

Venice Biennale 1999

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Political, racial, and religious conflicts, amplified by technology blitz, have plagued this century, making dinosaurs of our cities and spawning a relentless global nomadism. Curator Harald Szeemann's globalist theme for the 1999 Venice Biennale confronts this upheaval with a selection of art that emphasizes personal and cultural heritage, but little of it was penetrating. Equally significant cultural markers were missing: pop, fashion, multinational corporate mergers, cyberspace, biotechnology, and contemporary plagues. Showing multinational work for its own sake does not create the critical edge needed to deal effectively with the larger picture.

As curator of the 48th Biennale, Szeemann eliminated a strict curatorial doctrine in favor of a democratic idea that he initiated in 1980, Aperto ("open"). Now expanding his concept to D'APERTutto ("openness over all"), he included established and young artists from all countries (with an emphasis on China), and enlarged the physical plant to house them. To the colonialist model in the Giardini, he added the Arsenale, a 16th-century complex on the edge of the city comprised of shipyards, sheds, docks, gunpowder magazines, and warehouses (the Gaggiandre, the Tese, the Corderie, and the Artigliere). Although one needed space shoes or a golf cart to cover the doubled ground this year, the Arsenale nevertheless provided a perfect arena for installations; the acoustics, the character, and the dramatic and interactive possibilities of sculpture and videos inspired a number of the artists. Installed in the Artigliere was instead of striking people, one beats the place where people sit or sleep to awaken the mind an interactive work by Chen Zhen, which presented a characteristic Chinese concept. The artist roped together drums made from 100 chairs and five beds stretched with animal skins to create a formal structure with fragments of arms and ammunition, stones and branches, wood, and metal tubes. Sixty-nine batons made from police clubs were used for drumming. On opening day, a concert was organized on these drums; three Tibetan Buddhists played the overture, a second part was played by professional musicians, and the third was improvised by the audience. On other days it was curious just to watch viewers drumming.

Maurizio Cattelan's untitled work was sequestered in a cell-like niche where hands protruded from the dirt floor in a gesture of prayer. An Indian Fakir was hired to perform a controversial self-burial every two hours. Also in the Artigliere, Switzerland's Thomas Hirschhorn installed *World Airport*, a mega-sized runway filled with toy airplanes and emblazoned with familiar international logos. Using foil and other discardable materials, Hirschhorn's lineup was a quick take on Szeemann's motif. Serge Spitzer's beautiful work, *Re/Cycle (Don't Hold Your Breath)*, housed in a barn-like structure, replete with rafters, bricks, and timbers, was an installation of hundreds of identical glass goblets, carefully placed everywhere, on the floor and up in the beams. L.A. artist Tim Hawkinson exhibited a huge, loose limbed, clacking, primitive robot that attempted to fill a huge space at the Corderie but didn't. Artists who worked well with the structures of the Arsenale included Jason Rhoades and Paul McCarthy, with the mega-installation Proposition (recently seen in New York), and Soo-Ja Kim, whose *Cities on the Move-11633 miles Bottari truck (1999)*, a truck with bundles of brightly colored fabric that faced off against a mirrored image, was dedicated to the Kosovo refugees. Embroidered plastic kimonos by Wang Jin, erotically stitched canvases by Ghada Amer, and a smoke-filled bubble machine by Pippilotti Rist were also noteworthy.

Videos in D'APERTutto spaces introduced us to other global villages. Iranian artist Shirin Neshat's *Turbulent* (winner of a Leone d'Oro) placed viewers between two separate screens. One depicts a man in a white shirt singing Iranian folksongs; in the other, a woman dressed in a traditional black chador is singing a song without words. The music, exotic and astonishing, resounded throughout the Tese, while the camera angles created a sense of stillness and vulnerability. Istanbul's Kutlug Ataman projected four monitors, side by side, each with a Muslim woman describing why she wears wigs: a transsexual, a cancer victim, a woman

disguising her identity, and another with an identity crisis. Doug Aitkin, from L.A., won a Leone d'Oro for his video, *Electric Earth*, which explores a black man's journey through the contemporary American urban landscape. A series of closed spaces housed monitors for each chapter of events. Some viewers found the work offensive in its use of sensationalist stereotypes and slick ideas from film and television, but it was an interesting ploy. Aitkin's use of exterior spaces, the home, mall, or freeway combined with time, bodily movements, and breathó all captured by expert camera workómirrors an internal journey and poses interesting directions for this medium.

One large arena at the Corderie was darkened and dotted with smaller scale videos shown on the walls, floors, and ceiling, each one by a different artist. One of them, *Love Story* by Antoni Abad, depicts a red heart shape, slowly being eaten by rats who scoot in and out of the monitor's frame. This gesture was in stark contrast to the prize-winning (Honorable Mention) video by Eija-Liisa Ahtila, a Finnish feminist-neo-conceptualist, one of the three who shared the Nordic pavilion. Her high-budget, 25-minute video uses landscape and dialogue in a post-Bergmanesque way to speak about relationships.

