The Venice Biennale 47th International Art Exhibition
from Sculpture Magazine, November 1997

I arrived in Venice two days before the opening of the Biennale, intending to get some rest and relaxation before the games began and to reacquaint myself with this magical place. I immediately began glimpsing signs of the giant exhibition. As I sat over an espresso in a cafe overlooking a Palladian church on the Giudecca, a barge carrying an enormous aluminum sculpture with mast-like verticals floated by.

Biennales have been as important for their art-world schmoozing as for the exhibitions. This Biennale was no exception. Hours were spent over talk, cappuccino, or waiting for an over-crowded vaporetto which sometimes never arrived. The breadth and various locations of the exhibitors, however, made this into a Venetian treasure hunt. Except for a few stars, the exhibition was conservative, more about past and present than the future, but the global scope was an antidote.

In January, five months before its normal June opening, Germano Celant was appointed curator of the 1997 Venice Biennale (with the rumor of a repeat performance in '99). The exhibition comprised works from 58 nations, most exhibiting in the Giardini section of the Castello Gardens. The Corderie dell'Arsenale, or rope works, formerly used by the Venetian Navy, and the Italian Pavilion housed Celant's thematic exhibitions. As if this were not enough, there were 16 other exhibitions with official Biennale patronage. A feat of magic in just five months? No, if anyone could pull this off in so short a time, it is the savvy and politically well-connected Celant, who has organized and curated a host of exhibitions all over the world. Celant is, among other things, a consultant for contemporary art at the Guggenheim, contributing editor for Artforum and Interview and curator for the Biennale di Firenze '96, "Arte Moda " That the Venice Biennale was packed with artists and galleries with whom Celant has an ongoing relationship was no surprise, but who's counting? The theme for this Venice Biennale, "Future, Present, Past" was, like so many exhibition themes today, a ploy to get the show together in some clear configuration. The aim of the exhibition, says Celant, "was to investigate the present state of research in contemporary art by considering the three generations of the last 30 years: the '60s/'70s, dominated by the encounter between Europe and America; the'70s/'80s, characterized by the osmosis between Male and Female [barely visible]; and the'80s/'90s, defined by multi-culturalism."

The main site of the Biennale is a 20-minute vaporetto ride from San Marco. In the pavilions and throughout the Biennale, the works were more about installation than about traditional notions of painting or sculpture. Even what are now called "the International Venice Biennale Prizes" are inclusive, not specific to painting or sculpture. Yet the Americans exhibited Robert Colescott's paintings in their pavilion {uncomfortably stressing that he was the first African-American to be shown here) and Gerhard Richter's paintings won one of the Biennale prizes. Luc Tuymans, Julio Sarmento, and Anselm Kiefer were also well represented, but it wasn't painting that starred. It was both the huge conceptual sculpture installations and the less heroic multimedia, video, film, and digitized works which signified the Future in Celant's theme. Pipilotti Rist, a young feminist Swiss video artist whose roots are in the music video world, was represented in the Corderie by a deceptively light-hearted video, *Anahitas swinging* (1997). A beautiful young woman appears on screen dressed in a pale blue 1950s frock and Dorothy of Oz ruby slippers. Smiling and brandishing a red, flower-like poker, she moves in slow motion along a quiet street to the sounds of music, intermittently smashing car windows. A policewoman passes by and greets the girl-woman with an approving nod. Rist won one of the Biennale's three Premio 2000 prizes for outstanding achievement by a young artist. Other winners were the British sculptor Rachel Whiteread, and Douglas Gordon, the British video artist. Also in the Corderie, the American artist Jason Rhoades presented an installation titled *4 cars 4 venice (the intersection of the autopursuites*) (l997). Rife with good-old-boy sexual connotations, the set was strewn with porno material and legitimized by art historical

references. There was a red Ferrari which Rhoades owns (a trade for one of his works), an old yellow Pontiac (tireless), a cardboard interior model of an auto, and a Picabia replica with a catapult of sorts at the top as if to connect into the future The autos were strewn with videos, magazines, and a computer imaged with gridded girlie pictures and on the rear of the Pontiac sat two old jet engines which Rhoades charged up to make loud farting sounds. Rhoades, a natural showman from California, pitched the work to a few important looking men, inviting them to test one of the cars' more steamy comforts by lying on a furry seat with a speaker resonating on their genitals. Was I intruding on a private moment?

The Belgian sculptor Jan Fabre showed *Vogelverschrikker (Scarecrow)* (1996), a scarecrow or jester, with its wire frame encrusted with beetles. He chose beetles because the species has survived countless millennia. Symbolizing transcendence, the beetle is frequently seen in Flemish *vanitas* paintings.

