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# THE FACEBOOK BIENNIAL HOW SOCIAL NETWORKS HAVE TAKEN OVER THIS YEAR'S WHITNEY FESTIVITIES.

BY CARLY BERWICK

**W**HITNEY CURATOR Shamim Momin is walking the West 22nd Street gauntlet. She nods and waves and touches cheeks in the Continental manner to a succession of doe-eyed bearded men and slim-hipped men in large sneakers loitering outside Friedrich Petzel Gallery. It's not true that Momin knows everyone in contemporary art in New York, but it's as close to true as can be said of anyone.

Inside, people are drinking beer in celebration of Seth Price's new wood-veneer-and-plastic wall pieces: enlarged found images of basic human interactions represented via negative space; in other words, the outlines of hand pictures grabbed online. Momin, petite in heels and a tightly belted long sweater over a dark green baby-doll dress, greets Price, a lanky 34-year-old New York artist, then walks up to a tall blonde woman standing in the center gallery. It's Henriette Huldisch, her co-curator for this year's Whitney Biennial. Price is one of the 81 artists in the Biennial, and, a few weeks before the show is to open on March 6, his curators have come out to support him. With Huldisch is her taller, blonder husband, Andy Graydon, a film editor and sound artist. It's past eight and Huldisch, who has an infant at home, is giving Graydon the look that means it's time to leave. It's barely perceptible, a flattening of the lips and an intensity about the eyes.

There are other Biennial artists here, too: conceptual provocateur Fia Backström, printmaker Matthew Brannon, sculptor Heather Rowe. The new walls are up on the Whitney's fourth floor, the curators tell Rowe, and it's time to install her art—itsself a series of drywall supports marking out unbuilt walls. Momin speaks in fast, gushing, interlinked sentences, while Huldisch, who is German, picks her words carefully.

Backström knows Price and Brannon and included both in her 2005 project, "Lesser New York," an anti-hype rejoinder to the P.S. 1 show "Greater New York." It was filled with lowbrow conceptual stuff: posters and CDs and fliers to other shows made by, among others, Gardar Eide Einarsson; a group called New Humans, led by Mika Tajima; and Champion Fine Art, a now-defunct gallery run by Drew Heitzler. Turns out Einarsson, Tajima, and Heitzler are in the Biennial as well.

The 2008 Biennial may not necessarily be the most networked Biennial ever, but it is certainly the most unabashed about the importance of social networks. Artists have always hung out together and put the fruits of their conversations into their art: Think of seventeenth-century Amsterdam, the Montmartre crowd in the late 1800s, and Dada cafés in the twenties. But lately those connections and conversations have become the art itself.

It started a couple of years ago with a handful of thirty-something artists inviting other artists to their apartments and basement *Kunsthallen* for seminars and reading series or writing tongue-in-cheek press releases for their shows on the Lower East Side. They had watched other artists push shiny sculptures and pretty-pervy paintings through huge white-cube galleries, with obscene amounts of cash and press coming out the other side. And they had witnessed the impact of all

that high-minded political art of the seventies and eighties—that is, precious little. After Reagan came Bush I and II, after Gulf War I came September 11 and Gulf War II. So the artists went local: They turned to their living rooms and trusted friends, and started bands and small presses and planted front-yard gardens together, and let it be.

Huldisch calls all this a philosophy of "lessness," while Momin identifies it as a recognition that progress is a sham and, moreover, computer programs and the Internet and time and space and life itself exist as open-ended feedback loops rather than linear stories with clear ends. "Something we found across a range of media and themes," says Huldisch, "is a tendency toward smaller, more localized gestures, a modesty of material in approach and scale, a non-monumental quality."

Networked art is everywhere and nowhere: It is tough to buy but usually comes with handy artifacts for sale (nobody is silly enough to say they are completely anti-market). It is local and global: You work with your friends, but your friends are often on a plane somewhere over the Atlantic.

CURATORS OF THE BIENNIAL BY NOW understand that reviews will come, and many will be vitriolic. "In a weird way, it's freeing," says Momin. The 2004 Biennial, which she co-curated with Chrissie Iles and Debra Singer, was anomalously well received, with the *Times*' Michael Kimmel calling it "easily the best in some time." Like most Biennials, it had no predetermined theme, but was seen as a kind of elegiac celebration of beauty. In contrast, the 2006 Biennial, co-curated by Iles and Philippe Vergne, felt unremittingly dark.

