A new Pittsburgh Biennial

A LITTLE IN YOUR FACE

The Pittsburgh Biennial, which you will have encountered before in smaller incarnations going back to 1994, is back with a vengeance. It now lasts six months, putting it on a par with The Carnegie International; it engages more artists (some of whom might be more usefully presented in that International); and it has no fewer than five discrete locations spread about the city.

Based at the Pittsburgh Center for the Arts, and devised by Murray Horne, now of the Cultural Trust, it has four “independent” curators who work at five local institutions that provide the exhibition spaces and, in varying degrees, much of the funding for this very large venture. Since two of the institutions are rich and the others are poor, the input varies. All of this is absolutely fabulous, in the current sense of the word, and if the Biennial achieves and sustains the momentum it needs, it will, biennially, be the envy of many cities in America.

The purpose of a regular exhibition of this kind is to take the temperature of the arts at any one time (that is what the Carnegie International seeks to do, too) and to provide the community with a balanced “showing.” It is promotional, too, although that is a double-edged sword. So balance is everything. It is not called the “Pittsburgh” Biennial for nothing, and calls for some nexus between the city, its region and the participants. A day trip to The Warhol, however momentous, is not enough for inclusion. But a semester or two at a university might clinch the deal. Some artists in the current show might, as Warhol once did, appear to have severed their connection with the city, but we must leave such things to the good will and judgment of the curators. For many artists, Pittsburgh has been the essential seedbed.

Previous Biennials have been normatively juried, with jurors selected by the curator of the Pittsburgh Center for the Arts. This new Biennial is invitational. How the curators made their decisions (and possibly argued cases among themselves) isn’t important, although they admit to a comfortable degree of collegiality. This brings up an important side issue: the Biennial isn’t the only game in town, since the Associated Artists of Pittsburgh also take the temperature.

HOME GROWN CREATIVE On view for the Biennial, through Sept. 18 at the Carnegie Museum of Art, are works by artists with local ties, including (clockwise from top left) Fabrizio Gerbino, Ed Eberle, Peggy Ahwesh and Brandon Boan.
of the arts, as they’ve done annually since 1970, with a juried show in an open competition.

Somehow, in either system — invitational or juried — the usual suspects make an appearance. Wild-card artists make an added bonus. The hope is that the insights special to the invitational will benefit the juried show. And, importantly, the juried show should feed the invitational show. There is no doubt that the nearly automatic presentation of the Associated Annual at the Carnegie (falling back to the Warhol) is likely to be over if the Biennial succeeds in its program.

I doubt this Biennial could have come about in the way it has without the presence of the four curators involved, described by some as Young Turks. Curators of contemporary art are increasingly ephemeral in any one place, tending to move on with some regularity. They are also relatively young (Madeleine Grynsicz, curator of the 1999/2000 International once remarked to me that no one over 35 could hope to curate an International ever again). Adam Welch, curator of the Center for the Arts and Pittsburgh Filmmakers (and a regular exhibitor of primarily sculptural work with the Associated Artists of Pittsburgh), has chosen 20 artists, shown at both the Center and at Filmmakers. Appropriately enough, part one of the Biennial opened in those spaces June 10. It closes Oct. 23.

For his part, Welch disclaims any overarching theme to his selection; it is simply a survey with the unmediated voices of the artists in play. Dan Byers, the associate curator of Contemporary Art at The Carnegie Museum, has selected nine artists, currently showing in the museum’s Heinz Galleries. This, the second part of the exhibition, opened June 16 and ends Sept. 18. Byers does advance a thematic element, albeit a loose one — that of “work” and how those nine artists consider work themselves or approach the idea of work through their various disciplines.

The Miller Gallery at Carnegie Mellon University and the Warhol Museum, respectively; they close Dec. 11 and 10, respectively. Astria Suparak, curator and director of the Miller Gallery, has advanced in the Biennial’s web site (biennial.pittsburgharts.org) a clear agenda: “The Miller Gallery... takes as its points of departure the city’s long labor history and the university’s record of presenting courses that explore the social role of art in public contexts. The exhibition will feature collectives and artists who work collaboratively in socially engaged ways. They work in publishing, installation, participatory art, art education, new media, tactical media, contextual practice, performance, and printmaking.”

In other words, this will be an exhibition within an exhibition. It also will be exactly the kind of show in which the university has come to specialize, constituted of artists whose commitment may well stem from the university rather than from the region. And, notably, the university sponsorship of socially engaged art has had the effect of drawing new artists and collectives to the city and its satellites, some of which will be represented. This is markedly different from the survey form of Biennial. Suparak’s selection also may give us some evidence of the phenomenon of artist flight from metropolitan centers, as much for financial reasons as academic or social. Two collectives have moved here, one to Braddock, one to Lawrenceville.

Warhol Director Eric Shiner similarly adopts a more active remit. Former Director Tom Sokolowski was much involved in the preliminary arrangements for the Biennial, and is nothing if not an activist. The web site’s introduction to The Warhol section could, in fact, have been written by him, culminating in the observation that the chosen works “will aim to challenge and provoke the status quo.” This is what Shiner has done for the fourth part of the
Biennial, selecting only women artists who have had association with the city. Twenty-one women have been enlisted, not all of whom are visual artists. In invoking the names of the dead Pittsburgh artists, Mary Cassatt, Willa Cather, Martha Graham and Gertrude Stein, there might be a risk of homage or celebration, which is not what The Warhol ought to do, being saddled with its own presiding deity. The other risk, which I think may be the greater, is scaling off women in their own amniotic sac. This is not to marginalize them, and certainly not to ghetto-ize them either; but I do rather question this choice of theme in the context of a regional Biennial. In fact this topic is really far too momentous to be slipped into the Biennial. It's rather like a fat man stealing a child's bicycle. Again, we have an exhibition in an exhibition, and if you rate the integrity of the survey Biennial concept highly, then you may have concerns here.

