ILLUMInations: THE VENICE BIENNALE 2011

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The Venice Biennale, more than any other international art exposition, opens up beyond the boundaries of its site to engage with the entire city. Originally confined to a group of national pavilions and a central building in the *Giardini Pubblici,* it expanded in 1999 into the rope factory of the *Arsenale* and spread out to widely dispersed locales. As we move around Venice, perhaps lost in narrow streets, or riding on *vaporetti,* we see banners announcing shows in grand *palazzi,* and hole-in-the-wall buildings, in churches and abandoned industrial sites, even on a small island. They beckon to places where few tourists normally penetrate and often reward us with thought provoking and visually exciting exhibits. This year, eighty-nine countries are participating, some of them, including Cuba, new to the Biennale, or returning after a period of absence. In addition, many 'collateral' shows, sponsored by a variety of organizations, add to the offerings. While this year's curator, Bice Curiger, is responsible for the official exhibition in the *Arsenale* and the central pavilion, the essence of the Biennale is found in the multiplicity of voices.

Curiger, an art historian and the editor of *Parkett* an art magazine published in Switzerland, explains a play on words that links the theme of *light* with *nations* to produce the theme ILLUMInation*s*. However she builds on the global nature of art. One of five questions she asks all the participating artists is: How many nations are inside you? Celebrating light in a Venetian context, she includes three major paintings by Tintoretto in the central pavilion. Borrowed from the *Accademia* now undergoing restoration, the dramatically luminous *Removal of the Body of St. Mark,* (1562-6) and *The Last Supper* (1592-4) with its table set dynamically on a diagonal axis present a challenge to the art that follows.

Some of the artists in the show deal with light in a literal way. An installation by James Turrell, like all of his work, reveals the essence of pure light and its potential to overpower architectural space. The Iranian artist David Nuur defines and animates space with neon tubes. Others explore the theme in more metaphorical ways. Visitors navigating the vast array of art selectively will find

works that resonate for them, but as a whole the show lacks the vitality we associate with the Biennale.

The powerful industrial architecture of the rope factory and the once coherent interiors of the Central building have been divided into a maze of small, often crowded spaces to enclose exhibits and allow for many videos. It is therefore a relief to emerge into a large area, defined by massive brick arcades, where comfortable sofas invite weary patrons to sit and watch Christian Marclay's film *The Clock* which, running for 24 hours, assembles clips from over 1000 movies all of which include glimpses at clocks, watches or chimes showing the ractual time wherever it is shown. Spliced together with an uncanny illusion of continuity it exhibits cinematography that shows up the slow paced banality of many of the videos in the exposition. Marclay was awarded the Golden Lion for best artist at the Biennale


Song Dong *Intelligence of the Poor* Parapavilion

Curiger has commissioned four artists to create 'parapavilions' which include the work of others. The most arresting of these, entitled *Intelligence of the Poor* is the nostalgic recreation by Song Dong of his hundred year old parental home in China. In line with his recent installation at MoMA in New York entitled *Waste Not,* he is dealing with continued use and adaptation of cultural and physical resources. Indeed he surrounds it with dwellings made out of old wardrobes.
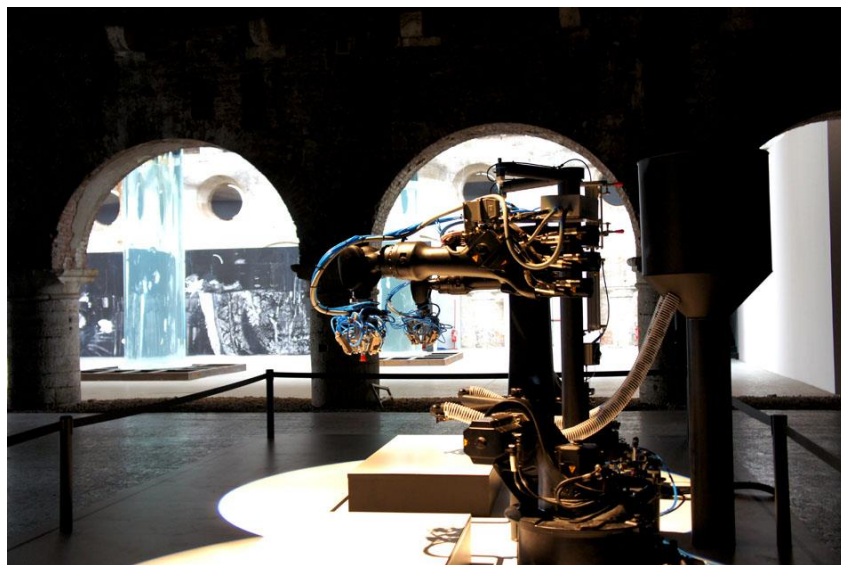
Alexander Ponomarev   Federico Diaz *Outside Itself*

