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Report from Venice: The Meshing of Elaborate Moments The 50th Biennale of Venice. June 15 - November 2, 2003

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Venice

REPORT FROM VENICE :
THE MESHING OF ELABORATE MOMENTSThe 50th Biennale of Venice. June 15 - November 2, 2003

his year's international art exhibition in Venice, the 50th Biennale, was chaos at first. The site expanded far beyond the Giardini and Arsenale with more locations in the city.

Over two hundred participants showcased their art either in pavilions as representatives of a country or independently in related venues. Given that the director, Francesco Bonami, chose the odd title *Dreams and Conflict : The Dictatorship of the Viewer* and divided a part of the Biennale into eight sub-exhibitions with eight additional curators each having a unique vision, and bestowed eight sub-titles such as *Utopian Station*, *Zones of Urgency*, *Revolutions Delayed*, and *The Everyday Altered*, it was chaotic. But chaos, as Gilles Deleuze argues, is the condition for an event. "Events are produced in chaotic multiplicity, but only under the condition that a sort of screen intervenes"¹ that confronts, exposes and initiates action and reaction. The screen can be seen in analogy to a selection, a decision-making process, which for this discursive and so far largest Biennale meant devising a personal itinerary so that something productive could emerge. In effect, the screen functions as a tool at the moment when the art begins its impact on the viewer, to provoke reflection and analysis, as I wish to do here.

Bonami's emphasis on the viewer is important because it recognizes a decision-making process, in a Deleuzian sense, acknowledging intervention. One could not do without it this year. But his word selection, as Thierry de Duve put it, is "clumsy, pseudo-political" and "provocative" especially in a time when a war is being fought to eliminate a dictator's rule, with its complications and human loss. "And we could do away with the term utopia and say instead : Not to give up on your desire."²

This 50th Biennale lacked the initial welcoming luster of previous exhibitions, which had been a major drawing point. I am thinking of several years ago, when the giant sculptural head of a horse, constructed after a sketch by Leonardo da Vinci, was set into the lagoon near the Giardini against the colourful flags of participating countries. It was a sight to behold. This year, 'industrial' cylinders, large enough in diameter for a person to walk through, were placed in various locations – one near the Piazza San Marco, another in the Giardini where one such cylinder served as a conduit of entry. In the attractively designed Biennale pamphlet, Bonami writes of the enormous tunnels, as "spatial connection[s] of steel, segments between the



various exhibition sites. They are a message of continuity demonstrating that art knows no bounds or limits, a means of communication between cultures and spaces." And it was the theme of space and with it an occupation with time that I found to be dominant. The initial luster then lacking, could be found in the individual exhibitions and on a personal level. One example among the national pavilions was *Archive* (2002/03) by Rùri from Iceland (www.ruri.is). Her interactive multimedia installation is a databank of photographs and sounds of fifty-two waterfalls, photographed and recorded on site in Iceland. The images of glacial torrents and mountain streams are on transparent film placed between glass, held by aluminum frames in a cabinet, the frames of which viewers are to pull on in order to see and hear (via hidden loudspeakers) the roaring waters. In pulling out a frame an existential space was created where I felt caught between image and sound in the small pavilion and made to meditate on, or be confronted by, this increasingly precious natural source : water. This



Moderata Fonte, in *Donne Illustre*, Photo : Irene Andessner/DieterBrasch/Peter Kubelka, Courtesy of Caffè Florian.

ode to Nature becomes an event for the viewer, through the intervening screen.

In the Giardini, also, I looked in vain for Maurizio Cattalan's *Charlie*, the child robot who on some days roamed the grounds on a tricycle. And a productive disappointment set in when I was denied entry to the Spanish pavilion. With the main entrance blocked by a wall of stones, a woman directed me to a back entry and wished "good luck." At the open back door a uniformed 'guard' denied access to all those not in possession of a Spanish passport. Here the artist-provocateur Santiago Sierra staged a telling performative, shockingly rejecting serious art-inquisitors, in order to foreground how important it is to 'have' the right papers.

