

Venice Biennale 2009 – Clear September Sky

By Rosanna Albertini

There will be no verdict in this report from the *Venice Biennale 2009*. A “quiet” venue? What’s the difference between a lagoon and swamp? They are both quiet. If nonsense weren’t good for the brain I would throw the word “quiet” into a canal, but so many told it, or felt that way, a common sentiment must be treated with consideration. Quietly, seventy seven countries from all over the world sent their artists to Venice, to refill the historical pavilions as well as empty basements on the Canal Grande, empty churches, dismissed convents, the abandoned ship factory of the Arsenale, other modest or rich spaces, private foundations. And many artists, instead of magnifying the aura around their ego or their objects, brought to Venice scenes of human experience of the kind shared wherever humans live. No nostalgia for frozen monuments, children of memory.

Venice is an expensive shell waiting for artists every two years to bring back international gossip, art comedies, and provocative gestures, as if the ballrooms were still open, and bridges and narrow streets could still embrace and hide love games and illicit exchanges, monkeys, bears, prostitutes, commerce of exotic goods, knives and fists in return for someone’s insult. “Quiet,” sounds like “nianza na strasa de comedia sto ano,” venician for “not even a rag of a comedy this year,” in a play by Carlo Goldoni, the local glory in the Eighteen century, a sort of Venetian Woody Allen.

Not my impression this year, frankly, maybe because in a previous life I have been a Venetian, and I love the city insanely. Today Venice has the charm of a lady who for centuries never undressed after the party; even threatened by financial straits, she is a majestic old lady. And this *Biennale* turns out to be an interesting, silent merging of international art into the normal flow of the city life, so that the art spaces are next to the pharmacy, the bakery, clothes and fruit vendors; at times signs for national pavilions or side events (forty four) compete with street markets, flocks of tourists, and spots of chairs for tired legs in front of small cafes. Some exhibits are so hidden in meanders that to find them is an adventure. No complaints: when the art is good, visitors are even more rewarded.

With a Babel of languages, visual or spoken, Italian administrators have not really shaped the Venice Biennale 2009; as for the director, Daniel Birnbaum, he seems to have let things happen without tightening any intellectual rope. After all the Biennale has become a natural phenomenon, up and down like the water that seasonally floods squares and alleys. Dead water? Open mind or opportunistic withdrawing? Too many Chinese artworks would not be good enough for an art school exhibit. Birnbaum certainly let happen one of the worst Italian pavilions in the Biennale's more than centennial history. Such a heavy amount of objects without soul matches the thick layers of propaganda and disinformation spread throughout Italy by newspapers and TV channels owned 90 % by the prime minister. Pistoletto, Cattelan and Plessi are not at the Italian pavilion, exiled at the end of the Arsenale. Most of the best Italian artists are simply not there at all. Curators from other countries instead often did a serious work, so did foundations, private galleries, groups of people who cared, mysteriously, about going to Venice at their own expenses. Artists born in Cameroon, Palestine, Brazil, Chile or New Zealand, (to name just a few countries) now working in Belgium, Nederland, Germany, or England, (some of them not allowed to go back to their country), brought to Venice vivid pictures of a social conversation about the human condition as it is all over the world, although it resonates in different ways artist by artist.

Pulling roots, migrating, struggling for meaning, artists seem to wear forms and colors of our living time. Their work is a portrait of us, of our hidden terrors; so far hopes are undefined. It is curious to find the same certainty that bridges toward the past are broken down, as well as those moving to the future, in pavilions apparently very different, as the Russian and the Danish and Northern Countries. Dirty dusty rusty and dark the first, in its strongest statement offered by Gosha Ostretsov's installation: a cave house, no more than a wooden skeleton, children's shoes lined up near a wall one can see through, the artist reduced to a mechanical hand from a sleeve, or a coat, a hand that never stops drawing, wherever history goes. Perhaps *Victory over the Future* is only possible keeping the gaze across the present, and walking over the ruins of any *avant-garde*. By contrast, the two Northern pavilions shine with cleanliness. The most celebrated, they come from a collaborative effort of 24 international artists directed by Michael Elmgreen and Ingar Dragset. We walk in a congealed scene of a movie, which does not progress:

death of modernism as a way of living, the end of clean lines of thinking that become forms while desire sinks. A house is there, *For sale*, every thing in it is broken, from the staircase to the dinner table perfectly set, and cracked in the middle as from a surgical cut. Nothing is really usable, but everything looks like if it were. The other house suggests a comfortable rest in modern chairs surrounded by music (Nico Muhli) and art of every kind: *The Collectors*. There is no distance here between naked forms, naked bodies, and death of desire. No metaphor neither: a collector's body floats face down in a pool, the only metaphysical space is the bathroom: with glass walls, the room is pierced by three trees parallel to the vertical showers... are the artifacts envying the natural energy of the trunks? Absurdity is at home.

Not so convincing Liam Gillick (German Pavilion), whose conceptual past turns into a cold, repetitive obsession with standard furniture, his own kitchen remade. A speaking cat breaks the silence, too smart to be appealing.

