

CANADIANART

Making Worlds: 53rd Venice Biennale



VENICE | 53rd Venice Biennale MAKING WORLDS

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Whatever its origins, however, it is art that must always be considered in relation to Venice itself and to its architecture, especially that of the exhibition sites. The contexts can be exhilarating and enlightening, or just the opposite. The Giardini has the faded air of a 19th-century world exposition, which was in fact the model for its organization. The pavilions of powerful nations like Great Britain, France, Germany and the United States, built at various times after the first biennial, in 1895, look like miniature versions of grand seats of state power. Today, the national pavilions are anachronisms that the best artists turn to their advantage.

Bruce Nauman, winner of the Golden Lion for best national presentation, subverts the neoclassical aura of the U.S. Pavilion by installing his neon relief *Vices and Virtues* (1983–88) on the frieze area of the building's facade. There the words FAITH/LUST, HOPE/ENVY, CHARITY/SLOTH, PRIDE/SUMMER, JUSTICE/WINTER, TEMPERANCE/GLOUTYNESS and FORTITUDE/ANGER flash on and off in a variety of colours. Hengem & Dragset, the artists also chosen to curate the popular

Danish and Nordic pavilions, have stuck a "For Sale" sign in front of Denmark's venue. It's part of an elaborate conceit in which they turn both pavilions into the homes of fictitious collectors, one an architect with a broken home and the other a mysterious gay figure named Minor K, who floats face down in a pool outside the Nordic Pavilion. The private and the public are frequently conflated at this biennial, giving the whole event personal and political overtones that are both interesting and effective.

More broadly, a desire to break free of the constraints of the nation-based schema can be sensed in the interesting hoose in the Giardini—not yet a wind of change. Hengem & Dragset acknowledge this by spreading their activities over two pavilions, one of which is an unprecedented showcase for queer art, including that of Eino of Finland. Germany hosts a British artist, Liam Gillick, who intersects brilliantly with the pavilion's Venetian architecture by installing minimalist pine mock-ups of kitchen counters and cupboards in an ideological space with a tragic history. Roman Ondak does away with the national pavilion altogether by bringing the Giardini inside the small building shared by the Czech and Slovak republics, so successfully that people walking through it on the last march of the biennial preview wondered where it was. The first-ever Internet Pavilion, at www.pavilioninternet.com, acknowledges the globalizing virtual world. It only it was faster and better.

Daniel Bribbaum, the biennial's youngest director to date, also seems to have changed his mind. "Making Worlds" is his chosen theme. Paolo Baratta, president of the Venice Biennale group of festivals, describes him as "on the side of the artist," hinting that past events

may have been oriented toward collectors and the art market and implying a critique of the current state of the art world. Bribbaum himself declares that "a work of art is more than an object, more than a commodity." It could be that the biennial is feeling the pressure of presenting art as close proximity to the billionaire collector Francis Pinault, who has mounted a concurrent show, "Mapping the Studio," filled with contemporary art's hottest stars, not far away.

Curated by Alison M. Giegereis and Francesco Bonami from Pinault's huge collection, the exhibition of slow-stepping pieces is divided between the Palazzo Grassi and the Punta della Dogana, the 17th-century customs house resplendently renovated by Italian Anish Kapoor. The spectacle is here, on Punta della Dogana's palatial dance floor or in the hazy room of Jake and Dinos Chapman's *Leaky Hole* (2008), set on the biennial grounds.

This is not altogether a bad thing. Bribbaum's "Making Worlds" is thoughtful, earnest, well in the middle and so all over the map that the theme loses its focus. Some of its artists should be made to write. John Baldessari's famous line "I will not make any more boring art" one hundred times. But Bribbaum's inclusion of influential but little-known movements, like the pioneering Japanese Gutai artists of the 1950s, and artists from the 1960s and 1970s whose influence is felt today, like Yggis Papp, Oyvind Fahlstrom and Gordon Matta-Clark, gives the show some context and depth. In the Arsenal, where weak art sinks into the shadows of the cavernous space, standouts include Paul Chan's kimonos and wall projection *Said for Said's Sake* (2009), Juan Jonás's layered video poem *Reading Dante II* (2009), Hans Peter Feldmann's magical *Shadow Play* (2002–09) and Goskar Cyprian's

raucous Buddha made of children's stickers and paper cuttings.

