

Late Modernisms and Post Nationalisms at the 54th Venice Biennale Published artdish.com July 2011

The irony of the Venice Biennale this year is that there are more nations than ever with pavilions, but less nationalism. Many of the new pavilions are intensely pointed to crucial concerns or to global politics, but there is often a curator from another country, and artists from many different countries (and of course the fact that many artists are no longer living in their original country.) Conversely, the official Biennial show is an example of art world nationalism. It promotes a tired late modernism using traditional approaches to painting, sculpture, video, and photography.

In the Giardini Pubblici, the official and historical venue of the Biennale since 1893, there are 28 permanent pavilions used by 30 countries. In addition 59 other countries were invited to participate in the 54th Venice Biennale (an increase of 12 over two years ago). Some of the new inclusions were Cuba, Haiti, Azerbaijan, Bangladesh, Saudi Arabia, and Iran. Further expanding the geographic reach of the exhibition, both physically in Venice, and in terms of the number of countries included, were officially sponsored "collateral" events such as Anish Kapoor's light sculpture, *Ascension*, in the Basilica di San Giorgio; a Roma pavilion, *Call the Witness*, sponsored by the Open Society Institute, Budapest, Hungary; Frogtopia's Hongkornucopia, a wonderfully wacky performance artist from Hong Kong; Lech Majewski's Brueghel Suite, in which the artist brilliantly re-created Brueghel's *Way to Calvary* with real actors; a pan Arab pavilion "The Promise of the Future;" and a "Soundscape" from Taiwan, to name just a few. There were dozens of Chinese artists in various exhibitions, but everyone focused on the detention of the famously outspoken Ai Wei Wei during the press preview (since released, but silenced).

The Curated Exhibition: "ILLUMInations"

By far the most space was given to "ILLUMInations," the international exhibition "without borders," by the Venice Biennale nominated curator, Bice Curiger, editor of Parkett magazine. The title "ILLUMInations" rather obviously echoed Venice as a city of light, as well as a traditional purpose of art. Its self-conscious typeface was also a little trite. The exhibition was dominated by modernism and abstract art with occasional dramatic interruptions. But based on this exhibition, it is clear that modernism is suffering today from entropy, a loss of its life force. As I walked through the acres of the "ILLUMInations" exhibition, I felt a sense of despair at the disconnect between these artists and the utopian hopes of historical modernism, as well as the contemporary drama in the world. I saw instead artists who recycled old ideas of abstract painting, of minimalist sculpture, of early modern art, of light art of the sixties. Some were well known, continuing practitioners like James Turrell, others were youthful mannerists.

The surprising starting point was the Old Master Jacobo Tintoretto, with his *Removal of the Body of St Mark* (1562-66) and the *Last Supper*. (1592-94) Both suggest drama with *chiaroscuro* lighting and steeply receding perspective. The third painting, the *Creation of the Animals* (1550) painted forty years earlier, with its sea teeming with fish and its sky filled with birds, reminds us of the extinctions on our earth today. According to the curator, Tintoretto was included because he was a radical in his own time, but the unexpected result was that he eclipsed many of the contemporary artists in the exhibition with his compelling drama and sumptuous surfaces.

The curator invited four artists to create pavilions within the exhibition, which she called Para-Pavilions. The most successful was Song Dong's recreation of his parents' ancestral home in China (echoes of Do Ho-Suh's similar act with fabric) at the entrance of the Arsenale. Doors, mirrors, windows, openings, and an elevated historical structure interrupted our forward motion and suspended time for a moment. In

the arena of this “Para Pavilion” Yto Barrata’s childhood mythologies based on home movies from the last century in Morocco echoed the nostalgia of the ancient house.

Also based on memories and nostalgia were the scaled-down replicas of disconnected buildings in Sukhumi, Georgia, by Andro Wekua. The small buildings are intentionally incomplete and seem almost haunted. This city and surrounding area was the site of a brutal civil war, massacres, and ethnic cleansing between the Abkhazian ethnic group and the Georgian government. Wekua left his hometown at the age of 15 in 1992 as smoldering hostilities began to escalate into civil war. As an ethnic Georgian, he can never return .

