

Biennale Demand

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The following text derives from a talk presented at the workshop ‘Cultural Events, Celebrity Curators and Creative Networking’, organised by the Department of Cultural and Religious Studies, Chinese University Hong Kong, in association with the Asia Art Archive and Para/Site Art Space.¹

Art criticism, in my view, turns on acts of judgement. But the function of judgement in art is not to attain certainty or correctness. It is to aid in understanding. The critic writes in order to better understand the art and ideas that he or she is writing about. A judgement is a test of understanding. The critic tests the art: what does the work say, and how does it say what it says? And so on. The critic tests herself too: reflecting on her observations and intuitions, challenging her opinions and interpretations—all in the hope of achieving some clarity, some sense of conviction. Criticism asks its readers not necessarily to agree with the writer. Rather, the demand of criticism is to better understand—both the art at hand and the critic’s arguments. We may disagree in the end, but with thoughtful criticism, we will have come to a better understanding of ourselves, our positions vis-à-vis each other, and the ideas and artworks that inspire or compel us to come into impassioned discussion or disagreement in the first place.

This year, Asia will be teeming with biennales and triennales; in September 2008 alone, seven are scheduled to open—Taipei, Shanghai, Gwangju, Busan, Guangzhou, Singapore and Yokohama. Clearly, the biennale-type exhibition is a topic that demands some thoughtful critical attention. Over the years, I’ve attended a number of these exhibitions, and have written pages about them, but, to be honest, I’m not sure I understand them. This essay is an attempt to step back and rethink my approaches to them. What comes to mind are four kinds of demand.

Firstly, there is the demand for more biennales. Here I’m referring to the governments, institutions, the powers-that-be who want them, and therefore organise them. This contrasts with the second kind of demand, the demands put upon biennales by local populations. The *Singapore Biennale’s* first and now second artistic director, Fumio Nanjo, has said that these events are primarily meant for local audiences—less the international set that jets into town for the opening.² So, how are these local demands

articulated? How are local needs and interests represented? Rather than the general public voicing its opinions directly, what one gets instead is various persons speaking on behalf of local communities. At stake therefore, is not only what the various publics really think and feel about the biennale happening in their midst, but how certain players, from government officials and public relations spokespersons to journalists, editors, critics and curators, assume their roles in mediating local reception.

Thirdly, there are the demands made of biennales by the art world, from the participating artists to the visiting curators, critics and so on. Not that I’ve become any less interested in the work on display, or the specifics of any given exhibition, but lately I’ve become particularly interested in analysing the art world’s commentary on biennales. These groups of people are highly vocal and sometimes even highly persuasive in articulating their demands. There are patterns that emerge, and tendencies to compare and contrast—for instance, is there a different demand made of ‘Asian’ biennales than of European ones?

Lastly, and this is the demand which I’m most interested in, is the demand that biennales make upon us—their audiences, consumers, participants, patrons, stakeholders, students and critics. What do biennales want from us? My question takes its form from the book by W.J.T Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want?: The Lives and Loves of Images*.³ The book blurb says: “Why do we have such extraordinarily powerful responses toward the images and pictures we see in everyday life? Why do we behave as if pictures were alive, possessing the power to influence us, to demand things from us, to persuade us, seduce us, or even lead us astray? According to Mitchell, we need to reckon with images not just as inert objects that convey meaning but as animated beings with desires, needs, appetites, demands, and drives of their own.” I don’t mean to talk about biennales as if they are all the same. Certainly pictures are among the most diverse of things, and yet it’s productive to talk of them as a whole, as Mitchell does.

My premise is that, for quite some time now, our discussions about biennales have been framed by a central question, “what do we want from them?” The ‘we’ is of course a complicated term. It is precisely in defining this ‘we’ that much of that question depends—are we referring to artists, audiences, scholars, governments or sponsors?

My proposition is this—instead of asking what we want from biennales, let’s ask—what is it that biennales want from us? What are their demands? I suppose the reason I want to turn things around is because I feel we have run into a dead-end asking ourselves, repeatedly, “what do we want from biennales?” To explain what I mean, let’s look at a recent review of one—the 2007 *Istanbul Biennial*. Let me quote at length from Peter Schjeldahl, *The New Yorker’s* principal art critic.