If that Biennial was end-times dystopian, this one—officially themeless—has a wryly self-aware neo-hippie outlook to it. Group experimentation is back. So is aimless fun. As for earnest ideas about sweeping change and remaking society—still working on it. "There's a certain wariness of grand revolutionary gestures and a great skepticism about the efficacy of art put into the service of a doctrine," says Huldisch. "It's not really an adolescent gesture per se," says Momin, "as much as a rethinking of failed systems."

For the Biennial, the pseudonymous Dexter Sinister (pamphleteers Stuart Bailey and David Reinfurt), for example, has invited 25 other artists and writers to craft press releases, which they will then broadcast in some shape or form at the Park Avenue Armory, a fortress that the Whitney has commandeered to provide a staging ground for these "expanded prac-

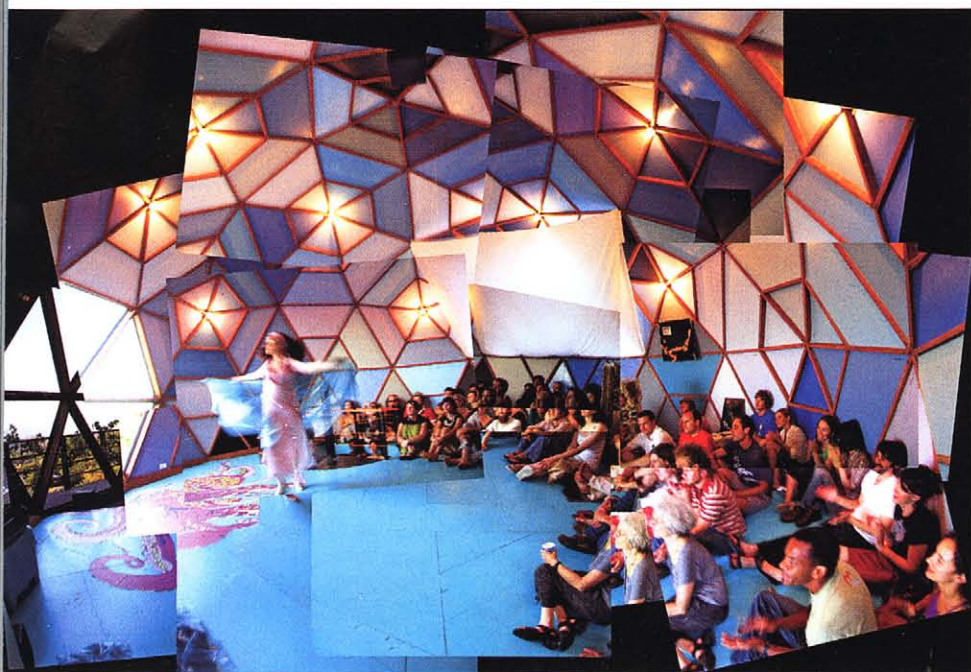
Opposite page, Henriette Huldisch, left, and Shamim Momin amid the installation of Fia Backström's piece at the Whitney. Below, Heather Rowe's *Screen* (for the rooms behind), 2007.



# COMMUNAL



PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF THE MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY



*A Fritz Haeg "dancing convention" in L.A., 2006.*

tices." Eduardo Sarabia, an L.A. artist who also works out of Berlin and Guadalajara, is setting up a bar, with artist peers as bartenders, that will serve tequila.

It was, in fact, while scouting out Sarabia's bar-cum-performance project in Berlin late this spring that Momin and Huldisch found time to talk to Backström, in the basement of another collaborative space called unitednationsplaza.

So, good news: Going out for drinks, staying up way past bedtime, and cooking a late-night meal for the half-dozen barely employed artists hanging around your apartment now are performative rites rich with aesthetic meaning and profound implications. The bar is "an artistic node." Your photocopied feuilletton initiates "routes of exchange."

This may all sound somewhat familiar to anyone who remembers the New York scene of the seventies, with artists such as Gordon Matta-Clark and his Food restaurant in Soho. Today's local-gestures pioneers know the reference: Most of them went to art school.

