

Frieze Blog, 55<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale: Afterthoughts, Text/Dan Fox, June 03, 2013

frieze blog

## 55th Venice Biennale: Afterthoughts

JUNE 03, 2013 by Dan Fox



Installation view at the Pavilion of Cyprus and Lithuania (Photo: Robertas Narkus)

I left the damp and maddeningly labyrinthine beauty of Venice a few days ago. Here is an assortment of observations still nagging at me:

**1. You Can Please Some of the People Some of the Time....** Putting together the main Venice Biennale exhibition has always struck me as a poisoned chalice for curators. It's about as prestigious a gig as you can get, but however the curator approaches it, they are damned if they do, and damned if they don't. Too many young artists! Not enough young artists! Too much video! Not enough video! Too much theory! Not enough theory! (Note that the complaint 'too few women artists' never raises a counter-criticism, because the opportunity never arises.)

## LEO XU PROJECTS

For many visitors to 'The Encyclopedic Palace', Massimiliano Gioni's richly-curated exhibition for the Biennale, it was the inclusion of many works from outside the orthodox canon of 20th century art history that excited the most enthusiastic responses. During the opening week, I wondered why I felt like giving little more than a shrug of the shoulders whenever I heard the criticism that 'It's a museum show, not a biennale'. Long gone are the days when a show such as this – or for example the Sao Paulo Bienal, or the Whitney Biennial – would be the one of the few opportunities one would have to be brought up to speed on the latest art being made in various parts of the world. Furthermore, the biennial model has been so frequently explored, experimented with, exploded, imploded and turned inside-out over the past decade, that at this stage the criticism felt a little like arguing whether white bread is more important than brown bread.

Another complaint about Gioni's show that I heard only a couple of times was that it 'didn't engage with the contemporary discourse,' though few seemed quite able to tell me what the contemporary discourse is. (I suspect for a certain stripe of VIP attendee during opening week, 'contemporary discourse' was code for 'recognisable names' or 'what collectors are buying.')

This observation seemed too worried by the inclusion of work by dead artists, rather than the large number of living, working artists also in the show. The argument also flattened out the idea that you can't have a conversation about the present without speaking to the past, and that the past doesn't necessarily take the same form for everyone. Save for the odd inclusion such as Walter de Maria or Bruce Nauman, I found it refreshing not to visit yet another biennale in which there was a central, chapel-like room in which audiences were expected to pay their respects to The Canonical White Male Artist from History; for instance, Cy Twombly in the last edition, or Sigmar Polke two biennales ago. Perhaps Gioni did stack the number of artists expressing dense personal cosmologies rather high in places throughout the show – at points it was a little like going to a party where every guest wishes to corner you and talk intensely about their definition of the universe rather than ask you how you're doing – but I was never short of something to discover, think about, learn from, agree with or push against. Rather than zone out whilst someone explains to me for the umpteenth time, via the magical transubstantiations of curating, The Significance of X 1960s Minimalist from New York or Y 1970s Conceptualist from Cologne. This feeling kept coming to mind as I walked around...

**2. ...'When Attitudes Become Form: Bern 1969/Venice 2013'**, the re-staging, at Fondazione Prada, of Harald Szeeman's landmark exhibition 'Live In Your Head: When Attitudes Become Form. Works – Concepts – Processes – Situations – Information' at Kunsthalle Bern, Switzerland, in 1969. (For a far more thorough perspective on this show than mine, my colleague Christy Lange has written an excellent overview that you can read [here](#).)

Don't get me wrong, I am sure that this exercise, organized by Germano Celant, Thomas Demand and Rem Koolhaas, is of value to scholars of exhibition history and to students of curating who would not only get the chance to see how some of these works functioned together in real life rather than in black-and-white documentary photographs, but see how far one can push meta-curatorial experiments. Yet, walking through this show I began to feel a faint, creeping sense of *ennui* and a deeper appreciation for the discoveries to be made in 'The Encyclopedic Palace'. As I mentioned, we don't all have to be interested in the same histories, or the same pasts, but how necessary is the further veneration of a particular generation of European and US Process, Minimal and Conceptual artists? Is an exercise like this one that just reinforces an already dominant narrative in post-war art history, only this time adding further cultural authority to the figure of the curator? (A set of wall labels, corresponding to letters sent to Szeeman by artists included in the original exhibition, told us that these missives were written using 'ink on paper'; an almost comically po-faced over-explanation that seemed to suggest this historical documentation should be treated as Very Important Art; reliquaries from the Shrine of Saint Harald of Curating.)

However, this exhibition does raise some much more interesting questions outside the echo chamber of curatorial studies. What is the relationship of re-staging exhibitions to the culture of re-staging, reissues, retro fashion and reformed bands that has dominated the field of pop music over the past decade – a tendency that critic Simon Reynolds has dubbed 'retromania'? What do we do when art starts gobbling its own tail, when the cultural cycle spins at an ever-increasing rate not just in pop culture but also in the supposedly more stately-paced, serious and scholarly museums? It is complacent and culturally snobbish to believe that art is somehow immune to this because we think we've all been inoculated by 'criticality,' by a deeply ingrained understanding of self-reflexive art-making.

