



MAMAS, DICTATORS AND CREEPING CORPORATISM, AN ITALIAN STORY

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In a way I feel like the person who has to turn the Mama of all biennials back into a young woman again—with nice breasts.¹

Now passed on to God's great Kunsthalle in the sky, the legendary Swiss curator Harald Szeemann was only one of a long line of Directors of the *Venice Biennale*, to turn the job into a grand Oedipal challenge. Indeed, it has seemed almost a precondition that the inheritor of this big budget biennale should slay the former curator for his/her folly and intellectual mismanagement, before swiftly heralding a new dynastic vision. The king is dead, long live the king. So immediately after Szeemann's 2001 remodelling of the *Biennale*, his successor in 2003, Francesco Bonami declared Szeemann's old-fashioned idea of the curator as singular and profound thinker, dead.

This all took place against a backdrop, in which the oldest of biennales, established in 1895, was showing its age. Its creative virility, intellectual vigour and fitness to call the shots on artistic debate was and remains, besieged by doubt. Thus, jerky attempts by recent directors to address a range of anachronisms, upon which the *Biennale* has been predicated, have resulted in a sequence of disjointed and mutually antagonistic curatorial strategies, leaving no-one the wiser as to what this cultural whirligig is really about. Troubled concepts such as the nation state, globalisation, material specificity, the avant-garde, gender politics, psychoanalysis, economic exclusion, social engagement and of course, the postmodern malaise of indeterminacy are just some of contemporary forces that have caused the old dame to go through some traumatic self-analysis.

Regardless, unwilling to succumb to the paralysis of doubt, or to rest on its laurels, with young biennales like Berlin, Istanbul and Gwangju snapping at its heels, Venice has made a decisive move over the last decade, taken straight from the '101 of trade shows'—if in doubt, make it bigger. Despite internal uncertainties, it is now more sprawling, on for longer, more glamorous and more 'society' than ever. Recent years have seen the marked transition of an event, from culturally important—though politically local—to a national tourism blockbuster, inevitably bringing with it significant national political attention, which in Italy is rarely a good thing. Let's just say that the substantial intellectual and creative challenges that have troubled Harald Szeemann, Francesco Bonami and more recently Robert Storr [more of him later] are not likely to deprive Davide Croff, the new government appointed president of the *Biennale*, of one wink of sleep. Without doubt a talented economist and banker, Croff has as much knowledge of, and interest in, the critical anxieties and cross fire of contemporary art, as I have of the instability of global option trading.

Depending on which side of the fence you sit, his cultural credentials either do not matter, or mark the first insidious step towards a more commercially driven, Berlusconi style dumbing down of culture. After all, this is not merely a formal ex-cathedra role, but is hands-on, responsible for selecting new directors and prescribing broad objectives. So, if the latter is true, clearly the last *Venice Biennale*, subtitled *The Dictatorship of the Viewer*, has uncomfortable resonances for those who have seen what Berlusconi has done to prime time Italian TV. In any case, as uncertain as the exact future of the *Biennale* may be at present [this text is written well before the *51st Biennale*], it is likely that changes to the *Biennale* President, the

status of the director's role and the overall composition of the *Biennale* administrative council—all of which have taken place in the last couple of years—could well mark a significant shift in its direction. A shift towards corporatism, such as has infused every aspect of our lives, from the local council to the global environment and which lurks in the small print of this bureaucratic churn. It has been dubbed by nervous centre left commentators, the 'Romanisation' of the *Biennale*.

Of course shifts have occurred many times in the past, such as when rabble-rousing activism challenged the *Biennale's* small cloistered world in the 1960s. This period saw the first expansion of the *Biennale* beyond the borders of a few 'old world' European nations, becoming at least partially global. Attendance grew, art traditions were challenged [with Robert Rauschenberg leading the charge] and political radicalism emerged, with rowdy crowds charged by Italian police while protesting an arcane prize system. Lawrence Alloway's account of the changing fortunes of the *Biennale* from inception to the '60s in *From Salon to Goldfish Bowl* [1968], described the 1966 *Venice Biennale* as one of pluralism and freewheeling energy, 'an orgy of contact and communication'—partly on the basis that it included 2,785 works of different media from thirty-seven countries and was attended by 181,383 people.² Fuelled by the libidinal hyperbole of the times, it's nevertheless funny to compare this to the latest edition of the *Biennale* in 2003. It clocked over 60,000 people in the first few weeks of its six month duration, in which a media marathon of previews included an exhibition opening every half hour from 10.30am until nightfall for three days.

