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Outside "Making Worlds" in the Giardini in Venice



The Palazzo del Esposizioni in the Giardini



Detail of Yoko Ono "instruction" in the Palazzo del Esposizioni

BIENNALE DEGREE ZERO

by Ben Davis

When it comes to curating the Venice Biennale, it seems to me that you can either succeed modestly or fail spectacularly.

The two touchstone Biennales of recent memory are spectacular failures. They are memorable precisely as grandiose, intriguing experiments that didn't quite come off. Francesco Bonami's epic 2003 "Dreams and Conflicts: The Dictatorship of the Viewer" was a massive essay on curatorial fragmentation, with a hyperbolic social mission, exhausting and confounding visitors with its universes-within-universes approach. 2007's "Think With the Senses, Feel With the Mind" was as keenly anticipated as any recent art event, mainly because of the undeniable intellectual prowess of curator Robert Storr, who seems to turn everything into a referendum on himself. Essentially one big polemic against *October*-ite theory-art (which stood accused, I guess, of thinking with the mind), Storr's Biennale ultimately seemed to disappear beneath the world-cracking weight of the curator's own ego.

Still, during the week I was in Venice, "Dreams and Conflicts" and "Think With the Senses, Feel With the Mind" came up as a reference point -- how many times? Ten? Twenty? Meanwhile, I'll admit that when I wanted to say something about 2005's Biennale, I actually had to look up the titles of that co-curated affair, Maria de Corral's "The Experience of Art" and Rosa Martinez's "Always a Little Further." These shows left no bad taste, but also almost no memory. Daniel Birnbaum's 2009 effort is comparable to 2005: It is brainy, pleasant, calm, professional, inoffensive, generally satisfying ("messy and classy" is how Birnbaum describes his esthetic). Even the title of the 2009 Biennale, "Making Worlds," is comically forgettable. I heard people say that the reference to "worlds" had something to do with globalization -- though not in the sense that the show brings together art that reflects on this omnipresent theme. Rather, it just brings together a good selection of international artists. Birnbaum has said that he was inspired by Nelson Goodman's treatise *Ways of Worldmaking*. Yet in the end, isn't the title "Making Worlds" about as close to naming an art show "Creative Things" as you can come?

Every Biennale is really charged with providing the answer to a question: What is a Biennale for? Every Biennale is trying to dodge the inertia of its own format. A couple of ready answers offer themselves. There is the Type 1 Biennale: an affair that pretends to be a survey of its moment, a representative slice of creative production, justifying itself as a window into what is going on now in art. The Whitney Biennial and the recent "Younger than Jesus" aside, Type 1 shows are increasingly seen as problematic, partly because the international glut of biennials and triennials demands a bit more of curators, partly because the idea that you can objectively survey the present sounds suspiciously pre-postmodern to today's savvy art crowd. All of which has spawned the more contemporary Type 2 Biennale -- the curator's essay, some kind of declaration about Art and its Institutions and Functions. Both "Dreams and Conflicts" and "Think With the Senses, Feel With the Mind" played variations on this theme.



André Cadere work [at right], with Georges Adéagbo installation, in the Palazzo del Esposizioni



Installation view of the "Gutai Room" in the Palazzo del Esposizioni



Visitor interacting with Shozo Shimamoto's *Please Walk on Top*

"Making Worlds," however, provides a different answer. It is really something pleasantly more modest -- call it the Type 0 Biennale. "The show does not try to illustrate a philosophy of art," Birnbaum says. It's as if he has resolved to admit that the Venice Biennale is exactly what it is: summer entertainment for the smart set.

The Type 0 framework dictates the way the art functions here. Birnbaum organizes his show based not on ideas or even themes, but on the conventions of art-world entertainment, a kind of compare and contrast presentational strategy that moves you from one space to the next. He alternates between established names and exciting new blood; unconventional things by familiar artists, and familiar things by unconventional artists; and so on. At the section of "Making Worlds" at the Italian Pavilion in the Giardini -- renamed this year the Palazzo del Esposizioni -- the façade is done over by John Baldessari with a pleasant blue oceanscape -- a refreshing, visually delightful display, cool in multiple senses -- while just inside, one is met by a posted series of typewritten Yoko Ono "instructions" for do-it-yourself performance art. The two artists share this year's Golden Lions for career achievement. Their displays play off one another, fey Pop spectacle set off against sincere Conceptual anti-spectacle.

