

WHITEHOT MAGAZINE

MAY 2019

THREE DAYS AT THE VENICE BIENNALE IS NOT ENOUGH: A REPORT

By Luisa Caldwell



Alex de Corte, Rubber Pencil Devil, 2019, at May You Live In Interesting Times, Arsenale

Art exhibitions the scale of the 58th Venice Biennale may not be the best way to view art, especially the packed first days. But like bingeing anything, it sure is fun. With 90 national pavilions, half of which are spread throughout the islands, along with 21 official collateral events (no count on the unofficial) plus amazing palazzo shows, it is an overwhelming amount of art to see.

The Giardini pavilions are in convenient proximity of each other, the modestly scaled buildings often designed by historically well known architects such as Carlo Scarpa and Josef Hoffmann. Once I loved them, now I find them kitschy and the least interesting viewing spaces in respect to all the newly restored, enormous industrial spaces around Venice.

Of the national pavilions at the Giardini, the Brazil Pavilion is the most exciting with *Swinguerria* by Barbara Wagner and Benjamin de Burcawith. A two-channel video installation, both fiction and documentary, of dance groups from Northeast Brazil. The distinct styles meld to create a narrative dance-off between male and females, but gender obfuscation and fluidity dominate distinction. Explains Bárbara Wagner, “Born from the need for social integration, this phenomenon includes the experience of identity and has arrived at the stage and on Instagram as a sort of spectacle fed by the mainstream, but which survives absolutely outside of it,” The dancing is hot, the dialogue dirty, and by employing actual participants in this cultural phenomenon, it embodies the inclusion the Biennale strives for.

Belgian Pavilion “Mondo Cane”, an exhibition by artists Jos de Gruyter and Harald Thys, low tech robotized life size puppets dressed in 18th c. garb enact traditional crafts such as knitting and blade sharpening. The installation speaks of colonization and patriarchy. The Uruguay pavilion by Yamandu Canosa was full of maps and references to global migration, including diminutive wall renderings of iconic architectural structures world wide. Finland’s Miracle Workers Collective and the Canada pavilion both showed work by and about their indigenous peoples. Sami (the last European indigenous people) artists and ISUMA artists collective of the Inuit people dealt with the struggle to retain culture and identity.

The best pavilion experience came with the search, either through the narrow calles for or by boat offering spectacular views of the Lagoon. I see why The Lithuanian Pavilion, “Sun & Sea (Marina)” by Lina Lapelyte, Vaiva Grainyte, and Rugile Barzdziukaite in a large restored ware-

house won the Golden Lion, though I did not see the opera performance that accompanies a beach scene viewed from a balcony above. Pastel beach blankets, beach balls, a bicycle, things you bring to the beach, so clearly depict human presence even without the performers, apropos content featuring planetary issues.

Kris Lemsalu's "Birth Hi and Bye" representing Estonia on the Giudecca was a sculpture installation, a fountain of sorts, organized by the four cardinal points along a thick central square column. Suspended figures with wings, figures with multiple limbs and colorfully glazed ceramic hands, sneakers and giant flower vaginas, were god-like evoking an ancient worship. While there was humor, like religion in general there was a fear factor, but is gently balanced by a soothing and sophisticated layering of ambient noises by collaborator Kyp Malone.

Representing Iceland also on Giudecca is Hrafnhildur Arnadottir aka Shoplifter, with her signature colorful wig installation called "Chromo Sapiens". It amounted to three cavernous hairy grottos complete with stalactites. It was a feat and probably cost a small fortune. On the flip side, the Zimbabwe Pavilion, a group show including Georgina Maxim and Neville Starling whose found object/material sculptures are all made by the artists' hand, no delegating nor expensive fabricating, is a very humble presentation in a run down, off the beaten path location outside the Giardini. With this comparison one becomes aware of the huge economic gulf between country pavilions.

May You Live In Interesting Times, the 79 artists two part exhibition curated by Ralph Rugoff is at the Arsenale and the Central pavilion. I spoke with 27 years old, independent curator Lizaveta Matveeva from St. Petersburg, Russia who said of the massive exhibition, "I really enjoyed that the curator selected so many young artists, the youngest is 1990 born. Most of the projects resonate with my generation, which is rare for this kind of big blockbuster shows. I found so much fun, sincerity, intimacy, humor, fears and hope — everything I have in my own practice".

The central pavilion is a cramped, low-ceiling labyrinth like building and I felt the curse of May You Live In Interesting Times coming true as I was trapped between people and art. A highlight, however, was Sun Yuan and Peng You's giant robotic arm behind glass, which perpetually keeps red liquid squeegied from seeping away. I normally hate this sort of thing, but the movement of this anthropomorphic creature was quite balletic and seemed to be enjoying itself despite its sisyphian task, something no human could endure. Another technological wonder was Cyprien Gaillard's LED image of a Max Ernst angel creature projected through a whirring fan generating a mesmerizing hologram, an effect I had never seen before.