South African Nicholas Hlobo’s giant magical bird called *Limpundulu Zonkie Ziyandilandela* delightfully interrupted the many bland modernisms. Entirely made of recycled materials, the sculpture forced a meandering path around it and under it. (A related experience was the sculpture by Joana Vasconcelos Contamination, an overpowering abstract construction of woven yarn, in the courtyard of the Palazzo Grassi that wound its way upstairs and hung over our heads, but in this case without mythical or ornithological overtones.)

Urs Fisher’s wax replica of The Rape of the Sabine Women by the mannerist Giambologna will melt down during the exhibition, as will its wax viewer. I liked this piece as a quick hit, but of course it is hardly a new idea.

Some of the videos captured a hidden life (Mohamed Bourouissa), or a compelling narrative (Emily Wardill, Dani Gal). In Elizabeth Benassi’s The Innocents Abroad, microfilm machines stopped at random on documentation on the back of press photos, speaking of lost technology and lost history as did Dayanita Singh’s photographs of newspapers packaged in piles, in a warehouse.

It is no wonder that Christian Marclay’s The Clock won the Grand Prize. Comprised of cuts from over 1000 films, each one with a person looking at a clock or a watch that corresponds to the real time in the place it is being viewed, it is a tour de force of editing, of pacing, of riveting tension, a reverie on time, about time, in real time through the time based medium of a film.

The concept of a large curated show at the Biennale, initiated in 1999, was supposed to move beyond an obsolete nationalism, but “ILLUMInations” was intensely insular, displaying the limitations of the traditional “art world” or “art nation” I would call it, as defined by Pierre Bourdieu: it maintains autonomy in order to sustain its own self- serving hierarchies and value systems, value systems that are increasingly irrelevant. Even when strong artists were included they were often diluted by their setting. One disastrous mismatch was Monika Sosnowska’s Para-Pavilion which displayed the photographs of South African David Goldblatt. The tight angled spaces and decorative wallpaper made it almost impossible to see Goldblatt’s moving photographs and clashed with their seriousness.

Part II A Few National Pavilions

Immediately adjacent to the huge former rope factory of the Arsenale were the pavilions of Saudi Arabia, Argentina, India, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, Croatia, and Chile, as well as a collective exhibition of over 20 Latin American artists. The juxtaposition of Saudi Arabia and Argentina was particularly dramatic, with the first glittering light and deep darkness, the second greyness and opacity. One reflected, the other was inert, one embraced us, the other rejected us. Is there a metaphor here for U.S. relations to these countries?

Saudi Arabia: “The Black Arch” Raja and Shadia Alem

The artists for the Saudi Arabia pavilion were sisters Raja and Shadia Alem, Raja is a writer who celebrates the fantastic (she has been a resident at Hedgebrook on Bainbridge Island, Wa) and Shadia, an artist who also affiliates with surrealism. They grew up in Makkah (Mecca), overlooking the Al-Ka'aba; many pilgrims stayed with them and told their stories. In this first Saudi Arabian pavilion in Venice there was clearly a desire to refute the world's perspective that women in Saudi Arabia are oppressed. *Black Arch* (a reference to a fairy tale about facing the unknown) first immersed us in complete darkness, then dazzled with reflections, geometries, and reflected shapes. A polished steel oval (veiled in black on one side) reflected thousands of chrome balls arranged around a cube. Multiple reflections of light come from changing color slides of abstract mosaics, stained glass, and paintings. *The Black Arch* evoked a connection between two light-filled cities of commerce and pilgrimage: Venice of the water filled lagoons and Mecca, of the dry sand desert. But fundamentally, it was also about the elusiveness of material reality, an apparition, and a mirage based on reflections of abstract geometries.