The pavilions still present the biennial's most focused and satisfying experience of art, at the revamped Canada Pavilion with Mark Lewis's brilliant films, the Netherlands with Fiona Tan's evocative video installation *Everest* (2009), Great Britain with Steve McQueen's anti-historical film *Giardini* (2009), the United States with its cogent Neuman mini retrospective, Poland with Krzysztof Wodiczko's architecture-transforming Ghosts, Germany's disquieting Liam Gillick intervention and Hengem & Dragset's debatable fiction uniting the Danish and Nordic pavilions were the best. If anyone asks if the Venice Biennale still counts, the answer is yes. NANCY TOUSLEY ■



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By Nancy Tousley

Venice

SEPTEMBER 15, 2009

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PRUDENCE/PRIDE, JUSTICE/AVARICE, TEMPERANCE/ GLUTTONY and FORTITUDE/ANGER flash on and off in a variety of colours. Elmgreen & Dragset, the artist duo chosen to curate the popular Danish and Nordic pavilions, have stuck a “For Sale” sign in front of Denmark’s venue. It’s part of an elaborate conceit in which they turn both pavilions into the homes of fictitious collectors, one an architect with a broken home and the other a mysterious gay figure named Mister B, who floats face down in a pool outside the Nordic Pavilion. The private and the public are frequently conflated at this biennial, giving the whole event personal and political overtones that are both interesting and effective.

More broadly, a desire to break free of the constraints of the nation-based schema can be sensed in the tree-rustling breeze in the Giardini—if not yet a wind of change. Elmgreen & Dragset acknowledge this by spreading their activities over two pavilions, one of which is an unprecedented showcase for queer art, including that of Tom of Finland. Germany hosts a British artist, Liam Gillick, who interferes brilliantly with the pavilion’s fascist architecture by installing minimalist pine mock-ups of kitchen counters and cupboards in an ideological space with a fraught history. Roman Ondák does away with the national pavilion altogether by bringing the Giardini inside the small building shared by the Czech and Slovak republics, so successfully that people walking through it on the fast march of the biennial preview wondered where it was. The first-ever Internet Pavilion, at www.padiglioneinternet.com, acknowledges the globalizing virtual world. If only it were faster and better.

Daniel Birnbaum, the biennial’s youngest director to date, also seems to have change on his mind; “Making Worlds” is his chosen theme. Paolo Baratta, president of the Venice Biennale group of festivals, describes him as “on the side of the artist,” hinting that past events may have been oriented toward collectors and the art market and implying a critique of the current state of the art world. Birnbaum himself declares that “a work of art is more than an object, more than a commodity.” It could be that the biennial is feeling the pressure of presenting art in close proximity to the billionaire collector François Pinault, who has mounted a concurrent show, “Mapping the Studio,” filled with contemporary art’s hottest stars, not far away.

Curated by Alison M. Gingeras and Francesco Bonami from Pinault’s huge collection, the exhibition of show-stopping pieces is divided between the Palazzo Grassi and the Punta della Dogana, the 17th-century customs house exquisitely renovated by Tadao Ando. The spectacle is here, on Piotr Uklanski’s pulsating dance floor or in the horrors of Jake and Dinos Chapman’s *Fucking Hell* (2008), not on the biennial grounds.

This is not altogether a bad thing. Birnbaum’s “Making Worlds” is thoughtful, earnest, soft in the middle and so all over the map that the theme loses its focus. Some of its artists should be made to write John Baldessari’s famous line “I will not make any more boring art” one hundred times. But Birnbaum’s inclusion of influential but little-known movements, like the pioneering Japanese Gutai artists of the 1950s, and artists from the 1960s and 1970s whose influence is felt today, like Lygia Pape, Öyvind Fahlström and Gordon Matta-Clark, gives the show some context and depth. In the Arsenale, where weak art sinks into the shadows of the cavernous space, standouts include Paul Chan’s fornicating wall projection *Sade for Sade’s Sake* (2009), Joan Jonas’s layered video poem *Reading Dante II* (2009), Hans-Peter Feldmann’s magical *Shadow Play* (2002–09) and Gonkar Gyatso’s radiant Buddha made of children’s stickers and paper cuttings.

The pavilions still present the biennial’s most focused and satisfying experience of art: the revamped Canada Pavilion with Mark Lewis’s brilliant films, the Netherlands with Fiona Tan’s evocative video installation *Disorient* (2009), Great Britain with Steve McQueen’s antibiennial film *Giardini* (2009), the United States with its cogent Nauman mini-retrospective, Poland with Krzysztof Wodiczko’s architecturetransforming *Guests*, Germany’s discursive Liam Gillick intervention and Elmgreen & Dragset’s delectable fiction uniting the Danish and Nordic pavilions were the best. If anyone asks if the Venice Biennale still counts, the answer is yes.

-Tousley, Nancy. “Making Worlds: 53rd Venice Biennale,” *Canadian Art*, Fall, 2009.