In the windowless Whitney offices, Momin and Huldisch further explain networked practice. Momin has pulled her heels up underneath her on a swivel chair, while Huldisch, hands clasped, sits facing me. Artists don't just make objects anymore—though they may do that too—but also often act as curators, inviting other artists to play along. It's an updated version of the fashionable late-nineties art term "relational aesthetics," which basically means art that involves people

hanging out and interacting. Its most famous practitioner is Rirkrit Tiravanija, who cooked Thai curry for gallerygoers.

For this Biennial, Backström went a step further and asked the curators to do part of her job: Under her instruction, they sculpted clay letters to accompany wallpaper of the Whitney logo.

"There is a fabric that is social and intellectual connecting a lot of these people," says Huldisch, citing "culinary gatherings like Agathe Snow is organizing: She is doing a big dinner as part of the Armory—"

"—in collaboration with Rita Ackermann, whom she's often worked with, which we didn't know," adds Momin. (Snow also makes assemblages from found debris, and orchestrates dance marathons; Ackermann's collage-paintings tie in loosely to her other group activities, such as puppet shows and art-rock concerts.)

Over salads at Sarabeth, the Whitney's fusty in-house café, we continue our discussion of these various collaborations, as snow falls on top of plywood in the museum's sculpture court. It forms the base of Fritz Haeg's beaver pond, one of twelve local animal habitats the L.A. artist (who works out of a geodesic dome) is installing. Later comes plastic lining and water. "It's all animals that were indigenous to this exact location but have found other ways to be here—or are no longer here," explains Momin. "It's supposed to feel constructed, more like a zoo. There won't be any beavers, though you won't necessarily know that." Haeg is also organizing

a special workshop for each animal and twelve "animal movements," performed by choreographers whose dances will spontaneously erupt throughout the museum. (Drew Heitzler's wife, Flora Wiegmann, will be dancing the bald eagle.) Lunch winds down, and we all check voice mail: Momin pulls out an iPhone, Huldisch a battered Motorola.

**N**ETWORKED PRACTICES are finding their public now, thanks in part to a new breed of curators willing to go native. Because for much of this stuff, you had to be there—and not just there, as in, at the gallery opening, but there, in the apartment where Agathe Snow was cooking or in that basement bar in Berlin. The curator's job, then, is to repurpose these meetings of like-minded souls. In the past, curators such as the Met's Henry Geldzahler contentedly dove into happenings, but rarely did they restage them in the museum. As art becomes projects and practices, curators are turning into producers.

Momin, 34, was branch director of the Whitney at Altria for eight years, until the midtown space closed in January. Huldisch, who often works with film and video, started at the museum in 2001, just out of NYU's film-studies program. Originally from Hamburg, she came here after receiving a first master's in American studies at Berlin's Humboldt University. While Huldisch, 36, says few of her important life decisions were planned, Momin has known she wanted this job, or something like it, since her senior year of boarding school, when she took a revelatory art-history course at Choate, which led to her attending art-history powerhouse Williams College. Thelma Golden, herself an indefatigable curator, hired her as an assistant in 1996; Momin has been at the Whitney ever since. "We share a quality that at its best is unbounded passion and at its worst complete dogged relentlessness," says Golden, who is now director of the Studio Museum in Harlem. "What I love about Shamim is that she feels she can do anything. She is somewhat tireless."

Momin thrives on the sleepless pursuit of the next best relational aesthetic. Between January and August of last year, while scouting artists with Huldisch, she was in her Union Square apartment a total of 28 days, she says. She has a reputation in the art world for partying as hard as she works—to which she responds: "You are never really out of the office in the art world. I mean, you obviously are literally. But it's a community." Later, she returns to the subject: "When it's not just an object, how I am supposed to under-

stand that if I don't experience it? The embrace of locality is part of the work. It's so easy to hear it as, 'You like to party.'

Embrace of locality is another way of saying, you know who you know. Networks and communities are also cliques and scenes. And this, of course, is one of the biggest gripes with any Biennial, that artist *a* or *b* was selected because he is with *x* or *y* gallery or knows this or that curator. Where,

people wonder, is that self-taught artist who mailed in slides from Alabama?

THE LAST BIG HAPPENING at the Armory was Aaron Young's motorcycle-painting performance—bikers screeching back and forth over panels, leaving art in their skid marks. Some found it a little much: the Tom Ford sponsorship, the invitation-only glitz, the Jackson Pollock

analogies, the carbon monoxide.