In the Arsenale, where Venice once built its maritime fleet, a jeep was 'parked' in the *Zone of Urgency* by Alfredo Juan and Maria Isabel Aquilizan, taking up much space and sidelining nearby installations. While no label indicated a title for this car-project, the American anthem issuing loudly and repeatedly from loudspeakers made up for it, driving away visitors by the sheer force of volume. As a result, the adjacent video-installation *Living Pictures*, 2003 by Sylvie Blocher was passed by many. Blocher's work demands time and concentration as it presents the messages of one hundred immigrants, women and men, who one by one enter a neutral space to stand briefly, often nervously, in front of the camera. The participants are from an immigrant neighbourhood in Paris, some perhaps 'sans papiers,' hence non-citizens, whom Blocher had asked to select one line that would convey a message of importance. Un-

censored, each line was printed (in French and English) on a t-shirt in which the participants posed silently while being videographed. One message reads, "Please speak to me" and another, "I am a person just like you." A sense of urgency is related in this video, which draws viewers closer to the contemporary urban transformation with its 'new' inhabitants and their realities. Blocher bestows citizenship through an intervening screen, staging an event of (re)cognition.

In *Revolutions Delayed*, the single channel video presentation *On Another Occasion*, 2002/03 by Kevin Hanley drew a crowd of onlookers. The project consists of one image alone, a digitally manipulated photograph of Fidel Castro that presents the revolutionary leader 'dead,' eyes grotesquely altered and projected against a white wall. Surprisingly, the image drew silence from the viewing crowd who was, it seemed, momentarily transported into a mortuary chapel. What would the outcome of such an event be ?

Altering the familiar image-subject or object through intervention is also the underlying motif of Damián Ortega's spatially expansive sculptural project in *Every Day Altered*. He took apart a 50s type Volkswagen Beetle and gingerly suspended each fragment by wires, including wheels and motor, in such a way as to keep the outline of the familiar shape, creating stunningly one fragmented whole. By isolating each part and altering the once popular automobile into pieces, he transformed the passage of time into space, drawing attention to fragility, nostalgia, intimacy, perhaps violence, while paying tribute to a vehicle loved by so many, the last model of which rolled off the production line in Puebla, Mexico on July 30th 2003. Here



Steel Pipe – the cord designed by Archea Associati/C+S Associati.

time and memory are quantified into space, into tiny events leaving us desiring.

Once in the Piazza San Marco, viewers were made aware of how this city is caught in time, preserving what is old while striving for new points of contact of which the cylinders are a reminder. There is perhaps no better place for this to occur than in the Caffè Florian. It was here Riccardo Selvatico discussed the idea of starting an art festival, the future Biennale. The first was held in 1895. Since opening in 1720, this bottega da caffè has attracted an illustrious clientele: Goethe, Dickens, Madame de Staël, Balzac, Stravinski among them.³ Balzac described the Caffè Florian as a centre for ideas, theatre, *belles lettres*, money and confessions. To this he may now add the art program *Temporanea : The Possibilities of Caffè Florian*, initiated to showcase art in conjunction with the Biennale. This year's 7th edition, finally allowed a woman⁴ to exhibit within its walls. Such a delay is difficult to understand given that the Florian was the first café in Venice to admit women at the time.

Among the Florian's six period rooms is the sala degli Uomini Illustri (room of illustrious men), which this summer became the site for an interventionist project by Irene Andessner (June 14 to July 31). Hers was a challenge to present art in a place where everything is historically protected, where nothing can be altered and where business is conducted as usual. She successfully turned the room into the sala delle Donne Illustri (room of illustrious women), her photographic installation that presents 'portraits' of ten Venetian women in period costumes (www.fashion.at/culture/andessner). The paintings of such celebrated men as Marco Polo, Titian, Palladio, Goldoni, Canova and others, which have adorned these walls since the mid-1800s, were covered with silver foil. Photographs transferred on screens in the shape of large medallions (that is how the men are presented) were fastened in front of each painting. Notably, each photograph shows the artist herself personifying the historical female sitters of

Venice, although this is not readily apparent. Her interventionist project demands time and careful observation for the event to emerge from this hyper-real staging. Here the photographic screen extends, stretching over the previous ones, as Gottfried Leibniz would argue, to intensify both image and space so that an audible wave can be felt/heard and points of contact created. I will call the event a cry exuding from these portraits of women who have been silenced by history but whose contributions and sheer determination, often against all odds, was extraordinary. Existing images indicate that their contribution was once recognized and perhaps even celebrated.

I was fortunate days before in the Galleria Pamphilio-Stampalia, to have seen the painting of the *Dogaressa Elisabetta Querini-Valier*, which Andessner appropriates, wearing as the original sitter does, the corno doge (the doge's crown). To wear the corno was usually the privilege of the male ruler of Venice. But since Elisabetta was married to a doge she claimed the crown for herself and was in fact crowned dogaressa. I was struck by Andessner's detailed and accurate rendition of the painting and her convincing stagecraft. For *Donne Illustri*, she reproduced and posed as the subject in the Stampalia portrait, involving a complicated application of the camera.