Ragnar Kjartansson's (Iceland) studio in Cannaregio looks like the most traditional art place: a painter with his model, a roof on his head, the Canal Grande flowing by with boats and workers on water. Oh, the stereotype is worm-eaten from inside: Ragnar wears his studio like a straitjacket, from 10am to 6pm every day, from June to November, painting the same subject over and over. The paintings wear his changing mood, as the beer bottles fill the space around the artist's endurance.

Ivan Navarro (Chile) is right; "there is always something that gets lost in the transformation of energy." His rainbow of neon on thirteen aluminum doors at the Arsenale leads to the darkness at the center of each door, the impenetrable black where imagination is stumped. A universal *Death Row*, 2006. Escaping from Pinochet, Navarro moved to New York. A video shows the artist pulling the pedals of a bicycle in Time Squares, to light a white neon chair, empty, that waits from the bike the energy, which makes her luminous.

In absence of cars, early in the morning the noise of shoes, carriages and strollers on the stones of the pavement, along with thumps of boxes off and on the boats, merges with the tireless, continuous concert of voices, laughs or screams that in Venice never stops. People are the best Venetian music, one word tied to the other, stretching vowels and sounds as if spinning sugar.

Vague figures of unnamed men and women move behind translucent screens at the Polish pavilion. A projection behind the screen. Krzysztof Wodiczko brings *Guests* to the threshold of our mind; they come from afar, look for work, fuzzy in our consciousness as in the art piece. A hand gets in focus as it approaches the screen, quickly disappears in the distance.

Totally unknown are the living people, from Serbia, whose hair, tons of human hair collected in hospitals, jails, has been used by Zoran Todorovic to make felt for blankets. *Warmth*. Piled up in the pavilion, the black volumes of human waste have sucked in DNA, forgetfulness, and cynicism. But, they are, undeniably, condensed human presence, massive and warm.

Pascale Marthine Tayou in the Arsenale spreads a different feeling of life. The installation is a life size model of an African village recreated, sculpted, painted, incrustated with videos and as many sounds of hammers, cutting, weaving, crying, talking, the artist could collect. He lives in Belgium. How is this art? One might say. "Art, for a while, will linger as a memory trace, but not as something that matters." Allan Kaprow. *To be Human* swallows the visitors almost forcing them to sit, to stay, paying attention to daily routines of survival and love. If the meaning of life has been shredded by the moneymakers, the meaning of art can go back to the making of goods. Not in utopia: long spines grow on the trees, each fact is a basket of fragility. When they break, other voices will be there.

In an odd way, the smell of straw in the Egyptian Pavilion, the light from Northern Brazil filtered through Luiz Braga's photographic portraits of people behind the curtains of history, and among Palestinians, fifty villages that became a Palestinian event, the Riwaq Biennale -- each village and its historical buildings are the art work -- remove from the eyes the privilege of defining what art is. More and more we look at the artwork and wonder what does it mean to be alive. Pencil shavings cover the whole floor of a white cube at the Palestinian space, in the Cosma and Damiano convent: stubborn like snow flakes that do not melt, impersonal remains of a not yet written historical tragedy. Pencil shavings, again, fly over Dublin from the top of a building in a Irish video installation, precondition of words dispersed in the air? I am surprised my words stick on the screen.

I need some more of them for the New Zealand Pavilion. Judy Millar and Francis Upritchard, split in two different locations, radiate human power in art, way more than most of the works on display.

Maybe only Lygia Pape and Michelangelo Pistoletto at the Arsenale have a similar, strong impact on the visitors. But their ideas are not new. With these artists from New Zealand our feet are on the ground, here and now.

Human figures are no bigger than a hand; each one seemingly lost in a physical state where no identity, no memory comes to help: *Save Yourself*, by Francis Upritchard, is a dry, human landscape. People, like flowers, are dumbfounded naked bodies stricken with colors. One would say they absorbed their color inside, so the yellow guy might have yellow heart, intestine, yellow throat, arteries and blood. We don't know. Oversized tables are their platform, a raft floating through time, god knows why, stuck in front of the old mirrors of a Venetian palace in Cannaregio, Palazzo Mangilli-Valmarana. Searching for themselves in imperfect reflections they seem to pray, "please tell me who I am." It's exciting prayer, the orange man has an erection. Mental alterations? Figments of a story, which does not need words, or specific places? Maybe only assimilation, genetic moods, and a sense of acceptance, in the colors of loneliness.

Judy Millar has a miracle space for *Giraffe-Bottle-Gun*, a small baroque church whose decoration is almost ridiculous for the size of the building, and so thick that the inside space is devoured by arches and columns. I always step into these churches knowing what to expect. I am Italian. Not this time, La Maddalena – the name of the church – contains the artist's invasion. A negotiated invasion: the alien bodies respect the matching of colors, and have a well balanced, central presence that doesn't hurt the architectural symmetry. But the scale is outrageous, breathtaking, and the action painting printed on large sheets of an artificial material, a wallpaper which does not care of walls, fills the church with a story of contrasted feelings, disasters, gestural movements of our time vibrating, circulating around a cylinder exactly centered in the middle, and exploding in front of calculated curves and controlled social events as were allowed in the old paintings. The new painting is not only surface. It is body, and form, and an act of freedom. As if a big boat had entered into the church and decided to rest, dismembered. No more. Physicality is not for words. To call it visual is a reduction. A giraffe, a bottle, a gun? Yes, and everything else one can feel in that space.

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