

August 11, 2009, 6:00 am

Another Biennial? Yes, but in Beijing

By [Aric Chen](#)



Adrian Bradshaw/EPA

Outdoor exhibits at the 798 Art Zone.

BEIJING | In just a few short years, Beijing's [798 Art Zone](#), a vast, former factory complex turned scrappy artists' haven in the Dashanzi Art District, went from being the epicenter of China's contemporary art world to a tourist destination that everyone loves to hate. The curmudgeons have a point: map-toting crowds and corporate-sponsored events share space with enough bad art to outfit the walls of a Marriott.

On the flipside, institutions like the [Ullens Center for Contemporary Art](#) and the [Iberia Center for Contemporary Art](#) are mounting solid shows, as are a respectable stable of galleries (after a prolonged hiatus, the blue-chip Pace gallery is set to reopen this fall). And now comes another test of the area's artistic staying power: the [Beijing 798 Biennial](#).



Jason Lee/Reuters The 798 venue in Chaoyang.

Running from August 15 to September 12, the biennial's inaugural edition, with the theme "Constellations," features the work of almost 200 artists, more than half of them Chinese, in nearly a dozen venues throughout 798 (as well as one in the Caochangdi district).

Spearheaded by [the:artist:network](#), a New York-based nonprofit organization, the biennial is under the joint artistic direction of Zhu Qi and Marc Hungerbühler. The emphasis is on emerging and mid-career artists — Jaishri Abichandani, Teresa Serrano, O Zhang and Joseph Delappe — spanning genres from video, photography and painting to performance and site-specific installations.

Still, given their proliferation in recent years, does the world really need another art biennial? Probably not. But does 798? The curators say yes.

"It's important that there's a dialogue here," Hungerbühler said, "and not just tchotchke stores, cafes and restaurants."

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DeLappe with a capital "L" please!

— *delappe*

2. 2. August 18, 2009 10:35 pm [Link](#)

I guess 798 may need some "rehabilitation" with fresh, new "real" artists. But it kind of irks me when people get all in a fuss over how 798 has been commercialized. This is China we're talking about, and if there's more money to be gained from a resource, some one will capitalize on it. Though, I understand that it is frustrating that one of the few artist havens has been redirected from its original purpose.

As for the tourism question, you have to look past the tourists. The dark truth is that we have all played this part. We go to see the sites, find ourselves among other visitors and perhaps suffer a scornful smirk or grumble from a disgruntled 'local,' whose precious home, though supported economically by tourism, is 'tainted' by the hoards. This is a delicate relationship that all major cultural centers must manage. And it's something that you must learn to deal with as a local or visitor; if you go climb one of China's holy mountains, you will not find remote, untouched nature, but maybe a thousand-step stairway up a steep face crowded with groups, souvenir stands, and people selling overpriced water to weary, unprepared 'hikers.' I just find it so pretentious to cast something off that you once enjoyed as having become too touristy. I guess you're just too cool to welcome people to your city, and work to enhance the originality of something while still keeping it profitable.

True, tourism and commercialism have decreased the quality of art in 798, but there are still some great works there. I still go, if not to enjoy art, then just to walk around and take in the area itself. The idea of a decently preserved Mao-era factory converted into what it is today: I find it so cool. It reminds me of many old textile mills in America's northeast turned into offices, shops, warehouses, studios and apartments - recycling property without entirely destroying or decontextualizing it's historic value.

Heck, I still love houhai. It may be the most touristy place in Beijing, but look past it. What it comes down to is that it's a beautiful place, and that's why so many people visit it. So 加油 !