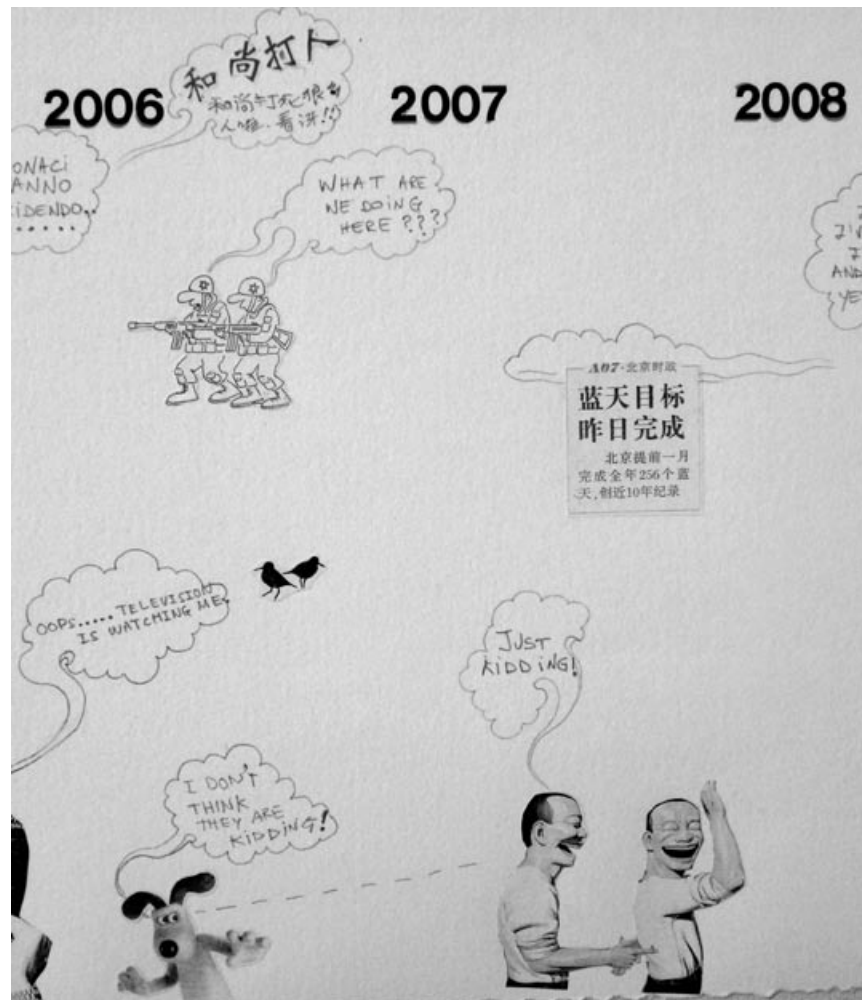


# fare mondi and other foreign affairs



## ASTRID MANIA

Okay, here's a confession. I begin to wonder whether the system of the national pavilions at the *Venice Biennale* isn't so bad after all. Or, to put it another way: maybe it is time to question the necessity of the Arsenale and the former Italian pavilion as the curated theme show for each *Biennale*. The dilemma is there are two opposing curatorial models at play in Venice; that of the solo show with a focus on an artist's work (which would be true for the majority of the national presentations) and that of the curated show with a focus on the *Biennale* concept and its ideology (at the Arsenale and the newly termed "Palazzo delle Esposizioni della Biennale", formerly known as the Italian pavilion). In retrospect, most of the recent *Venice Biennales* are remembered because of exceptional (for better or worse) national presentations or, more often the case, their curatorial labels. We remember the name of their curators or the titles of their shows—a towering Harald Szeemann in 1999 and 2001; Francesco Bonami's much debated *Dreams and Conflicts-The Dictatorship of the Viewer*; María de Corrales and Rosa Martínez's *The Experience of Art*, a featureless title, but two rather controversial and political exhibitions; and Robert Storr's oxymoronic *Think with the Senses-Feel with the Mind*.

This year it is Daniel Birnbaum *Making Worlds*. Admittedly, we live in the era of the supercurator. He or she has acquired a cultic status that turns their activities into ritual acts closely watched by their adherents. The inclusion of an artwork into the show of one such curator brings about a kind of transubstantiation. As we all know, this may lead to wonderful displays, surprising juxtapositions and stimulating experiences. However, this may also subject and reduce a work to footnote status, an appendix to a curatorial thesis. Which isn't necessarily the result of bad curating, but a consequence of the audience's and the critics' frame of mind: all eyes on the curator. As long as there is a hype around curators, as long as curating enjoys a novelty factor, as long as it is regarded as an esoteric science even its disciples aren't willing to demystify, it will be hard for artists and, in particular, their works to come back into the spotlight. Even more so since supercurators have turned into cash cows. They are valuable assets, key marketing tools in the service of global and local tourism. Would you travel long distances to see a show by, say, Alan Smithee? Exactly.