The Istanbul Biennial, in its tenth edition, is one of the first non-Western biennials, and one of only a few in Muslim countries, out of the scores of contemporary-art festivals that speckle the planet from Santa Fe to Kwangju. Like most biennials of late, it is strenuously fun-filled and earnest, in soft-core, we-are-the-world veins. Not Only Possible, But Also Necessary: Optimism in the Age of Global War, the Chinese curator Hou Hanru... has titled it. Let’s everybody cheer up, in other words. More than a hundred artists and artist collectives from three dozen countries mostly play along...

Each biennial art is critic-proof, because it eschews formal engagement with past art, providing no basis for comparative evaluation. It is flimsy and ad hoc: here today, gone later today. While often avid for up-to-date technology, it churns academic postminimalist and conceptual aesthetics, continually resetting art’s clock to a noontide—the nineteen-sixties, more or less—of nebulously utopian afflatus. Its themes tend to be off-the-shelf topical and its sentiments well worn: war and commerce suck, love and public-spiritedness rock. Hou, in the Istanbul catalogue, fulminates against “neo-liberal economic power” and promotes an ideal of “new and more relevant public spheres to counter the current trend of privatisation and gentrification”. At this point, biennialism is a networking function of and, it can seem, for publicly funded art administrators and curators, worldwide... Does it suggest hypocrisy that most of the show’s hundred and



seventy or so listed sponsors are corporations? (Others are government agencies and private foundations.) It would, if Hou's anti-capitalist posturing were meant to persuade rather than to serve as parochial boilerplate that bothers no one. Nor is his show apt to inflame...⁴

Schjeldahl next speaks about Vasif Kortun, the curator of two past *Istanbul Biennials*. Schjeldahl is surprised when Kortun says: "Biennials have consumed their role. Their job is done. [That job was to publicise cultures outside of Western Europe and America.] It has become almost impossible to not know what's going on in the world. We're post-curiosity." At the conclusion of his review, Schjeldahl talks about visiting a mosque, and how that experience "overshadowed that of the *Biennial*, though in ways that rendered the shallow, frantic show and its yuppie-ish, wine-swilling social milieu oddly cherishable in their fragility."

Schjeldahl's criticisms sound all too familiar. Who hasn't taken a shot at a biennale, especially one curated by Hou Hanru, or some other 'star curator'?⁵ But it's hard not to react to the sarcasm and disdain of his review. However, my point isn't to dismiss, in turn, *The New Yorker* art critic. I don't want to get into typecasting—the bashing of Western art critics who misunderstand Asian curators or biennales. The same things could just as easily have been said

by a critic from this part of the world. Although one can easily imagine a different critic, one who is much more sympathetic, if not exactly partisan to the (new) biennales in Asia. Even then, it's hard to imagine such a critic finding these shows to be faultless. I can anticipate my own essay on the 2008 *Singapore Biennale*; it could very well be entitled: 'Brilliant Errors are Missing Here: the Ruins of the Contemporary'.⁶ Anyhow, I don't mean to single out Schjeldahl or anyone else as a cynic—someone who's seen it all, is jaded, and can only despair at how bad the situation is. Schjeldahl's far from that in his other writings. But there's something about his Istanbul review that exemplifies the problems of biennale reviewing at large.

From Istanbul, let's travel across a continent to the Pacific. Rather than review the 2006 *Sydney Biennale*—which I couldn't, since I didn't have much time to see the show—I wrote instead about a small book of reviews of the exhibition. The *Critical Reader*⁷ is published by Artspace, a leading independent arts organisation in Sydney. For several *Biennales*, Artspace has invited a handful of artists, curators and critics to write reviews of the exhibition; it then publishes the *Reader* within the show's first month, with the intent to spur critical discussion. My own response to the 2006 *Reader* included these remarks:

There are two kinds of discourses about biennales. The first kind, which purportedly explains the art works and curatorial concepts, is a demonstration

of intentions accomplished, and often celebrates new ground being broken. One is tempted to say this discourse should not be taken seriously, as it merges with marketing and publicity, despite its often sophisticated language and numerous citations of theory. The other kind, which is indeed taken seriously, too seriously, criticizes the biennale—in the particular and in general—and is ultimately dismissive. Between the two, the second kind of writing is more demoralising for the art world. In the first, the space between thinking and selling collapses; in the second, however, the collapse is between knowledge and despair. The critic is always more clever than the biennale curator, who inevitably fails to realise his or her ambitions, does the opposite of what he or she claims, and so on. The critic may be best able to see and say all this, but then criticism becomes strangely impotent: it is a discourse of the symptoms of a hopeless situation.⁸

I was making a caricature; those are but two extremes. We can disagree with a review like the one by Schjeldahl. But what worries me is not the disagreement, the diversity of our different perspectives and interpretations. I'm worried about how true believers in art—Schjeldahl among them—speak in incommensurate discourses. These different discourses don't speak to each other. At most, they speak at each other, and there seems no way of bridging them. How can one ask something more of biennales, when they can only posture with political correctness, when they can only publicise different cultures for global consumption, when they have already consumed their role? How, when we have gone past the point of curiosity about cultures other than our own?