The Argentine Pavilion: "Ahora estaré con mi hijo (Now I will be with my Son" Adrian Villar Rojas

Argentina invited the young artist, Adrian Villar Rojas, to represent it in the year it gains an official pavilion. His installation had two titles, *Now I will be with my Son*, a line from a Jorge Luis Borges story *The Circular Ruins* about the unknown relationships between dreams and real life. The second title, *The Murderer of Your Heritage* (from a Punk rock song) suggests a more brutal story. The site evoked archeological sites with massive figures (like upside down Spanish Conquistadors), that become a fantasy past for the present. Built of tons of clay, the installation towered over us and threatening us with its jagged edges and huge overhangs. It suggests a lost history, a buried colonial past, a savage present, and an unknown future.

The Turkish Pavilion: Plan B, Ayşe Erkmen

Turkey featured the well-known Turkish artist, Ayşe Erkmen with *Plan B*, an intersecting geometry of blue and green colored pipes. As an elaborate purification system, it called attention to the difficulty of cleaning up after we have polluted the environment. It actually did purify water, a tiny amount returned to the canal at the end of the long process. Just outside her installation, a sign announced a regeneration project by the Venice Water Authority that is "managing the lagoon ecosystem" and a defense system against high water that has been under construction for many years. Erkmen's project echoes that overwhelming job.

The Italo-Latino America Institute Pavilion: *Between Forever and Never*"

While the Turkish Pavilion invited only one artist, the Italo Latino America Institute's group show, "*Between Forever and Never*," ambitiously declared that in honor of the Latin American Bicentennial of Independence twenty artists explored all of Latin America. Particularly strong was the work of Martin Sastre's video *Tango with Obama*, which featured an Obama look-alike dancing with a partner in front of the Museo Reina Sofia (in Madrid). The tango led irrevocably to World War Three by means of texts between the steps. Another compelling work was by Claudia Casarino. She created an evocative dress called *Pynandi (Barefoot)*, (*neither whore, nor goddess, nor Queen*), worn by the Guarani, those powerhouse women who resisted colonization and continue to protest deforestation.

The U.S. Pavilion: "Gloria" Jennifer Allora and Guillermo Calzadilla

The pavilion's title *Gloria*, the Spanish word for "glory," is the first joke: whose glory? What is being glorified? Outside the pavilion, a tank from the Korean War is upside down, with a treadmill installed on its right track. Periodically, a USA track and field athlete makes its tracks turn by running on the

treadmill. The reference seems obvious, the endless and futile treadmill of war. But what about “Gloria?” Is it sports, is it war, Is it the history of colonialism? , is it small successful steps to get the U.S. out of Vieques, Puerto Rico (the artists live in Puerto Rico)?

Inside, Armed Freedom Lying on a Sunbed included a scaled down replica of the statue on the top of the national Capitol in Washington D.C. lying on a tanning bed with its blinding light. The statue appears on the medals given to soldiers and civilians who serve in Operation Iraqi Freedom. Here is another joke, Armed Freedom on a Sunbed?? She is taking the day off?, she is getting ready for the next assault, she is finished with protecting freedom, she is tired of those heavy arms?

An ATM machine in a pipe organ, replaced the sounds made by pipes with electronic music generated by making a transaction. A male and female gymnast performed on two scaled down replicas of business class airline. The pavilion combined the absurd with an anti-capitalist edge. Humor and politics make a wonderful mix and in the case of these two artists, also almost a deadpan quality that opened up the work for almost any interpretation. Not surprisingly, Roberta Smith in the *New York Times*, hated the installation, missing all of its puns entirely.

The Danish Pavilion: Speech Matters

The Danish pavilion, “Speech Matters” curated by Katerina Gregos, a Greek-born curator based in Belgium, underscores the concept of post-nationalism. While the theme of the pavilion is well suited to recent events in Denmark and the infamous Mohammed comic book uproar, Gregos’s analysis of freedom of speech examined the issue broadly both in her choice of artists and in her essay. Gregos states: “Freedom of speech... seems more and more to be used as an empty political slogan that is subjected to a very simplified, biased and populist debate. In reality, it is an extremely complex and often ambivalent issue that is contingent on subjective political, social, cultural, religious, and personal views.” (9).

