The Humbling of the Biennale in the Age of Global Austerity

by Ben Davis
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Foreground: David Zink Yi's "Untitled (Architeuthis)," 2011; Background: Monica Bonvicini's "Add Elegance to Your Poverty," 2002
(Photo by Ben Davis)

"The biennale is merely one arrow in any would-be global city's quiver — or, as often, in one that aspires to that status — drawing in a particular class of tourist (some of them extremely wealthy) and hopefully entertaining those residents who have the power to leave." That's British critic Julian Stallabrass writing a critique of the proliferation of international art biennials in 2004, charging that the trend is merely a symptom of the triumph of capital in the age of globalization. In Stallabrass's (pre-crisis) view, the vogue for launching spectacular global art festivals was little more that "a cultural elaboration of new economic and political powers."

Well, the bloated rhetoric of biennials certainly deserved to be brought down to earth. But in truth, this critique was already dated even as it was being penned. The rage for new biennials has lately been eclipsed by the rage for new art fairs, which are of course even more naked in their appeal to wealthy jetsetters. Meanwhile, it seems an open question whether such grandiose, curator-focused affairs can stand on their

own as symbols of combined economic and cultural capital in the age of art-funding austerity. At least, that's the lesson I took away after visiting three biennials that opened within months of one another this past year in the economically ailing First World — one in Europe, one in Japan, and one in the United States.

The best of the bunch was undoubtedly the newest, Dublin Contemporary, which brought 114 artists to venues throughout Dublin from September 6 to October 31. The idea to launch an international biennial in Dublin had been kicking around for a decade as a symbol of the former colony claiming a place at the center of the international stage. Unfortunately, Dublin Contemporary became a reality at exactly the wrong time, just as the vampire squid of international capital came looking for a hit of Celtic Tiger blood. Amid ballooning unemployment and savage government cuts, the fledgling biennial struggled to define itself. Its budget was slashed. The original Irish curatorial team was let go in January, and the whole thing finally came together in just a few incredibly abbreviated months under the new leadership of artist Jota Castro and critic Christian Viveros-Faune.

This duo succeeded curatorially by hitting a note of knowing scrappiness that reflected the ragged moment without being too didactic about it. The curators mined a vein of humble neo-Arte Povera (Wilfredo Prieto's barbed wire clouds; Albero Borea's rainbow arch made out of multicolored plastic bags) and political unease (Omer Fast's unsettling video about U.S. drone pilots; Richard Mosse's hallucinatory photos of conflict in the Congo), as well as throwing some fine, wacky moments into the mix (a limp cast of a giant squid from David Zink Yi; a large fur-covered lamprey by Nedro Solakov).

So: a tentative success from a curatorial point of view. But meanwhile, the question is whether an event so pleasantly quirky can deliver on the palpable pressure it was under to deliver as a big-tent civic centerpiece. Final figures touted that it had exceeded its hopes of 2,500 foreigner visitors, luring an estimated 3,200. Which sounds OK, maybe, until you dig into the original press materials and find that the biennial projected that Dublin Contemporary would attract 62,500 foreigners. Two weeks after it closed, organizers sent out an announcement saying that they were

having a discount furniture and AV equipment sale, liquidating all the biennial's gear at low, low prices. Now there's a way to make a biennial relevant to the public!

Half a world away, the Yokohama Triennale was dealing with its own funding challenges. Everyone talks these days of Europe and the United States suffering a "lost decade." The Yokohama Triennial was founded in 2001 at the end of the original "lost decade" in Japan, the period of savage stagnation following its collapsed bubble in 1991 when the Rising Sun sank into a smog of bad debt and real estate loans gone sour. The Triennale was born as a self-conscious, government-directed initiative to reposition Japan as a beacon of international culture on the model of the Venice Biennale. (As Philip Tinari pointed out in his review of the show, the fact that its "official Japanese name is written entirely in katakana — normally reserved for foreign terms — hints at this awkward ambition.")

More recently, amid a global crisis that has hit Japan hard, the Triennale's backers in the government-funded Japan Foundation have had their budget cut. So in 2011, for the first time, the event soldiered on as a municipal affair hosted by the city of Yokohama instead. Symbolically, the festival shrank from seven venues to a more focused two, including the doughty Yokohama Museum of Art. Then, another disaster struck: the official Japanese press launch for the triennale was on the same day of the devastating Great East Japan Earthquake of March 11 that killed tens of thousands of Japanese and set off a sustained crisis at the Fukushima Dai-ichi nuclear reactor. (As the whole country pitched in to save power, the museum turned off its escalators and bathroom hand dryers to pitch in.)

This is a rather dramatic backdrop to be set against, and was mainly striking how little the 2011 Yokohama Triennale, which ran from August 6 to November 6, felt like it was about the awful urgency of the present. While there were plenty of high points, from a restaging of a James Lee Byars performance to a collection of Nobiyushi Araki's devastating recent photos, overall the collection of 60 artists felt strangely slack, an exercise in putting on a brave face, hitting all the notes necessary to keep up appearances. Curator Akiko Miki's theme "Our Magic Hour" — having something to do with art's ability to heal through the imagination — came across as an exercise in bare-bones biennalism, offering a collection of highlights by global art stars (Damien Hirst's butterfly-wing-bedecked cathedral windows; Ugo Rondinone's rainbow signs and groovy, totemic heads) and local favorites (Tadanori Yokoo's wild, "Yellow Submarine"-esque adult cartoon; Tetsuya Ishida's dark neo-surrealist painting),

mixed with a few reliable classics from the museum's permanent collection (Magritte, Delvaux, an ukiyo-e print).

