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By **PARVATHI NAYAR**

THE year 2008 is a significant one for Asia, and not just because of the Beijing Olympics. In the field of visual arts, there are at least seven major biennales/triennials scheduled in various cities in the region, including the second Singapore Biennale right here at home.

While this might mean that Asian visual arts has well and truly penetrated the international art world, the question arises: do we really need so many biennales in Asia?

It was one of the issues raised by BT with Gao Shiming, curator of the Guangzhou Triennial 2008 and Okwui Enwezor, artistic director of the Gwangju Biennale 2008, both key players in the contemporary art scene. They were in town for the prestigious Asian Art Museum Directors' Forum 2007, held at the Singapore Art Museum (SAM), which was attended by 203 top museum and biennale directors from 14 countries.

In exclusive interviews with BT, Dr Gao and Mr Enwezor discussed the role of what Dr Gao calls "international mega shows" in cities like Singapore next year.

Let's face it: today, for the art of any nation to make an impact, it needs to capture the attention of the international art world.

Mr Enwezor – whose past prestigious incarnations include artistic director of Documenta XI – sees Asian biennales as a result of globalisation in the cultural sphere. The more such events, the more it "illuminates and elevates that part of the world in the global consciousness".

Also, as Mr Enwezor points out, many Asian institutions do not have the resources to do international shows; biennales compensate for a city's lack of a robust international art programming. To place the local within the context of the international is the way of the future – and it's one of the strategies adopted by organisers to maintain the relevance of the biennale.

An artistic agent *provocateur*, Dr Gao suggests it is time to rethink the form of the biennale itself, in an art climate where, instead of ideas that are critically debated, we have ideologies. He sees the rise of the biennale in Asia as an opportunity to start afresh. Dr Gao believes it is vital for Asian biennales to link up with each other, making the Forum held at SAM a critical initiative leading up to next year's shows.

A biennale, obviously, has many agendas – social, artistic, political – but if one goal is to bring art to the people of a city, then, arguably, you cannot have too many biennales.

Dr Gao adds a corollary to this



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YEN MENG JIIN



Mr Enwezor: *Sees Asian biennales as a result of globalisation in the cultural sphere*

proposition. He says that "over 300,000 people attended the sixth Shanghai biennale, so much so, the event actually made money thanks to door sales". But, somewhat surprisingly, he doesn't necessarily see this as cause for artists to cheer. "Many people attended the biennale only because they saw it as part of what constitutes the fashionable life today," and fashion by definition is a fickle creature.

Spectator sports, carnivals and festivals have their niches in society but a biennale should retain its role as a place for artistic and intellectual exploration. It is a role in which the biennale serves all those interested in the arts in a city, by the "dynamic interaction it can facilitate between the local and the international art scenes."

As for the artists of a country, Mr Enwezor says: "Artists often work with a deep sense of isolation and want/need to make contact with the larger art world. Biennales can enable such contacts." There is nothing more impoverishing for artists than not having opportunities for the kind of international discourse that deeply affect the way they see the world.

If you do the circuit, however, you

tend to see some of the same artists at different biennales. "Artists as well as curators should make choices," says Dr Gao. "Obviously, an artist can't change his ideas within, say, the three months between one exhibition and the next, so they need to be more judicious in the invitations to exhibit that are accepted." Like good wine, art needs a long time to mature, but with so many gallery, museum and biennale exhibitions, artists often do not have enough time to develop their practice.

As director of the Gwangju biennale, Mr Enwezor is looking at the very nature of exhibitions, by putting together many that are structurally different – travelling exhibitions created elsewhere being brought to Korea, new shows created particularly for Gwangju as well as provisional exhibitions that aren't finished products.

The difference between museum and biennale exhibits is that the latter should be much more risk taking, says Dr Gao. He would like to see biennales play a role in research, something he hopes to achieve at the Guangzhou Triennial.

As Mr Enwezor says, for Asian art to take its legitimate place on the world stage, much intellectual work needs to be done to contextualise Asian contemporary art. Despite the spiralling prices of Chinese contemporary art, for example, he is ambivalent about the way it is developing, without being anchored in sufficient intellectual discourse. Perhaps, he suggests, biennales are a good place to start the Asian discourse.

There is no reason, he says, why a biennale cannot help create "an intellectual infrastructure that supports the creation of art in a country. We would have failed in our task if all we create are artists who can be consumed in the art market". In other words, rather than define an audience for the biennale, Mr Enwezor prefers to ask the question: "What is the biennale for?" We only need wait till 2008 to find out how Asian biennales will answer this question.