Art in America

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“The Exhibitions that Defined the 2000s”
By Art in America and Lumi Tan

Is it too soon to write the history of the new millennium’s first decade? The period feels close at hand. Its eponymous generational cohort is ascendant. The computer systems many feared would malfunction at the stroke of midnight in 2000 have only entangled us further. The wars that began in the decade continue. The effects of the 2008 economic collapse still linger. And yet the aughts are just distant enough to allow us to gain some critical insight, to assess the gap between what captured attention then and what matters now.

In the pages that follow, A.i.A. editors and contributors take stock of fifteen exhibitions that helped define the era. This is not a comprehensive list of the most important shows, but a survey of those projects that embody strains of thought and modes of feeling that are decidedly ’00. This not a ranking, but an overview of the exhibitions that laid the groundwork for the art world that we experience today. Finally, this is not a chronology but a selective look at major themes.

The early 2000s can appear larger-than-life. The alignment of major biennials and recurring exhibitions on the Continent in 2007 was referred to as the “Grand Tour,” suggesting a twenty-first-century version of an aristocratic coming-of-age ritual. In retrospect, however, even these mammoth festivals were harbingers of subtle shifts. Curators and artists sought out once marginal practices—outsiders of all kinds came into the fold—to redefine what the center could be. The decade fostered a revisionist understanding of the modernist legacy, driven by feminist artists and curators from around the world.

The early 2000s can at the same time look small and parochial. Escapism was rampant: psychedelia, microutopias, and hipsterism. But the art world also saw a global expansion. This was the decade in which Chinese contemporary artists and institutions asserted themselves and artists navigating postcolonial societies came to the foreground. It is crucial to review the history of the aughts now because the most important legacy from that time may be its debates about history itself: who gets to write it, whose voices are heard, and what purposes can it serve.

Photo : Do Ho Suh: Seoul Home/LA Home/NY Home, 1999, silk and metal armature. Courtesy MoMA PS1, New York.

Greater New York

In February 1999, MoMA and PS1 Contemporary Art Center announced their partnership; a year later, their first joint venture, the survey “Greater New York,” opened, beating that year’s edition of the establishment Whitney Biennial by a month. With no theme other than “what it means to be in New York at the

beginning of a new era," "Greater New York" allowed itself to be charmingly incohesive, brushing off any threat of enforced conservatism from mother MoMA.
The only connection between the 140 artists, selected from an open call in addition to research by a team of PS1 and MoMA curators, was that they live in New York City or within commuting distance, and had not had a solo show in the city before 1995. That five–year gap of "emergence" allowed for better-known names showing now-signature works such as Ghada Amer, Cecily Brown, Mark Lombardi, Julie Mehretu, Rob Pruitt, Do Ho Suh, and Lisa Yuskavage, set against artists such as Yael Bartana, Emily Jacir, and Daniel Lefcourt, who were participating in their first major exhibition. Typical of the show's irreverence was Pia Lindman's Public Sauna, which required any participants to strip bare in the museum's courtyard in full view of visitors in order to enjoy a tiny sauna and have a bucket of cold water dumped over their head upon exit.

But the work itself was overshadowed by the celebration of newness—this new institutional model, the new millennium, a New York optimistically emerging from the devastation of AIDS crisis unaware that 9/11 was just around the corner. The lasting legacy of the show was its democratic approach not just to the art, but to the production of knowledge around it in two egalitarian strategies. First, the museum created Hotmail addresses for the show's artists and then displayed them on the wall labels, checklists and website, so that any member of the public (and far more likely, intrepid dealers and curators) could be in contact. Even more generous (though likely unpaid) was the open call format for texts responding to works in the exhibition; those accepted were not published in the unfussy catalogue but collected in an accompanying CD-ROM and on the website. The show was a blockbuster for P.S.1, and a feel-good beginning for the MoMA partnership.

"Greater New York" was not founded as a quinquennial, but the form proved too successful not to continue. It also contributed enormously to the early 2000s MFA market boom. At the opening of the 2005 edition, dealers were scrawling their names on the wall labels to claim artists for their roster. That exhibition continued in the boisterous, heterogenous form of its predecessor, with even more artists (162!), but solidified its talent-scouting authority with a textbook-sized catalogue. By the 2010 edition, after some lessons learned from the 2008 economic crash, the event took a far more restrained form with sixty-eight artists. The installation—particularly the third-floor galleries with streamlined matchings of artists such as Erin Shirreff, Naama Tsabar, and Zak Prekop, or Michele Abeles and Nick Mauss—felt much more in line with a generation of artists expected to be professionalized by the time of their MFA thesis shows. Circling back to 2000 in light of our current biennial fatigue, the exhibition's formlessness unwittingly provided a model for curatorial modesty and collaborative communication.

—Lumi Tan