Art Education: How a Biennial Exhibition can impact Art Schools

Written by Sumithra Sunder.

A biennial/biennale show is a show that happens every other year. It is most commonly used within the art world to describe large-scale international contemporary art exhibitions. As such the term was popularised by the Venice Biennale, which was first held in 1895. These have become a large sensation in the contemporary world. What began as a large-scale exhibition to showcase current trends has evolved into spaces and events that are reactionary and question the hegemony of the West. In South Asia, the biennial has become a narrative of contemporary politics and the ways in which art can act as a tool of resistance. To keep this piece relevant to contemporary India, I will focus on the case of the Students' Biennale, so far, a unique event in the art world.

The Students' Biennale, part of the Kochi Biennale Foundation's educational initiatives, seeks to extend and strengthen art educational practices and infrastructure in India. The intention was to expose graduate and post-graduate art students and young curators to the processes of contemporary art and exhibition-making. The project was led by 15 curators, who worked with students at art schools around India. This project was specifically aimed at student artists in government-run fine arts colleges in India, an important and significant goal of this initiative was to create a platform for young artists and curators who lacked the means and opportunity to reflect on their practice and exhibit on an international stage.

Between November 2015 and mounting the show in December 2016, there were a series of workshops and interventions that helped mold the show. The curatorial brief for the Students' Biennale was set at the conference: *State of Art Schools*, a platform to bring educators and artists together to think about art education in India. This conference was structured around the issues within art education at the university level. The Foundation for Indian Art Education (FIAE) began thinking about the lacunae in pedagogical models and ways to rethink the same. There are some key problems that face art schools and perhaps an initiative such as the Students' Biennale can help. The first problem is that there is no hard data on the state of art schools today. Secondly, there is no nodal agency to provide information about secondary education in India. With the set-up of these kinds of spaces, there will be a way to deliver the missing parts in art schools through a networked space or a nodal centre that monitors art schools and the education they provide.

The process of the Students' Biennale allowed the 15 curators to get a close look at the way art schools functioned. What this also did was to reveal a rather outdated system of teaching art and a lack of exposure to contemporary trends and art practice. The education system itself needs some change but with specific reference to art schools and curriculums and teaching practices need to be updated. Perhaps the Students' Biennale can help. How? Through the year-long process of curating and mounting

the exhibition, the narrative that emerged was a response to the various crises in institutes. These institutes thus became 'sites' for institutional stories to play out. These sites are public; spaces within spaces; city; history; the site of the biennale. In an art school 'site', can one engage with the idea of good art and bad art? What is bad art? Is it a comment on what is learnt? Or is it a reflection on what skills are not present? Some of the interventions included spending time at the spaces students inhabit and then provoking them to question the basis for their art-making; doing ethnography to produce art; among others. Curriculums have been so far divided into theory and practical classes or studio hours. This means that there are a few hours of art history lectures and the rest of the time is spent in the studio spaces.

One solution to the problems in teaching art can be resolved by a reorganization of practices in teaching. While this is a long-term solution, the module followed by the curators of the Students' Biennale can be used as a prototype to create syllabi/curriculum materials for an effective art education. Art cannot be effective unless it is accessible and not perceived as an elite pursuit. Meaningful art needs society to think of it as useful. Engaging students in the broad framework of resistance will also open the scope and range of work that can be produced. It is obvious that students are not insular and are reacting to the political and social climate. The Students' Biennale engaged art schools that have been around since the 1800's as well as those that were set up in the past 2-3 decades. The kind of curriculum followed in the former are based in the academic realism of colonial institutions while the latter show promise of a more interdisciplinary education. For example, the School of Culture and Creative Expression in Ambedkar University, New Delhi offers master's degrees in Visual Art Practice as well as Performance Studies.

Curating this show also provided a space to interrogate contemporary Indian art practices, allowing students to use the means of a post-medium art world and exhibit alongside international artists. It would benefit both students and the faculty, not to mention future curators if there was a regular method of knowledge dissemination in the form of film screenings and artist talks with direct connection to the Biennale. Exams and class schedules in art schools prevent continuous contact with students and therefore syllabi and curriculums followed. If there was a more permanent way of making these more flexible and including regular exhibition modules in coursework, it would be helpful to students who aim to enter the art world.

Sumithra Sunder is a Ph.D. candidate at the National Institute of Advanced Studies in Bangalore. Her research focuses on Contemporary Art Practice and Curating in India. She tweets at @techtard86. Photo Credit: CC by Biennale/ Flickr

Share this: