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What will it take for the Biennial to stay relevant?



Chiharu Shiota, The Key in the Hand, 2015, red wool, old boats, old keys, Photography by Gabriel Buys, image courtesy of Gabri

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Yokohoma Triennale, Bangkok Biennial, Asia Society Triennial are amongst regional biennials hedging their bets and going ahead in the second half of the year, reinventing the typical format and increasing digital engagement to stay relevant. Will it be enough?

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During the first half of this year, as the pandemic spread across continents, the 2021 art world calendar inevitably became packed with at least 20 major biennials

(<https://news.artnet.com/exhibitions/biennials-2021-car-crash-1874445>), most of which were originally slated for 2020. Meanwhile, others such as the Biennale de Lyon in France and the Venice Biennale in Italy have been pushed to 2022, coinciding with documenta 15, another major art exhibition on the calendar, which takes place every five years in Kassel, Germany.



(<https://www.cobosocial.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Chiharu-Shiota's-The-Key-in-the-Hand-at-the-Japanese-pavilion.-Photograph-Gabriel-BouysAFPGetty-Images.jpeg>)

Chiharu Shiota, *The Key in the Hand*, 2015, red wool, old boats, old keys, Japanese pavilion, at the 56th Venice Biennale. Photography by Gabriel Bouys. Image courtesy of Gabriel Bouys/AFP/Getty Images.

Meanwhile, other regional biennials are hedging their bets and making plans to go ahead during the second half of this year such as the Bangkok Art Biennale, its antithesis Bangkok Biennial, Yokohama Triennale, Berlin Biennale and Asia Society Triennial.

Given the restrictions on travel and the need for social distancing, avoiding the typical crowds and spectacle has become a mandatory requirement. As such, a few of the abovementioned exhibitions are throwing up some interesting possibilities on the future of the biennial format.

The Bangkok Biennial, known for its non-traditional open registration of pavilions, without a central curator or curatorial team, relied on a highly flexible scheduling for its 2018 debut edition with various pavilions running for different durations, even exhibiting in multiple locations beyond Bangkok and Thailand. For the upcoming exhibition, they are choosing to build on [this approach](https://www.facebook.com/BangkokBiennial/posts/4196771173728983) by splitting BB2020 into three different periods spanning an entire year from October 2020 while “taking a sequential/episodic/modular approach to the biennial format over the course of a year.” Organisers recently issued an open call.



(<https://www.cobosocial.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Nasim-Nasr-33-Beads-Unworried-2-video-still-2018.-HD-single-channel-video-no-sound.-Duration-2-minutes-35-seconds-loop.-Courtesy-of-the-artist.-for-Asia-Society-Triennial.jpg>)

Nasim Nasr, 33 Beads (Unworried) #2 (video still), 2018. HD single-channel video, no sound, 2 minutes, 35 seconds, loop. Image courtesy of the artist for Asia Society Triennial.

In New York City, Asia Society Triennial, showcasing Asian contemporary art from over 40 artists in October, will present its exhibition and programmes over eight months and in two installments. Speaking with CoBo Social, Boon Hui Tan, Vice

President for Global Arts and Cultural Programs and Director of Asia Society Museum, said, “The hope is that this ‘slow food’ approach will enable a more contemplative encounter with the art rather than oversaturated spectacles of most other biennials/triennials.”

Tan added, “Now that we are closed for the summer, we are taking the opportunity to roll out online programming related to the Triennial, allowing the audience to take a peek into the creation of the works, a behind the scenes look with as many of the artists as possible.”



(<https://www.cobosocial.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Raqs-Media-Collective-©-Photo-KATO-Hajime.-Courtesy-Organizing-Committee-for-Yokohama-Triennale-Office.png>)

Raqs Media Collective co-founders Jeebesh Bagchi, Monica Narula and Shuddhabrata Sengupta. Photography by Kato Hajime. Image courtesy of Organizing Committee for Yokohama Triennale Office.

Closer to home, Yokohama Triennale which opened in July with the theme “Afterglow” and works by 67 artists and groups, is also taking on a digital approach. Speaking with CoBo Social, Monica Narula, co-founder of New Delhi based Raqs Media Collective, which has been appointed as artistic director for the Triennale, said, “Since we recognize that the exhibition now has to offer modes of engagement that are not based on physical presence, the Triennale website has an active and regularly updated section called Episōdo X, where artists present short videos that annotate or extend their work.”

"There are plans to run online screening programmes for some of the screen-based and recordable performative works in the exhibition," She added.

Nonetheless, the future sustainability of this centuries old European invention will take more than rejigging its format, increased digital engagement or fundraising efforts. While all three aspects are crucial to the running of the biennial in the 21st century, taking on greater exigency due to the pandemic, the real crux of the issue is the art. A biennale that is likely to stay relevant right now and in the years ahead is a platform that showcases art not merely representative of our times but daring to critique it wholly and truly.

In 1974, the Venice Biennale replaced its traditional art exhibition with various events and programs protesting the Chilean dictator who came into power in 1973, after a coup d'état supported by US. The critically derided protest Biennale was organised mainly because thousands were being tortured and imprisoned under the dictatorial reign.

Over the years since, that edition stood out for being something marked and different. Prior to the launch of the 2015 edition of the Biennale which he curated, the late Okwui Enwezor said (<https://www.artforum.com/print/201505/okwui-enwezor-talks-with-michelle-kuo-about-the-upcoming-56th-venice-biennale-51556>), "I see 1974 as an antidote to this negative residue: one of the only instances of Venice confronting a contemporaneous catastrophe, and mounting a radical critique, at that moment." He added, "I mean, can you imagine doing that today?"

Now, in 2020, as we live through a global catastrophe unfolding on a daily basis, his words resonate, not just for the Venice Biennale, but biennials, and mega exhibitions, all over the world. The biennial we will remember during this epoch of volatility and white noise is the one that takes us to task, as individuals and a civilization undergoing transformation at a warp speed.

The idea of mounting a biennial, as a radical critique of what we are currently experiencing is a worthwhile notion to contemplate, especially given the arbitrary clutter the international biennial calendar has become in the face of a multitude of postponements.

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