At the other end of the scale, two futuristic installations occupy a shipyard building beyond the Rope Factory with an interior like an ancient basilica. In the further aisle of this monumental space, *Outside Itself* by Federico Diaz involves robots that make art untouched by human hand. In the course of the Biennale a German automotive robot will arrange half a million black plastic balls representing photons in a pattern determined by various stimuli, according to a mathematical program.

In the first aisle, the Russan artist Alexander Ponomarev refutes such a mechanistic approach. With sponsorship from London's Courtauld Institure of Art, he invited three other artists to collaborate with him in *One of a Thousand Ways to defeat Entropy.* In a statement, reminiscent of the 1914 Futurist Manifesto and reflecting the optimism of the Russian Avant Garde after the revolution, he writes that while everything we need is shrinking, 'Only one thing grows fatally – Entropy.' 'Our project in Venice throws light on this tendency, emphasizing that resistance to the principle (declared to be the second beginning of thermodynamics) can only be carried out by a creative person! Only a creator gives birth to life energy….' 'The bearers of this energy – artists, engineers, poets – are a small army, the guides of evolution, warriors with cosmic noise…."

Ponomarev has erected two vast transparent acrylic tubes each filled with twelve metric tons of lagoon water and containing a 'Kinetic futuro-automobile,' complete

with an incipient human being, slowly rising and falling within its cylinder. He uses water 'as the symbol of the unending cycle of life in which entropic reduction oscillates with vital essence.' The bluish green fluid in its smooth cylinder, illuminated by rooflights and a window of ecclesiastical character, commands the space.

Near them, Hans Op de Beeck illustrates entropy in a model of a suburban home covered in volcanic ash. Ryoichi Kurokawa contributing eight ICD screens arranged in an octagon to surround the viewer with sound and image. On these screens, waterfalls cascade in a threatening manner down rocky clefts. To one side stretches an eighteen metre long monochrome collage by Adrian Ghenie depicting Marcel Duchamp's corpse lying in state. Revolutionary zeal appears to be the connection between the four artists. Inspired by Canto XXI of Dante's *Inferno*, which refers to the *Arsenale*, Ponomorov insists that visitors can only reach his show in the *Novissimo Arsenale* by boat: 'Where else but in the Arsenale of Venice should one build an ark, a ship of associates, poets, dreamers and utopians to set out together on a fascinating adventure.'

Some of the most exciting work is found in national and independent pavilions, both in the *Giardini* and in remote sites. Given the state of the world today it is hardly surprising that many of the national exhibits are political in nature, or express angst or outrage. Those of Egypt, Iraq, Israel, Denmark, stand out among many examples.

Allora & Guillermo Calzadilla ,United States Pavilion

In the United States pavilion Allora & Guillermo Calzadilla have used 'quai-Surrealist strategies of free association and unexpected juxtaposition in order to pose questions about the relationships among art, politics, and international identity in the 21st century' In front of the neoclassical building stands an upside down tank on which an athlete runs on a treadmill. Can this be a new interpretation of 'swords to ploughshares?'

