

The Context Matters

Impressions of the 54th Venice International Art Exhibition

As a closing event of my three-day trip at the Venice Biennale, I was quietly climbing the stairs leading to the third floor of a Canal Grande private house to encounter the works of four Zimbabwe artists. It was quarter to six, and I enjoyed the unexpected quietness inside the building, so much in contrast with the hustle and bustle of the inner city. I realized how the environment helped to create an inner silence so much needed for valuing artworks.

Every second year, and now, for the 54th occasion, Venice has become an international art capital for about 6 months, between 4th June and 27th November. Such as every occasion, *La Biennale* is the place to meet first rank artists. Works from Anish Kapoor, James Turrell, Sigmar Polke, Maurizio Cattelan, Christian Boltanski, Cindy Sherman, Pipilotti Rist and many other renowned artists can be found at one place. The biennale itself has 89 national pavilions -- 30 permanent national pavilions in the Giardini, 10 in the Arsenale, and others all over town. In addition, there are the so-called "collateral events" organized by independent nonprofit organizations. In addition, again, are the many independent exhibitions and projects all over the lagoon city which altogether amount to at least 200 exhibitions.

It goes without saying that an event of such magnitude attracts hundred thousands of visitors. The Biennale is the place where interested individuals make their pilgrimage every other year. It is also a meeting place for the distinguished, who –within the bearing limits of the official non-trade policy- can take advantage of the occasion of making a primary deal with the artist.

It also goes without saying that an event of such magnitude entails enormous amount of mess: catering activities of all kinds (with the concomitant noise and tumult, thrown-away paper, plastic, bottles and long queues). And my experience is that in such a big beehive many artworks simply get dismissed. It was especially peculiar at the Arsenale. When I had to queue for half an hour in order to get into James Turrell's *The Ganzfeld Piece*, the strictly measured five minutes I could spend inside was insufficient to forget all the circumstances: the people next to me, the long waiting, the rustle of the plastic shoe covers... I would have definitely needed more time to experience the "presence of light itself as it occupies a space", whatever much I had learnt about this piece beforehand. Urs Fischer's monumental work, created on the base of Giambologna's sculpture *The Rape of the Sabine Women* (1582), was but a dirty heap of burnt candle by the day I saw it. All these impressions together made me thinking over the extent to which contemporary art was nourished by (our collective) garbage.



Urs Fischer: The Rape of the Sabine Women (Photo by E. van Steenpaal)

Certainly, the Venice Biennale is not a place for artistic contemplation but looks rather as an inventory of artists and artworks. There is, however, a unique feature which makes it unmistakably different from other art shows: the much debated tradition of the national pavilions. Although the external location of artists and their mixed nationalities are often mentioned as an argument against the national pavilions, this 116-years old tradition usually offers a guarantee of quality, as well as the possibility to raise current national issues. Last but not least the practice of national representation also allows artists to work with broader budget.

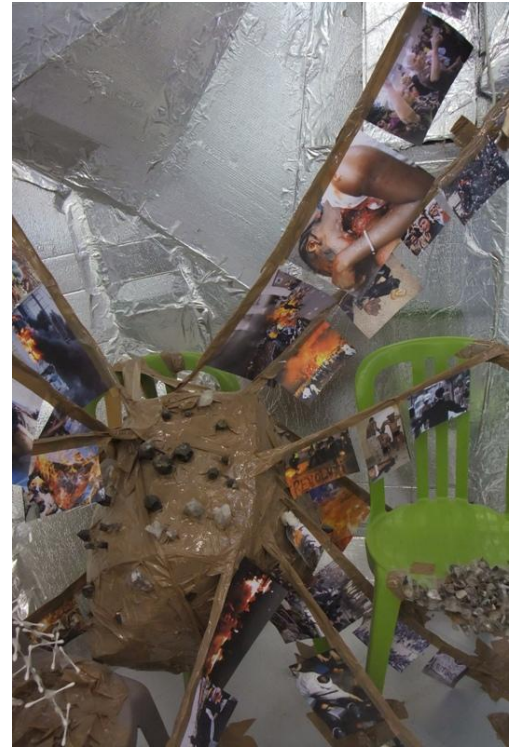
National issues often appear as political questions. It is more so than ever. The pavilions of Poland, Egypt, Israel, Denmark, Korea, US - all refer to current political issues. We can see the Statue of Freedom lying in a sunbed, an upturned tank transformed into a giant, noisy treadmill, armed soldiers hidden among colorful flowers, military uniforms made of flowery textile, a film parody of the sterile discussions on Middle-East issues.



J. Allora & G. Calzadilla: Track and Field (Photo by E. van Steenpaal)

Among them I found prominent the Danish Pavilion. The exhibition entitled “Speech Matters” is an exceptional initiation which groups the works of 18 artists from 10 countries. Drawings, paintings, photographs and films intend to shed light on various aspects of intimidation, surveillance or control of media – in the “free and democratic” countries.

Another pavilion that merits our attention is the pavilion of Switzerland which houses the work of Thomas Hirschhorn. This work, entitled “*Crystal of Resistance*”, shocked me profoundly. Entering the pavilion, I felt like accessing a giant cave with many passages. It evoked the feeling of underground passageways; the slimy, viscous, gleaming and moist inner realms of the Earth, where the beauty of the dripstones and crystals make us momentarily forget the grim and dreadful depths, but as soon as the lights go out we are gripped by fear. Hirschhorn made visible the prolific, crystallized, dark underground world of the human mind. Deposits of all kinds of attributes of our consumer society: plastic chairs, tv-sets, cell phones, plastic bottles, newspapers, ear cleaners, Barbie dolls, etc.... all seemed to crystallize gradually, creating ever-growing formations. Among them, sets of terrible newspaper photos of all kinds of tortured men, women and children, burnt and wounded, bleeding body parts and faces twisted with pain reminded us that this underground garbage world is far from being a cool museum show. All this is real and bloody serious.



Thomas Hirschhorn: Crystal of Resistance. (Photos by EP Murakeözy)

Next to all the blare and heaviness of human aggression we find the delicate melancholy of Mike Nelson in the British pavilion. The title, *I, Impostor* leads us back in time and space, where scenes of a photographic dark room are mingled with sections from a 17th century Istanbul caravanserai. It is dark, old and dusty; the air is really stuffy and suffocating. We sense a hidden story but there are no signs to help us unraveling the identity of the absent photographer or his connection to the caravanserai scenes. Comparable in subtleness is the Hungarian pavilion, where the installation of Hajnal Németh *Crash - Passive Interview* is based on the story of a car accident. The story unfolds gradually as we listen to the improvised opera whose librettos are composed of interviews with the crash survivors. A subtle tension builds up in the visitor while waiting for the drama to happen – which remains to be inferred from the sight of a strongly deformed car

bathing in red light. In this work the car is deprived of its attributed values meanwhile eternal human values are emphasized.



Hajnal Németh: CRASH - Passive Interview, video still, 2011, camera: István Imreh.

Next to the national pavilions I enjoyed most the “collateral events”. Their separateness and limited rooms provide better conditions for contemplation on artworks. I hope it becomes a more extended project for the next biennial.

Finally, I must confess that I enjoyed to the outmost the three days spent in Venice. The Biennale exhibitions set against the wonderful landscape of the lagoons, the warm September nights with early sunset, the nice diners in the company of colleagues made for an altogether unforgettable visit.