

by NILOFUR FARRUKH

'Making Worlds...for all'

A MESSAGE THAT CAN BE A MOVEMENT

The potent communication sent out from the 53rd Venice Biennale (May to October 2009) is that Art is a serious human activity. However many masterpieces may go under the hammer or be sold at the growing number of Art Fairs. Art Fund figures may climb to six digits but Art at the end of the day can never be just a commodity.

This international art exhibition acknowledges the soul of art as the articulation of the human creative endeavor. The transformation in form, language and medium may have radically changed the way art appears, is made and discussed but the desire to push an idea to the edge of its possible limit with the vitality of imagination and enjoy the absolute freedom to realize one's vision remains the energy that continues to fuel art.

Yoko Ono
Tokyo, Japan
2006

photo Anne Terada
©Yoko Ono



The 53rd Venice Biennale, given the optimistic theme of 'Making Worlds' by its curator Daniel Birnbaum hoped to view the world's present and future through the visionary lens of the artists from 77 countries who were invited to be a part of the exhibitions at the official sites of Arsenale and Giardini. Besides this, the 44 fringe events that fanned the Venetian archipelago also gave countless artists an opportunity to be included.

In his catalog essay, the curator stresses on a fluidity of exchange rather than fixed stereotypes to open up the channels of exchange through readings and... misreading. To support this message that the world has much in common and much to share, a graphic vocabulary of basic geometric forms common to national flags of the world was developed and integrated into the Venice Biennale's signage.

The works selected present new conceptual directions while pushing the boundaries of material and explore the interventionist role of art.

It is in the context of this theme 'Making Worlds' that I will discuss some works that for me succeeded in either conveying the spirit of the theme or had an extraordinary artistic strength to become a part on the visitor's consciousness and served as a symbol of hope. The works selected present new conceptual directions while pushing the boundaries of material and explore the interventionist role of art.

Yoko Ono, the grand dame of inventiveness was awarded the coveted Golden Lion Award at the 53rd Venice Biennale. Her *Instruction Series*—a row of typed lines on A4 sized sheets—were unceremoniously stuck on a wall in the main pavilion at the Giardini. Created in the 1960s this series was based on papers with instructions that invited the audience to be a part of the art. 'Watch the sun until it becomes a square,' 'Listen to a heart

beat,' and 'Buy many dream boxes,' 'Ask your wife to select one,' 'Dream together,' etc. These simple and sometimes absurd directives with the power to spark the imagination were as absorbing as any powerful visual.

While Yoko Ono used words for a response, the thesis of the curator of The Moscow Poetry Club, a kind of multi-disciplinary happening, sought to separate reality from the word. To him, since the word 'bread' is not edible and the word 'water' is not drinkable so his objective was to coalesce art, word and food into one physical experience. For this poets from different countries were invited to recite their poetry while artists created art on a small wooden platform set up in a clearing at the Giardini. During the recital, bottles of water and slices of bread were distributed in an atmosphere of camaraderie. At first it could be a little bewildering for the visitor to be in the midst of these simultaneous activities but the synergy of this live event provided a sensory awakening.

Hector Zamora's art married reality with fiction in his make-believe *Zeppelin Festival* during the Biennale. The specially designed commemorative postcards and souvenirs, sold by vendors on the streets of Venice, allowed his art to reach new audiences.

