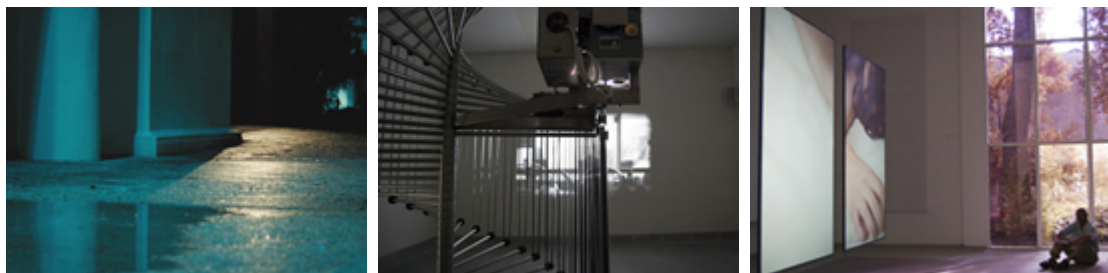


## An artist reflects on an artist's Biennale

Giardini, Arsenale and collateral events



It is an odd year, therefore, we are off to Venice again, planes full, all wondering how the global economic downturn may have affected the most international of art exhibitions, now in its 53rd edition. The title, *Making Worlds*, is an intriguing start. As I rush in the Arsenale and queue for the Giardini pavilions, I cannot help but think that the event, curated by Daniel Birnbaum, is, above all, an artist's Biennale. We seem to have regrouped, closed in, like a party conference. The President of La Biennale di Venezia, Paolo Baratta, confirms my first impression on his press release: 'we have chosen Daniel Birnbaum because we feel him to be on the side of the artists'. This is not a happy-go-lucky curatorial proposition, a wish to make the world a better place. The proposed *weltanschauung* is a double-edged sword. While the show focuses on the process of creation, a work of art can also represent a vision of the world. If taken seriously, Birnbaum warns us, the works can be seen as a way of making the world –with all its psychotic consequences.



The works of art on show are apt for a Biennale: site specific, spectacular and very self-conscious. In fact, you could simply call it Biennale work (yes, there is such a thing). The medium is not important, what matters is the impact, whether this is made through drawings, photographs, installations, paintings, sculptures, performance or time-based (video, film) work. In *Making Worlds*, this latter medium offered the widest spectrum of approaches to creating and exhibiting work at a Venice Biennale.

I only realised this when, tired and with my feet bleeding (this is what these exhibitions do to me), I sat down in the former 'Italia' pavilion, now the Palazzo delle Esposizioni. If you are familiar with museums but have not yet been to a biennial, the issue of seats is one of the big differences. In museums, you can rest; in Venice, seats usually mean video art. This time, though, it was for the better. The work in question was 'de Nove', a piece by French artist **Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster**. Shot to look like television, making-of type of film –at least visually, if not in content– it first shows Venice on a rainy day, with the author's voice over talking about the struggle of making art for the Biennale, recounting the four previous times she has been invited to do so, and visiting the sites of the preceding pieces. Later on, she will interview herself, telling us about her process of making work, showing it us, as she draws on a paper tablemat.

Creating works for the Venice Biennale must be difficult, more than in most other settings because there is the added pressure of exposure and the difficulty of the space. So must have thought **Steve McQueen**, showing at the British Pavilion. His film, *Giardini*, also shows the city (the site of the exhibition's national pavilions, to be precise) in what we understand as winter, but this is a very different proposition. McQueen's work is cinema, with all the contextual elements we understand by the term. One cannot wander in an out but has to book a time for the screening, sit down in a pitch black, uncomfortable auditorium, and wait for the projection –impressive in terms of sound system and image quality– to be finished. As an artist, McQueen shows us what we cannot see while we are there, that other Venice, the one we don't usually come to. The Giardini are overgrown, empty, managed by stray dogs; the buzz of the city is elsewhere and can only be heard. This time, the artist is the master, the seer, rather than a vulnerable maker (like Gonzalez-Foerster), but the reverence to the place remains.