The parts of the Biennial currently up for inspection are exciting and different. The Associated Artists of Pittsburgh Annuals are almost the only yardstick we have for judging the Biennial. They also have been hung in the Heinz Galleries, usually by Carnegie Museum staff, more densely as a rule, showing as many as 100 artists, compared to the nine Byers has selected and currently displayed.

Fabrizio Gerbino is well known from his appearances in previous Annuals. Here his work can be seen on a scale and in depth that the Heinz Galleries can allow. He is a painter from Italy now living in Stowe Township, but also a sculptor, deriving two-dimensional inspiration from three-dimensional found and constructed materials. This show makes this relationship apparent and further points out the complex underpinnings of his art.

Ed Eberle has not shown much at the Associated Artists since the 1980s although his work is well known locally and nationally. The work Byers has introduced into this exhibition is a small group of highly reflective pieces—worth contrasting with what might be described as “major” works elsewhere in the museum—that discuss the formal issues that constitute much of his artist’s practice.

The other seven artists in the exhibition generally are not familiar to city gallery goers and indicate that the curator has taken his remit very broadly indeed. There is a thriving “zine” culture in the city. Frank Santoro has made a special illustrated magazine to be given away during the course of the show (the essential “work”), juxtaposed with the original drawings for it and other paintings of current concern to the artist. Some artists have moved on, away from the city, and it is good that Byers has been able to induce them back. It might well be easier to do this when the venue is the Heinz Galleries at The Carnegie. Overall, his selection is judicious, bringing back significant filmmakers such as Stephanie Beroes and Peggy Ahwesh, and keeping tabs on artists such as Zak Prekop, a 2001 CMU graduate, whose work had already entered the
museum's collection in 2009. His abstract work was new to me: bold and complex collaged paintings that repay close attention. Meanwhile, Adam Welch at the Center for the Arts and Pittsburgh Filmmakers has made a selection that concentrates primarily on the younger artists who in the main have been formed here or have come here via the local universities and whose practice seems to me to be fairly complementary. It struck me as I walked through the spaces that there was a body of artists doing different things in ways that were understandable to them all. In other words, the language of understanding is at work in this selection. I think this means that Welch, although he denies seeking any overarching theme, has yet made a selection that has certain very contemporary aesthetic resonances.

That's not easy with 20 different artists. Natalie Settles, a relative newcomer, brings unexpected new ideas into the mix: decorative elements from the 19th century in a beautifully conceived installation. This contrasts well with the graphic "Encyclopaedia Destructica" zine culture established in Pittsburgh and present in this show. The selection is heavily weighted in favor of installation work and sculpture. Certainly the participants have, by and large, a prodigious amount of space, which may be a weakness of this show overall. The intimate work of art is largely missing. Paul LeRoy is an artist as well known for small works as he is for the obsessively large installation found here. His smaller pieces can pack quite the punch too, as do Mark Franchino’s wonderfully ironic and beautifully made sculptures. Subversive as they may be, they are by far the most traditional pieces in this show. I doubt whether the turning away from traditional art implicit in this entire Biennial is symptomatic of the overall mindset of Pittsburgh. But as a shot across the bows, it surely does seek to challenge and provoke the status quo.

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The cost of blight

Kildee needed a better way to take control of vacant property before it fell prey to land speculators and blight. He found it in a land-bank model that new laws and property tax reforms in Michigan made possible. The land bank allowed the county to more quickly take control of a delinquent property through tax foreclosure and made sure it was reused in a way that advances community improvement strategies, rather than selling it off at auction to the highest bidder, who may not have the community's best interests in mind. Once the land bank takes a property, it can rehab, sell, rent or demolish it. Programs were put in place to help homeowners avoid tax foreclosure, and the land bank adopted a brownfield redevelopment plan for all of the nearly 4,000 tax-foreclosed properties under its control.

These land banks not only take control of tax-delinquent properties, but the revenues they generate as well. One of the hidden truths about tax delinquency is that most owners find a way to pay back taxes and penalties after they are threatened with foreclosure. By collecting interest penalties and principal from delinquent owners, land banks are able to recover a sizable portion, if not all, of the costs of maintaining, demolishing, rehabilitating and marketing properties in their inventories. In Cleveland’s case, the land bank brings in $6 million to $8 million a year.

Land bank legislation came close to becoming law in Pennsylvania last year when the session ended before a bill that by all accounts had bipartisan support could finish working its way through the General Assembly. Both land banking and property tax reforms are being taken up again this year.

Whether land banking would be widely embraced in southwestern Pennsylvania is unclear. Pittsburgh Mayor Luke Ravenstahl, for one, has endorsed the pending legislation. The city takes tax-delinquent property through its treasurer's sale process and holds parcels for community development corporations and other organizations in its land reserve. But financial constraints limit it to taking only vacant properties that have a buyer, and constraints also cap acquisitions at 300 properties a year. What the city wants more than anything is a better, sustainable financing mechanism that would allow it to take a larger share of the 6,000 vacant buildings and 14,000 empty lots found in its neighborhoods, and more quickly and cheaply put them in the hands of community groups, public and private developers, and others interested in turning them into