This time things are more democratic. Anyone so inclined can register at the Armory for Snow's dance marathon or for Haeg's animal-movement schoolhouse or drop by Sarabia's bar for a shot. It won't be quite the same as sipping tea with Haeg in his geodesic dome (which he has put up for sale, anyway), but it could be as close to being there as you'll get. ■

## The Biennial Annex

*Tequila. Dancing. Heavy-metal nuptials.*

SAVE FOR SOME scattered programming in Central Park, this year marks the first time the Biennial runneth over from the Whitney. The museum has co-opted the Seventh Regiment Armory (a.k.a. the Park Avenue Armory) for free programming from March 6 through 23. Don't expect *faux* white-walled galleries in the expo-ready Drill Hall—more than a third of the 81 Biennial artists will activate much of the Armory's historic interior with site-specific performances and installations. RACHEL WOLFF

### THROUGHOUT

**Matthew Brannon's** *The Last Page in a Very Long Novel* (2008). Tapes of creaky Armory noises inspire a film script, the only copy of which will be buried in the building forever.



### FIELD AND STAFF BAR

**Eduardo Sarabia's** *Salon Aleman*. At the blue-and-white porcelain bar artists serve homemade (in Mexico) tequila. And beer. Some even make barware.



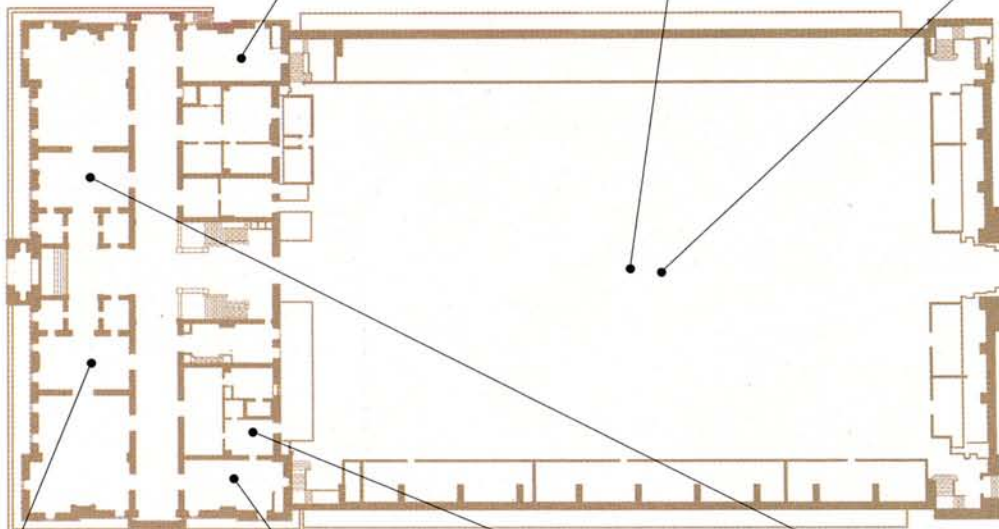
### DRILL HALL

**Kembra Pfahler's** *The Voluptuous Horror of Karen Black's Actressocracy* (2008). The always-evocative painted lady stages a rock-opera extravaganza/wedding.



### DRILL HALL

**Agathe Snow's** *Stamina: Gloria et Patria* (2008). Snow's 96-hour dance marathon culminates in the huge barrel-vaulted hall on March 15. Prizes to be awarded for stamina.



**SOUTH HALL AND RECEPTION ROOM**  
**Ellen Harvey's** *100 Biennial Visitors Immortalized* (2008). Free art! Harvey whips up fifteen-minute portraits of 100 visitors, and invites the subjects to give feedback on her work.



**COLONEL'S ROOM**  
**Bert Rodriguez's** *In the Beginning...* (2008). Free therapy! Rodriguez holds daily office hours, broadcasting incomprehensible murmurs from each session throughout the space.



**COMMANDER'S ROOM**  
**Dexter Sinister's** *True Mirror* (2008). Conceptual and traditional press briefings on Biennial happenings from the commander's old perch—now an in-house communications HQ.



**LIBRARY/SILVER ROOM**  
**MK Guth's** *Ties of Protection and Safekeeping* (2007-8). Rapunzel! Guth weaves a giant braid of artificial hair flecked with strips of flannel bearing audience-composed phrases.