**Simon Starling's** work, at the Palazzo delle Esposizioni, is also playful with regards to cinema, although, this time, what is brought to us is the process by which we see the images, the mechanisms. His is a cinematic sculpture, if you get the nuance, made of discarded film footage, magnificently arranged in space. No Venice is seen; we are not reminded of where we are or why we are here. The work has relevance outside of its immediate Venice context and, after so many derivative pieces, this fact alone produces an impact. Wolfgang Tillmans (Palazzo delle Esposizioni), Pavel Papperstein (Palazzo delle Esposizioni and Russian Pavilion), Lucas Samaras (Greece Pavilion), Jordan Baseman (ArtSway's, New Forrest Pavilion, Dorsoduro) and Fiona Tan (Dutch Pavilion) also stand out for the daring quality of their work, defiant in a micro-world where everybody seems to be making in-jokes.



Then, of course, there are the outsiders, which in this edition seem to be the most distinguished and best-known artists. Allow me a detour in my filmic walk, because the big names (not the works) deserve a place in my writing. Bruce Nauman –who spectacularly, has work on show at three separate venues around the city, including the United States Pavilion, and won the Golden Lion for best National Participation– and Miquel Barceló (Spanish Pavilion) bring us quality works within their oeuvre, utterly predictable, forgettable and accompanied by an unnerving sense of déjà vu. They feel out of place in relation to the Biennale works. Unfair, I know, but I can't wait to get back on the Venetian track.

A lot of *Making Worlds* seems to turn around the concept of place-making, of artists bringing something of their place into Venice, or bringing the strange city into their works –an encounter missing in Nauman and Barceló. This chain of thought, then, brings me to **Mark Lewis**, representing Canada. With his work, we are back to addressing the cinematic, but not in McQueen's way. His cinema is more in the rear projections he uses, in the image rather than the context of viewing. Lewis has a number of shows around the city, in the Giardini and the Dorsoduro. Some show us his home country, some others are based elsewhere. In both, and through the trickery of cinema, he makes his relationship to the medium and the place clear, and brings us times and places (Canada, Los Angeles, summer, winter), to the gallery space. The works envelop us like the projection must envelope the actors, and we are there and not there, at the same time. Just like the uncanny: homely, yet strange. And this same relationship to place making can be found in **Aleksandra Mir's** work in the Arsenale. Her playful postcards, which viewers hoarded, collected, went mad about, are of Venice. And then they are not. But you only realise this after a while, when you look again behind the cheesy green-white-red coloured font with the dot in the 'i' shaped like a heart. You know the image. Where from? The Sydney Opera House is not in Venice, is it? No. And neither is the Uffizi, or the Empire State Building. In her work, the place artist's fear or reverer elsewhere in the exhibition is frightfully near that other Venice, the one in Las Vegas. I am glad someone had the guts, and the humour, not to take the city, or the curatorial proposition (and art), that seriously.

Laura Gonzalez



Images from top: **Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster**, *De Nove* (Still), 2009, Video, 20'. **Steve McQueen**, *Giardini* (Still), 2009, Film, 30'. **Simon Starling**, *Wilhelm Noack oHG* (installation view), 2006, Purpose built loop machine, 35 mm film projector, 35 mm b/w film with sound, 4 min, 407x192 cm, projected dimensions variable. **Fiona Tan**, *Rise and Fall* (Still), 2009, HD colour, stereo installation on 2 vertical 16:9 screens, 26'. **Bruce Nauman**, *Untitled (Hand Circle)*, 1996, Bronze, silver solder and copper sculpture, 1155 x 710 x 700 mm. **Mark Lewis**, *Cold Morning* (Still), 2009, HD video single screen projection, 7' 35". **Aleksandra Mir**, *Venezia (all places contain all others)*, 2009, one million postcards for distribution, variable dimensions. **Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster**, *De Nove* (2 Stills), 2009, Video, 20'.

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