

Non-Western Biennials and Globalization

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Biennials are famous international art exhibitions that aim to bring Western and non-Western art and artists together, and they take place every two years. However, these exhibitions have been helpful in bringing artists from various countries together and encouraging artists to produce and be engaged with artwork. The biennials are also important in providing platforms for artists to present their artwork in front of a global audience. Moreover, it is considered an important way of merging the core and periphery. However, some criticize the biennials for focusing on the hierarchy and maintaining the differences between core and periphery, engendering exclusion and discrimination. Regardless, biennials have their benefits, as well as promotional art and artists from various parts of the world.

Art has no borders, and it is a famous line even among non-artists. They consider the arts to transcend boundaries and borders, but Chin-Tao Wu, in her article “Biennials without Borders?” questions the idea of the globalization of art. She studies the trends and globalization in the biennial Documenta exhibitions between 1968-2007 and concludes that the artists that are represented in these exhibitions are most of the time from Europe and other Western countries. Also, some of the ‘outsiders’ who attend the exhibitions reside in Europe or America. The statistics show that in 1972, 96 percent of the artists presented in the exhibition were North American Europeans. Even in 2002, a number of artists from the West constituted 60 percent of all participants. Moreover, the artists from the periphery have moved to the core countries, and they represent their culture. Most of the artists who have presented in non-western countries currently reside in Europe or America. Therefore, the idea that the biennials are integrating the non-represented cultures and artists is not true. The artists who join the biennials presenting their countries of origin live in the core. For instance, the study of the biennials up to 1982 shows that a hundred percent of the participants representing non-western countries were residing in Europe or America. Consequently, the biennials have not contributed to encouraging artists from the non-western world. Rather, they help the privileged few who have flowed to the center from the periphery. Regardless, the percentage of artists attending these exhibitions from the country of residence, core, dropped to 61 percent in 2007. Moreover, the flow of artists from the periphery to the core is mostly one way, which provides a sense that the artists move from the periphery to the core and not the other way around. Such a trend of a one-way flow of artists shows the lack of globalization. As in globalization, there must be a two-way flow of artists (Wu). The argument proves that there are certain borders in the art as well, and the art’s hierarchy persists in the so-called globalized world.

Moreover, the biennials focus on hierarchy, validating and authenticating European or Western art over art from other parts of the world. The biennials, such as Magicians of the Earth, raised many questions on hierarchy. It also raised questions about the authenticity of modern arts of the “third world” because the exhibition draws a fine line between Western cultures and other cultures (Buchloh). It creates the division of the art and artistic approaches by creating the “other versus

Western culture.” The exhibition promoted the culture of magic and ritual and considered them authentic culture and art of non-Western culture, suggesting the modern art of the non-Western world was copied from the West and Western societies. The exhibition related ‘traditional’ spiritual, magical, and other anecdotal artwork to the non-west and refused to recognize the modernized artistic work of non-Western art, claiming a monopoly over modern art (Araeen; Buchloh). Therefore, other art exhibitions are criticized for similar ventures as they stereotype certain types of art to non-Western culture, creating a hierarchy where Western art is modern and creative, but non-Western art is traditional (Buchloh). It shows a willingness of the exhibitions to represent stereotypical artwork and ignore the artwork that does not fit their definitions of non-Western art. In addition, it is necessary that the two artists, western and non-western, must be different from one another to be considered authentic (Araeen). Therefore, the biennials are trying to incorporate certain artwork stereotypes and discriminate against non-Western art.

Despite the criticism, the Biennials are beneficial for the artists in many ways. For example, the biennials provide a platform for the artists and bring them together. They provide an environment in which people can discuss their issues and concerns. They helped people to realize the hierarchy, problems, and stereotypes that persist in the field of art. For instance, if there were no biennials, people might not have realized certain Western and non-Western biases regarding artwork from a particular country. It helps artist realize their similarities and differences. It contributes to raising awareness and becoming critical of the strongly held notions in the field. It has helped to understand and improve the biases, including people from various cultures (Konate). Therefore, the biennials must not be disregarded as evil as they are crucial in many other ways.

To conclude, biennials have helped artists in many ways by recognizing stereotypes, providing a platform for discussion, changing attitudes, and bringing openness to the discussion. However, the exhibitions have surfaced the problems of prejudice and discrimination. It has raised awareness about the perceived Western monopoly over art that contributes to the problematic behavior towards non-Western art and artists. It has surfaced the prejudices of the Western world towards non-Western artwork by providing a platform to voice the concerns of the non-Western culture.

Works Cited

Benjamin Buchloh, “The Whole Earth Show: an interview with Jean-Hubert Martin” in *Art in America* (May 1989)

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