

Florence is feeling the pressure to reinvent itself as a city of the twenty-first century. Using its grandeur as a stage for an ambitious multi-disciplinary exploration of the ways in which the body, clothing, essence, appearance, communications, and style have changed and continue to change, it has now created its first Biennale. A cultural operation linking the old with the new, the Biennale cost nine billion lire (fifty-four million dollars) and was funded by the Tuscan territorial budget, along with commercial and private sources. It occupied 18 cultural institutions throughout the city, using 160,000 square feet of exhibition space. The organizing forces of the event are Luigi Settembrini, an American-Milanese marketing and fashion promoter who worked to relaunch the city's textiles and clothing fairs; Ingrid Sischy, former editor of *Artforum* and present editor of *Interview*; and Germano Celant, a part-time curator at the Guggenheim Museum and newly appointed Commissioner of the Venice Biennale.

This Biennale di Firenze was designed to give Florence a new and more contemporary look, a strategic way to extend the historical idea of the city, while wooing industry, specifically the fashion industry. Therefore, this first Biennale was heavily oriented toward fashion. While it may have been a culture shock that offended purists, the program was not meant to contaminate a sense of history but to oblige it. Organizers contend that Florence is not only about the past, but is connected with the future, a humanistic idea that would not have offended

Renaissance thinkers. This Biennale dressed historic Florence in new and provocative clothes. Further, the subject of clothing and identity has been a prevailing theme for artists over the past decade, but this Biennale is the first major art fair to make the pairing of art and fashion explicit.

Having lived in Florence, I was particularly sensitive to any clashes sparked with the genius of the past, and was anxious to see if that past and the present exhibit could coexist. Happily, I found the venture so interesting, despite its minor flaws, that to damn the whole because of petty scrutiny would be missing the point. This exhibition of heroic proportions

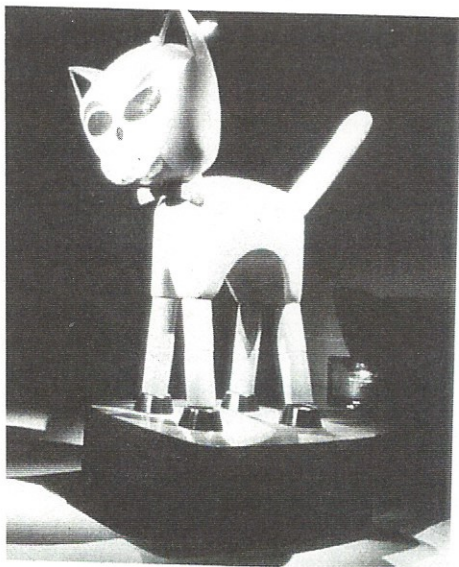
and varied content was accompanied by a huge, spare-no-cost catalogue including provocative essays by the curators. So, let the purists be drowned in the Arno.

I visited three of the 18 sites in Florence and Prato, concentrating on the exhibits that included visual-art components. "New Persona/New Univers," curated by Celant and Sischy and designed by the architect Denis Santachiara, was located at the Stazione Leopolda, a converted century-old train station now used for contemporary art shows. Santachiara transformed this enormous, vaulted, brick-and-concrete structure by draping diaphanous white fabric into a serpentine series of installation spaces. Twin elements of art and fashion pervaded the exhibit, featuring works by individual creators or existing creative pairs. I wandered from one artwork to another like Alice in Wonderland, visiting a dream-like cornucopia of paintings, photographs, videos, films, sculptures, and events that had in common themes of body, clothing, and identity. Not unlike Carnival, most of these works set out to disturb the conventional logic of separation of gender and class. Here emerged the clone, hermaphrodite, and cyborg whose energies are directly related to the intensity of their mutant conditions, more jarring than the filmic ones in *Blade Runner* or *Star Wars*. Celant described the cyborg as the techno-cry of the human being who, craving immortality, is implanted with prosthesis, collagen, plastic, crystallization, or whatever other techniques developed to glorify its body.

Some of the artists question the presence, nature, and accessibility of the souls of these techno-beings. The genetically tampered, cross-sexualized, bewigged life-sized dolls made by the London-based team of Jake and Dinos Chapman are both haunting and haunted. A faux forest called "The Island of Dr. Moron" was inhabited by four of these beings, whose skulls are studded with penis-horns, and who share one fist, four sneakered feet, and one set of buttocks, with a vagina in the place of the anus. My curiosity aroused, I tried to peek into another Chapman work, *Iconic Hallucination Box I*, an *Etant Donnés*-like piece, but found it had no interior illumination. The pert, pantsuited guard explained that the box depicted a violent and bloody porn tableau involving the Chapman ensemble. "Why the black-out?" I asked. "Oh! the light-bulb needs changing," she replied.

Charles Ray, a Chicago-born Los Angeles artist, contributed *Mannequin Falligi*, an eight-foot-tall replicant in Shaquille O'Neal proportions dressed in an electric-blue, skirted suit, sporting a blond wig and enameled red nails. This simplicity of caricature rivals the Halloween parade in Greenwich Village, yet it is mild compared to the real-life NBA star Dennis Rodman, who has sported such ensembles as a silver corset with matching lipstick.

