

NETWORKED:

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"People's Biennial": an alternative

Text by Nova Benway



Joseph Perez performance

People's Biennial, initiated by Independent Curators International and curated by Harrell Fletcher and Jens Hoffmann, presents work by artists based in five cities considered outside of the mainstream art world – Portland, Oregon; Rapid City, South Dakota; Winston-Salem, North Carolina; Scottsdale, Arizona; and Haverford, Pennsylvania. During a year of curatorial research, Fletcher and Hoffmann have traveled the United States with ICI, meeting with hundreds of artists and participating in numerous open calls and public events. They have collaborated with curators at art institutions in each city to find the best examples of artistic expression present in these communities. One of the primary goals of the project is to question the often exclusionary and insular process of selecting art, as well as to propose an alternative to the standard contemporary art biennial, which frequently focuses on art from a few select cities (New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, Miami or San Francisco).

As Jens Hoffmann has said, the name "People's Biennial" points to the curators' interest in individuals: in people rather than institutions. People's Biennial's direct engagement with questions of populism in art, and its desire to circumvent traditional nodes in the network of power in the art world, provides an opportunity to consider how the project's own distinctive network might make new relationships between art and audience possible.

Networks span distances - ICI, for example, functions as a hub that brings together curators, artists and other practitioners from around the world. Do such networks allow us to span contexts as well? Hoffmann and Fletcher are both intentionally removed from the mainstream art world - they work in San Francisco and Portland, respectively - and yet simultaneously established in it: Hoffmann directs San Francisco's CCA Wattis Institute, while Fletcher has exhibited his work widely in galleries, museums and biennials. Can a network created by such visible members of the art world bring new agency to under-represented artists? More broadly, can the already-visible bring representation to the invisible? In this sense, the network is a political entity - more than the sum of their parts, the connections formed through such a project can take on a power beyond that afforded by its initiators. This is perhaps one potential outcome of People's Biennial that continues to develop through the artists it presents: rather than bringing "outsiders" in, its network may create new art world categories altogether.

Nova Benway