But this is not the way I want to end a discussion on the biennale. My point all along has been to move beyond this seeming impasse. Let me return to the question I have been setting the stage to ask—what is it that biennales want from us? What are their demands? No doubt, biennales demand our attention. They are celebrations of the visible—of seeing and being seen. Visually spectacular, these events are prime fodder for mediatised hype. Occasions for all sorts of grandiose claims of how art can heal the world, or in somewhat more modest rhetoric, how contemporary art represents the cutting edge of enjoyment. Biennales and other such exhibitions are exemplary instances of the society of the spectacle.

Many biennale-type exhibitions, for instance, Okwui Enwezor's *documenta 11*, or Charles Merewether's *Zones of Contact*, not only demand attention, they also are emotionally demanding. In his catalogue preface, Enwezor wrote: "Almost fifty years after its founding, *documenta* finds itself confronted once again with the spectres of yet another turbulent time of unceasing cultural, social, and political frictions, transitions, transformations, fissures, and global institutional consolidations... [T]he prospects for contemporary art... could not be more daunting and demanding."⁹ One of the things *documenta 11* seemed to demand of its viewers was guilt. A peculiar guilt—guilt as a defensive reflex, an admission of not knowing how or not being able to confront our historical burdens; guilt as a symptom of the twentieth century's defeated self-reflexivity.

If it were just our attention and our guilt, then I don't think biennales would be asking too much of us. They wouldn't be asking more than what the nightly news asks. We watch our TVs, we watch attentively as the catastrophes of the world are paraded before us, we feel terrible, and then we watch some other program—from *Crime Scene Investigation* to *Desperate Housewives*.

But one of the things I think that biennales really want from us, which is not what the nightly news demands, is our time. The news recognises that soon after its half-an-hour, we will stop attending to it, stop feeling bad about the world. Biennale-type exhibitions want much more time than that. A typical exhibition, for instance, will feature several video or film works: some brief, others hours long. The sheer scale of these events means that they demand a lot, a whole lot, of one's time. And this is something we hardly give to *documentas*, biennales or triennales. We typically rush through them, and then some of us even write reviews of them. Rarely do we look at them over and over again, over the entire stretch of the exhibition, giving to them a substantial commitment of our time.

If critics gave more of their time to biennales, perhaps we might get better criticism. Often it is the ambitions of curators that is targeted by critics. But ironically, though not surprisingly, the over-reaching rhetoric that biennale curators use to defend their exhibitions derives from past criticisms of biennales. Such curatorial-speak is in good measure criticism refracted, processed and incorporated. Biennale criticism is as repetitive and predictable as the objects of its criticism. So if critics want to fault the conceits of curators, they too must recognise that they have a responsibility. Perhaps we might have better biennales, if our criticisms of them were also better.

We might have better biennales, if we attend more carefully to what they want from us. As you'll recall, the central question of my text takes the form from

Mitchell's book, *What Do Pictures Want?* The demand of pictures is the demand of a tradition of pictures—or rather traditions of pictures. Traditions of painting, of photography, film, advertising, television, and so on.

We have, as the American art critic Harold Rosenberg once said, a "tradition of the new",¹⁰ but he was referring then to the modern art of the mid-twentieth-century—to abstract expressionists like Willem de Kooning, Jackson Pollock. What of contemporary art—the stock and trade of today's biennale? Do we have a tradition of 'the now'? Notwithstanding the museum building craze in Asia and elsewhere, the global site of contemporary art is the biennale-type exhibition, and not the museum. The museum is, arguably, an irrevocably modernist thing. The biennale, in comparison, is best described not as a postmodernist but as a global phenomenon (it signals the advent of a different narrative from the modernist-postmodernist trajectory). The tradition of 'the now', of the contemporary, would therefore also be a tradition of the global. The philosopher Arthur Danto has described today's global art as post-historical, of being so radically diverse, that we can no longer find a unified historical framework for it.¹¹ Is Danto saying that we can never have a tradition of the now, a tradition of post-historical global art and its paradigmatic platform, the biennale-type show? Or is he just saying that there is no one single tradition, that global art is irreducibly plural?

