

RESIDENT

P U B L I C A T I O N S

Death Of Venice? Tribeca's Democratic Biennial

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By Heather Corcoran

On the short hike from Chelsea's major art dealerships to Apexart's Tribeca gallery, attitude melts away with each passing block. Here, there are no six-figure price tags. No too-chic-for-words assistant sits behind the front desk. Even the title of the non-profit's

latest show, "The Most Curatorial Biennial of the Universe," underscores Apexart's outsider status.

The exhibit is a howl in protest against the outsize group shows that dominate the art world. But it's also an inquiry into the process itself. Can an exhibition work as a collective effort? The show, opening July 7 with works by up to 1,000 different artists, has nearly as many curators as exhibitors, each trying to present their own message.

"We tend to have a reputation of not being intimidating," said Kerri Schlottman, Apexart's director of operations. "I think because [the exhibition] is all-inclusive, there's no jury process ... it's really just so fun and carefree." In fact, when artist Steven Rand founded the organization in 1994, he saw it as a venue for curators, including creative types who had never thought of themselves as curators, to organize thought-provoking exhibitions. Today's Apexart version of the biennial is a lighthearted, albeit critical, look at the big business of art.

When Venice opened its biennial in 1895, the massive exhibition was a way to connect an international artistic community in a pre-Internet world. As the 20th century progressed, other cities decided to host their own exhibitions, starting with Sao Paulo in 1951. Now, every town from Istanbul to Iowa City boasts its own biennial and the exhibitions themselves have gotten bigger, too. Obese exhibition halls around the globe are routinely stuffed with exhibits.

In this new art market paradigm, Chelsea's finest regularly jet to museums and convention centers to hobnob with blue-chip artists and big-name

curators, collectors and critics. These insiders chase one another from one big-budget show to another, hunting for the next big thing. It's a new type of tourism fueled by a rotating calendar of exhibitions: annual events, biennials and triennials, artistic mashups organized by theme, by nationality, by medium.

Last month, four major shows – the Venice Biennale, Documenta, Art Basel and the Sculpture Project Münster – all opened within a week of one another.

Unlike many other exhibitions, the Apexart biennial does not conform to a single curator's master vision; the exhibition started with an open call. Instead of a bureaucratic jury process where connections can outweigh talent, everyone was invited to play the role of curator, by submitting two works by two different artists. To hold so many works, the gallery will be filled with rungs of ledges, rising up the wall, one on top of the other. The only stipulation? All submissions must be smaller than eight-by-ten inches, to accommodate as many artists as possible. For the artists, it provided an additional challenge.

To fit the rules, artist Danielle Durchslag scaled down her work – pinup-style paintings superimposed with oversize images of her face at age 6. "It actually challenges you to do something that you wouldn't usually do and approach your work from an angle you wouldn't normally," she said. After the experience, she plans to continue experimenting with the smaller size, at least some of the time. "I think that's a gift at the end of the day, it reveals something about your work – either it is for you or it's not for you."

Artist isn't the only role that Durchslag will play at the Apexart Biennial. As curator, she submitted the work by the husband-wife team of Heidi and Steve Aishman. When choosing her submissions, Durchslag said she was looking for smartly considered, well-made works that spoke to one another in style and theme.

Other participants have also taken advantage of the fluidity between the roles of curator and artist. Jennifer Saavedra, an artist, educator and curator based in Florida, submitted two works, a collage of her own making inspired by the Fluxus art movement and a photograph by artist Shawn Niebruegge. She chose to use the works together as both deal with themes of gender and identity.

Based on her experience, Saavedra sees the popularity of group shows and art fairs as a "double-edged sword" for artists. Success at a major group show can shoot an artist or curator to superstardom, but once back in the real world of the gallery or museum, many have quickly fallen back to earth. But at large shows where participants pay for inclusion, it doesn't matter if you're good enough, she said. "Some artists have great art but aren't able to

get the exposure," said Saavedra.

Steadily, submissions arrive at the gallery from around the globe, and as they open each package, Apexart's five-person staff has no idea what to expect.

There are photographs in dime store frames. A series of 10 figures spray painted onto found cardboard. Some works are so delicate they can't be opened until the day of the installation. There are amateurish pencil sketches and an oil painting so thick with paint that its surface was still wet. There are works from local artists and some from as far away as Turkey, Germany, Mexico and Spain.

Gabriela Galati is an independent curator who splits her time between Rome and New York. Her submissions for the show, from artists Vanessa Chimera and Paolo Bartocchi, deal directly with the tradition of art making in Bologna, the Italian city the artists call home. Galati was intrigued by the limitations on the size of submissions and the open nature of the show and the fact that the exhibition wasn't bogged down with commercialism.

With rotating exhibitions and no permanent collection, organizations like Apexart are in the middle of the gallery and the museum, she explained. "It gives a very good chance to both young, or new, curators and artists to exhibit in a non-profit space."

"As the invite says, you're not going to become famous, but it's a chance to add to your resume and show your work; that blatant honesty is refreshing," added Durchslag. "It makes me want to work with Apexart again."

Visitors to the show and its Web site will also have a chance to take part. In an atypical move for the non-profit, all of the work in the exhibition will be offered in an online auction. Prices start at \$10, and all proceeds benefit the Robin Hood Foundation, an organization that fights poverty in New York City.

Until the show opens this Saturday, the staff at Apexart continues to accept new submissions. The improvised filing system created to accommodate the works may already be bursting at the seams, but the team is ready for the challenge of this organizational nightmare. "There will be a lot of mayhem," said Schlottman. "But it's our last show of the season – the last hurrah. Even if it kills us, we'll have a month to recover."

Artwork part of Sally Grizzell Larsen's submission for the series "Thread and Carbon"