The curatorial Venice dilemma began in 1980, when Harald Szeemann and Achille Bonito Oliva introduced a new section to complement the Giardini with their national pavilions—the Aperto. The *Biennale's* statutes, which had been changed in 1973, from then on allowed for the introduction of new concepts and for the participation of independent curators. The success of this curated exhibition, which heralded the advent of young and at the time provocative art to Venice, has since changed the structure and habitus of the entire *Biennale*.<sup>1</sup> However, what was necessary at the time to provide a platform for the then contemporary debates seems less urgent today, as most countries present artists who participate in both the international art discourse and art market. (This year's staggering exception—Italy's national pavilion, which looked like the manifestation of a Berlusconi wet dream of art.)

For the 2009 *Venice Biennale*, the task of curating the corporate identity group show was handed over to Daniel Birnbaum, who joined forces with Jochen Volz, art historian, independent curator and, from 2001 until 2004, curator at Frankfurt am Main's exhibition venue Portikus, under the directorship of Birnbaum. Birnbaum still holds the post at Portikus. It is one of his responsibilities as rector of currently super hip art school Städelschule in Frankfurt. He was called there after successfully running Sweden's International Artists Studio Program, IASPI. And Birnbaum would draw a lot from these networks for his Venice project *Fare Mondi/Making Worlds* by inviting colleagues, former colleagues and students from this school. And even though the title may suggest a show with a geopolitical impetus, this reading couldn't be further from the truth. "Making worlds" was coined as a metaphorical term for the creative work of an artist. Every oeuvre—a universe of its own. Still, the focus is on the works and not, as one might also expect from such a title, on creative practice, on a reflection of production processes.

Pretty much anything would fit under the umbrella of such a title. But there were some red threads running through the show—an interest in urbanistic or architectural models and utopian visions. This became apparent in Yona Friedman's site-specific *Ville Spatiale-Visualisation of an Idea* (2009), a net-like structure placed under the Arsenale's ceiling, to hold recycling materials, cardboard boxes, shapes and provisional, small-scale objects looking like houses. A similar metaphorical approach was employed by Tomas Saraceno's *Galaxies Forming along Filaments, like Droplets along the Strands of a Spider's Web* (2009), prominently installed in the first main room of the *Biennale* Pavilion, something like the show's hub, an image of networks, strings of activities and densification. The architectural theme was also dominant in Marjetica Potrč's drawing series, many of them contemplations on the social and psychological effects of contemporary urbanisation.

Another major concern of Birnbaum's *Biennale* was a reflection on artistic genres and categories, a blurring of their boundaries. Here, works from the 1960s onwards prevailed, like Palermo's *Himmelsrichtungen* (1976), painted sheets of glass held together by T-beams and looking like integral parts of the exhibition space's structure. There was Sherrie Levine, a beautiful room with works from the Gutai group, Tony Conrad's great paintings that look like and serve as (mental) projection screens (from the series *Yellow Movies*, 1972/73). Distributed throughout the exhibition were André Cadere's *Barres de Bois Rond*, striped wooden sticks leaning against walls and corners that were originally meant to move outside of and beyond the art context. There was a *Magazine Sculpture* by Gilbert & George, and *Instruction Pieces* by Yoko Ono.





All these works were combined with or juxtaposed by contemporary pieces dealing with similar issues, so that large parts of this exhibition became a display of the links, similarities, inspirations and affinities between artists from the ‘older’ and today’s generations—Wolfgang Tillmans had a whole space for his ‘monochrome’ photographs that, from a distance, might be mistaken for paintings; Grazia Toderi’s two-channel video *Orbite Rose* (2009) shows overlapping night views of cities, drawing from the tradition of the veduta; Falke Pisano’s sculptures and assemblages play with phenomenology and perception; and Moshekwa Langa’s large-scale installation *Stage* (1997-2009), a cityscape/floor sculpture made out of everyday material, empty bottles, cotton reels and toy cars.

