



Entrance to Arsenale, Venice Bienalle

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Venice Biennale 2011:

Between Discussion and Response

In keeping with the introspective spirit at the beginning of the new millennium, Fondazione La Biennale di Venice organized a four-day symposium under the stewardship of Robert Storr, in 2005, to critically examine the existing model of the Venice Biennale, the world's oldest biennale, in order to make it more responsive to the times.

According to Davide Croff, the head of the Fondazione, "The phase we are currently experiencing is one of disorientation and uncertainty: the crisis of utopias, models, and even history challenges the idea of the future. Even in terms of cultural institution, in this historical phase, we have the impression that we are living in a present without a future and with less and less of a past. We no longer talk about the future; actions are not inscribed within change with a view to future goals. Everything seems to be circumscribed within the immediate present, as if the future could not coincide with it. The Biennale, on the contrary, wants to reflect on its own future, so it can redesign and adapt it to new scenarios....This symposium is to help us to

put together, through debate, indications that we can use to recognize the landscape we are currently moving in, in order to explore new spaces for planning and valuable creation."¹

At this international symposium, titled *Where Art Worlds Meet: Multiple Modernities and the Global Salon*, among the various points under discussion, two points that I would like to critically look at and expand here are: the impact of the market on the Biennale, and if the art discourse is meeting the expectations of the new audiences.

The symposium had its share of pragmatists and idealists. The former seemed to have accepted the market as a necessary evil, which, with readily available money, was fast becoming the driving force behind the initiatives of funds-starved public institutions. The willingness of powerful galleries and auction houses to support high profile events to further their interest had many members of the art community worried.

There was a general consensus at the symposium that a Biennale,

unlike an art fair, should not be driven by art commerce. In the words of Massimo Cacciari, the mayor of Venice, it should be a place where, 'art deals with truth';² this is why the presence of big galleries behind the scene and the projection of their selected artists, was seen contrary to the spirit of the Biennale.

As artist Daniel Buren explained, "If artists who are chosen don't have a gallery backing they will be excluded if their project is rather costly and biennial cannot find anyone to finance it. We know that some directors and organizers of large exhibitions invite certain artists, provided they find a sponsor to look after their economic aspect".³

Tania Bruguera was of the view that if the biennial works independently, then it would "allow more space for risk, success or failure and discussion".⁴ However, this is not so, as a large part of global talent seen at Art Fairs is increasingly appearing at the Biennales, which makes one wonder if the Biennale is becoming a part of the same networking strategy. This practice has pushed priorities like scouting for innovative art practices and fresh narratives to the sidelines.

If the question is, has the Biennale been able to minimize the influence of the art market since the discussion in 2005, even a cursory glance at the 2011 Venice Biennale catalogue will inform the reader that the involvement of galleries far outnumbers the public institutions. Sometimes more than one gallery seems to have contributed to facilitating the participation of the work of an artist. This support, in most cases, covers the high costs of the transportation and installation of the work and the artist's stay during the installation and the event's inauguration.

The power of influential collectors was visible in the pavilions of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the UAE in the center of Arsenale. Frankly the works from these embryonic art scenes did not merit such a prime location and if merit alone was the consideration than this space would have been better utilized by stronger works from less wealthy nations like Iraq and Zimbabwe, that were tucked away in modest far away locations.

Illuminations, the theme chosen by the curator, Brice Couriger and the use of a historical work of Tintoretto's as its pivotal focus to hold the promise of an inspirational journey through the art on display, somehow fell short of becoming a universal statement. One can imagine the spaces at Padiglione come alive with Islamic Calligraphy, Chinese Painting and works from other traditions where grand masters have interpreted light, both as spiritual and aesthetic energy. By embracing such cultural polycentricism in her selection, Couriger could have added depth and breadth to her thematic choice and spoken more convincingly to global audiences. It would also have been a recognition of the pre-modern independent centers of art and culture and a step towards countering what Salah M Hassan at the seminar called, "the darker side of modernity and its link to the colonial project outside the West, the colonial violence and ruptures it caused in places outside the West".⁵

As Stuart Hall's concept of replacing the center and the periphery with the concept of intersecting centers of art in the world is gaining currency, the Venice Biennale that David Croff emphasizes, 'wants to continue to play a leading role in changed scenarios, expectations and values within international culture and art',⁶ can respond by recognizing that important movements can emerge from any location, in any hemisphere. To bring these emerging visual discourses to the visitor, a new group of local curators from different continents needs to be added to the existing curatorial model of the Venice Biennale. Such an addition will help to bring authentic voices from the local into the global art space and decrease the dependency on Diasporic artists as the dominant representatives of these art scenes. This will also create a need to accept and understand diverse narratives and their complex context without always wanting to interpret it through the discursive tools of the West. ■

All quotations are from the published catalogue of the seminar *Where Art Worlds Meet: Multiple Modernities and the Global Salon*, 9-12 December 2005, Istituto Veneto di Scienze, Lettere ed Arti, Palazzo Cavalli Franchetti, Campo Santo Stefano, Venice