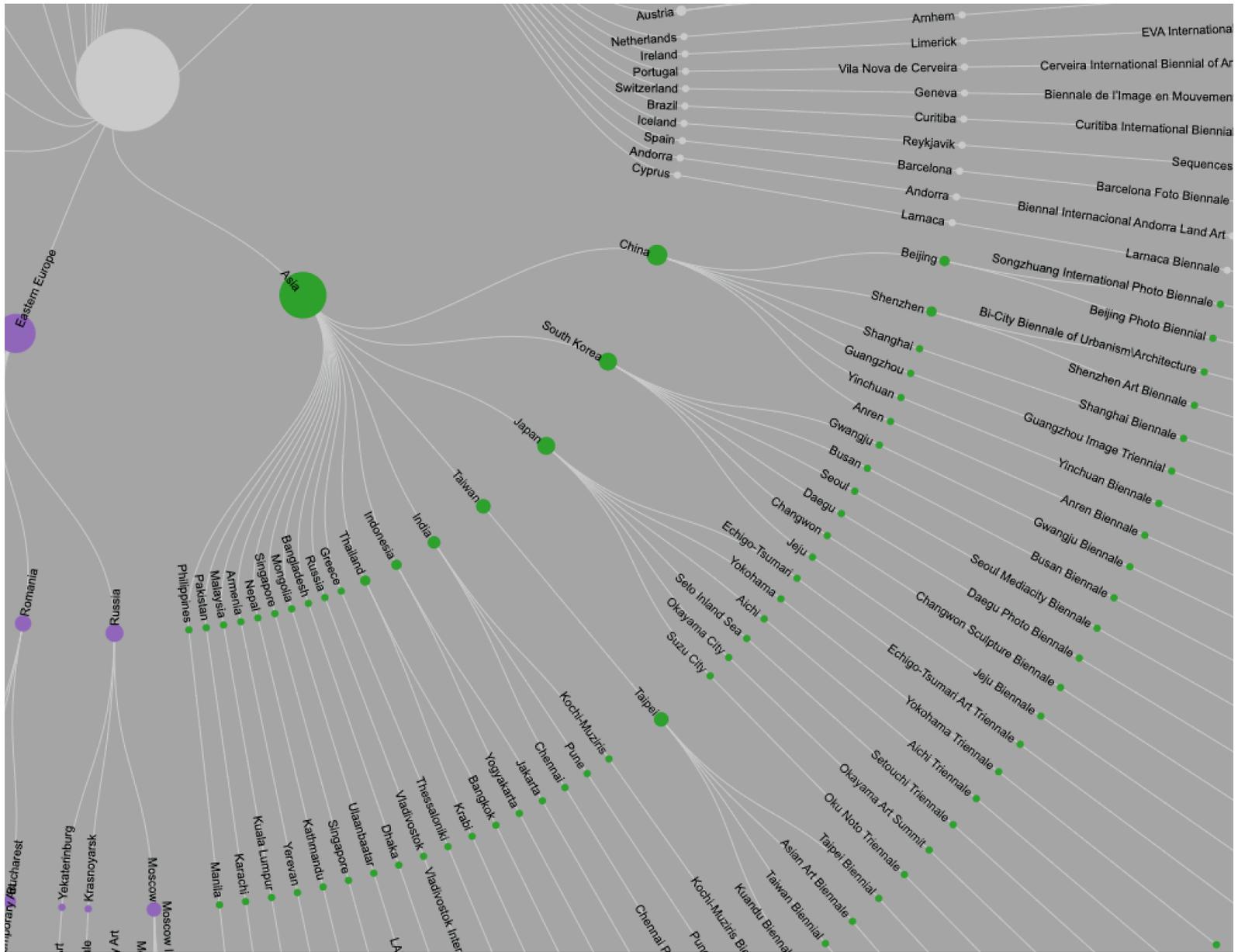
Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo - 2 each

The following visualizations show all 200 biennales in our dataset organized by geographic locations. The inner ring shows **regions**, the 2nd ring shows **countries**, the 3rd shows **cities** and the 4th outer ring shows individual **biennales**. The colors indicate regions - Asia is **green**, Eastern Europe is **violet**, Western Europe and North America are **gray**, Latin America is **pink**, Middle East is **emerland**, and so on. The regions and countries with more biennales correspond to branches that are positioned further apart from neighbors. This happens because the map drawing algorithm needs to fit it all smaller branches (cities and particular biennales).

