

# The Renaissance City's Biennales

By Durriya Dohadwala

The fourth edition of the island's most important contemporary art event, the Singapore Biennale, is scheduled to open this October with the thought-provoking theme of *If the World Changed* and promises to be a valuable insight into the hopes, fears and vision of the region as the artists see it.

While Singapore's biennale is relatively new, mega-exhibitions have been around for more than a 100 years. The first biennale was staged in 1895 in Venice, Italy, to showcase and promote the sale of contemporary artworks by local and foreign artists. Very different from today's exhibitions, it had no theme or country-specific pavilions. In fact the trend toward a thematic exhibition did not start until 1972, with the first one being *Work and Behaviour*.

Biennales became international only in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century; San Paolo, Brazil, staged the first one outside Europe in 1951 and Tokyo followed suit in 1952. Both exhibitions' purpose was to establish the cities as international art centres, with the additional aim of making their own art known to the rest of the world while also showcasing western art.

The mushrooming growth of a recurring contemporary art event did not take hold until the 1990s. That decade launched more than a dozen such events and today the Biennial Foundation estimates that there are close to 200 biennials, triennials and other such mega-exhibitions being held around

the world, with almost a fourth in Asia. This profusion of recurring mega-exhibitions or *perennials*, as they are sometimes known, does not mean that they are all organised using the same framework. While they may share certain goals and formats, the different exhibitions have yielded many curatorial configurations.

Singapore hosted its first biennale in 2006. The impetus for this was both economic and cultural. Recognised internationally for its efficiency and economic stability, Singapore had traditionally relegated the arts and culture to a back seat. The *Renaissance City Plan*, implemented in 2000, aimed at rectifying this by initiating the biennale to enhance Singapore's art profile, develop the public's interest and awareness and also to nurture and develop creativity among the nation's artists. Spread over 19 locations, including places of worship and iconic public institutions, it showcased the island's multicultural heritage using the theme *Belief*.

The second edition of the Singapore Biennale was held in 2008 with the theme of *Wonder*. It was hosted in four locations: a specially designed pavilion made up of 150 shipping containers, two historical public administration sites, City Hall and South Beach Development (a camp and police station during Singapore's colonial period) and the public space between them. Both events were directed by Fumio Nanjo of Tokyo's Mori Art Museum.

The last biennale (*Open House 2011*) was different in several respects. For the first time it was directed by a Singaporean artist/curator, Matthew Ngui. Ownership of the biennale was shifted from the National Arts Council to the National Heritage Board via the Singapore Art Museum (SAM). Two of its four venues were national museums, SAM and the National Museum of Singapore (NMS), while the other two were the old Kallang Airport site and the Marina Bay area. The biennale also had a stronger Asian focus compared to the first two editions.

The upcoming biennale is similar to the third one in many respects. Organised by SAM, it will be staged mainly in three national museums (SAM, NMS and the Peranakan Museum). The National Library, Singapore Management University and Fort Canning will be additional locations. The focus of this biennale will be Southeast Asia and to date 80 artists are expected to participate.

Though the Singapore Biennale continues to evolve in terms of its structure and focus, each edition has been a visual treat for the art aficionado, bringing in artists and works that have opened up new ways of looking at the world. As contemporary art in Southeast Asia continues to develop at a remarkable pace, the current theme is an opportunity for the region's artists to share their vision of what the future holds.

SINGAPORE  
BIENNALE  
2013  
IF THE  
WORLD  
CHANGED



The Merlion Hotel, by Tatzu Nishi, photo courtesy of the Singapore Art Museum

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