The Arsenale, on the other hand, is a cavernous red brick structure with massive columns and high ceilings. It is the kind of space that makes me salivate as an artist. The work was larger, had more room and the same list of artists looked much better in this space. Tavares Strachen had several pieces about the first African-American Robert Lawrence killed in astronaut training in 1967. A finely crafted neon light figure of the nervous system suspended in air had an emotional poignancy. I liked the low-tech effect of a large cylindrical sculpture made of thousands of small wood discs cut from salvaged school desks and lit from within casting dramatic shadows, by Kemang Wa Lehulere from South Africa. Teresa Morgolles addresses narcoviolence in Mexico with actual storefront glass panes adhered with posters of missing women. These found objects are powerful by transporting us to location. Martine Gutierrez nails it with *Body En Thrall*, large scale photographs of herself in a feminist commentary on class and privilege. With mannequins as props, she enacts various characters via glossy magazine style images, some spoofing current day celebs, picking up where Cindy Sherman left off years ago. Liu Wei's sculpture installations are elegant and mysterious positioned behind glass. These large scale curvy shapes are hermetically sealed in isolation chambers, conjuring a sort of metaphysical reality.

Alex Da Corte's video viewing room, with a tall Venetian archway emitting fluorescent orange

drew me in to watch *Rubber Pencil Devil*, a 57 segment video, of which I watch about 10 (25 minutes worth). I noticed, inconveniently, no time lengths were given for any video projections throughout the entire biennale. I imagine this one could easily have been 5 hours long. Using actors dressed as iconic cartoon characters (Bart Simpson, Seven Dwarfs, etc.), Alex DA Corte presents in high color and camp futile attempts at progress and happiness... Pinocchio (a nod to Venice) blows up a balloon only to have it popped by his growing nose. A funny/sad Sleeping Beauty segment called "It's Hard To Wait" ends with a sinking feeling. Colorful, easy to watch and intellectually provocative, I hope it comes to a theater near me!

Anthea Hamilton installation called *The New Life*, employed an overlarge Hamilton Tartan as her back drop to mannequins dressed as chefs, plus a giant decorative monarch. It was stylish, maybe about food, but could be mistaken for high end boutique display. That said, I liked it anyway. Ryoji Ikeda techno savvy *data-verse 1*, is a large-scale high-definition projection interpreting into graphics massive scientific sets of data from institutions such as NASA, CERN and the Human Genome Project. While gorgeous and meditative, this advanced imaging technology makes me feel as though humans are becoming obsolete.

Colonization, immigration and migration, identity politics and feminism, climate change and war, and even a post-human future are what this Venice Biennial iteration is all about. On Biennale relevance, access and inclusiveness, I spoke with Arendt Oak Speser, Academic Director Jefferson Clemente Foundation Port Townsend, WA USA, who later wrote to me, "The Venice Biennale poses both challenges and opportunities in terms of access and inclusivity. One can pay for the official entrances to the Giardini and Arsenale, or one can elect to forego the ticket-price and wander the city streets, crossing and recrossing canals, in search of exterior pavilions and exhibitions free of cost. The lists of these exterior locations and maps of their whereabouts allow for more direct access, although dedicating oneself to their pursuit en masse is not for the faint-at-heart. After a full day of finding the free exhibitions, your feet will ache...can result in a state of exhaustion, with conditional degrees of euphoria depending on taste, desire, expectation, and perhaps most importantly, humor. If you cannot laugh at the Biennale, and as an ontological extension, yourself AT the Biennale, the predominant response will likely be one of pure and overwhelming defeat."

The only regret I have is not making in to the collateral event Africobra. Documentary filmmaker Lewanne Jones, Brooklyn, NY described it to me as a "group of Black American artists, including many women, from the south side of Chicago who came together in the tumultuous times of the late 1960s. Africobra articulated a philosophical, aesthetic, spiritual and practical manifesto for their practice. The art in the exhibit was both overtly political representing many of the heroes and martyrs of the liberation struggle of the day, but was also liberatory and spiritual, claiming a space of reorientation and reconnection with the ancestors, bringing the rhythms and patterns of Africa to life in paint and expressive clothing".

I'll conclude by saying La Biennale di Venezia is a thriving, ever expanding and still important art exhibition, transcending genres, technologies, and themes, drawing an international crowd, however the means, all of it worth while. According to Paolo Baratta, Biennale Director in a press release stated, "our exhibition must be open, without any boundaries". I felt it was. Everyone I know who wanted got into the preview. Being set in Venice, a tiny mega-tourist center uniting people from all over the world only adds to that concept. Yes, one has to get themselves to Venice. And while within this framework are definitely class, economic and social inequities, the great equalizer is no one can or does see all the art.