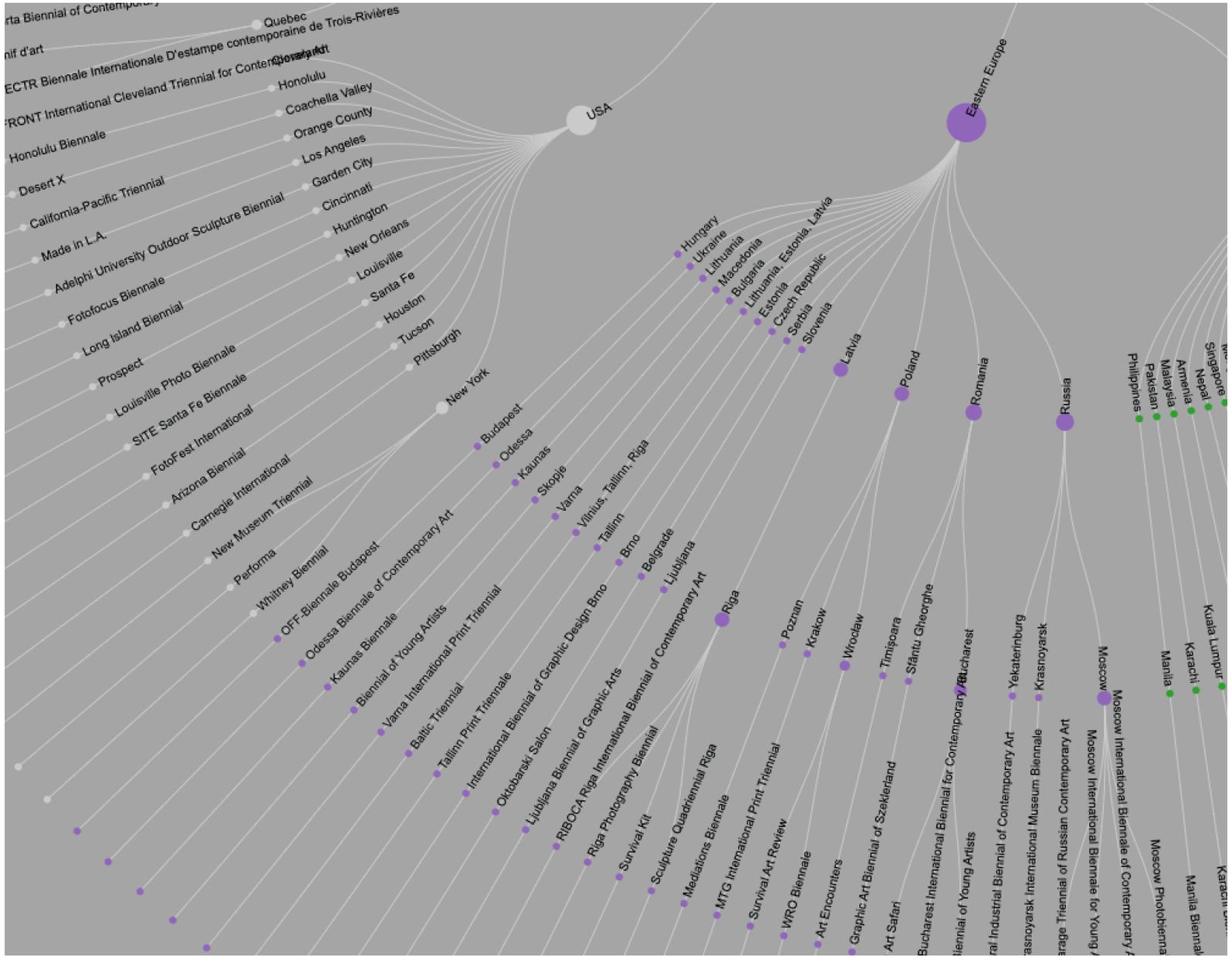




Elsewhere project: Art Biennales, 1895-2019



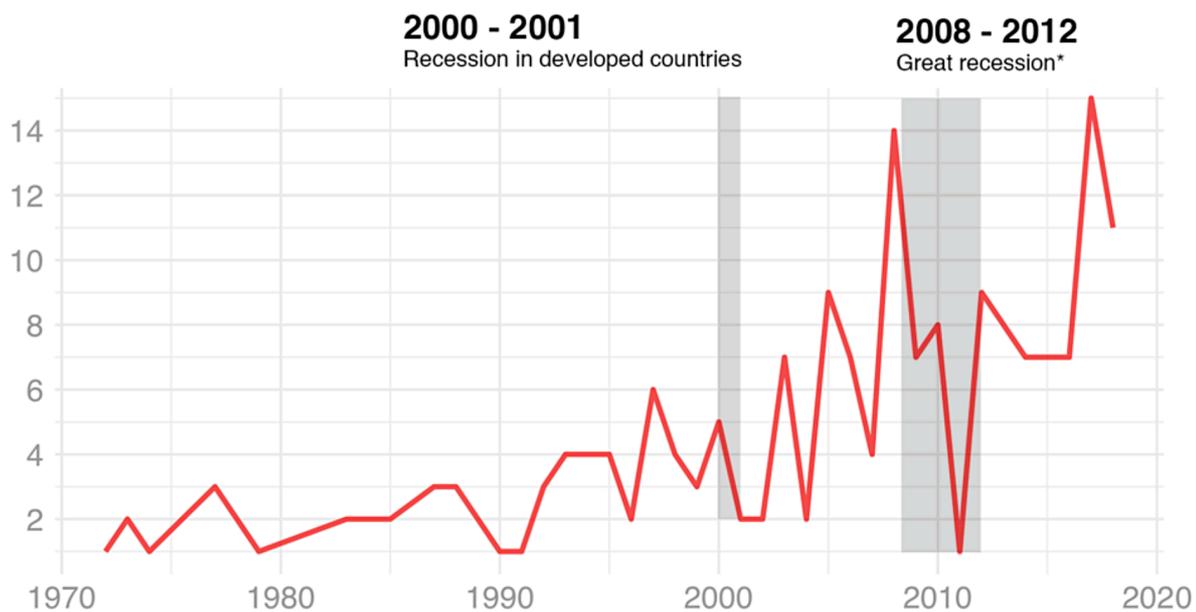
Closeup: Asia



Closeup: Eastern Europe

Finally, what about possible **effects of 2007-2008 global financial crisis on biennale growth**? Did the growth in the numbers of new biennales slowed down? More generally, is there a direct connection between the economic patterns and the growth of art biennales?

To approach this question, we plot the data in different way. While previous graphs were showing cumulative numbers of all biennales for every year, in the next graph we only show the **numbers of new biennales** established every year from 1970 to 2019:



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\* Countries that did not have recession: Poland, Slovakia, Moldova, India, China, South Korea, Indonesia, Australia, Uruguay, Colombia, Bolivia.

There are three periods of particularly fast acceleration of growth: **1997-2000**, **2006-2009**, and **2017-2018**. Between 2009 and 2017, the growth rate does not change - 7 new biennales are added every year. Only one year is an exception. This year is **2011** - three years after the crisis started. Only one new biennale still active today was added in 2011.

What will be the effect of the **current global pandemic** on the future of large-scale cultural events ? Since we don't know how covid-19 virus continues to evolve, we can't predict these effects. However, it is encouraging to learn that **the impact of the last big financial crisis** in at least one area - art biennales - was limited. While it did **slow down the growth** for a number of years, it did not stop. **New biennales were still launched every year.**

Of course, other factors can be also responsible for these trends besides changes in economy. The current crisis is different because it impacts not only economy but also many other things including travel and gatherings of many people in physical spaces (which is what biennales required so far).

