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54th Venice Biennale
ENGLISH TEXT

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INTRO

Every two years, the Venice Biennale takes place as a huge, burgeoning and sometimes anachronistic display of cultural excellence and nationalism. It's the closest thing that the art world has to the Olympic Games. Battles for prominence are "fought" between international superstars, fans take sides, and there are various prize-giving ceremonies. In 2011, with 87 participating countries including the inaugural pavilions of Saudi Arabia, Bangladesh and Haiti, and with the official return by such countries as Congo, Costa Rica, Cuba, India, Iraq, South Africa and Zimbabwe after an absence of decades, the 54th Venice Biennale is the biggest edition ever. As far as public and critical reaction go, there has never been such consensus in response to the event. The Austrian, Swiss and British pavilions are universally popular (respectively featuring Markus Schinwald, Thomas Hirschhorn and Mike Nelson), there is a strong presence of innovative art from Arabic origins and there are superlative collateral exhibitions by Anselm Kiefer, Anish Kapoor, Marisa Merz, Julian Schnabel and Pier Paolo Calzolari spread throughout the museums, palaces and other venues in the city. Overall, the visitor notes a welcome lack of sensationalism, combined with a sense of freedom. But most of all, everyone agrees that the confusion and chaos of the Italian pavilion, with its racks of paintings, photographs and sculptures by 200 hard-to-distinguish artists, displayed in a chaotic stack as a supposed celebration of 150 years of Italian Unification, is simply dreadful. As a political gesture, it might be the best symbol yet of the sad state of the nation.

In a slightly smelly canal in the backwaters of Venice, you enter a dilapidated building. You climb up crooked stairs to the first floor, through a dirty corridor into a darkened room. There is the buzzing noise of a badly-connected electrical light. There are broken cabinets, office shelves and discarded files on the floor. In a video projected on a wall, two businessmen play a game of *Star Wars* in an office similar to where you are standing. Using ordinary fluorescent tubes instead of sci-fi light sabers, they joust with each other in a playful battle between Jedi Knights, providing a light-hearted but hard-hitting view of the recent wars in the Middle East. As they smash the fluorescent tubes, the lights go out. This is an installation by young Iraqi artist Adel Abidin, in the Iraqi National Pavilion in the Gervasuti Foundation. Welcome to the unexpected world of the 54th Venice Biennale.

During the opening days of the Venice Biennale in the heat of early June (the exhibitions continue through November 27) gossip and excitement was rife. Strolling through various exhibits, Elton John and David Furness with a baby carriage vied for attention with Salma Hayek and Naomi Campbell, while *Luna*, the 377-foot super-yacht belonging to Roman Abramovich, Russian businessman and owner of Chelsea football club, was ostentatiously moored directly outside the Biennale gardens. In between all the pavilions, visitors literally kept running into joggers. These were professional athletes warming-up for their ongoing performance staged by American art duo Allora & Calzadilla. Outside the American pavilion, a tank has been turned upside down, functioning as an over-sized treadmill, with different athletes taking turns to run on the rotating tank-tracks. It is as though Allora & Calzadilla have set up a training program for an aggressive, military gym. Meanwhile, all throughout Venice, protesters distribute red t-shirts and carry-bags branded with the slogan "Free Ai Weiwei", the imprisoned dissident Chinese artist.

This year, much heated discussion revolved around the Italian pavilion, with claims of cultural kleptomania, and visions of minor masterpieces tossed in amongst the trash. The media-savvy curator of the Italian pavilion, Vittorio Sgarbi, faced an onslaught of ever-mounting criticism. Outrageous rumours alleged that he had received 5 million Euro personally from President Berlusconi to organise the Italian pavilion in Venice, accompanied by a series of aligned exhibitions throughout the country dedicated to artists from each Italian region (an exhausting list of more than 3,000 artists). At a later press conference, in a homage to Piero Manzoni's infamous "Merda d'artista" (shit of the artist, in a can), Marina Ripa di Meana, a Roman aristocrat, threw the contents of a jar labeled "piscio d'artista" (artist's piss) over the incensed Sgarbi. Meanwhile, former Venice Biennale director Achille Bonito Oliva publicly denounced the national pavilion as a disastrous example of "karaoke pluralism". The public lapped it up.

