

ETC



A strong social and political critique

The 52nd Venice Biennale: entitled *Think with the Senses — Feel with the Mind. Art in the Present Tense*. 10 June - 21 November, 2007

Maria Zimmermann Brendel

Numéro 80, décembre 2007, janvier–février 2008

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/35084ac>

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Éditeur(s)

Revue d'art contemporain ETC inc.

ISSN

0835-7641 (imprimé)

1923-3205 (numérique)

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Citer ce compte rendu

Zimmermann Brendel, M. (2007). Compte rendu de [A strong social and political critique / The 52nd Venice Biennale: entitled *Think with the Senses — Feel with the Mind. Art in the Present Tense*. 10 June - 21 November, 2007]. *ETC*, (80), 67–72.

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ACTUALITÉS/EXPOSITIONS

Venice

A STRONG SOCIAL AND POLITICAL CRITIQUE

The 52nd Venice Biennale entitled *Think with the Senses – Feel with the Mind. Art in the Present Tense*, 10 June – 21 November, 2007

hat makes a good exhibition, is not that it differs in all categories from the previous ones you have seen, but that it falls somewhere out of the frame, in ways that you have not yet experienced,” said

Robert Storr, director of the 52nd Venice Biennale. As the first American to hold the prestigious post following the two first women, changes were expected. Storr traveled to Africa to select art, “I was told to be the first biennale director to do so,”¹ added national pavilions, including a first African, and moved the coveted Golden Lion award from June to October; except for the Lifetime Achievement, presented to Malick Sidibé from Mali on opening day, “for enriching an image archive that adds to our awareness of textures, traditions and transformations of African culture.”² Sidibé’s photo and sound installation *L’Afrique chante contre le SIDA* (2005) was shown at the international exhibition venue, the Arsenale (old shipyards and warehouses), curated by Storr where death and conflict were referenced but with relief in between. The national pavilions are traditionally under the care of curators from participating countries with continental Africa spearheaded by the Fundação Sindika Dokolo in Luanda, Angola. But all corresponded in wondrous ways of which Jason Rhoades’ *Tijuanatanjerchandelier* (2006) was emblematic, installed halfway through the mile-long Arsenale where ropes tied one item to the

other like a spider-web into which viewers had to step in order to proceed. The overall tenure was low tech with issues personal and political but with global relevance. Following are highlights of strong articulations corresponding across the Giardini, Arsenale and historic city centre.

At the Giardini where the old national pavilions stand, the Morrinho Group from Brazil built favela, shacks of bricks on sand mounds, *The Morrinho Project* (2007) which contrasted sharply with the surrounding neo-classical buildings. “Welcome to miniature original,” read a note. A monitor in a cardboard box played a video that pointed to the Group’s substandard human habitat at home. Nearby a black Senegalese (a paid performer) washed the windows of the Nordic pavilion behind which billboard-sized photographs of Toril Goksøyr & Camilla Martens spelled out their work’s title *It would be nice to do something political* (2002/07). Here the subaltern, the economically dispossessed, to use Gramsci’s term, did real-time intervention at the heart of the Biennale. In *Borrowed Light* in the British pavilion, Tracey Emin focused on the body. Across mixed media we see her exploring sexuality and intimacy of which some images are just below the level of tastefulness. But one cycle surprised me in its sensitivity. Twenty-seven watercolours on sheets of paper feature heart motifs and other child-like expressions, explained by a letter written in pencil: *Abortion – How it Feels Now*, signed and dated Tracey



Maari Wirkkala, *Landing Prohibited*, 2007. Courtesy Nordic Pavilion

Emin, 1. 8. 2000 ...

Most of the pain from my abortion was induced by guilt....

For years I suffered intolerable pain.

At the time of making these watercolours it was all I was possible of making –

Id [sic] never made anything before like them in my life and I never have since.

I opened and closed [sic] – like a snapshot of my soul.