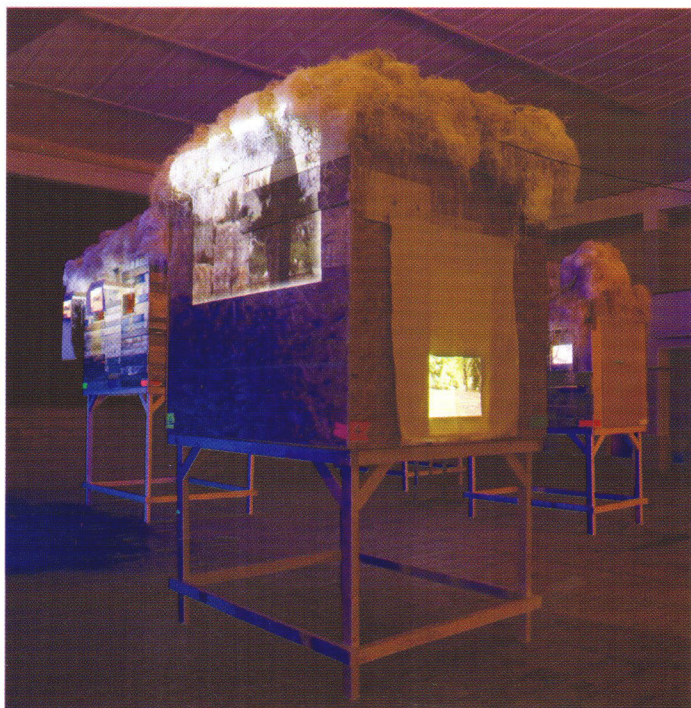
The visitors to the Arsanale experienced the zeppelin stuck between two buildings almost as if it had crash landed there. Accompanying postcards carried a digitally manipulated make-believe picture of a dozen or so zeppelins in flight over the landmarks of Venice. At first glance, they looked like buoyant sharks, more threatening than festive. To some it might have evoked dark memories of the Nazi zeppelins that set the great fires of London.

Pascale Marthine Tayou
Human Being

mixed media, dimensions variable
2007

photo Ela Bialkowska

courtesy Galleria Continua, San Gimignano / Beijing / Le Moulin



Héctor Zamora
Sciame di dirigibili (Swarm of Zeppelins)
mixed media
2009
courtesy the artist



Hector Zamora, the Mexico born artist from Brazil '...creates social interventions that manifest themselves as architecture or sculpture, as a collective action or an installation in public space.' As 'his work is based on exhaustive research into the history of a place and its inhabitants' collective memory myths and desires,' elaborates the exhibition essay.¹

At the Biennale there were numerous testimonies to displacement. The impact of living in different locations was the concern underpinning Pascale Marthine Tayou's art. For an artist born in the Cameroon and presently living in Belgium he has much to draw from biographical experience. 'The ceaseless movement between places and contexts' which the artist has made a positive foundation for a practice from which he criticizes enduring colonial structures and establishes connections between forms and histories supposedly belonging to radically different cultures, places or worlds.²

As the visitors walked through the huts on stilts, with projections on their window curtains of films on everyday life in different countries as diverse as Japan, Cameroon, Italy, etc. They also found themselves negotiating a maze of objects, sculpture, piled produce, improvised furniture and tools. It was evocative of the colors and sounds of an African village, almost like a shantytown backyard, which seemed to serve as a metaphor of an underdeveloped consumer culture where 'imported' goods can have several recycled lives.

The Poland Pavilion at the Giardini hosted Krzysztof Wodiczko's *Guests*. This work referred to the ambiguous status of the immigrants in Europe. The audience was invited into this quiet hall so they could see moving shadows, busy cleaning the tall windows and skylights behind the frosted glass. Through the earphones could be heard clear voices speaking in different languages but their faces remained blurred. The life-size



Krzysztof Wodiczko
Visitors
 video projection
 2008/2009
 courtesy Profile Foundation



Péter Forgács
Col Tempo – il progetto W.
 illustration
 2009
 courtesy Naturhistorisches Museum
 Anthropologische Abteilung, Wien