The catalog included a conversation with Antonio Negri about the US campaign in Libya and its other hegemonic interventions as they are confronted by the resistance of the multitudes; an insightful essay by Raoul Vaneigem, a writer and philosopher from Belgium with roots in the Situationist movement of the sixties: “The significance of WikiLeaks lies less in the denunciation of state secrets used to justify lies, and of the barbarism and the manipulation of citizens, than in the demonstration that it is possible to break down all the barriers of oppression.” (37)

The curator was inspired by Czech filmmaker Jan Švankmajer’s *Zahrada (The Garden)*, (1968) which uses surrealist techniques to question “power, control, hierarchy, authority, institutions, brainwashing, passive acceptance and self- subjugation to an oppressive system.” (20)

Inside the pavilion, Robert Crumb’s confrontational comics were sensational examples of pushing free speech to its limits. Also included in the catalog was a reproduction of Crumb’s cover for the *New Yorker* that he was invited to submit on the subject of gay marriage, which was then rejected without any reason.

Wendelien van Oldenborgh’s slide projections created intersections between quotes by Egyptian philosopher Tariq Ramadan and five young immigrants in Belgium who talk about their personal confrontations with racism, danger, and intolerance as they stand or sit in a well- known modernist building. The dramatic consonance between Ramadan’s thoughts and the young people’s experiences, and the dissonance with what the utopian ideals of the architecture created a riveting video.

Each artist followed different aspects of the theme of “speech matters,” including how history is told (Sharon Hayes, Zhang Dali), language (Ayreen Anastas and Rene Gabri) and controversial imagery Steklios Faitakis amazing mural on the outside, an “Index of the Hidden and Unfamiliar” by Taryn Simon, and the process of copyright (Agency).

Outside the main building was the striking *Pavilion for Revolutionary Free Speech* by Thomas Kilpper. On its wooden floor the artist cut portraits of people who have actively played a part in perpetrating hate speech, political right wing affiliations, leaders who are opposed to freedom, and Pope Benedict who is charged with covering up allegations of sexual abuse in the Catholic Church. His subtitle reads “How to get rid of em without fighting for revolution and emancipation”

The Egyptian Pavilion: Ahmed Basyony (1978 - 2011)

As a direct connection to the popular surge of demand for democracy in the Arab world, the Egyptian pavilion honored young media artist/activist Ahmed Basyony (1978 – 2011). He was brutally murdered in Tahrir Square on January 28th, 2011 as he was filming the uprisings. He, along with other journalists, were purposely targeted by snipers.

Basyony was a radical in his art and his politics. He was a pioneer in experimental digital media and an inspiration among the younger generation of Egyptian artists. His last Facebook posting, posted in the entrance of the exhibition, pleaded: “Please O Father, O Mother, O Youth, O Student, O Citizen, O Senior and O more. You know this is our last chance for our dignity, the last chance to change the regime that has lasted the past 30 years. Go down to the streets, and revolt, bring your food, your clothes, your water, masks and tissues and a vinegar bottle, and believe me, there is but one very small step left . . . If they want war, we want peace, and I will practice proper restraint until the end, to regain my nation’s dignity.”

Basyony's footage from Tahrir Square alternated with his art work *30 Days Running in Place*. The artist runs in a transparent sweat suit with sensors on the soles of his shoes and his body that translated his exertion into a visual diagram. The sense of futility contrasts entirely with his footage of the surging crowds in Tahrir Square. While this is an Egyptian artist in an Egyptian pavilion, the theme is the Arab world struggle for democracy and the inspiration it is giving the entire world.