And so it goes in "Making Worlds." No overall narrative thrust, but a series of curator-ly micro-narratives eddying through the installation -- formal and conceptual rhymes, and such -- giving it some amusing texture, guiding you on. In the Palazzo del Esposizioni, you hit repeatedly upon works by André Cadere, examples of the late artist's sectioned, multicolored staffs leaned up against the white walls, enigmatic markers punctuating different spaces. You also repeatedly pass through detritus-filled zones by the Benin-born Georges Adéagbo. At some point, the two meet -- you come upon a space where one of Cadere's staffs has been placed at the edge of one of Adeagbo's crowded displays of newspaper clippings, banners and souvenirs. You are left to decide who trumps whom -- the European artist's mock shamanism comes face to face with the African artist's shaggy archeology of the political unconscious. It is a sparkling little moment.

Birnbaum's most gutsy move is the inclusion of an entire room dedicated to figures from the Japanese "Gutai" art group in the Palazzo del Esposizioni (Akira Kanayama, Sadamasa Motonaga, Saburo Murakami, Shozo Shimamoto, Kazuo Shiraga, Atsuko Tanaka, Tsuruko Yamazaki, Jiro Yoshihara and Michio Yoshihara), whose members were doing the "Unmonumental" thing way back in the '50s. Saburo Murakami is represented by *Six Holes*, a display of brown paper stretched over a scaffolding and punctuated by, well, six holes, a parody of the signature Ab-Ex gesture, and *Box*, a large wooden box sculpture that is completed when the visitor places his ear on it; Shimamoto's *Please Walk on Top* consists of two wooden walkway structures -- one with wobbly, moving plates, the other uneven, Louise Nevelson-esque slats of black-painted wood -- and asks visitors to (carefully) tread atop them; Motonaga's piece consists of three clear tubes stretched overhead, each filled with a bit of colored liquid -- yellow, green, red -- to racy sculptural effect.

So much other art in Birnbaum's show is echoed in the pokerfaced lyricism of these vintage pieces, which are quintessentially "messy and classy," inscrutable and playful, and totally fresh feeling. The "Gutai Room" gives the Biennale a note of scholarly gravitas. But it is really just that -- a note, a flourish, a beat within a composition. It is not clear what function singling the Gutai artists out for group display has. In an interview, Birnbaum talks about how Gutai is "radically underappreciated," and mentions their subliminal influence on Western art via Allan Kaprow. A bolder Biennale could have made a stronger commitment to this thesis, could have pushed the idea of an



Outside "Making Worlds" at the Arsenale



Lygia Pape's *Gold Thread in Square Forms* at the Arsenale



Michelangelo Pistoletto installation at the Arsenale



Grazia Toderi film installation in the Arsenale



alternate history, a buried postmodern *Japonisme*. That would have been a true "world-making" gesture. . . But such a move would have taken some courage. It would also have been less fun, requiring more of a commitment than Birnbaum cares to ask of his viewers here.

The method is similar over in the stately, sweeping brick halls of the Arsenale, where the even larger second section of "Making Worlds" finds its home. You enter the show by passing through two rooms, each devoted to an impressive, perception-bending installation by a venerated artist. The first chamber, hushed and darkened, contains a recreation of Brazilian artist Lygia Pape's installation of stretched gold threads, glimmering in the low light like ghostly harp strings. The next room contains the great Michelangelo Pistoletto's contemporary creation, a room of large mirrors (sans Pistoletto's usual painted figures), each one more broken than the last as you walk clockwise around the room.

All the way at the other end of the Arsenale's two sections, you emerge from another series of low-lit spaces containing still more perception-bending art -- Italian artist Grazia Toderi's lovely two-screen video that transforms a cityscape at night into something alien and abstract, and Chinese artist Chu Yun's lightless room filled with appliances, their blinking lights becoming an abstract, almost painterly, experience. The final chamber of "Making Worlds" couples large stained-glass windows by Spencer Finch and giant fiberglass replicas of the fruit known as the "Hands of Buddha" by Huang Yong Ping. Thus, considering the Arsenale overall, you move from the lean minimalist severity of the older figures to the skeptical religious references of the more contemporary ones, from darkness into the light again, and so on. It's a satisfying progression -- though you must admit that it is so precisely because it offers the tantalizing sense of a meaning without being burdened with one.

