

'READING' CONTEMPORARY ART: THE SINGAPORE BIENNALE

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My interest in the inaugural Singapore Biennale, which opened to the public on 4 September 2006 and ended on 12 November 2006, has been mainly in its documentation – what people have been saying and writing about it, and whether this information is likely to shape the way we view contemporary art in Singapore. I have found a fairly substantial amount of information on the event, but less about its content and its overall impact. I expect this will emerge over time, from various stakeholders in the local arts, and possibly from some new voices among student artists.

However, I am certain it will remain difficult to get information from the most elusive group of all - the “general public”, who sought for and discovered these artworks, and maybe also sought to understand them.

As a member of the general public, I did try to educate myself on the methods and motivations of the contemporary art that appears in biennales. I found a great amount of interesting, contradictory and sometimes, frustrating information. Do we need to understand art in order to appreciate it? One message that I have been pleased to hear being reinforced by artists and audiences is this: that art creation and appreciation both begin with research.



Eugenio Ampudia. *En Juego (In Play)*, 2006.

Organised by Singapore Biennale. Exhibited at the National Library.
Robert Hughes's story of modern art *The Shock of the New* gets rough treatment in the 2002 World Cup

Much has been written about the Singapore Biennale in the press and on the Internet, which I will try not to repeat here. News of a Singapore Biennale first appeared in the press around the time that SENI was being planned. Held in October 2004, SENI was a two-month-long art exhibition and symposium, and was described as a precursor to – or practice run for – the Biennale of 2006.

It was hoped that the Biennale, as an international event, would bring the “world” to Singapore as well as showcase Singapore artists to their global counterparts. The concern of local arts advocates was not whether Singapore could or should host a

Biennale of this scale, but what it would really do for the arts scene here. Would it bring the visual arts to the attention of those outside the artist and art critic enclaves, and encourage dialogue, exploration and discovery?

Judging from what has been reported in the local press, the inaugural Singapore Biennale has indeed captured attention and encouraged the asking of some questions, most notably, “Is that art?” This question goes in tandem with the ultimate unanswerable question, “What is art?”

The implied consensus seems to be, if it is part of a Biennale – that is, an artist must have made a case for it to be included and a judging panel or person must have agreed – then it is art. We like to have the art pointed out to us, though we may well disagree on who is qualified to do this. Or, perhaps it is a general consensus, and is based on what we have heard or read about in other countries. Though it will not resolve the debate, a more answerable question might be: “How do we feel about this being called art?”

To complicate the matter, the sites chosen for the Biennale seemed to have drawn almost as much attention as the artworks. The exhibition used some 16 venues, including City Hall, the Singapore Art Museum, the Church of St. Peter & St. Paul, St Joseph's Church, the National Library, Sculpture Square, Sri Krishnan Temple, Kwan Im Thong Hood Cho Temple, Sultan Mosque and the Tanglin Camp.

If you had never entered these places, it would have been easy to get distracted and to feel nostalgic about them, or to start telling unrelated anecdotes to your neighbours. It would also have been easy to miss the artworks in unfamiliar surroundings, and if you had gone when there was a crowd, it would have been nearly impossible to catch the sound art. That said, the “treasure hunt” process of finding art in Singapore was an interesting idea in itself, as was watching the regular patrons of these places coming over to see what the groups of young people and tourists had come to look at.

As for engaging the community, the Biennale held a number of peripheral events called the “Encounters” Series, which brought artists, curators and the public together. As not much has been reported in the press about these events, it is difficult to say how well they had bridged the gap between the artists and curators, and the rest of us.

I attended a couple of these events, and found the main benefit to be the demystifying of the whole Biennale concept. It was a good idea to hold such talks, and I hope they will continue in some form even after the Biennale has ended. Having such a regular feature may find a niche beyond the usual crowd who attends art talks – in short, it could create a new community.

As with any community, of course, the drive and the interest must be there to sustain it.

