

THE BIENNALE AND ITS DISCONTENTS

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The 50th Venice Biennale, June 15 through November 2, 2003.

The international art press has weighed in and its verdict is clear: the 50th Venice Biennale was weak, weak, weak! Even under the best of circumstances, the Biennale is a difficult, marathon event, with exhibitions spread among sixty-four national pavilions, half in the Giardini (Venice's city park), the other half distributed around the city; the endless-seeming Arsenale; and numerous other locations, this time including the Museo Correr in St. Mark's Square, home to a survey of painting from 1963 to the present. During the vernissage in mid-June, temperatures in Venice consistently reached over 100 degrees Fahrenheit, with the result that the throngs of art lovers often felt as if they had to choose between seeing more art or doing something—anything!—to ward off heat prostration.

The weather, which was reported on as much as the art, was not conducive to a patient assessment of what many critics found to be a badly curated exhibition, and the critical responses were frequently intemperate. Although previous directors of the Biennale had undertaken to curate both the Arsenale and the Italian pavilion themselves, Francesco Bonami, director of the 50th, delegated the curation of most of the Arsenale to others, each of whom was allocated a "zone" within the massive space. Laura Cumming's fulminations in the London *Observer* are fairly typical of the critical response: "No art deserves to be presented thus, and no viewer could make anything of it in such conditions."¹

To be frank, I have no argument with the essentially negative cast of most of the criticism generated by the Biennale. Much as I enjoyed the experience of seeing so much art and so much of the art world gathered in one place at one time, the whole affair felt dispirited, as if no one really knew what to say or do about art at this particular moment in geo-political time, an uncertainty reflected in the titles of both the Turkish and Taiwanese exhibitions: *In Limbo* and *Limbo Zone*, respectively. Good intentions abounded: the curatorial conceits that animated each zone of the Arsenale were worthy, but they simply did not generate very good exhibitions. Hou

Hanru's *ZOU/Zone of Urgency*, a collection of highly politicized work by Asian Pacific artists, was a clangorous environment that felt like a city under siege, yet communicated nothing beyond that. The *Utopia Station* zone at the far end of the Arsenale, curated by Molly Nesbit, Hans Ulrich Obrist, and Rirkrit Tiravanija, presented the work of a multitude of artists in a low-key plywood environment that was meant to de-emphasize art world glam and celebrity but ended up seeming only like a particularly pretentious alternative space.

Much of the work in the national pavilions was not so much bad as disappointingly predictable. Fred Wilson's installation in the American pavilion, *Speak of Me As I Am*, for example, made a clear point about continuities between depictions of Moors in Venetian art and more contemporary representations of blackness. It wasn't bad but it also wasn't particularly fresh; it felt like the entirely foreseeable result of applying a formula: FW + Venice = X. That said, I must disagree with Cumming, who criticized Wilson for employing a Senegalese handbag vendor like those one sees on the streets of major cities worldwide to sit outside the pavilion with an array of bags apparently on offer. Whereas she contends that Wilson unethically treated the bag seller "as an object . . . and not as a human being," I would argue that Wilson's gesture pointed directly to the pertinent question of who these people are and how they got where they are. It was the only truly edgy and provocative part of the installation.

In spite of the Biennale's shortcomings (and the heat), there were pleasures to be had. It was wonderful to see a whole room of the Italian pavilion devoted to large format prints of Richard Prince's Marlboro Man cowboy photographs (c. 1989). Likewise, it was a pleasure to see Beatriz Milhazes' explosively colorful, neo-psychedelic paintings, though they were probably not exhibited to greatest advantage in the outdoor Brazilian pavilion, an unforgiving space for painting. Chris Ofili's installation of his paintings in the British pavilion was a highlight. The paintings themselves, in red, black, and green, were lush and spectacular images of African lovers in a verdant jungle setting—the surfaces, adorned with glitter and map pins, sparkled like sequins. Ofili collaborated on the installation with architect David Adjaye: each room was suffused with one color—Afrocentric red, black, and green—through lighting and the treatment of walls and floor. The overwhelming presence of one color had the curious effect of negating that color's presence in the paintings: in the red room, for instance, one was surrounded by red yet could barely see that color in the paintings. Some observers felt that the installation was overdone and, indeed, there are undoubtedly better ways to get a good look at the paintings. But at the British pavilion, the paintings and the installation worked together exquisitely to create a complete environment as dense and seductive as Ofili's jungles.