For me, the most symbolic curatorial moment was the inclusion of Christian Marclay's famous "The Clock," a world-stomping work of art that had already won the Silver Lion at the Venice Biennale earlier in this year. Yet the venue hosting "The Clock" for the Triennale, the BANKart Studio, wasn't actually open 24 hours in order to accommodate it, undercutting the very essence of the piece. It was as if the idea of hosting a showy international spectacle was just a gesture, out of phase with real institutional capacities or curatorial vision on the ground.

Which brings me to Prospect 2 New Orleans, the second edition of the Dan Cameron-conceived event in the Crescent City, held from October 22 to January 29. Prospect is not actually a city-sponsored endeavor — the fact that it received no local support was something that was emphasized by organizers many times during the preview, with barely concealed frustration. Yet Cameron was very clear when the project launched three years ago that its raison d'être was to help with the redevelopment of New Orleans following Katrina — the city remains almost 30 percent smaller than it was a decade ago, with levels of street violence at literally medieval levels, as a recent New Yorker article noted in passing — by attracting the kind of flush art tourists who flock to Venice.

The sprawling, big-spirited first edition was a critical success, but also coincided closely with the economic meltdown of 2008. It cost $5 million to put on, and ended over budget and $1 million in debt — not a great way to make a case for the art festival as engine of economic development. Reeling, Prospect 2 was delayed by a year, and returned this fall with half its original budget and a measly 28 artists, down from 80 — hardly a biennale, really, and more of a group show scattered over an eclectic and diffuse array of venues including the Contemporary Art Center, the New Orleans Healing Center, and Delgado Community College. Even an idea as modest as incorporating some photos by Cindy Sherman had to be nixed — the art star's work was too expensive to insure.

Even with an exhibition this drastically curtailed, there were highlights. Swedish artist Jonas Dahlberg's video of an empty room being slowly engulfed in darkness offered a quietly haunting metaphor for a world in decline, while local favorite Dan Tague impressed with his badass inventiveness, stenciling the crisp seal for a "U.S.

Department of Civil Obedience" directly onto the wall at the Contemporary Art Center. But as a whole, I've actually never been to a major art show that felt so overburdened, so scattered, so purely held together by scotch tape and good will. Curatorial choices that might have seemed bold, like including the homemade costumes of local Mardi Gras legend Ashton Ramsey, were undone by the lack of a central focus — Ramsey's suits were annexed to a solo show on the top floor of the Ogden Museum, unconnected from the rest of the biennial and essentially ghettoized. Prospect 2, overall, felt less than the sum of its parts.

"Whatever you do, whatever you write, you must say that this biennale has to continue," one of Prospect 2's disgruntled artists told me, after an epic bout of complaining about the event's failings. And indeed, New Orleans, a city of palpable charm, deserves something world class, and there may be something to Cameron's idea that its magical aura could make it an American Venice. Cameron has stepped aside as curator of the next Prospect, in part, he says, to help draw a line between the event's future incarnations and its past failures. The next edition is in the capable hands of LACMA curator Franklin Sirmans. We'll see if he can overcome the headwinds.

Stallabrass posited that the biennial boom was "a cultural elaboration of new economic and political powers." But instead of representing globalization's triumph, the fate of the contemporary art biennial probably more accurately reflects its contradictions. The world's most important art festival, the Venice Biennale, has been dealing with a shrinking budget for years now in a stagnant Italy, leading it to moneymaking schemes like selling off rights to be official collateral exhibitions for €20,000 a pop, contributing considerably to the unpleasant circus atmosphere around it. Meanwhile, the world's most consistently well-funded — and,lately, intellectually adventurous — biennale is certainly in Gwangju, in the rising economic power of South Korea. (In a poignant reversal of traditional roles, a blog post on the Prospect Web site looks to the Asian event with envy: "the biggest challenge facing Prospect New Orleans is to develop a sustainable infrastructure that has the level of government and corporate support that the Gwangju Biennale was fortunate to have had almost from its inception.")

Biennials have an undoubted status as the place where contemporary art has taken on its most intense sense of intellectual gravity, positioning itself as the centerpiece of a cosmopolitan world culture. It seems possible, however, that the kind of

triumphalism that Stallabrass was projecting onto biennial culture was always just wishful thinking — whatever their merits promoting cities as part of the global "cultural economy," biennials, as far as I can tell, are not generally self-sustaining economic engines. They are instead mainly dependent on the kinds of government funding sources that are shrinking today, or the kind of private largesse for which there is ever-increasing competition. Their world-encompassing curatorial visions and sense of self-importance have been subsidized by such sources, and therefore, in the future, this sense of importance will likely have to be rethought, or reined in, or traded down for something more modest.

Interventions is a weekly column by ARTINFO deputy editor Ben Davis. He can be reached at bdavis @ artinfo.com