

EXHIBITIONS & COLLECTIONS: MUSEUMS AND BIENNIALS

Christina Storey, PhD. looks at the nature of biennial exhibitions and the historical importance of exhibitions and permanent collections to the development of the museum as a social institution.

She also discusses some of the questions raised by this year's Bermuda Biennial and asks what it means to be a Bermudian artist working in the early 21st century.

EXHIBITIONS & COLLECTIONS

Exhibitions and collections are the cornerstone of all museums, both historically and contemporarily. A drive to create personal collections for the purpose of private exhibiting was a marked feature of European elite culture during the 16th and 17th centuries. These private, often dynastic, family-based collections would become the cores of many now famous museums during the late 17th, 18th and 19th centuries as the number of public institutions grew up alongside newer ideas about democratic and participatory civic life. This remains the case through to today: the Bermuda National Gallery owes its foundation (from a technical perspective) to the donation of Hereward Watlington's collection, put together over a lifetime and one which followed the centuries old tradition of acquiring pleasing examples of various schools, periods and styles.

For the smaller museum, or the more specialist, there may be greater possibilities 'to be a place for self-affirmation, to contribute importantly to the health of human communities, to be a place where the melting pot melts.'¹ Such museum or galleries may function in a role of 'service' as much as 'mastery'.² These potentials reside in the non-iconic museum's ability to use more fully two things: its physical presence in a community as a space in which to create and conduct personal interaction and its capacity as a vehicle for exhibiting work sourced from outside the permanent collection.

This is especially true for the BNG. This year's Biennial, following as it does on the heels of the single Rembrandt exhibit, confirms the vital role that the BNG plays in giving artists access to a public and that public's access to new artworks. "Since the Salons of nineteenth-century Paris," writes Toni Burlap, "the exhibition has functioned as an indication that the art world still works. Within each changing cultural paradigm, the exhibition continues to perform a ritual in which the real and the imaginary join forces to find a concrete, and yet open, final result, which could give new meaning to humanity. The search for meaning is one of the driving forces behind curatorial thinking: a quest for new ways of seeing."³

It is the nature of an exhibition to be temporal — to have an opening and a closing. They represent snapshots in time, providing a window onto what is of interest to both curators (seen in the title of shows), jurors (as seen in selection choices) and to the public (as expressed in popularity). As such they sometimes provide more information about the society that is producing and consuming them than they necessarily tell us something meaningful about their contents. There is a great freedom in creating exhibitions which function, in a metacontext, to tell us something about a whole community at a given moment in time.

In this way, exhibitions differ from permanent collections - works that have been designated as owned. Objects that are to be owned connote a much longer-term time horizon and the relative values assessed when choosing works to join a permanent collection are different from those that govern the choice of exhibition content. Here, tradition and security of long-term value are more likely to be important to an institution, regardless of its purchasing power.

THE 2008 BACARDI LIMITED BIENNIAL EXHIBITION

While any given museum may have a smaller or larger permanent collection, the museum's primary technical function is to exhibit — to make visible and accessible — works of art. The exact source of art gives

each exhibition its special flavour. In the case of this year's Biennial, it is the nature of a juried and 'contemporary' show — in the small c, temporal sense — to produce both eclecticism and deep linkage. By virtue of having our two distinguished jurors, the works selected all share some quality that appealed to them. The commonality of response of the jurors, separately and together, may be rooted in an aesthetic reaction too deep or alchemical to be easily rendered articulate. Likewise, the very eclecticism of the subjects and media submitted by all the artists in the first place makes the aspects that the selected pieces share difficult, perhaps, to see. Yet, be assured, by the very fact of their selection there is some common ground of excellence, power and novelty shared by the works in this year's Biennial.

This, the BNG's 8th Biennial, joins the international community of galleries and museums that hold such exhibitions. The word Biennale (Italian for 'every other year') is commonly used within the art world to describe an international manifestation of contemporary art. The first such exhibition was, of course, the now venerable Venice Biennale held in 1895. This was followed by the Whitney (USA) in 1932, the Sao Paulo Art Biennial in 1951, and the Biennale de Paris in 1959. During the 1980s and 1990s the number of Biennials held across the world started to flourish — the BNG's inaugural exhibition in 1994 and Liverpool's first Biennial in 1998 are good examples. The concept of a repeating exhibition designed specifically to show current works by living artists remains a vibrant forum in which the public and artists can meet through the medium of artwork.

In some ways, a Biennial is the one type of exhibition that retains the closest link to the 18th century spirit of exposing the public to living artists who are making art that is relevant to the very here and now. Over a century has passed since the Venice Biennale, and fourteen since the BNG's first, and yet the concept retains a vibrancy as a moving frame for assessing the present before it becomes, all too quickly, the past. Once in the past, history may render the artist's fate, as Duchamp believed, to be "like that of gamblers in Monte Carlo and in the blind lottery some are picked out while others are ruined." ⁴

The fact that the BNG Biennial invites contemporary pieces from artists, in the sense that the works submitted are to have been executed in the previous two years, nonetheless raises some interesting questions about the use of the term contemporary. It is impossible to escape echoes of the larger periodising term, Contemporary, even when using the word's more restricted sense of recent time.

"Contemporary Art" today (as opposed to a century, or even 15 years ago) is a term that attempts to locate artwork in a framework that both maintains the continued relevance of Modernism while also acknowledging that we live now in a post-modern era in which the 'end of modernism' (now with a small m) means also the end of the 'utopian idea of progress'.⁵ Self-identified Contemporary art sets itself in contrast to traditional art, and codes a number of current aesthetic values. To be Contemporary is to hold within a tension between the Modernist ethic of making the viewer work hard to apprehend the artwork (e.g. conceptual, installation) and the post-modern perspective that since the surface is all that there is, there is value in creating sensual, easy feel-good art (e.g. pictorial, narrative).

In asking living artists to submit recent work, the BNG has gathered together a community and asked: What is relevant to you today? How are you, the artist, interpreting and reacting to the space between Modernist certainties and post-modernist relativities? What is beautiful? What matters? How are you, the viewer, reacting to the art you see here before you? How are you feeling? Why did you come and what will you go away with? Do you want beauty or hard-won knowledge, or both?

It is in provoking such questions that the Bacardi Limited 2008 Biennial stakes a legitimate claim to participate in the global context of Contemporary art and in fulfilling its role as an exhibition venue, the BNG is indeed proving that the art world here in Bermuda still 'works'.

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1. Weil, Stephen. *Making Museums Matter* (Washington: Smithsonian Institute Press, 2002), 208.

2. Weil, Stephen. *Making Museums Matter* (Washington: Smithsonian Institute Press, 2002), 197.

3. Burlap, Toni. *Day for Night: Whitney Biennial 2006* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 2006), 29.

4. Marcel Duchamp quoted in Judovitz, Dalia, *Unpacking Duchamp: Art in Transit* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 182.

5. Burlap, Toni. *Day for Night: Whitney Biennial 2006* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 2006), 29.