What do we have? The biennale, despite all the diversity, as its critics continue to complain, has become conventional. And a convention is not a tradition. Conventions are characterised by patterns and predictability; traditions, in contrast, are notable for their density of reflexivity. Important artists responding to past important artists, and so on. The dominant convention of biennales is the representation of ethnicity as geography, and vice versa; to coin a term, this is a form of ethno-geography. As the former *Istanbul Biennial* curator put it—the job of biennales is to publicise cultures from outside the West.

Art historian Terry Smith seems more sanguine than Kortun or Schjeldahl about the role of biennales when he says their goal is to show "the latest developments in international contemporary art". He asks: "Why is it that the biennale has become so important to international visual arts?... Are biennales telling us more about the state of contemporary art than the writings of critics and historians?"¹² In a discussion of the American *Whitney Biennial* of 2004, Smith noted how one reviewer found the failings of the art to stem from the failings of USA society. But as Smith rightly asks, isn't the function of contemporary art to go beyond merely mirroring society? When art aims only to reflect, it does so reductively. Yet isn't this the defining problem of the conventional biennale?

Its goal is to present us with the latest in contemporary art, but what mostly defines the 'new' in international art is geographic representation—a new corner of the world that has yet to be fully colonised by global fascination. The proliferation of biennales has only intensified this convention of contemporary art being increasingly burdened with the representation of place. And of all places, at the moment at least, Asia is possibly the exemplary sign and site for the 'new' and the 'next'.

To be sure, there are constant comparisons when it comes to biennales—we hear, 'this show is not as good as that one'. But these comparisons are framed by the imperatives of the 'new' or 'next', even when the shows in question are years apart (because those shows were new then). What is lacking are comparisons with a historian's care and rigour. We don't give biennales our time, and we don't see biennales in time, historical time. Instead of always being disappointed with these conventional representations—of wanting more than what's paraded in one city after another—what if we really listened to the demands that biennales make of us? What if we recognise that underlying these ethno-geographies are dense and reflexive histo-geographies? What if we recognised that what biennales truly want of us is to look at them, not in a flash, but slowly? And to see them as emergent traditions—or, at least, to contemplate that possibility as a horizon.

Notes

¹ The workshop took place on 27 October 2007, convened by Helen Grace, Chinese University. The other speakers were Tobias Berger, Director Para/Site Art Space, Doug Hall (former director of the Queensland Art Gallery, 1987–2007), and Su Yachua, Taipei Artist Village. It was moderated by Desmond Hui, Hong Kong University. This essay was first published by the Asia Art Archive, January 2008 as part of their DIAALOGUE series; see www.aaa.org.hk

² See Alan Cruickshank's interview of Fumio Nanjo in *Broadsheet* Vol 35 No 3, 2006

³ W.J.T Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want?: The Lives and Loves of Images*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2005

⁴ Peter Schjeldahl, 'All Together Now: The Istanbul Biennial', *The New Yorker*, 8 October 2007

⁵ During the workshop, Tobias Berger made the point of questioning the myth of the 'star curator'

⁶ Thanks to Jaspar Lau for bringing to my attention Jerry Saltz's review of Robert Storr's 2007 *Venice Biennale*: 'Think with the Senses—Feel with the Mind. Art in the Present Tense'. Saltz's assessment of the effort is that 'What's missing ... are the "brilliant errors"'. See: <http://www.artnet.de/magazine/usa/features/saltz07-17-07.asp>

⁷ Natasha Bullock and Rueben Keehan (eds), *Zones of Contact, 2006 Biennale of Sydney: A Critical Reader*, Sydney: Artspace, 2006

⁸ Lee Weng Choy, 'The Appreciation of Criticism', *Eyeline* 61, 2006

⁹ Okwui Enwezor, *documenta 11 Platform 5* (catalogue), Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2002

¹⁰ The phrase is a title of one of his well-known books; see Harold Rosenberg, *The Tradition of the New*, New York: Horizon Press, 1959

¹¹ See Arthur C. Danto, *After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997, and *The Wake of Art: Criticism, Philosophy, and the Ends of Taste*, Amsterdam: G&B Arts International, 1998

¹² Terry Smith, 'Biennales in the Conditions of Contemporaneity,' *Art & Australia* Vol 42 No 3, 2005