Italy was far better served by excellent solo shows staged outside the main venues – sculptures made from lead, neon and refrigerator elements by the Arte Povera master Pier Paolo Calzolari at the Ca' Pesaro Museum on the Grand Canal, and *Lucid Dreams*, a brilliant solo of vast canvases by young Roman artist Cristiano Pintaldi at a former shipyard in San Pietro di Castello. Pintaldi reveals spiritual and otherworldly aspects to recent media events, including his images of political rallies, natural disasters and religious figureheads, juxtaposed with scenes from science fiction films and alien invasions, all painstakingly painted in pixelated images similar to enlarged television screens.

Bice Curiger, the Zurich-based curator of the 54th Venice Biennale, took the brave step of using three late 16th Century canvases by Tintoretto, restored especially for the occasion, as the introduction to her central exhibition entitled *ILLUMI-nations*. *The Last Supper*, *The Creation of the Animals* and *The Stealing of the Body of Saint Mark* were revolutionary for their time, initially rejected as too modern by the men who commissioned them. Currently seen out of their historical context of the Accademia and the Scuola di San Marco, these paintings now flash and glow with strong, contemporary light, well-suited to the overall theme of Curiger's exhibition. She presents a selection of 83 artists, a mixture of emerging artists together with outsiders and such superstars as Maurizio Cattelan (he has contributed a flock of semi-hidden, stuffed pigeons, perched on rafters throughout the central pavilion, causing the ire of animal-welfare groups), Cindy Sherman, James Turrell, Katharina Fritsch and Franz West. Austrian artist West was presented a Golden Lion for his career.

While many people were perplexed by the central exhibition, two artists truly shone. Urs Fischer has installed a series of incredibly life-like sculptures – a male art collector, an ordinary office chair and the reproduction of a Florentine marble statue – which are in fact giant candles, slowly becoming distorted as they burn and drip. Exhibited in a cinema-like setting, Christian Marclay's *The Clock* deservedly won the grand prize for the best artist. Using snippets from film and television, the American artist has created a 24-hour-long montage in chronological real-time, as a parallel, fictional countdown. Different scenes showing watch-faces, time-pieces and dialogue report the exact hour, to create Marclay's surreal, disjointed universe which ticks along at exactly the same pace as the real world.

As clearly shown by Tintoretto's masterpieces, great art is timeless, but some contemporary art is emphatically time-based. This is never more-so than in many of the works exhibited in Venice which have been created in the aftermath of the Arabian spring. This year reveals a focus on art from the Middle East (apart from the last-minute defection of the pavilion of the Kingdom of Bahrain for political motives). In the Egyptian pavilion, *Thirty Days Running in the Place* is a moving exhibition dedicated to Ahmed Basyony, an artist who used new media technology in his research. His filmed performance in a

sterilised space in the gallery of Giza Opera House is interspersed with videos he made using his phone camera, recording the riots in downtown Cairo and Tahrir Square, events which lead to his death on the night of January 28, 2011.

Meanwhile, *The Future of a Promise* at the Magazzino del Sale (former salt stores), is a pan-Arab exhibition of works by 25 artists from Tunisia to Melbourne, via Lebanon, Los Angeles and London, seen as a proposal about how they interpret this current period of social transition. This is a landmark exhibition, free of false rhetoric. Highlights include *Shadow Sites* by Jananne Al-Ani (aerial films of desert regions in which traces of human activity are only revealed by the shadows cast when the sun is at its lowest), fake real-estate ads selling bombed residences by Taysir Batniji, glass-works by Mona Hatoum, and *Embrace* by Palestinian artist Emily Jacir. This is an empty, circular, motorised sculpture fabricated to look like a luggage belt, similar to those found in airports. It is activated when the viewer approaches. It is a metaphor for the act of waiting, and for those people whose voyages stop before they can even begin.