One clear effect of the pandemic we saw in 2020-2021 is the faster and wider adoption of internet-based platforms and new digital formats in many cultural fields including contemporary art.<sup>5</sup> Here are just a few examples: art galleries started to create online "viewing rooms"; many art museums build interactive 3D virtual recreations of their physical exhibitions; Christie's and Sotheby' auction houses started to hold hybrid physical and digital art auctions; k-pop companies in South Korea developed "beyond live" format that combines a live group performance, real-time 3D graphics, and AR, and the gives online viewers ability to chat with the performers and choose camera angles; and NFT art format originally introduced in 2014 by NYC artist Kevin McCoy<sup>6</sup> quickly quickly grew in popularity in 2020-2021.

The development of contemporary art and culture in general cannot be fully captured by quantitative datasets such as the one we created for this study. For example, the number of new art biennales launched every year, although indicative of growth and expansion in the field, does not say anything about the nature, topicality, or importance of the art exhibited in these biennales. However, the comparison of biennale activity among geographical regions illuminates the impact of the economic and political inequality on the art world. But most importantly, our data captures the development of the **biennale as a very specific model for organizing art production and consumption.** This model so far used to rely on transnational networking and ever increasing global mobility of artists and curators. In case the current (or future) pandemics will have a long-lasting impact on how we travel, the biennale model will have to reinvent itself or otherwise we will see the rise of alternative models in the art world.

<sup>1</sup> On “pandemics era,” see Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) #pandemics report, 2020, <https://ipbes.net/pandemics>, accessed December 12, 2021.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.artbasel.com/stories/art-market-report-2021>, accessed 12/13/2021.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.ox.ac.uk/news/2021-12-07-professor-dame-sarah-gilbert-delivers-44th-dimbleby-lecture>, accessed 12/13/2021.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.statista.com/statistics/885531/global-art-market-share-by-country/>, accessed December 12, 2021.

<sup>5</sup> Jacqui Palumbo, “The art market has radically changed. Here's how to buy art today,” CNN, December 11, 2021, <https://edition.cnn.com/style/article/how-to-buy-art/index.html>.

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.mccoyspace.com/project/125/>.