The great collective movements of our day, those capable of galvanizing energetic masses intent on supporting and defending a common cause, are rarely found in the political arena. With a dwindling anti-war movement as Obama escalates the second longest war in American history, a marginalized struggle for single-payer healthcare in the face of a corporatocracy that has just passed healthcare “reform,” and a placated centrist “progressivism” content on having “voted for change,” we need to look elsewhere for the causes capable of mobilizing the American people. And there is indeed at least one place where collective mobilization is stronger than ever, where passionate investment goes hand in hand with common causes, where no obstacles can keep the people at bay. This place, as the recent Olympic games in Vancouver helped remind us, is none other than the sports complex.

Arbitrary Fervor for the Service Industry

In no other place, in America today, is mass mobilization as feverish and dedicated as when it comes to supporting sports teams. What other public events will have people drop everything to cathartically participate in (or at least go to) in the well-rehearsed rituals of communal rivalry? And yet, what other events, we must ask, are more distant from political mobilization in the name of communal transformation? Indeed, the sporting events are resolutely apolitical. Decisions concerning the structure and norms of communities do not matter; all that’s important is the team that you happen to be on or the team that you happen to support. And this is, ultimately, as arbitrary as it is normatively ungrounded. Playing for or supporting a particular team is usually simply the result of a contingent chain of events such as where you were born, what teams your family or friends supported, etc. However, the arbitrary nature of the root cause of this massive public outpouring doesn’t diminish in the least the fervor of its defense. Tunnel vision is essential to the American sports complex. The guiding imperative is ‘play ball!’ (or ‘watch other people play ball!’), not ‘ask questions about the games you are cajoled into playing!’

The biennial inherently forces these unpleasant choices because of its conflicted allegiances. It is simultaneously overly concerned with innovation and secure 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, ‘[t]he 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 profitmaking. 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 (mis)deploy cultural funds 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