The 2003 *Venice Biennale* saw art go viral. Swarming hordes of artists, arts officers, curators, dealers, critics, museum directors,

funding middle-managers and sponsors [and doubtless a gaggle of groomed debutante gallery assistants for whom Venice is part of a time-honoured finishing school for young ladies], dutifully picked over the almost countless numbers of artworks, colonising space well beyond the traditional Giardini and the Arsenale. Every available palazzo, de-sanctified church, temporary gallery space and diplomatic outpost the city had to offer was occupied. And yet, despite the lagoons of wine consumed and the vast circus of art paraded, reports from the *Biennale* described an experience less orgy, than the unfulfilled promise of a gigantic session of speed dating. Although perhaps the American art historian Scott Rothkopf nailed it when he described it as, “the feeling of the world’s galleries on a runway”.³

However, just because the *Venice Biennale* may be getting too big and unwieldy to yield much genuine artistic poignancy, that’s no reason to let that get in the way of a good junket. For better or worse, international interest continues to grow and this year’s revenue from ticket sales promises to continue on a path upwards. And as the national representations become ever more numerous, an expanding militia of arts professionals answer the call. In fact surely it’s high time Air Italia introduced special ticketing for ‘curator class’, screening the *Cremaster* series [for long haul] with takeaway bags of ‘special fuel’, sponsored by Larry Clark, for the ruthless onslaught of openings and champagne flavoured Berocca for the morning after.

So, as the ‘great show of shows’ [as Bonami so humbly described it] grows forever bigger and bigger, what changes have there been to this monumental artfest? For one thing, the egalitarian rhetoric of opening up, breaking down and flattening out that has been an insistent sub-theme for many years now, has resulted in the previously mentioned abandonment of the singular director as intellectual lion. Szeemann’s 2001 *Biennale* may well mark the end of the curator as impresario, who single-handedly unlocks the truths of art. But before you go celebrating the death knell of the elitist, male auteur tradition [as shamelessly aristocratic and out of step with today’s managers of cultural capital] spare a thought for what will replace it—a fully empowered, nationally controlled *Venice Biennale* Administrative Council. As stated by Croff, “First there used to be a person charged with making the show. Now, instead, first we’ll see what the *Biennale* should be able to do. Then we’ll see who is the person, or persons who can accompany us in the project.” Sounding ominously hands on, in a ‘moving forward’ kind of way, this administrative council will

consist of Croff, three politicians and one seat remaining, most likely to be given to a prominent, deep-pocketed donor. I think we can safely say, there’ll be less talk of existential metaphysics and more cost benefit analysis at the monthly *Biennale* meetings.

In addition, it is with some bitter irony that just as the curatorial role has been emasculated by committee, in the demotion of director from driver to passenger, this year sees the appointment for the first time in history, of not one, but two women curators, Maria de Corral and Rosa Martinez, as co-directors of the 2005 *Biennale*. In a further diminution of their roles, the 2005 *Biennale* has been cast as an ‘exhibition debate’, which will share the limelight with an ambitious symposium to be organised by the 2007 director Robert Storr, as part of a thirty-six month interrogation of what the *Biennale* ‘should be able to do’. As such, it’s hard not to see how the *51st Venice Biennale* will be more than an aggrandised focus group for the following *Biennale*, by which time presumably Storr will have sorted out an ambition for the *Biennale* consistent with the administrative council’s vision. Whatever comes out of the next thirty-six months, here’s my wish list of things the *Biennale* could do better.