In 2005, visitors were greeted in the Arsenale by posters from the Guerilla Girls looking at the inclusion—or rather exclusion—of women in the *Biennale*, and by Joanne Vasconcelos’ chandelier made from tampons. In 2009? Again a work by a woman—Lygia Pape’s *Ttéia I, C*, a—for lack of a better word—‘poetic’ installation. And absolutely inoffensive. Just these few examples from both the Arsenale and the Giardini pavilion may give an impression of the *Biennale*’s strange indifference towards anything outside of its own aesthetic universe. It was certainly one of the least political presentations in recent years, one that completely ignored current political and economic turbulences—turbulences that do, after all, concern art just as much. It was also weirdly timeless in that it felt like the art world in the year 1960—something: at a time before globalisation exported the Western Art concept to every corner of the globe, and before the West was willing to embrace art concepts that differ from its own. *Making Worlds* looked like a map of the art world at that time—dominated by the United States of America and Western Europe, with a few blotches of Eastern Europe and South America. And tiny dots of art from Africa and China. Any other Asian countries? More African artists? The Arab world? Australia? New Zealand? Walking through the two venues felt like stepping back in time. And it didn’t feel good.

Oddly enough though, Daniel Birnbaum predicted the fate of his *Biennale* well in advance. In his postface to Hans-Ulrich Obrist’s ‘A Brief History of Curating’, he discusses various curatorial models of the *Venice Biennale*. (He was speaking from experience, since Birnbaum was involved in Francesco Bonami’s 2003 exhibition which split up into a number of rather heterogeneous shows under the directorship of different curators. “Many people didn’t like it much, but I have a sense that almost everything coming after this endeavor will look conservative”, Birnbaum says.<sup>2</sup> Nothing wrong with a conservative approach as long as “conservative” concerns the notion of the exhibition, as long as it posits the possibility of an overall concept, of an almighty curator. But being conservative in handwriting as well as in content, in the choice of artists? Maybe Birnbaum became a victim of his own criticism, to which he submitted all too willingly.

In the context of this *Biennale*, the most exciting reflection on curatorship was provided by artist duo Elmgreen & Dragset, who were in charge of the Danish pavilion and that of the Nordic Countries. They had turned both buildings into the (fake) homes of private collectors; the Nordic pavilion a gay phantasmagory, the Danish pavilion a picture of bourgeois tragedy. A fabulously snobby ‘real estate agent’ led visitors through the pavilion which contained real furniture, “real” art work and art work as “furniture”, such as Klara Lidén’s *Teenage Room*, a nightmarish gothic structure reminiscent of a bunk bed, or Nina Saunders’ *Delicate Landscape* (both 2009), a black *fauteuil* in a state of surrealistic dissolution and deformation. While walking through the house, the agent released more and more details of the family drama that had led to the split-up and



subsequent sale of the family home, delivering something akin to the plot of an Ingmar Bergman drama and of course, the curatorial narrative that binds these works together. And furthermore, a comment on or metaphor for that same narrative. A contemplation on the exhibition pavilion itself which was so much more playful, appropriate and—in the best sense—entertaining than Liam Gillick’s endeavour to try a somewhat related approach in the German pavilion. His attempt at thematising the building’s history (the classicistic pavilion was constructed in 1938 under Nazi rule) led to a rather cryptic play with notions of modernism, embodied in and released by a standardised modular wooden kitchen that was inspired by modernist reform movements. A stuffed cat sitting on top of a cupboard told its own story as “talking animal”, throwing in occasional remarks on the pavilion and contemporary politics, thus also delivering a kind of prefabricated narrative, even though a puzzling one.

One good thing, however, must be said of the German contribution to Venice and that is the abdication of the national rule. Asking an artist from a different country to represent another State is maybe a solution to the obsolete system of national pavilions. Perhaps this would also provide a solution to the curatorial dilemma of Venice. If more countries would open their pavilions to foreign artists, if there were more intelligent and enjoyable contributions like that of Elmgreen & Dragset, the national pavilions would become exciting places for exciting art, without nationalistic showmanship. And maybe then we could do without the giant effort (for curators, artists and visitors) to manage the Arsenale and the exhibition pavilion. We could look at art, and we would discuss art, not a curatorial concept. And this would also be a different text.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> cf Robert Fleck, 1980—‘Aperto’: Die Geburt der Postmoderne auf der Biennale von Venedig, in *Die Biennale von Venedig—Eine Geschichte des 20. Jahrhunderts*, Hamburg: Philo Fine Arts, 2009: 177–195

<sup>2</sup> Daniel Birnbaum, ‘The Archeology of Things to Come’, Postface to Hans-Ulrich Obrist, ‘A Brief History of Curating’, Zurich: JRP/Ringier & Les Presses du Réel, 2008: 234–239, 237