Christian Boltanski *Chance,* French Pavilion

Christian Boltanski the artist featured in the French Pavilion deals with the issue of population, recording in huge, separate LED displays the number of births and deaths predicted throughout the world. The central element, supported on a scaffolding is a wide, continuously moving strip of film showing the faces of innumerable babies. When the movement suddenly stops, one face is displayed as a still. Chance alone singles out this infant, for what we do not know. The artist also involves viewers in a game allowing them to seek a complete face from the randomly matched upper and lower parts of faces of babies and elderly people.


Lee   Yong-baek, Angel Soldier Korea.

The Korean Pavilion stands out from the old, neoclassical ones; its steel frame and glass walls give it transparency. The artist Lee Yong-baek presents contradictions, camouflage and threats. Near the entrance, over life-size robot-like figures fight, one pinning the other to the floor, and further back, against a bank of trees outside, they are seen again in a pieta pose. In one corner, a close look at a wall of colourful flowers behind glass reveals soldiers in matching floral camouflage carrying guns moving behind them. In another room, we peer into mirrors only to be assailed by bullets smashing into them from behind.

Czech Republic and Slovak Republic: Dominik Lang, *The Sleeping City*

For the Czech Republic and Slovak Republic Dominik Lang, in *The Sleeping City* recreates and transforms the studio of his father 'manipulating already-finished material and composing new entities out of it.' The artist combines critique with personal engagement.
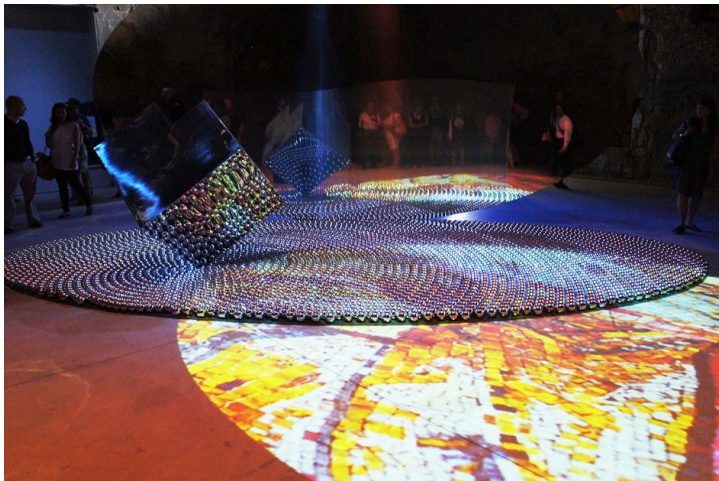
Saudi Arabia: *The Black Arch* By Raja and Shadia Alem

Argentina Adrián *The last Art Work of Humanity,* Adrián Villa Rojas

The precise and exquisite form s of *The Black Arch* By Raja and Shadia Alem in the Pavilion of Saudi Arabia, with its polished metal surfaces and projected mosaics contrast with the rough, almost violent concrete-like structures by Adrián Villa Rojas in the Argentine exhibit. The first refers to experiences of Mecca and Venice; the second, perhaps to 'alternative universes.'

Several Venetian churches offer milieus for art. Anish Kapoor has attempted, in the Palladian church of San Giorgio to create a spiritual manifestation in a column of vapour rising from a cylinder at the crossing of nave and transepts. Unfortunately the four tall banks of fans and a funnel projecting from the base of the dome above, destroy the sense of immateriality.

Lech Majewski, *Bruegel Suite* Church of San Lio, Poster on the wall of the church

The small church of San Lio in the Castello district hosts a recreation on film of the scene in *The Road to Calvary* by Pieter Bruegel the Elder. (1564) Actors who possess an amazing resemblance to the artist's own characters enact the events leading up to the crucifixion, every frame looking like a Flemish painting. To one side of the nave, three screens show the landscape background of Bruegel's painting filled with convincingly Bruegelesque figures in motion. In the foreground of one of them the artist himself is sketching. This is the work of the Polish multi-disciplinary artist Lech Majewski who spent three years 'weaving an

enormous digital tapestry composed of layer upon layer of perspective, atmospheric phenomena and people' He collaborated on the text for the film with the art critic Michael Francis Gibson.

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