

A Biennial Beyond the Art World

[originally published Hyperallergic: December 29, 2014]

DETROIT — The People’s Biennial at the Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCAD) successfully draws on the founding concept of the biennial art event, with the original model of the Venice Biennale in 1895 intended to be a sort of World’s Fair of contemporary art. The vaulted and wide-open floor plan of MOCAD’s Woodward Gallery has been segmented into 17 installation “huts” designed by Exhibition Manager Zeb Smith. The structures unify the show, but each is also a world unto itself, creating an effect that’s half art-party, half trailer park, and all happening.

How did curators Harrell Fletcher and Jens Hoffmann manage such a weirdly diverse range of presentations? By acting on a simple idea that exploits a basic precept of the creative community: behind every established artist, there’s someone close to their process who remains largely or completely unknown. Building on MOCAD’s first People’s Biennial in 2010, this year’s event outsourced the process of curating to 17 established contemporary American artists, artistic duos, or collaboratives. Each was given the opportunity to present their work in conjunction with that of someone personally known to them, effectively bringing previously under-the-radar creators into a fine art exhibition context.

These collaborative installations take on myriad forms, some showcasing the individual work of the participants, others featuring immersive new installations made by the combined efforts of the artists involved. For example, illustrator Carson Ellis worked

together with her young son, ‘alienologist’ Hank Meloy, who described characters for her to illustrate. The expansive and unselfconscious imaginings of the self-defined autistic and misunderstood Meloy are beautifully realized in Ellis’s whimsical renderings.

Alternatively, there are installations that draw heavily upon the artist in the curatorial role to facilitate the translation of work that may not be considered art by its creator into a gallery setting. Artist Hank Willis Thomas played an instrumental role in configuring the presentation of materials accrued by Baz Dreisinger through her **Prison-to-College Pipeline** program, which focuses on enrolling inmates in college classes while they serving their sentences, enabling them to earn credits that will apply to their guaranteed placement in the City University of New York system upon their release.

Ultimately it is the “outlier” nature of many of the featured creators in the People’s Biennial that raises a central question about whether art is an inherent characteristic or one defined by its audience. The gathering of an array of objects and stories in an art museum context subjects them to the kind of transfiguration that are the philosophical implication of Pop artists such as Andy Warhol. Yet it’s possible that this process, which would be considered an honor or a triumph to people working within the sphere of the fine art world, is disenfranchising — or at least dislocating — to the people who ultimately make their practice outside of that system. One gets the sense that for North Carolinian upholsterer Franklin Lewis (aka “Mr. Coppers”), the attempts by artists Lee Walton and Harriet Hoover to corral some of his chairs, tools, and process into a museum was frankly alienating. Museums, by nature, tend to hold objects and ideas in a kind of stasis that may feel antithetical for the people that exist actively with them.

Luckily, the overwhelming impression here is that the especially interesting aspects of the *People's Biennial* are those that transcend the work, seeming to highlight the relationship between collaborators above the content itself. What we are left with is a village of human interactions, with objects on display as mere signifiers of those lives and connections shining through.

People's Biennial 2014 *continues at the Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit (4454 Woodward Avenue, Detroit) through January 4.*