

Yes! We Have No Biennials!

Philadelphia already shambles behind New York City, tripping over itself, breathing heavily. A Philadelphia biennial would only expose our flaccidity to a larger audience. Yet recently, there has been some whimpering about having one, both on the artblog and its heinous, feral offspring, the artblahg.

In “Home is Where the Art Is”, an article for the *Philadelphia Weekly* on March 10th, Roberta Fallon advocates a Philadelphia Biennial, in the vein of the Whitney’s. She wants to showcase regional talent in a big, institutionally-supported way. The arsenal—ICA, PAFA, the PMA—though dusty, can draw in large crowds, serious revenue, and ultimately garner interest in collecting. The exhibition would be an investment and a commitment to cultural awareness for the Philadelphia area. Her argument hinges on the supposedly lucrative culture market that exists here: the huge flocks that graze the Flower Show, the tents pitched the night before *Wicked*’s opening.

The artblahg, that unnamed individual (or individuals) who fires willy-nilly at everything in range, takes charge on Ms. Fallon in an open letter published on March 11th. Fallon’s proposed biennial is contested and torn apart, labeled as ‘clueless’, and replaced by an alternative anti-establishment model. This version of a biennial would be, from my interpretation, a cross between InLiquid’s Art for the Cash Poor show and a big group high five.

To be clear, the artblahg actually did not argue with Fallon. As is its wont, the blog (I’m sorry, the blahg) threw its hands in the air and declared a fight. Fallon’s and the artblahg’s ideas of a biennial are congruent modulo... everything. The two aren’t in the same ring, or even the same stratosphere. While I sympathize with the thoroughly DIY artblahg model, it is in no way an alternative to Fallon’s big idea.

As such, I am not interested in dissecting either side’s proposed biennial and comparing the problems and benefits with each. What I am interested in is the given presumption that the biennial model is worthwhile, particularly in Philadelphia. The biennial is simply a terrible way of exhibiting art. The intentions are good, perhaps even noble: the biennial is a much more flexible entity than its museum counterpart. It is (or it aspires to be) a post-institution: periodic, event-based, and temporary. Yet it doing so, it often eschews historicity, careful research, and contextualization. It presents a gaggle of artists, haphazardly linked through a curatorial concept or, more often than not, basic contemporaneity. In its effort to be everything that the museum is not (adaptable, current, liberal), the biennial also loses the content and the weight that are inherent with establishment exhibitions.

The biennial’s self-image is schizophrenic and unsatisfying. It attempts to walk a tightrope between independence and foundation. It strives for the uninhibited forward thinking of a gallery while it uses the marketing strategies of massive institutions (and the crowd-herding techniques of a seasoned ranchman). It occurs in specific locations, but offers no local engagement. Certainly, the Whitney, Manifesta, even our dearly beloved Philagrafika (which, I know, is not a biennial) happen all over the world. But they happen in white cubes all over the world. A Philadelphia biennial could exhibit regional artists or international ones, but that

selection is entirely immaterial if it’s just at the PMA. And while of course it could happen at a location with personality and weave itself into the fabric of the community, this would significantly reduce the size of the audience.

The biennial inherently forces these unpleasant choices because of its conflicted allegiances. It is simultaneously overly concerned with innovation and securing sponsorship. This is the biennial at its most seedy, as it attempts to merge widespread palatability with site-specific boldness. With a clear nod to its political and nationalistic roots, the biennial is an agent in a worldwide cultural competition. Or, as sociologist Pascal Gielen writes, ‘[the profusion of biennials] cannot be explained without the enthusiasm with which politicians, managers and other sponsors have embraced the event...it fits easily in a neoliberal city marketing strategy of so-called creative cities.’ This is not to naively suggest that art exhibitions should (or can) be free of profiteering. I mention it simply to highlight the unique quandary in which the contemporary biennial finds itself. It’s mobile but established. It’s local but disconnected. It must be opportunistic without being exploitative, political without being self-aggrandizing. The exhibition model holds tight to the Modernist notion that a good idea is a new idea. But how can a good idea realistically recur ever other year?

Of course, biennials will always hold an esteemed position in the art world. Some are actually good exhibitions, like the Poly/Graphic Triennial in San Juan and some, like the Whitney, just aren’t going anywhere. But the template as a whole is outdated, problematic, and supremely uninspiring. A recurring regional arts show in Philadelphia, establishment-endorsed or otherwise, is boring and indistinguishable from the hundreds of other exhibitions like it. It is not, as Roberta Fallon claims, an investment. It’s a gimmick. Better to channel the weight of Philadelphia’s institutions and (miserly) cultural funders to independent curators, gallerists, and critics with great ideas, or promote lasting regional engagement with contemporary artists. Philadelphia can highlight its makers, thinkers, and earnest independence to a mass audience without simply copying the withered biennial model.

¹ Except as the inevitable week-long event at Little Berlin for the self-loathing unselected artists, titled ‘we don’t need no institution’.

² Pascal Gielen, “The Biennale: A Post-Institution for Immaterial Labour”, Open 16

-Manya Scheps

