

ArtReview

The curator of the second Brent Biennial argues for a local and long-term focus



Michelle Lopez, *Keep Their Heads Ringin'*, 2020-21. Commissioned by Protocinema, Istanbul, New York

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, many arts organisations have found ways to reach audiences beyond their physical events or exhibitions. Most brought their activity online as a way of broadening their reach at home and abroad, creating an illusion of democracy and access that was never expected to hold for long. But a few initiatives and projects rose to meet the challenges posed by the pandemic through an acute awareness of their most immediate surroundings, while never losing sight of the urgent need for ongoing international solidarity.

Ashkal Alwan, a non-profit organisation supporting artists in Lebanon and the region, announced that the 2021 edition of their Home Workspace Programme – which normally accepts up to 18 fellows a year for a ten-month intensive study programme – would be open to anyone wishing to attend, either online or, when possible, in person. They have made the same open call for this year's programme, once more entirely for free. As well as widening participation, this inclusive approach addresses the conditions that threaten cultural and educational infrastructures in Lebanon and abroad.

Also defying the logics of a pandemic, the Istanbul and New York-based Protocinema has been operating cross-culturally through 'site-aware' art for some time. Their 2020 group exhibition *A Few In Many Places*, curated by Mari Spirito, commissioned five projects to be developed across five cities, with a focus on creating incredibly localised conversations.

Happening in Montreal, Istanbul, Philadelphia, Berlin and, again, Beirut, all the of projects addressed inherited cycles of violence specific to their own contexts, while simultaneously reflecting on what it means to work, relate and respond to each other outside the economies of travel, networking and 'globalised' collaboration; conditions that, even outside of a pandemic, are all too often exclusionary.

Sounding out violence through history and the present, Philadelphia-based artist Michelle Lopez's contribution, *Keep Their Heads Ringin'* (2020), saw a group of young inner-city kids ride bicycles with speakers playing a sound piece that combined the traditional ringing of the American Liberty Bell's clock tower with snippets of popular music that use the derogatory terms 'ding-dong' and 'ching-chong'. Activated at noon on weekdays in close vicinity to the clock tower in the downtown of her home city, the sound installation alluded to the bell's symbolism as an object of freedom and equality while simultaneously highlighting the insidious and pervasive nature of racism, particularly in relation to the increase of anti-Asian sentiment brought forward by COVID-19. In 2021, as part of a second iteration of the exhibition, Lopez organised a series of guided tours through Independence National Park, home of the Liberty Bell, this time assembling people to walk and listen to the sound piece in procession; turning the audience's physical presence into a body of protest.

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