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Beijing 798 Biennale Asserts Beijing's Position as an International Art Capital

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Twenty-five young artists presented their works of art today at Beijing 798 Biennale.

Starting with an opening reception on August 15 and running through September 12, 2009, the Beijing 798 Biennale will assert Beijing's position as an international art capital, bringing artists, curators, and critics from around the world to China's capital. Art Map editor and prominent Beijing art critic Zhu Qi serves as artistic director, and Marc Hungerbühler, founder of New York City's the:artist:network, is the curatorial director.

"The Beijing 798 Biennale is primarily about redefinition," says Hungerbühler. "It redefines Beijing as a catapult for transcultural movements and it builds its structure from the bottom-up starting with the artist and the curator, rather than the museum or institution "

Under the theme Constellations , the biennale will bring together more than 70 artists. Two-thirds of the participating artists will be international, with a focus on video, photography, installation, performance, audio, site-specific works, and other new art forms. Constellations stems from the notion that stars in a constellation are often vastly distant from each other, but they appear close to one another from the perspective of Earth.

"Viewing it from the outside, the exhibition is a space in which a group of people are traveling. Everyone gravitates to the places they are most interested in," explains artistic director Zhu Qi. "While seeing it from the inside, one sees that people form a community among others with similar views and ideals--regardless of whether they live in the same physical place. The internet and an unrestricted art community provide possibilities for this."

Located in the northeast of Beijing, the 798 Art District was, in a former life, an East German-designed factory producing electronics. By the late 1990s, the factory was abandoned, leaving an opening for artists and galleries to fill

the vast industrial spaces in the early part of this decade. In just a few years, the area transformed from a dusty outpost for art pioneers into the international tourist attraction it is today, with trendy cafes squeezing in next to increasingly prestigious galleries.

Rather than engaging in facile criticisms about the evils of commercialism, the biennale organizers hope to spark a dialogue about the role of the market in an artistic community. The ongoing financial crisis provides a starting point for discussion.

"China's economic and social progress over the past decade proved the potential of giving full support to every group that has a dream for life," says Zhu Qi. "The possibility of vital communities in China starts with the opening up of markets. The 798 Art District is run under market rules in order to attract art crowds and international involvement. This openness has created a vigorous sense of community and allowed for the exchange of new concepts."

To foster discussion, a series of symposiums and art forums will be held, all of which will be open to the public. International scholars, curators, artists, heads of art organizations, and representatives from China will be invited to discuss contemporary art and social changes. "Launching the biennale in 2009 is time-sensitive, China-sensitive, and an extraordinary opportunity to examine place and global implication," says Hungerbühler.

The biennale publication will be a special issue of Art Map magazine and will be bilingual in English and Chinese. By deviating from the standard format of an exhibition catalog, the publication will be more accessible and available in venues such as newsstands and bookstores.

In addition to a central exhibition featuring Chinese and international artists, there will be several satellite shows around 798. German artist and curator Martin Wehmer will curate Annexe/Infix, an exhibition of abstract paintings from the German-speaking world. Chile-based duo nicoykaytushka will put together an exhibition of Latin American art, Turn On, Tune In, Drop Out. New York-based curator Raúl Zamudio presents The Man Who Fell to Earth, a group of sound and visual works. New York-based Alexandra Loewenstein and Jaishri Abichandani will curate Transitional Aesthetics, a show of female artists of South Asian and Middle Eastern descent.

The Beijing 798 Biennale is organized without chinese government funding or the backing of a major museum. 706 will be the central exhibition space with satellite venues such as the SZ Art Center and T Space. The 798 Construction Committee serves as the main organizer.

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