Juan Munoz, from Spain, was represented by two works at the Corderie. His enigmatic dummy-like figurations were resin-clothed and scaled slightly smaller than nature. *Acqua alta* (1997) was composed of 12 of these smiling figures, who stood upright with metal leg supports; none had feet. Perhaps they are involved in a cult of ritualized sequential amputation (as in a formal minimalistic act of the early'70s). Munoz's figures are compelling in their unheroic physicality, perhaps like ourselves.

Marina Abramovic's performance piece and installation work, Balkan baroque (1997), at the Italian pavilion, was seductive and compelling. This political piece originally was scheduled, then canceled, by the Montenegro Republic for the Yugoslavian pavilion. In the center of a pile of bones and dressed in a butcher's coat, Abramovic sat ritually scrubbing the huge bones An accompanying video showed her performing a Balkan dance, alternating with a man describing a Balkan form of rodent control. The sounds, textures, and movements worked together in a harrowing event Her work, about the body and endurance, speaks in a global voice of humanity's inhumanity. One of the two International Venice Biennale prizes was awarded to her.

Haim Steinbach's sculpture, *Mothers, Daughters, Children, (with "37 Stories About Leaving Home " by Shelly Silver)* (1997), gathered an impressive power which came simply from an unassuming video telling the stories of 37 different women, each a universal and touching tale of separation from her mother. Steinbach's sculpture, a two-story gurney strewn with schoolroom chairs, was superfluous

Among the international pavilions, the Nordic countries assembled a geographic potpourri of artists with interesting works by Mark Dion, Henrik Hakansson, Sven Pahlsson, and Mariko Mori. Mori, a Japanese photographer and performance artist, won a citation for special merit. Her work was in a viewing room, where only a few could enter and don the special glasses necessary to see an otherworldly 3-D video Here, Mori appears in futuristic regalia multiplied many times amongst bubbles and light and other techno effects that delighted and amused.

Gia Edzgveradze, a sculptor born in Tbilsi, Georgia, who now lives in Dusseldorf, was represented by two impressive installations in the Georgian pavilion. One a huge rectangle of rice ("a basic substance" says Gia), was spread on the floor and framed by a thick border of carrots (erotic and organic and will rot") studded with a plastic mold of feet. The walls in the room were lined with drawings depicting days marked off and blotted out with paint strokes. Close by, a video displayed a man lying on his back in a fetal position, repeating a mantra In the adjoining room, written across a large spread of grass, were the words, "My Father told me" and in a corner was a large photo of the artist wearing a nightgown.

Edzgveradze s works are narrative and biographical, and imply a psychological or philosophical conflict within himself: from the East, (Buddhism) and from the West (Freud, Beckett, and Ernst).

There were a few outstanding exhibitions with official Biennale patronage which were not easy to get to but were well worth the effort. "Artists for Sarajevo," at the

Fondazione Querini-Stampalia, was part of the Sarajevo 2000 project, which aims to present a number of works that will ultimately form a museum of contemporary art for the Bosnian capital in the year 2000.

Dennis Oppenheim's exhibition of 40 works from the past 10 years was held in a plate glass

factory in Marghera, the port of Maestra. Vaporetti ran there a few times a day, taking visitors through the less familiar waters around Venice. Looming up on the horizon were deserted petroleum tanks and industrial structures that looked like an early 20th-century Constructivistís dream of an industrial park. Now having polluted the environment, they stand abandoned. The government is trying to revitalize the area by finding new uses for the old buildings: a cultural site is what they have in mind. Crowning Oppenheim's exhibition is an outdoor work, Device to root out evil (1997), an upside-down church with Murano glass windows, its steeple stuck in the ground. "Venezia Marghera" was another great show in the Campannone Pilkington SIV It consisted of powerful photographs taken in Marghera by invited Italian photographers who analyzed and recorded the process of urban change in this industrial ghost town. Each artist had a unique style and a haunting vision.

Finally, the Venice Biennale was more reflection than harbinger. Issues that distinguish the moment and that were present in other recent Biennales, such as new technologies, gender identity, the abject, theatricality, narrative, and the free-floating paranoia of the approaching end of the millennium, were few. Perhaps the daunting notion of the fin de

siecle induced a restraint or conservatism (lest we should fall off the edge). But it is, after all, the schmooze factor that has distinguished the Biennale, and for that it was a success. Ý

-Carolee Thea