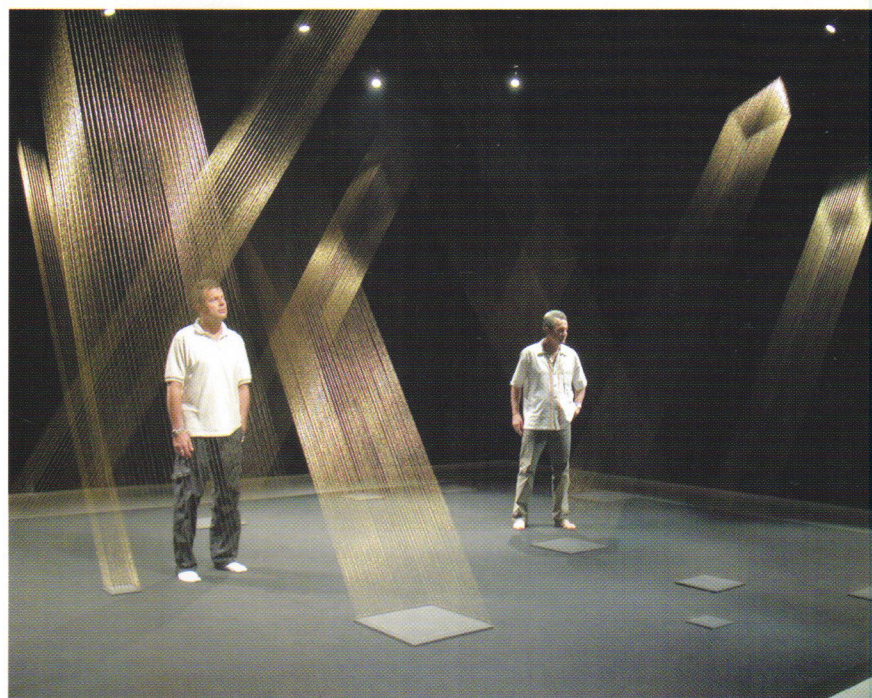
Lygia Pape
TTÉIA I, C
 gold thread in square forms
 (2002) 2005
 Project Lygia Pape - Cultural Association
 photo Paula Pape

projections that replicated real life situations in which guest workers live as aliens because of the 'otherness' of their language, culture, religion and economic status.

With Time—The W Project at The Hungarian Pavilion is a bold investigation into the roots of ethnic stereotyping. Peter Forgacs, the artist has looked into the Nazi archive established in Vienna in 1939 for scientific investigation of racial traits. Countless portraits of people measured for their limbs and features are used in the work to highlight 'the social and anthropological dimensions of looking as an instrument of power, dominance and understanding.'³

At the Arsenale, the converted Renaissance shipyards recently handed over by the city for the Biennale exhibition, the visitor entered through a double layer of dark curtains. Even before the eyes were adjusted to the pitch dark, floating beams of golden light appeared. This poetic work by the late Brazilian artist Lygia Pape, who died in 2004, is connected to Neo-Concretism, a movement committed to promoting interactive links by removing the hurdles that made Concretism remote for the audience so its social dimension could be explored. Pape's ephemeral beams constructed from gold wires were stretched in square columns and then partially lit to create the magical illusion of being weightless. Since it was made in 2002, it has overwhelmed audiences with its quiet splendor.

Walking into Michelangelo Pistoletto's work the visitor felt confronted with violence in the room with its fifteen shattered huge mirrors in gilded frames that were reminiscent of grand ballrooms. In *Seventeen Less One*, distorted and incomplete images were almost infinitely reflected in multiple shapes and sizes to create new perceptions on how viewing can be altered



Michelangelo Pistoletto
Seventeen Less One
 mirrors and wood, 17 elements, 243 × 178 cm each
 2008
 Yokohama Triennale
 photo Ueno Norihiro
 courtesy Galleria Continua, San Gimignano / Beijing / Le Moulin



Giardini della Biennale di Venezia
photo Giorgio Zucchiatti
courtesy Fondazione La Biennale di Venezia



with a physical or emotional rupture. Pistoletto's preoccupation with the mirror in his art has to do with the artist's search for his own identity. In this work '...the violence of the action symbolizes the evil and tensions that are a part of the human existence, the same obscurity that emerges from the depths of the broken mirror like a black hole.' 4

An instrumentalist intervention by Anawana Haloba focused on the imbalance created by globalized economic systems with its no-fuss title of *The Greater G8 Advertising Market Emancipation of the Third World Trade 2007*. This provocative visual statement on the resource exploitation of under-developed nations invited visitors to help themselves to sweets and biscuits in canisters placed on an improvised outdoor market stand. Each element in the installation had been carefully used to support the artist's concept, from the wooden pallets on which the stall rested that were made to European specifications, an emblem of the inflexible structure of economic exchange to the subtext of the labels on the containers. The loaded slogans like 'Abdala Motor Oil from Iraq for your conscious' and 'Mullah of the Somali banana brand' called into question the hidden catch in the G8 countries foreign aid policy and free trade agreements.