Global relationships were confronted in a variety of ways in the national pavilions in the Giardini. France used two curators: Denys Zacharopoulos, who is Greek and who collaborated with Jan Hoet on Documenta 92, and Hou Hanru, a Franco/Chinese who co-curated the "Cities on the Move" exhibition with Hans Ulrich Obrist. Each curator chose an artist from his own culture and generation; the selected works of one artist did not necessarily relate to those of the other but were integrated by site. Huang Yong Ping altered the look of the Neoclassical architecture by installing eight- to 15-foot timbers, piercing the roof, and topping them with cast aluminum figures inspired by Chinese legends. His work functions in a realm that connects the unconscious, tradition, and technology through architecture to create new relationships. It stood apart from the work of French artist Jean-Pierre Bertrandóperhaps to comment on the insistence of individuality within a multi-cultural environment.

In another mixed pavilion, the Danes exhibited a colorful and loud installation, *Snowball* created by Jason Rhoades and Peter Bonde. Another "global" ploy was to divide a pavilion between two communities, for instance the Slovaks and Czechs. The Slovak curators, Petra Hanakova and Alexandra Kusa, created "Art for Free," a wall of artist-designed tattoos that were applied to willing visitors. The Bulgarian artists, who were not informed about their inclusion until a week before the opening, handed out a card in their flag colors. A wooden platform with a tree growing out of it was executed by the ubiquitous Thai, Rirkrit Tiravanija. This work stood within eyeshot and in contrast to Ann Hamilton's *Myein* at the U.S pavilion.

Funded by Gucci and major collectors, Hamilton's piece contained the lush elements and esoteric metaphors characteristic of her sensibility. The Minimalist-inspired, gridded glass wall, which she built in front of the pavilion to create a distorted view from inside or out, backfired and became an isolating device that separated the pavilion from the others. The interior of the Neoclassical building was more intriguing. Along the walls, fuschia acrylic powder intermittently fell, leaving deposits on the floor and clinging to the walls where Charles Reznikoff's poem, "Testimony," was imprinted in Braille. Each night, a vacuum system collected, filtered, and returned the talc to its feed for a new cascade.

Some work was gimmicky, such as a piece by Ann Veronica Janssens, which clouded the Belgian pavilion with a white fog. In contrast, Rosemarie Trockel's three video offerings at the German pavilion were compelling in their intelligence. In the main room, the viewer is viewed by an enormous eye, actually seven different female eyes that flow imperceptibly one into the other. In the next room, side-by-side videos, *Sleeping Pill*, depict a Kubrick-type 2001 futuristic dormitory. Is this a displacement camp or a rest stop for gluttoned and weary Biennialieri? The video was made from an actual installation, an inflated prototype Trockel created on the outskirts of Cologne, which she envisions as a structure to be built in shopping malls or airports as an alternative pit stop for the weary. Here, people seemingly unrelated or indifferent to each other remove their shoes and either lie on mats or are lifted into womblike plastic pods for short naps. In the rear two rooms of this pavilion there are rows of actual cots for viewers to use. The third film, *Kindespeilplatz* unfolds time images in a playground; starting at sunrise, it ends at sunset, coursing the panorama of urban life as a "still life" moving within itself. The video seems to be free floating but people wearing color-coded shirts and certain camera plays reveal the director's hand. The works are surreal and link with sleep, waking, youth, life, and dreaming. Other interesting Pavilion artists were Japan's Tatsuo Miyajima, Poland's Katarzyna Kozyra, Brazil's Nelson Leirner, and Roman Signer in the Swiss pavilion.

The Italian pavilion was packed with artists reflecting Szeemann's desire to include artists from emerging countries, the young, the old, and women. Though trying to right his exclusions of women from his last go at a Biennale in 1973, he missed again—only 25% of this year's artists were women. Louise Bourgeois, born in France in 1911, was represented by her stuffed and sexually explicit sculptures. Ann-Sofi Siden, of Sweden, created a surveillance piece, *Who Told the Chambermaid?* Many monitors were interspersed with folded towels and other closet gear in a constructed linen room. Each monitor voyeured a different room in the hotel. Also in the Italian pavilion was Sarah Sze, a young woman from the U.S., who constructed a crowd pleaser, a miniature high wire made up of tiny objects, like a Calder circus without figures, just wire and detritus. It traveled from a rectangular hole in the wall up along the walls and ceiling and then out a window that opened to a canal. An imperceptible tapping sound was triggered by the wake of passing boats. A white male African artist, William Kentridge, presented a haunting, terrific projection of a lonely man overwhelmed by technology who finds solace in his cat.

What the Biennale promised was a "hybridity of cross national collaboration," and it gave that, along with a biased showcase for Chinese artists. Zhang Peili's *Just for you* consisted of 10 monitors, each with a head shot of a Chinese person singing "Happy Birthday." Zhuang Hui's photographs capture large groups graduating from the police, army, or college. Yo-Bing's video, *fly fly*, shows a group of Chinese artists sitting around a table playing a childish game with a zeal akin to the Russian Roulette scene from the film *The Deer Hunter*. Wang Du's oversized installation of characters sits on a room-sized, Caroinspired tabletop as pedestal; the notorious and politically famous mock sexual and political mores. Szeemann's ploy here is akin to post-glasnost days when an interest in Russian art seemed a good bet...a losing one.

After viewing almost all of the 123 works, I am struck by their, familiar and uncontroversial nature. Szeemann will curate the Biennale again in 2001 and will perhaps give this next exhibition the punch it deserves.

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