3. With all that said, why did I enjoy **The Romanian Pavilion** in the Giardini? Here, a small group of actors performed mime versions of famous art works from the Biennale's history, ranging from Picasso through Vito Acconci to Maurizio Cattelan. Aside from my own contrariness, perhaps I liked it because it seemed to be coming at history from the other end of the spectrum to 'When Attitudes Become Form'. There was lightness and humour to the attitudes here. I sense also that there was something serious being said about how work enters history and what gets forgotten along the way, or about how memory functions in tandem with photographic documentation. (Furthermore, how much it simply costs financially to reinforce your place in history; compare a handful of actors in an empty room to the complexities of re-staging 'When Attitudes Become Form'.) And if you thought the Romanian Pavilion was a bit of a Tino Sehgal rip-off, as some did, well believe it or not, experimental theatre and mime existed before Sehgal. Imagine that!

4. **The return of the film/video essay** was another salient feature of not just Gioni's exhibition, but a number of national pavilions too: A single narrator – often, though not always, that of the artist – advancing an argument about identity, politics, the nature of images and objects, or their value and methods of circulation, speaking over footage that might be directly related to the narrative, or have a looser, more associative relationship to it. In 'The Encyclopedic Palace' this approach could be found in work by Ed Atkins, Camille Henrot, Harun Farocki, Helen Marten, Hito Steyerl and, a little more obliquely, Mark Leckey. The artists covered subjects ranging from the meaning of the universe (Henrot) through to methods of disappearance from an increasingly controlled surveillance culture (Steyerl). For the Scottish Pavilion, Corin Sworn told us the story of her anthropologist father's experiences in a remote part of Peru – a tale that was also framed by the voiceover with questions about the nature of images – and Duncan Campbell gave us an essay on art, value and Negritude, based on Chris Marker and Alain Resnais' 1953 film *Statues Also Die*. (Marker's work looms large over a few of these film and video essays.) In the Welsh Pavilion, Bedwyr Williams showed a video that wasn't strictly a film/video essay, but also featured a single voiceover paired with associatively related images, in a work that was dark, delirious and psychedelic. Much like...

5. ...**The Pavilion of Lithuania and Cyprus**, held in a building one would never expect to find in Venice. An almost Brutalist-looking edifice, tucked next to the Arsenale, housed a huge, modern school gymnasium, where curator Raimundas Malasauskas had organized a show of performances, sculpture, painting and dance in an environment that was about as un-Venetian as one could get. This being a working school, the sound of children echoed through the rooms. Occasionally a troupe of kids might be spotted walking amongst the exhibits in their sportswear. A low bass sound rumbled through the building's veins as a dancer performed an increasingly frantic dance in the school's basement gym, illuminated by a single spotlight. Robot vacuum cleaners patrolled darkened corridors. Sculptures perched on sharply raked rows of seats overlooking a basketball court. Performers crawled along, or slowly rolled down these seats too. They leaned against doorways and glowered at visitors. One figure, wearing a mask but otherwise dressed in the biennial audience uniform of exhibition tote bag, dark jeans, and trainers, cut a sinister figure as he crept amongst temporary walls that had been shipped to Venice from a range of northern European museums. These walls sat on pine needles that gave off a pleasing scent. This pavilion was a portal to a parallel world. It provided a break from the overload of history that oozes everywhere else from Venice's bricks. The experience was refreshingly disorienting. Were we still in Venice? Where were the souvenir tote bags and officials from the national ministry of culture and lavishly produced catalogues? What on earth was going on? What was the work and what wasn't? For once it was nice to simply enjoy the mystery.

6. Finally, a nod to the **SS Hangover**, by **Ragnar Kjartansson**, included in 'The Encyclopedic Palace.' Outside the far end of the epically long Arsenale was a small boat, done out like a miniature Viking longship, with a uniformed sea captain at the helm. In it, a small group of tuxedo-clad musicians played a slow, plaintive composition for brass instruments; it was uncomplicatedly beautiful music that could fit the lump-in-throat finale of a film, or perhaps a ballad number on a Tom Waits record. The boat sailed out 100 yards from its berth, and round the corner into the adjacent dock. From there it sailed out again, and made the return journey. Repeat, with feeling, for the next six months.

## LEO XU PROJECTS

Kjartansson's work put me in mind of a short piece of music written in 1977 by British composer Gavin Bryars, entitled *White's SS*. Rather less sinister than it sounds, the 'SS' in this instance referred to Bryars' fellow composer John White, and the method of 'systems and sentimentality' that he applied to music-making. It's a piece of music as melancholy and evocative as the one in Kjartansson's boat. I wonder, rather than standing for 'Steam Ship' (a misnomer anyhow, as it was a sailing boat with an outboard motor), if we might let the 'SS' in the name of Kjartansson's vessel stand for 'Systems and Sentimentality'. If 'When Attitudes Become Form' redux, or the debates over the nature of Gioni's show are anything to go by, then a 'systems and sentimentality hangover' seems like a good way to describe how we feel about the present condition of art and exhibition-making.