With the help of an extensive Film-Equipe and the result of her own research into archival and visual records she translates these women, in fact becomes them, turning them into a visibility and correcting their exclusion from Florian's visual program. Moreover, strength lies in Andessner's painstaking research where she locates their traces in order to call attention to their achievements. Her research then becomes the event as she sorts it out from the chaos of patriarchy and gives form, space, and voice to those illustrious women via her own body.

While not every woman left an image for Andessner to follow, the 'photograph' of the abbess Agnesina Morosini is likely a construct after fragments taken

from various sources. Yet it is the aloofness in Andessner's face, and her being dressed in a nun's habit that triggers inquiry into Morosini's unique contribution, being leader both of the wealthy convent of San Zaccaria and costume designer. She in fact designed the corno doge in the 9th century. In contrast to this black and white portrait of Morosini, there are two outstanding, colourful images in *Donne Illustri*. One depicts the well-educated and most sought after Venetian courtesan, Veronica Franco, who after a successful career opened a house for abused women. Andessner embodies and frames herself as Franco with short, red hair wearing fine clothes and jewelry, and emphasizing a face absorbed in thought. The other portrait is of Moderata Fonte, who is given the seat of honour at the Florian. Fonte's 'portrait' is presented twice, as photographic transfer in the form of a medallion like the other women, and life size in a filmic transparency set into a light box and displayed in the room next door. The latter work was purchased by the Florian and will henceforth be shown on Fonte's birthday in the 'saletta liberty,' which will become the 'saletta Moderata Fonte' every year.

Modesta Pozze changed her name to Moderata Fonte, *moderate source*, indicating that she is a source for *belles lettres*. She wrote numerous sonnets, madrigals, a passion play and the book *Il Merito delle Donne* (the merit of women), completed the year of her death in 1592, when she was 37 years old. Andessner stages an indelible portrait of Fonte, with eyes directed outward looking directly at the viewer. She wears an elaborately decorated period dress with a starched lace collar, necklace and puffy sleeves to set the sitter off from the background, in fact to generate Fonte's presence. Her head is crowned with a laurel wreath while the blond hair forms two horns indicating an illuminated mind, as was custom at the time in visual presentation. One thinks of Michelangelo's Moses.

The other women of *Donne Illustri* include the painter Marietta Robusti – Tintoretto's daughter, the composer Barbara Strozzi, Elena Cornaro-Piscopia, the first woman to graduate from the University of Padua, Rosalba Carriera who as pastel portraitist painted at

the French court capturing vividly the young Dauphin, Cecilia Venier-Baffo who as Sultana established ties between the Venetian Republic and the 'Islamic' court, and Catarina Cornaro who as daughter of the Republic exercised political will in Cyprus.

Interestingly, during the exhibition each white marble table in the sala degli uomini had a sign: *riservazio*. The room was indeed reserved for the *donne illustri*, with business being conducted on the piazza and under the arcades, as it is possible during the summer. There I noticed a small red banner announcing the exhibition. As I entered the room and saw that all tables were reserved, I felt an atmosphere of immanent arrival. It was as if the illustrious women were soon to fill the empty red velvet seats.

This year's chaotic Biennale demanded the insertion of a screen, because the screen is able to make something. And as a result one walked away intellectually challenged and nourished while aesthetically satisfied. But *Donne Illustri* left traces in the viewer, as if the event has just begun. The exhibition in the Florian has not only (re)opened a door for women, it awaits now, I would like to suggest, the entry of a female Biennale director who, like Selvatico, would articulate her views within.

MARIA ZIMMERMANN BRENDEL

This text is dedicated to the memory of P. – mon amour absolu.

NOTES

- ¹ Gilles Deleuze, "What is an event?" in *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993, 76ff.
- ² Thierry de Duve, *Janus*, 14/03, 72. Janus was freely available in the Arsenale – an art project?
- ³ Floriano Francesconi founded the bottega under 'Venezia Triofante' (triumphant Venice). It soon became il Florian. "The Caffé Florian Past and Present," *Press Release of Temporanea: The Possible Realities of Caffé Florian*, Venice, 2003.
- ⁴ *Temporanea: The Possible Realities of Caffé Florian* was initiated by director Daniela Goddo Vedaldi. *Ibid*, 2003.