Inez Van Lamsweerde, the Dutch photographer-artist, produced several big, memorable Cibachrome portraits of seductive pubescents, half naked, who stare out, red-lipped and seemingly chemically enlivened, from their '50s-motel-like inte-



WALTER VAN BIERENDONK
Installation view at Stazione Leopolda, 1996.
Photo by Motti/Sestini.

riors. Walter Van Bierendonk, in a work called *Welcome Little Stranger*, designed an amusing tableau with four TV monitors showing runway models dressed in futuristic clothing. Below, on an actually constructed runway, a huge Felix the Cat stared down three outsized black-helmeted mannequins duplicating those on the TV runway—or was it the other way around?

Many of these installations attempted to dissolve the boundaries between natural and artificial, mind and body, physical and ephemeral. Their tools were the video camera; heat, pressure, light, and movement sensors; electronic projections; and other secret devices. *Coro* was an interactive installation which worked in mysterious ways, designed by a team of set designers, Studio Azzurro from Milan. Projected on pale carpet were life-size images of sleeping couples, each having different body types and wearing varied styles of simple white bedtime garb. Subtle slumber sounds accompanied these video images, and viewers could control the sleepers' movements by walking, stomping, kicking, or dancing on them. The interaction involved in this appealing play briefly distracted from the implications of invasion, intrusion, control, and violence in the work, creating a memorable tension.

It was fall and the weather in Florence was great. With a stolid single-mindedness, I crossed over the Arno on the Ponte Vecchio past a multitude of early morning vendors and climbed the steep hill to the Forte Belvedere to see the Biennale's other artist/designer endeavor, titled "Art/Fashion." The interior of the Pallazina, the loggiato, and even the broad terraces overlooking the Duomo were incorporated. The curators were Celant, Sischy, and Pandora Tabatabai Ashagi.

Architect Arata Isozake was asked to design seven outdoor structures to house paired superstar artist/designer team projects. Here the goal was to hold a mirror between human beings and the universe; connecting landscape, the sky, architecture, and the city with the inner core of psyche and the outer shell of skin. To compete with the Florentine skyline is quite a challenge. Isozake's minimal structures clad in eight- by ten-foot plywood sheets painted in primary colors appeared to be very temporary. (A reflection of our small moment in the universe?)

The collaborative teams were: Gianni Versace and Roy Lichtenstein; Helmut Lang and Jenny Holzer; Alaïa Azzedine and Julian Schnabel; Jil Sander and Mario Merz; Miuccia Prada and Damien Hirst; Rei Kawakubo and Oliver Herring; and Karl Lagerfeld and Tony Cragg. The Merz/Sander/Isozake team assembled a successful and memorable project. The housing designed for the work was a huge cylindrical form which, when entered, gave viewers the sense of being inside an enormous telescope peering out onto the famous skyline. The work was further activated by the movement of torn pieces of fabric, motorized inside the double glass of its walls, implying a kind of interior storm. For the Hirst/Prada team, Hirst created a structure containing a petting zoo with live animals roaming about a fenced courtyard. The sounds of clucks and baas added a note of humor. This uncharacteristically witty piece, arguably more about theater and surprise than fashion, was "too much"

for Prada, who withdrew her contribution, a handbag, before opening day.

On the loggiato, Judith Shea's statue of a mid-life Venus unraveling a bolt of fabric interjected a feminist sensibility into a formal vocabulary, carrying us into the multivalent concepts about art and fashion that pervade the latter part of this century. The work segued into the Pallazina, the old mansion that sits atop the Forte Belvedere, which hosted a historical survey of early collaborations in art and fashion. From early in the century were sketches and gouaches by the Futurists Balla and Depero; the Constructivists Popova, Rodchenko, and Stepanova; and the French Surrealist Sonia Delaunay, all of which used painterly and sculptural elements, violent colors, patterns, and asymmetrical forms. Also on view were photographs and original wearables that were the result of important collaborations between Man Ray and Schiapperelli.

Influences throughout the century represented the many stages of fashion's coincidence with artistic, sociological, psychosexual, conceptual, or other prevailing concerns, with the works of Warhol, Christo, Arman, Spoerri, Beuys, and Bourgeois as examples. By the '80s, that clothing belonged to the realm of art was no longer a revelation, though in the work of contemporary artists such as Jana Sterbak it becomes a disturbing device with which to inscribe meaning. Sterbak's *Absorption* consists of two photographic panels mounted on two sheets of 71- by 48-inch aluminum with accompanying text. The startling photograph depicts the artist with her head inside a huge constructed cocoon. Imagining that she has metamorphosed into a moth, she says, "I proceeded systematically to eat, one after another, the 100 suits Beuys sold to private and public collections around the world. In some cases my activity was temporarily disrupted by misguided conservation efforts." Her wish to destroy Beuys, the symbolic father, is a nostalgic reminder of Rauschenberg erasing a DeKooning drawing in the '60s, but this work has much more to say. It speaks eloquently about the construction of definition; of gender; and of servitude to the social model, to fashion, and to art modes.

All of the works bespoke the fearlessness and breadth of this exhibition as a public event. Though the collaboration between artists and fashion designers seemed sometimes arbitrary or hasty, the Biennale Di Firenze was challenging and encouraging, serving as a model for other cities. Bravo Florence, you have enhanced and revitalized your most precious of legacies, the imagination.

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JANA STERBAK

Absorption: Work in Progress, 1995. Photograph: 71" x 48", text: 13 15/16" x 10 11/16". Courtesy of Donald Young Gallery.