The national contribution from Turkey, featuring five artists who work in photography or video, was unexpectedly rich. Particularly memorable was the work of Gül Ilgaz, whose collages incorporating multiple images of the same outdoor scenes are reminiscent of David Hockney's photo collages. But whereas Hockney achieved a

Cubist effect by presenting the same image from multiple perspectives, Ilgaz's images evoke the flatness, repetition, and symmetry of Oriental carpets designs. Nazif Topçuoğlu's photographs were also creepily effective. His images of uniformed schoolgirls posed in heavily paneled interiors, one of which is appropriately titled *A Disturbing Picture* (2002), create an atmosphere of voyeuristic eroticism located somewhere between Balthus and commercial pornography even though all the figures remain fully clothed.

Doran Solomons's video *Father* (2002), the very first piece I saw in the Arsenale, proved compelling: I watched it twice and am still haunted by some of its images. Solomons, a British-born artist who lives in Israel, combines stage magic, intentionally cheesy digital effects, and quasi-documentary footage to produce an anxious examination of a father's desire to protect his daughter from a violent world in which other young women are blowing themselves up in the service of political and religious fanaticism. The video ends with a strange and distressing image of a prone male figure being prodded and dragged by a robotic device used to defuse bombs, while the deceptively gentle theme from *M*A*S*H*, "Suicide is Painless," is sung in the background.

Whereas the 49th Biennale (2001) was dominated by video, assemblage seemed to be the hallmark form this year. One of the more enjoyable assemblages in the Arsenale was Colin Darke's *Capital* (2002–3), a large collection of consumer detritus (advertisements, packages, labels, small objects) onto which Darke handwrote texts from Marx and Lenin in tiny print. The objects were then laminated and displayed meticulously on a grid. Equally obsessive was Mladen Stilinović's *Dictionary—Pain* (2002–3), individual pages of which were mounted on the walls of the Arsenale. Stilinović took a standard English dictionary, whited out all the definitions, and replaced each one with the word pain, a gesture meant to challenge the global dominance of English and the consequent marginalization of those who speak other languages (Stilinović is Croatian). Monica Sosnowska's *Untitled (Corridor)* (2002), a sculptural installation in the Arsenale, replicated in forced perspective a long, drab, institutional corridor ending in a door. (When I first saw the piece, the door was closed, but when I returned, it seemed that someone had crept down the corridor and opened the door at the end.) While it is fair to say that these three pieces sound only a single note apiece, each note is a creditable one and the pieces are well made and successful.

During the planning stages of the Biennale, Bonami caused a controversy by mentioning in passing that he was thinking of adding a Palestinian pavilion. The Italian press immediately decried this possibility as implicitly anti-Semitic.² Instead of a pavilion, the Palestinians were represented by a project entitled *Stateless Nation*, designed by Sandi Hilal and Alessandro Petti, both trained as architects, consisting of ten, seven-foot tall Palestinian passports distributed around the Giardini. These stood as poignant acknowledgments of both the problematic situation of Palestinian nationhood and the political pressures surrounding the whole notion of Palestinian representation, even in an art context.

Although every Biennale has an official curatorial theme chosen by its director (the stated theme of the 50th Biennale was “Dreams and Conflicts: The Dictatorship of the Viewer,” whatever that means), it is inevitable that other thematic currents run through the work exhibited. In my view, the last two Biennales have been characterized by emergent investigations of posthumanism. Several pieces which I saw at the 49th Biennale two years ago made me think about robotics and the question of the relationship between human beings and machines, particularly in relation to performance.³ The posthumanism explored at the 50th Biennale was not of the technological variety for which the cyborg is the key figure but was, rather, the kind that reconfigures the relationship between human and animal subjects as one of continuity rather than insurmountable difference, and therefore questions the dominance of human beings over animals and the natural world.