In a similar vein of conceptual openness, the Danish pavilion crosses many borders to present an international survey called *Speech Matters*, based on the ideas of liberty and the freedom of speech by 18 artists. From the hard-hitting “racist” comics by Robert Crumb (US) and the portraits of revolutionaries burnt into wooden scaffolding by Thomas Kilpper (Germany), to the conversational mini-tragedy filmed by Wendelien van Oldenborgh and the “truisms” voiced by the split personalities of Han Hoogerbrugge (both artists from Rotterdam), it shows how it is sometimes notoriously difficult to distinguish a real threat from a purely expressive activity. According to a delightfully cynical dilemma posed by Hoogerbrugge: “Freedom is just chaos with better lighting.”

Given this attitude, maybe the Dutch pavilion didn't fare so well in these surroundings. Its function was to study the notions of national identity and community, spotlighting the current problems facing the Dutch cultural world, with budget cuts of up to 40% and a seriously diminishing infrastructure. These are draconian times. The pavilion itself, however, comes across as self-referential, and didactic. It brings home the basic issue of how practically to deal with national representation in such a global “fun-fair” as the Venice Biennale. For which audience is a country actually catering? How do you attract the interest of a viewer in the midst of so much competition? In itself, this is a valid argument, but maybe a Biennale exhibition is not the best platform for theatrical discourse, even in a pavilion designed by Gerrit Rietveld. The scale-model of the Dutch pavilion, designed as a pop-up book by Maureen Mooren, is almost as legitimate as the larger installation itself – a constructivist maze with a viewing platform and various elements reflected in mirrored tiles.

The labyrinth

Compare this to the jumbled pathway inside the Swiss pavilion. The visitor is forced to make his way precariously between smashed mirrors, spiked glass and reams of horrifying photos of violent deaths in Thomas Hirschhorn's complex installation. Everything is taped down, wrapped in foil, set up as a dangerous mixture of a terrorist news agency, a drug lord's den and a backyard bomb factory. Hirschhorn's pavilion is a terrifying meeting point between the *Kristallnacht* and a crystal-meths laboratory. It includes grim pictures of body parts, burnt corpses and all the things you never want to see.

But if there was a common link as part of the 54th Biennale, then the labyrinth was a recurring motif used by many artists to disorient us, to distort normalcy through fractured perspectives. Mike Nelson has transformed the proud British pavilion into a squalid series of slum workshops, constructed around an abandoned courtyard, like a cemented-up bunker in a war-torn city. The visitor is lost in a dusty maze containing dim photo labs, furnaces, wood lathes and sewing machines, hemmed in by low ceilings, stairways to

nowhere, locked doors, and a basement of doom. Claustrophobia rules. An identical domed room, with woollen spools and broken looms laying on the floor, has been constructed twice, so that the unsuspecting visitor suffers a heightened sense of uncomfortable *deja vu*.

In one of those wonderful coincidences which make every Biennale such a joy, two nearby pavilions almost function as oblique annexes to Nelson's installation. At the Australian pavilion, Hany Armanious has made incredibly realistic casts of such "worthless" objects as damaged work-benches and old pin-boards, similar to those found scattered throughout Nelson's installation. Deliberately using the non-precious material of polyurethane resin, Armanious creates a visual double-take, inspired by his desire to superimpose the mysterious on the mundane.

A different sense of poetry is revealed by Dominik Lang in the Czech pavilion. He has created a new studio workshop as a labyrinth, incorporating the figurative sculptures of his father inside new constructions of reassembled showcases, cabinets and mirrors.

"My father was a sculptor," explains Lang. "He had stopped working long before I was born. His sculptures were more like sleeping witnesses than living work. With their help, I am trying to look into my own past, which is at the same time a portrait of collective memory. I am thus construing an inter-generational dialogue in retrospect, a dialogue which in reality never came to pass."

