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IS IT TIME TO REIMAGINE THE CARNEGIE INTERNATIONAL?

By Marylynne Pitz



A video starring and created by Philadelphia conceptual artist Alex Da Corte plays on an over 2-hour loop in the center of a neon house art installed at the Carnegie Museum of Art in Oakland. Mr. Da Corte is one of 32 artists exhibiting work for the 57th Carnegie International, which closes March 25. (Jessie Wardarski/Post-Gazette)

From Sao Paulo to Sydney to Shanghai, the world is saturated with contemporary art shows.

Pittsburgh's premier exhibition, the Carnegie International, is America's oldest contemporary art show. The first exhibition in 1896 drew 300,000 visitors during a two-month run. The 57th Carnegie International, which opened Oct. 13, 2018, has drawn more than 135,000 visitors with a week to go before the six-month show closes March 25.

Andrew Carnegie established the exhibition so that the museum he founded would purchase artworks shown at the Carnegie International for its permanent collection. Today, artists such as Christopher Wool, Willem de Kooning and Phyllida Barlow are represented in that collection, which includes 6,000 contemporary artworks.

First held annually, then every two years, the Carnegie International is now held every five years partly because it is a major expense and undertaking. The current show cost \$5 million. There's also far more competition. Last July, Cleveland introduced its first Front International: Cleveland Triennial for Contemporary Art, which featured 110 artists across 28 venues in the city and also in Akron and Oberlin.

So after 123 years, is the Carnegie International ripe for a reboot?

Vicky Clark, an art historian and independent Pittsburgh curator, worked on five Carnegie Internationals, three during the 1980s and two during the 1990s. She loves being able to visit

the exhibition repeatedly during its six-month run, calling it “a revered tradition.”

“But that doesn’t mean that it shouldn’t be re-evaluated from time to time, and now seems to be an appropriate moment to take a serious look, especially with the increased number of competing international venues. The amount of resources dedicated to this exhibition strain finances and programming at the museum, limiting what it can offer,” Ms. Clark wrote in an email.

“I believe that a new model is needed, one that looks at, presents, and thinks about art in new ways while also reaching out to our communities in new ways. A smaller, less expensive show would allow the museum to organize and bring in more exhibitions, presenting a wider cultural context for contemporary art while still honoring the encyclopedic nature of the Carnegie,” Ms. Clark wrote.

Eric Crosby, the newly named co-director of Carnegie Museum of Art and contemporary art curator, worked with Ingrid Schaffner, the curator on the 57th Carnegie International.

The show, Mr. Crosby said in a telephone interview, “could become more community focused. It could become more globally minded. It could become more performative. It could become bigger, smaller. There are so many models in the field right now.”

One of Mr. Crosby’s favorite biennials is in Berlin because “it embraces the city widely. Art becomes a lens through which to discover place. Memories are made that way,” he said.

“The Berlin Biennial is actually in different sites each time, which makes it exciting to explore different facets of the city every two years,” Mr. Crosby said, but he declined to say if he would like to see Pittsburgh adopt that model.

Andrew Russeth is executive editor of ARTNews, a visual arts publication founded in 1902. He reviewed the 57th Carnegie International for the ARTnews newsletter.

The Carnegie International, Mr. Russeth said in a phone interview, “may be more important than ever before, especially at a moment when there is so much art getting made and so much of the talk about the art world has to do with auction prices and really expensive famous artworks. This show counteracts that.”

A global show like the Carnegie International, Mr. Russeth added, “creates these opportunities for artists to be bold and ambitious and not have to maybe worry about selling it.”

As examples, he cited Yuji Agematsu’s artwork made of debris collected from New York City streets and Alex Da Corte’s large house decorated with colorful neon. Inside the neon house, which occupies an entire gallery, videos play on a large screen for 2 hours and 40 minutes. In one of them, Mr. Da Corte mimics Fred Rogers’ arrival on the set of “Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood.”

To choose the artists who created works for the 57th Carnegie International, Ms. Schaffner traveled to 23 countries, including Haiti, India, Morocco, Nigeria, Romania, South Korea and Senegal. A trusted art colleague accompanied her on each of her five trips. Bank of America sponsored the exhibition.

The international is a candy box full of contemporary art that allows local collectors to buy works they might never see. Major collectors and museum donors see the show before it opens to the public.

“They gain instant access to contemporary art through the exhibition and the work of those artists,” said Alison Brand Oehler, co-owner of Concept Gallery in Regent Square.

“Sometimes there are long waiting lists for the work of artists who are considered the hottest in any given moment, and the International and connection to Pittsburgh often gives collectors access to purchases they might not have been able to make otherwise,” she added.

Michelle Grabner, professor of painting and drawing at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, is also an artist and curator. She was artistic director for the Cleveland Triennial last year at the Cleveland Museum of Art. In 2014, she was one of three curators who organized the Whitney Biennial of 2014.

The explosive growth of contemporary art shows during the past 15 years, Ms. Grabner acknowledged, has led to “biennial/triennial fatigue.”

But she vividly recalls the Carnegie International of 1991, curated by Lynne Cooke and Mark Francis. The show is remembered for expanding to The Mattress Factory where work by Ann Hamilton, John Cage and Christian Boltanski was shown. Christopher Wool’s text paintings in stenciled block letters, such as THESHOW/ISOVER appeared at different spots in the city. One of his works is on display at the museum’s back entrance. This show also marked the first time a team of curators outside the museum organized it.

“The 1991 Carnegie International was so important to me. The curators really were taking the temperature of what ideas were being proffered,” Ms. Grabner said.

In shows like the Carnegie International, curators select the artists but artists determine what they will make so the show’s context and ideas are largely driven by artists.

“On the upside, a benefit for these exhibitions are commissions” that allow artists to “play out something on a scale that they didn’t have in their studio or through a gallery. These exhibitions do provide artists with the opportunity to generate new work,” she said.

A show like the Carnegie International, Ms. Grabner said, demands a high level of scholarship while giving curators a chance to visit studios, meet new artists and have “a chance to see how place affects ideas as well as the bigger contextual forces that are shaping art.”

William Stover, a New York-based curator, worked at Carnegie Museum of Art from 1985 to 1994. Just before the much-praised 1991 Carnegie International opened, a well-known New York gallery director, Antonio Homem, appeared and Mr. Stover was asked to give him a tour of the international.

“The ability for me as a young, just-out-of undergrad art student to meet with someone like that and speak about contemporary art was fascinating. It was really a great learning experience for me,” Mr. Stover recalled.

“Andrew Carnegie was interested in bringing the world to Pittsburgh to inspire and to educate,” he added. “It still happens. I think it’s money well worth spent.”