The works at the Biennale that reflected this perspective ranged from those that simply pointed to the problematic presence of animals in a human-designed world, to others that represented the world from an animal’s perspective, to still others that hypothesized radical continuities between human beings and other species, including the possibility of interspecies life forms. In the first category, I would place a video installation by the Spanish artist Fernando Sánchez Castillo in which a horse and rider move through the interior spaces of an academic building. The disjuncture between the horse—its height and weight, the room it needs to move—and the human-scaled environment foregrounded the way that animals are forced to find places in a world built by and for other beings. Another piece that addressed the same issue in an even more direct and literal way was by American artist Will Kwan, who collaborated with a group of Venetian animal activists called the Associazione Animali in Città. Kwan staged an intervention on the Biennale grounds in which the members of this group, dressed in black like Bunraku puppeteers, walked their dogs en masse around the exhibition spaces to remind us of the presence of animals in our lives and cities and our responsibility toward them.

The Canadian representative to the Biennale, Jana Sterbak, offered a multi-screen video installation entitled *From Here to There* that presented a non-human point of view. I will simply quote the description from the press release: “Made up of a series of short segments, the work chronicles the adventures of Stanley the dog in the City of the Doges, as well as on the banks of the St. Lawrence River. Without conventional plot development or predictable aesthetic choices, spectators will observe life as it appears from a height of 35 cm above the ground.” Sterbak made her video using a puppy cam attached to the adventurous Stanley, a young Jack Russell terrier. The resulting images are slurred and oddly cropped; the frame bounces and vibrates according to the rhythms of the dog’s movements.

In a catalogue essay for Sterbak’s exhibition, Gilles Godmer makes the provocative claim that “through Stanley, the image subjects us to the animal nature of smell . . .” The camera’s position (35 cm above the ground) is that of a being for whom olfaction is the primary sense. In Godmer’s view, “the camera [in *From Here to There*] serves interests that rely to a great extent on the olfactory and that are



Sandi Hilal/Alessandro Petti, *Stateless Nation*, 2003, billboard, mixed media. Photo: Courtesy of the artists and the Venice Biennale.



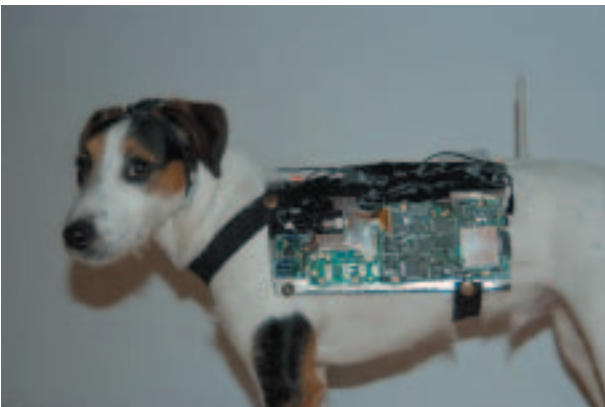
Gerda Steiner and Jörg Lenzlinger, *Falling Garden*, 2003. Photo: Courtesy Swiss Federal Office of Culture.



Richard Prince, *Untitled (cowboy)*, 2001, Ektacolor photograph, 50 x 75 inches. Photo: Courtesy Barbara Gladstone Gallery.



Doron Solomons, *Father*, 2002, video. Photo: Courtesy of the artist.



Jana Sterbak, *From Here to There*, a multi-screen video installation. Photos: Courtesy of the artist.



foreign to us”⁴ Sterbak’s video thus can be understood as a *visual* record of Stanley’s *olfactory* attention. Arguably, by presenting images of the things to which a creature driven more by smell than by sight chooses to give his attention in a way that traces the trajectory of his shifting interests, the installation allows humans to experience what vision looks like when it is subordinated to another sense.