Christian Boltanski takes this labyrinthine sense of memory to a further nostalgic level in the French pavilion, with black-and-white faces of infants and elderly people turned into a conveyor belt. This is set in motion as a continuous loop, running like negative film in a giant projector made from a maze of aluminium scaffolding pipes. It is like we are seeing generations of people pass us by in an instant, trapped inside a whirring machine.

Out of the blur of the Venice Biennale, particularly in an edition dedicated to *ILLUMINATIONS*, there are always a few individual works which shine out like beacons. In the Palazzo Loredan, Belgian artist Koen Vanmechelen has continued his artistic study based on the creation of a new breed of chicken, with a marble statue of his 15th generation Mechelse Fayoumi rooster surreally exhibited on a plinth among busts of Veronesi, Palladio and Bellini in the foyer of the Institute of Science, Letters and Art.

Anselm Kiefer's *Salt of the Earth* at the Magazzino del Sale is essentially a single gigantic landscape installation, with a series of lead panels covered in ash, sulphur and salt. After they are submitted to the process electrolysis, areas on the screens become calcified, or tarnished with green patina, creating an oxidised backdrop panorama for Kiefer's *Ark*, a sculpture in the form of a rusting submarine. Salt also appears in the form of a natural bridge made from salt-crystals proposed by Sigalit Landau in the Israeli pavilion, part of a multi-faceted project about changing the demarcation of borders. This features a pair of videos in which three nude women act the roles of mermaids, cancelling the watermarks of high-tide on the shoreline, while three youths are reduced to an amusing game of endlessly bickering over lines drawn in the sand.

At the Punta della Dogana, as part of the new museum exhibiting Francois Pinault's Collection, a room dedicated to Subodh Gupta resembles a kitchen-sink drama, mixing the romance of housework with the fetishism of daily life in New Delhi. In a trio of oils on canvas, stainless steel kitchen utensils fall from the heavens. They reflect in themselves like deities of abundance and excess. On the floor lays an out-size sculpture of a pair of stainless steel spoons, reclining together like lovers.

Surreal domestic bliss is also celebrated in the Luxembourg pavilion at the Ca' del Duca, honouring the work of Martine Feipel & Jean Bechameil. In a series of interconnecting neoclassical rooms, they have created a rubberised, white interior, with curving walls, bulging columns, warped panelling and mirrors reflecting infinity, reminiscent of an illustration by Escher. It is like walking through a dream, where the architecture is made from white chocolate, and the chandelier swings as though in an earthquake. As a visual

series of tricks (Bechameil has also designed the décor for several films by Lars van Trier), the artistic duo has created a series of volumes that are dislocated and completely illogical.

Here again we see the reference to the mythical labyrinth, although at the 54th Venice Biennale, it has been used best of all by Markus Schinwald in his radical installation of paintings, sculpture and films in the Austrian pavilion, a building itself designed by Modern architect Josef Hoffmann in 1934. The space has been divided into maze of blocky panels which hover about a metre from the floor. You can always see the legs of other visitors as they wander through the series of corridors to look at Schinwald's elegant portraits of people wearing golden clamps, facial harnesses, mouthpieces and restricting metallic devices, with unspecified purposes. Each portrait hangs alone in its special niche. Elsewhere, installed high up, are his sculptures made from the wooden legs of tables and chairs, morphed together as anatomically carved forms, sensual and eerie. Add to this two film projections in which well-dressed bourgeois-looking actors are shown in an abandoned building. They are alone, unsettled, irritated. Strange things happen for no apparent reason. A small block of tiled masonry moves by itself, bumping into a woman's foot. An elderly man finds his leg trapped in a fissure in a wall. Another woman is suddenly involved in a magical rope trick, elevating without visible means. That we seem to be in the presence of a new art superstar is only strengthened by the fact that *Flash Art*, the Italian bible of last-minute trends, has just dedicated the cover of its Venice Biennale summer issue to Schinwald. This is contemporary art of the highest order. The division of space is extraordinary and exciting, creating an exhibition which is alone worth the trip to Venice.

54th International Venice Biennale
Giardini, Arsenale and other venues
opening hours 10-18, closed Monday
through November 27
www.labiennale.org