It could recognise that national pavilions, if they are to be more than the official ordination of one or other artist as worthy of the attention, might instead provocatively explore what nationhood means today. While this has admittedly spawned some confused provocation, such as Santiago Sierra who stationed security guards at the door of the Spanish Pavilion—denying entrance to all but those carrying Spanish passports—it has also produced one of the best occupations of a national pavilion in a long time, when Hans Haacke presented *Germania*, in the German Pavilion in 1993. As an aside and to suggest the superficiality of national demarcations, it’s worth mentioning that Hans Haacke has been an American all his life and has never claimed German citizenship. Meanwhile Ricky Swallow, this year’s chosen star for the Australian Pavilion, whose muses include iMac and Darth Vader, lives and works in his adopted home of London. I’m not saying that he should either be shackled to Melbourne or out painting trees gum, but if we’re all busy being trans-national creative nomads, what’s the point of a national pavilion at all—aside from the rather banal job of simulating local market demand.

The *Biennale* could understand that like all metabolic systems, the art exhibition has an optimum size, beyond which it starts to lose the ability to articulate itself and becomes moribund, preceding a collapse of its basic

essential functions—that is, for art to be seen. As the New York urbanist Michael Sorkin says of the city and urban sprawl, “Like systems and organisms of many other types, cities can reach a scale in which they are simply unable to perform co-ordinated movements. Beyond a certain scale, cities become inaccessible and beyond management... Services are undeliverable; they become factories of despair, forcing their inhabitants into ever more desperate margins in which any hope of individual autonomy becomes an impossible dream”.⁴ These thoughts could just as well apply to the *Venice Biennale*. It is not the role of a biennale to be as big a container of art as is possible, but rather to provide the platform from which the singularity of great art can take part in a legible conversation with other art.

The *Venice Biennale* could fully address the fact that Eurocentric cultural hegemony is a geriatric delusion that needs some shock therapy. In 2003, special sections such as *Contemporary Arab Representations* and *Fault Lines: Contemporary African Art and Shifting Landscapes* did laudably signal a new era of global inclusion, but nevertheless restricted such inclusion to a state of curatorial parenthesis. The notion of alterity in art needs a more sophisticated articulation, than one of ‘special needs’.

Finally, the *Venice Biennale* could resist the temptation, while necessarily recalibrating its intentions and ambitions, to capitulate to the pack mentality of tourism driven cultural support. While it makes perfect sense to manage a tourist resort by committee and following the path of least resistance, I cannot but observe, what seems to me a truism—that there are vital differences between tourism and arts programming. Most importantly, despite howls of elitism, I would like to make a plea for a position, defined and accountable but nevertheless of some intellectual sovereignty, of the curator. Every exhibition of worth I have ever seen has been the product of individually authored purpose. The point, despite Szeemann’s flaws, is not to remove the power of the voice, but to share the opportunity for other resounding voices to be heard on this venerable stage. Give individual voices from different localities, cultures and genders a proper platform. Imagine a biennale, not with some ‘multicultural’ bit parts, but seen entirely through an Asian prism. From such authored commitment comes the sometimes chaotic, belligerent and provocative, but also potent will to wrestle meaning from multiplicity. Curating is dangerously hit and miss, as perhaps art should make it, but when biennales start to assume the political goals of constituency approval, the banality of compromise is not too far behind.

Without prejudicing the outcome of either the 2005 *Venice Biennale* or the symposium and subsequent reappraisal of the *Biennale* over the following years, there have been some worrying signs from the council that this will be the era of consensus and policy programming. If this proves the case, I have a feeling we will all be reminiscing for the days when the curator was indeed more king than CEO.

Notes

¹ Harald Szeemann interviewed by Robert Storr, *Artforum* Vol 7 No 9, 1999

² Lawrence Alloway, *The Venice Biennale 1895–1968 From Salon to Goldfish Bowl*, New York Graphic Society, 1968

³ Scott Rothkopf, *Artforum* Vol 42 No 1, 2003

⁴ Michael Sorkin, ‘Formulary for a sustainable urbanism’, *Eco Edge* Conference, Melbourne, 2005