Such a radical aesthetic of intimacy, now shared, reaches us on the level of empathy and pain. On a giant raw canvas in the African pavilion, the South African Tracey Rose writes in *Untitled* [sic] (2004) about the heartaches of an African woman: [M]y husband took me to the doctor [who] said I can't fall pregnant

because the thokoloshi is keeping my baby.

My heart is so sore My husband he is going

to leave me if I don't have the baby soon ...

and I like to be pregnant I like it so much.

This *écriture féminine*, of women writing the truth about their bodies, is liberating but it reminds us that the metaphors of the Dark Continent, of women and geography, are still with us. Adjacent, Miquel Barceló's two large watercolours *Untitled* (2007) with delicate chromatic accentuations depict a group of African people casting long shadows as they run away from a village and out of the fictive space. I see these figures standing for all those fleeing war, illness and poverty with the hope for a better life in Europe or elsewhere. As I am writing, July 19th, radio newscasts report that fifty illegal Africans are being rescued in Spanish waters after their makeshift boat capsized in four-meter high waves. Spain and Italy have the highest influx of African boat people. How do you deal with illegal immigrants? asks Aernout Mik in *Citizens and Subjects* in the Dutch pavilion. A video, *Training Ground* (2007), focuses on training exercises in which the police learn and practice methods of enforcing the law against refugees. A critical reader co-edited by philosopher Rosi Braidotti extends and intensifies discussions with the hope that a new kind of political reality with moral consequences could be constructed. Approaching the small Finnish pavilion, the door was ajar and light flooded through the ceiling window. In the centre a wooden boat was bobbing and it seemed that the surrounding coloured pieces of glass sparkled like the waters of the Venetian lagoon. A glass ladder was leaning on the wall. For a moment all was quiet until language intervened. A label read: *Landing Prohibited* (2007) by Maaria Wirkkala. In the large Italian pavilion, Storr placed recent work of established artists in a way never seen before. Gerhard Richter's fantastic abstracts in homage to (John) *Cage I-VI* (2006) in whites and grays were put in vicinity to Sigmar Polke's transparent canvases, *Forward* (2007), displayed close to Robert Ryman's *Series White* (2003–2006) and Ellsworth Kelly's *Red Relief with White* (2007). Here beauty and craft reigned supreme. Beauty of another kind could be felt by meeting the shamanic gazes in *Gods of America* (2004) in the Venezuelan pavilion, photographed by Antonio Briceño who presents the shamans in harmony with Nature. Only meters away another reality set in. A loud voice blurred from a storage room: *Book Your Flight to Bagdad, More than Just a Holiday* (2007), by the Iraqi Adel Abidin.

In the Arsenale, Emily Prince formed a US map with 3,800 pencil drawings to be added to daily, titled *American Servicemen and Women Who Have Died in Iraq and Afghanistan (But Not Including the Wounded, Nor the Iraqis nor the Afghans)*, (2004 – to present). Opposite, a DVD projection shows a boy playing with a "ball" that makes an unfamiliar noise. Scratching on gravel and debris, I looked attentively only to recognize that he is kicking a human skull in front of a bombed-out building. Paolo Canavari's *Bouncing Skull* (2007) is a new memento mori, less to remind us of our mortality more to point to the absurdity of war and the effect it has on children. If our age is more baroque than the Baroque, as Peter Greenaway argues, than these large images



support that claim of deathly excess. After more depictions of death and destruction by artists from around the world entering Rhoades' bright colourful web with mattresses to rest on was an out of the frame experience despite the inclusion of garage-sale-kitsch. Storr may have wanted to pay tribute to Rhoades who died in 2006 and for whom art was an autobiographical search for wholeness. Dmitri Gutov's *The Karl Marx School of the English Language* (2007) honours composers, writers and philosophers with twenty exquisitely painted tableaux, of which Hegel's portrait was most prominent displayed in the centre. Here, while reflecting, the argument surfaced that Hegel's Master/Slave dialectic is played out through war and capitalism as one piece and dependent to which artists react.

