

TMCQ

The Mind's Construction Quarterly

- DIARY
- ARTICLES
- INTERVIEWS
- REVIEWS
- ABOUT

National Pride

Every June, as art students across the world prepare for assessments and organise degree balls, Venice celebrates a new Biennale. In 2003, architects gave way for the artists to create wonderment on the 100th anniversary of the exhibition under the umbrella title of The Dictatorship of the Viewer. The Venice Biennale occupies, until November, three main city spaces: the Giardini, the Arsenale and the Museu Correr.

The Museu Correr showed Pittura: From Rauschemberg to Murakami, a finely researched, carefully curated, gracefully displayed exhibition of elegant paintings in air-conditioned rooms just off Piazza San Marco. In a Venice of over 10,000 press accreditations and 100F heat that made temper gush, the calming environment achieved by the Museu Correr was no little thing. But in terms of art, the exhibition was too thin. When has painting, by itself, been satisfactory to the modern art lover? This was the venue for those who come to the Biennale not liking what it stands for and wanting to get comfort in that enemy of contemporary art: pretty pictures.

Over in the bare Arsenale extension, 8 curators show what they know. The result of so much erudition is a bric-a-brac of sounds, colours, forms, objects, often resembling more a virtual reality space than a real one. The poor, defenceless visitor is unable to transit from one room to the next without heart failure. Catherine David displays Contemporary Arab Representations, a set of videos projected on identical freestanding screens. Then, no idea how, one simply appears in Hon Hanru's Z.O.U. (Zone of Urgency), a mad videogame-like space, where appreciating the fire extinguisher's aesthetic qualities and symbolisms is one of the essential coping mechanisms one has to have readily available. But the secret of so much chaos is that, after a certain time either one does not care anymore or the show transforms itself into art. Gabriel Orozco's proposal, The Everyday Altered, showing similar box-like objects, uncluttered, with some interesting and contrasting exceptions is just fresh air to the eyes and the brain. And so is the freedom of the Utopia Station space, curated by Molly Nesbit, Hans-Ulrich Obrist and Ripkrit Tiravanija, where everything is brightly ideological, postmodern and free.

What makes the Venice Biennale an appealing display, in contrast to the Documentas, Manifestas and other Latin plurals scattered around the European geography, is certainly what goes on at the Giardini. Situated in the Eastern area of the city, these gardens are the manifestation of a truly interesting idea, if only because of its incongruence: exhibiting art in National Pavilions. The Biennale's list of official nations amounts to 64, 29 of which meet in these Giardini pavilions, built by the nations themselves sometime this century.

Walking around the lush Adriatic gardens, trying to keep cool, one cannot help but think about politics:

whose pavilion is where, whose is the biggest, who is who's neighbour and, more importantly, who is still who. Everything about the arrangement of the exhibition area is as blatantly obvious as a Eurovision contest. In fact, I will venture to say that the Biennale is art's Eurovision, taken to a global level: more about anything (politics, economics, entertainment) than about art itself. Czechoslovakia's pavilion, in all its absurdity, is a far greater statement than any art that could be displayed in there, on either Czech or Slovak side; Venezuela, whose pavilion was left empty due to last minute discrepancies between the artist and the government is also to be noted in this popularity contest.

The fact that the works showed in these spaces completely negates this farcical categorisation adds to the surreal atmosphere. Occasionally, someone shows signs of sanity. Santiago Sierra exhibited two pieces in the Spanish pavilion: Covered Word, a piece of black plastic wrapping and obscuring the name of the nation the pavilion represents and Wall enclosing a space, a brick wall preventing the entrance to the space. A sign and a policeman warns visitors that only Spanish nationals, with identity cards or passports will be able to go inside. As I was born in Spain, I could enter the space after a thorough police control. Outside, queues of people were indignantly discussing with the immovable police officer, they were denied entrance even though they were press. Inside, there wasn't much to see: nothing but rubble and debris from the last Spanish exhibition, but I was still privileged to be there.

United Kingdom was represented by Britain, Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland and Manchester. While Chris Ofili and David Adjaye show the world Britain's cutting edge at the Giardini, the Manchester Pavilion offers drinks and company in the Dorsoduro area of the city. A confident bar transformed for the occasion, the Manchester Pavilion is not showing any art but charmingly analyzing the idea of Nationality, with humour and irony.

It might be professional deformation or personal obsession, but my first Biennale resembled too closely my habitual Junes, touring London's undergraduate and postgraduate degree shows. Each artist/country, like my student, is given a space to do what they want with it: close, paint, hang things, move walls, destroy roofs not caring much about the show as a whole, their neighbours or the viewer. As in degree shows, very little sinks in. At the Biennale, there is also assessment: at the end of the press days, a jury awarded a Golden Lion for best National Participation to Luxembourg, represented by Su-Mei Tse.

What makes the Venice Biennale an appealing display, in contrast to all the other Documentas and Manifestas and paradoxically saves it from sinking is certainly the fact that it takes place in seigniorial, warm, car free Venice.

Laura Gonzalez | Autumn 2003