Whereas Sterbak’s piece emphasizes the ineluctable differences between human and animal sensoria, other contributors to the Biennale suggested continuities between human and other beings. In the video work of Michal Rovner, the artist selected for the Israeli pavilion, small, silhouetted, unindividuated human figures move in ways that suggest the behavior of bacteria or viruses—they process in long, unbroken lines; they spiral around each other; they clump together. Part of her show was an installation in which we saw tiny versions of these figures in motion at the bottom of Petri dishes displayed on long lab benches. Rovner invites us to see ourselves from the perspective we generally take toward micro-organisms; the patterns of human life thus come to seem disturbingly similar to those of entities we take to be much simpler and more elemental than ourselves.

If Rovner’s work suggests that we may be more like micro-organisms than we’d care to think, three other pieces explore the realm of trans-species hybridity. Daniel Lee, one of the artists representing Taiwan, constructs “manimals” using photography, drawing, painting, and digital manipulation to produce images of beings that combine aspects of human and animal. In his installation *108 Windows* (2003), that number of faces morph into being. The results disconcertingly resemble caricatures and monsters (such as werewolves or vampires), perhaps leading the viewer to wonder whether this morphing of human and animal is a benign process and exactly who or what is produced as a result.

The artist representing Australia, Patricia Piccinini, whose recent work deals with various aspects of bio-engineering, including cloning and stem cell research constructs images that suggest the results of some unknown process of transspecies reproduction. Her hyperrealist sculpture *The Young Family* (2002–3) features a mother and her three pups. These creatures have basically human facial features (though they apparently develop larger snouts as they age) but also have tails, primate feet, and large flaps of skin across their heads that become floppy ears. They are largely hairless, except for a few wisps. The total effect is of a being that is at once human, simian, canine, and bovine. One is left to imagine from what area of research the *Young Family* may have emerged.

Lee’s and Piccinini’s respective approaches hint at connections between high art and such popular cultural forms as the horror movie and science fiction, and to an extent their images partake of the sensationalism characteristic of both. Another artist who operates at this juncture is Motohiko Odani, one of the Japanese representatives, whose video *Rompers* is set in a colorful fantasy garden resembling the set of a children’s television show. A young, happily singing girl sits on a branch from which drips gelatinous-looking sap. Her facial features suggest genetic mutation, as does

her frog-like tongue, with which she captures insects to eat. Below her, a group of frogs with human ears on their backs dance in a circle. This video, which alludes cheerily to actual genetic experiments (in which human ear tissue has been cloned on the backs of mice, for example) comes across as the fruit of an unsuspected collaboration between Matthew Barney and Pippiloti Rist.

I will conclude this highly selective account of the 50th Biennale at the Church of St. Staë in Venice, the last venue I visited. Overheated, exhausted, and disappointed with the last several exhibitions I had seen, I stumbled inside, where I was told to take off my shoes. Hanging from the ceiling above was *Falling Garden*, an installation by Swiss artists Gerda Steiner and Jörg Lenzlinger. This delicate work consisted of a complex filigree of twigs and branches, real and artificial flowers and leaves, and crystals, all hanging individually at various heights from strings attached to the ceiling. Against the pristine background of the white sanctuary, which it filled completely, the installation looked like a colorful rain shower in a state of suspended animation. In the center of the church was a large, round, spice-scented sofa on which we were invited to lie down and gaze up at the installation. The chance to lie still in the quiet, cool church, looking up through the busy yet limpid tangle of lines punctuated by small patches of color was a welcome, meditative respite from the demands and discontents of the Biennale.

NOTES

1. Laura Cumming, "But Where's the Art?" *The Observer*, 22 June 2003, retrieved from <http://observer.guardian.co.uk/review/story/0,6903,982390,00.html>.

2. For an account of the Palestinian controversy, see Christopher Hawthorne, "The Venice Biennale's Palestine Problem," *New York Times*, 1 June 2003, retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/06/01/arts/design/01HAWT.html>.

3. See Philip Auslander, "Humanoid Boogie: Robotic Performances in Venice," *Art Papers* 26.1 (Jan./Feb. 2002), pp. 20–22. A longer version will appear in *Staging Philosophy*, edited by David Krasner and David Saltz, forthcoming from the University of Michigan Press.

4. Gilles Godmer, "Roving Photographer," in *Jana Sterbak: From Here to There* (Montréal: Musée d'Art Contemporain de Montréal, 2003), p. 88.

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