The jury is largely still out with regard to international impressions of the Biennale, although several writers have expressed surprise that Singapore had hosted a Biennale at all. This is probably due at least in part to the prevailing attitude that artistic expression is stifled in Singapore, a debate that I will not go into here. I can, however, make the observation that the liveliest scholarship, journalism and general interest tend to focus on the censorship of the arts – not in Singapore alone, but everywhere – and it is not unlikely that art scholars, critics and artists themselves would be a shade disappointed if nobody protested.

In international news, the Singapore Biennale has often been mentioned in conjunction with the other Asian biennales taking place around the same time, and this might have served to confuse the international art world more than it did to educate them. That said, the Biennale might yet have its good effect in getting artists from various countries to meet. The best way to understand a place is to get to know someone from that place, and this is perhaps one of the best reasons for holding international art exhibitions to begin with.

I will not go into great detail about the exhibits themselves. Chances are, you would have seen some of them or seen pictures on the news or the Internet. There are difficulties in recording such events for posterity, as installation works need to be experienced in person, and pictures do not convey much for multimedia or sound-art works. Also, it is often (though not always) in the nature of installations to be ephemeral, and the element of impermanence



Wilfredo Prieto (*White Library*), 2006.

Organised by Singapore Biennale. Exhibited at the National Library. This work features a collection of beautifully bound, neatly shelved – and completely blank – books.

is part of the point. Despite this, we librarians do try to keep track of as many materials in printed or digital form as are available, to add to our recorded knowledge of local art. The reason for this is simple: we keep it just in case any future researchers want to know, and experience tells us they will.

It is certainly best to see the actual works if possible, and though the Biennale is over, rest assured we have not seen the last of contemporary art exhibitions in Singapore. It is, after all, a Biennale, so it will presumably be back two years from now. In the meantime, the rest of us can prepare for the next encounter, and hopefully enrich our experience by exploring the wealth of information available on Singapore's first Biennale, and the multifarious world of contemporary art.

Websites

Singapore Biennale 2006

<http://www.singaporebiennale.org/>

More information is available on the Singapore Biennale official website.

Singapore Biennale – Information by Universes in Universe

<http://universes-in-universe.de/car/singapore/english.htm>

Universes in Universe – World of Art has created this webpage on the Singapore Biennale, complete with photographs and video clips.

Asian Art Archive

<http://www.aaa.org.hk/> (click on “Online Projects”).

News on international Biennales can be found at the Asian Art Archive website.

News Coverage

<http://www.nlb.gov.sg/> (Click on eResources>eDatabases>News)

If you would like to read more news coverage of the Biennale, check our Digital Library collection

Select Books on Contemporary Art

Making Contemporary Art: How Today's Artists Think and Work

by Linda Weintraub.

Publisher: London: Thames & Hudson, 2003

Call no.: RART 709.22 WEI

Today's artists have unprecedented freedom in the ways they can create and present their art. This book explores, in all its stages, the quests of these “free radicals” to express themselves through their work, in an era where anything and

everything can come into question, including the idea of radicalism itself. Each chapter draws from the works of contemporary artists with widely different goals and methods, producing works ranging from the deliberately innocuous to the pointedly disturbing.

Installation Art: A Critical History

by Claire Bishop

Publisher: London: Tate, 2005

Call no.: RART 709.04 BIS

The history and evolution of installation art is difficult to pin down, perhaps because there are several histories, or perhaps because the art form is itself so fluid and diverse as to defy description as either a medium or a movement. There seems to be, however, some common underlying elements of installation art, particularly in its multi-sensory, multi-media and participative nature.

Creative Code: With Over 600 Illustrations

by John Maeda

Publisher: London: Thames & Hudson, 2004

Call no.: RART 709.2 MAE

Digital designer and artist John Maeda is a pioneer in the bafflingly diverse world of digital art. Describing the tools available to the digital artist as an “instantaneous rush of tremendous resources”, Maeda provides illustrations of the possibilities computers provide when harnessed to the human imagination. Artworks that at first glance seem to be obscure or simply entertaining experiments, can be seen to have a much deeper resonance in our ways of thinking about art in the age of digital expression.