In the historic city centre two palazzi made biennale history. A first Mexican pavilion was realized in a beautiful Renaissance palazzo where Rafael Lozano-Hemmer installed *Pulse Room* (2006). One hundred transparent flickering light bulbs, suspended from wooden beams displayed the heartbeat of visitors, whose



pulse was measured by holding briefly onto two metal bars. It felt strange, even emotional to leave behind a trace of one's heart. And a first Roma pavilion showed the work of Europe's largest minority from eight countries, grouped ethnically, although "multiculturalism might be an appropriate concept to describe the basic reality of the gypsy people."³ Kiba Lumberg's *Black Butterfly* (2000) of velvet and pearls, held by knives behind metal bars, points to the voluminous skirt, a distinctive mark of Roma women, which for her became a prison uniform. "Whatever the community," Lumberg said, "they always try to suppress the woman's life energy. It is stronger and more visible in a minority. That's all. I left." Dusan Ristic's digital print *Global Warning* (2007) confronts us with the prejudice towards Gypsies as dirty, while Nihad Nino Pusija uses photography to affirm Roma identity and brotherhood in *Triptych* (2007). "National identity" has its







Morrinho Group, *Morrinho Projects*, 2007.
Biennale di Venezia, Press Office

privileges in a Special Administrative Region in a time of post-coloniality an Asian city-state/island handed back to China from Britain in 1997. Hong Kong had its own pavilion and claiming international art status like the other nations. It was among the best in the national category. As I stepped into the courtyard where MAP office (Guitierrez + Portefaix) had an island of oyster shells installed, mist was rising and a recording was heard with parrots asking

questions as an appeal for critical inquiry. During the Biennale, fragments of the shell-island were moved to the Chinese pavilion to celebrate the tenth anniversary of Hong Kong's retrocession. In *I love you more than my own death* (2006/07) Hiram To uses lenticular photo-transparencies to critique Mao's dictatorship and China's continuous human rights violations, which his territorial residency allows. Photographs and texts are incorporated and covered by lush fruit, a mango (Mao's favourite), a peach and a pomegranate – signs of the false promises of freedom and riches for all. Each fruit is closed when standing vis-à-vis but breaks open to reveal the truth when seen at an angle. Amy Cheung's *Devil's Advocate* (2007) presented five frozen humanoids in a freezer the size of a train wagon. I observed viewers being awestruck as they recognized in the dark container the spotlighted figures. Their positions recall the famous dead from Pompeii, equally struck by the devil, asphyxiated like the desperate Chinese (although under different circumstances), who were found in a cargo container in Dover, England, in 2000, the victims of human trafficking, to which this installation makes reference.

Why all this darkness in an international art playground? Artists, especially the younger generation, use their work for strong social/political critique with the hope to effect change through exposure. Storr supported that critique in selecting art sensibly and installing it in ways to maximize the inherent communicative potential. Equally, he focused on beauty in art found in colour, form and abstraction (as an escape to reality?), which he placed wondrously albeit in small portions against the overwhelming images of death.

MARIA ZIMMERMANN BRENDL

Maria Zimmermann Brendel who holds a PhD from McGill University, Montreal, is working as an art critic in Berlin.



NOTES

- 1 Interview with Robert Storr, in *Art 6*, 2007, pp. 60-63. Thanks go to Dr. Nina Roy for editing and Nicolas Roffet for visuals.
- 2 Biennale Press Pack. Storr nominated Sidibé for the award.
- 3 Thomas Acton, *Paradise Lost: The First Roma Pavilion*, Munich: Prestel, 2007, 16. Curator Timea Junghaus clarifies: "Roma does not describe all groups of Gypsies. I consider it far less important to use a politically correct term than to clean the word Gypsy of prejudices and negative stereotypes," p. 23 Lumberg's citations are from this catalogue.