In between, the Arsenale installation rolls out one set-piece after another: Camaroonian artist Pascale Marthine Tayou's ambitious, clamorous "African village," filling a giant hall with huts and teepees, fragmentary video projections and the occasional flickering neon, mingling imagery from different world peoples into one overloaded experience; Paul Chan's showstopper, a jerky five-hour, 45-minute-long shadow-puppet orgy, his homage to the porno-metaphysics of the Marquis de Sade; Cildo Meireles' installation where you walk through different chambers, each painted vividly in a different color of the rainbow; Ulla von Brandenberg's elaborate tent space where visitors confront a hypnotic, tightly choreographed black-and-white film of people breaking into song over dinner at Le Corbusier's Villa Savoye. The default language of the art here is sprawling, theatrical -- but Birnbaum varies things just enough that this carnival feel doesn't become too oppressive, as with Richard Wentworth's understated display of canes, dangling high up on a wall from glass plates, perched like lost birds.

There are many images I take away from the 2009 Venice Biennale. Here are some of them: In the Palazzo del Esposizioni, Öyvind Fahlström's disjointed, rebus-like mobile, *Dr. Schweitzer's Last Mission*; Tomas Saraceno's room full of cables, stretched and woven into three-dimensional structures based on the webs of the Black Widow spider; the vitrine of Lygia Pape's charming Neo-concretist cardboard sculptures; U.S. sculptor Rachel Harrison's customarily intriguing, boxy, half-finished monstrosities. And in the Arsenale: Hector Zamora's video imagining a zeppelin festival for Venice (and the actual blimp he wedged in the alleyway right outside); Madelon Vriesendorp's *Mind-Game*, a stage containing Dali-esque props that spectators are meant to arrange, thereby exposing something about their psychic makeup to the public; the homage to German Pop artist Thomas Bayrle at the end of the Arsenale, with his giant, busy, wall-

Works by Spencer Finch and Huang Yong Ping in the Arsenale



Pascale Marthine Tayou installation in the Arsenale



Visitors watching Paul Chan's *Sade for Sade's Sake* in the Arsenale



Image from Ulla von Brandenburg's film installation in the Arsenale



Richard Wentworth installation in the Arsenale

filling silkscreen of a car, surrounded by his *Chrysler Wallpaper*; the videos by Toderi and von Brandenburg.

All in all, I am content. Whether people will have anything to say about "Making Worlds" in two years, that is another matter.

At one of many end-of-night soirees, I hit upon a perfect analogy for the way I felt about this show. Throughout the week, any attempt to get some good dancing off the ground was sabotaged as the music descended into the deep end of deejay-ish wankery -- I am sure that a looped beat with minutely varying bleeps over it is where it's at for record-spinners, but it's just not what lights my fire. Every time some recognizably cheesy pop song came on, things predictably perked up. Even better if the deejay had the genius to play some tune that had some cachet for the crowd -- an entire airport hanger lit up with collective recognition when the stomping drums and plaintive synthesizer riff from *Kids* by bratty Brooklyn electro band MGMT came on. Nothing makes you appreciate the simple things like a few really bad deejay sets.

The point is, Birnbaum has avoided the deeper end of curator-ish wankery with "Making Worlds." This is not the greatest ambition you could have -- but then again, just getting people moving happily through space is not the worst thing you could aspire to, either.

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Installation view of Öyvind Fahlström's *Dr. Schweitzer's Last Mission* in the Palazzo del Esposizioni



Tomas Saraceno's *Galaxy forming along filaments, like droplets along the strands of a spider's web* in the Palazzo del Esposizioni



Sculptures by Lygia Pape (foreground) with paintings Sherrie Levine (background), in the Palazzo del Esposizioni



Sculpture by Rachel Harrison in the Palazzo del Esposizioni



Blimp by Hector Zamora, outside the
Arsenale



Visitor interacting with Madelon
Vriesendorp, at the Arsenale