The British Pavilion: “I Imposter” Mike Nelson

Post national in another way is Mike Nelson’s re-creation of a 17th century Ottoman “han” or market building, based on a work he created inside the Büyük Valide Han at the 2003 Istanbul Biennial. In its original incarnation, the artist set up a photographic studio in the han for three weeks, a piece I analyzed in my book *Art and Politics Now*. (www.artandpoliticsnow.com)

Nelson’s 2003 installation, his photographic studio, with prints of his photographs of the Han hanging to dry from the ceiling (now itself an antiquated craft), was amplified by the experience of finding and visiting the Han, meeting its residents, and drinking tea with the ancient *cayci*. The re-creation in Venice is taking on the idea of the entire Han, although still with his darkroom and its red lighting as its center. He transformed the British Pavilion into a series of small workshop like spaces, meticulously echoing the various types of partial lighting of the original building. His interest here, he has said is in the materials, the glass, the metal, the textiles, not the history or the craftspeople. By saying that, he makes the entire Han an act of fantasy, not recreation, for the Han itself is about people, history, and global commerce.

The pavilion is based on the photographs that the artist took in 2003. This is a memory, an arrested moment: the Han today is both gentrifying and the subject of intense research, but that is not part of this exhibition.

The Iraqi Pavilion: "Wounded Water"

Located in the decayed Gervasuti Foundation building that underscores the condition of the infrastructure in Iraq, the Iraqi pavilion "Wounded Water" was pertinent not only to Iraq, but to what most people consider the main crisis of the twenty-first century. Each of these artists approached it within the framework of Iraq, but the problem is world-wide. But this pavilion underscored ongoing ecological disaster of contemporary Iraq. It was the first time in 35 years that Iraq had a pavilion at the Venice Biennale.

In Ali Assaf's video *Narcissus* a man leans over a slow moving stream. The dramatic lighting is intentionally Caravaggesque. Gradually detritus appears floating down the river, a box, a document, photograph, scraps, until the water is barely visible. It is a quiet slow moving piece.

The artist is from Basra a place that used to be a beautiful city. When he returned he found it in ruins, its river polluted. Assaf also has an installation work dedicated to Basra that included, when I saw it an unfinished pyramid of dates, family photographs, splashes of oil on the wall, and a video with a series of stills of birds caught in the Gulf Oil Spill accompanied by a childhood song about the river and birds. The intersections of oil, pollution, environmental disaster, family, nostalgia, made this one of the most compelling installations in the pavilion.

Also lighted as an echo of academic art, is Azad Nanakeli's video *Destnuej* (Purification). In two adjoining images, a man is pouring water over himself as at a hamam on the left and gradually being engulfed by blood and then oil on the right.

Nanakeli also made a second resonant work called *Au*, (Water, an installation with three oversize water spigots, and underneath a sea of plastic bottles. Dimly lighted, the water bottles at first look like a crystalline structure, then are revealed for the rubbish they are.

By far the most amusing (in a deadly way) is Adel Adibin *Consumption of Water*, a two room installation, one sparsely furnished with a filing cabinet and a chair, and a video of the sky, the second with a video of two business men who enter into a duel to the death using long neon lights as swords.

Walid Siti's installation *Beauty Spot* animates the waterfall that is illustrated on an Iraqi bill, a waterfall that no longer exists since Turkey built a dam north of Iraq on the Tigris River and cut off the water. He also had a stunning installation of the dried up Great Zab river, a tributary of the Tigris, made with red mylar.

The painter Ahmed Alsoundani appears in several other exhibitions at the Biennale. His turbulent compositions cascade on the surface of the canvas, revealing horrible scenes of carnage, death and destruction. Although he does make reference to other art work, such as holocaust photographs and Goya it depicts an Iraqi holocaust without any equivocation. His art is not specific to the theme of the exhibition as were other artists, but it is certainly pertinent to the theme of disaster in Iraq.

To reiterate the theme of this article, the "borderless" ILLUMInations, with its tired aesthetic nationalism, was far less post national than the national pavilions, all of which expanded our understanding without ever being simply nationalist. The Iraqi pavilion, the Danish Pavilion, and others

not discussed here like Central Asia, (that included Krgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan), or Bangladesh or Cyprus, or Haiti or Cuba all provided provocative ideas. Seeing art by contemporary artists exploring a wide range of issues in the exhibitions that included almost ninety countries, suggests that post nationalism now an established fact among artists and curators responsive to the contemporary world. But here also is post globalism, for these artists are not, in many cases producing bland international art. Rather they are finding many new relationships between social issues and art.