Haloba Anawana
The Greater G8 Advertising Market
sculpture / interactive sound installation
2007-09
courtesy the artist



Besides the two main venues Arsenale and Giardini, every two years, art takes over Venice from May to October. During this period art is installed on the docks, afloat in the sea, on remote islands and in important historical buildings as well as decaying palatial homes by the Grand Canal.

'East West Diwan,' showcasing contemporary art from Pakistan, Iran and Afghanistan was installed on the first floor of a cathedral under refurbishment. A staircase encased in scaffolding led the visitors up to be greeted by a grand sized calligraphy of Allah in neon lights by Shezad Dawood, an artist who divides time between UK and Pakistan. Other participants in the show from Pakistan were Imran Qureshi, Aisha Khalid, Nusra Latif Qureshi and Khadim Ali.

Aisha's work, with its mirror walls collaged with her signature unfurling spheres that morphed into black bullet holes took center stage with its daring physical presence and contemporary relevance.

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'Edge of Arabia' mounted in a quaint courtyard of a dilapidated palace was a collection of contemporary art by artists from different cities of Saudi Arabia. Breaking away from restrictive stereotypes, the small group presented a new visual identity connected to their time and experience. The haunting video *The Path* on flash flood victims that made the choice to trust technology and took refuge on a newly built bridge only to lose their lives when the structure was swept away. For the artist, Abdunnasser Gharem, the incident that inspired this video serves as a metaphor for life altering decisions. Ahmed Mater Aseeri's three-dimensional work on Kaa'ba constructed from tiny iron filings and magnets challenged the received visual representation of holy places.

Unlike this independent initiative, the pavilions of the UAE and Abu Dhabi were lackluster as the voice of the artists in both pavilions was marginalized by the projection of the official cultural policy.

At the Biennale the theme 'Making Worlds' has been interpreted with a pensive examination of the experience of alienation, fear and violence that dominates the present world. Their concerns focused on the polarization brought about by institutionalized social profiling and social stereotyping.

Abdulnasser Gharem
The Path
 2007

A visual interface that brings such a large number of artists together offers hope that a dialogue is possible but it also points to difficulties in holding a dialogue without epistemological baggage. For the non-European visitor, even to one with a Western education, the influential references to Western philosophies and history in the exhibits reinforces the issues of the dominant discourse and the discussion for 'a multiplicity of centers, grounds, worlds' has not moved beyond a theoretical wish list.

To carry out an insightful exchange between art from different global locations the need to go beyond the spectacle has acquired urgency. For a deeper dialogue, heterogeneity and plurality has to be accompanied with a '...struggle to construct meaning together, across the borders of cultural differences. Only the meltdown of one's intellectual framework makes possible the genuine surprises of an ethical encounter' as suggested by Sarat Maharaj.³



From a Marginalized Position

While it was exciting to see the art of important Pakistani artists like Imran Qureshi, Aisha Khalid, Khadim Ali and Nusra Latif Qureshi at the Venice Biennale, where some of the world's most outstanding artists are exhibited, one could not help but feel that an independent exhibition rather than a small space in the tri-nation show of Pakistan, Iran and Afghanistan, would have been more suitable for them.

Their exhibition titled 'East West Diwan' was a continuation of earlier exhibitions titled 'Living Tradition' held in Kabul and Islamabad by Turquoise Mountain, a London based organization with a mandate to revive Afghan cultural heritage. According to the curator Jemima Montagu, the objective of the show was to explore how artists of Pakistan, Iran and Afghanistan 'are responding to, renewing and reinventing their common histories and traditions.'

In an international context, the show with its emphasis on the interpretation of traditional art and craft practices presented Pakistani Contemporary Art in a very narrow framework. For religious and historical identity is only a small part of its very layered and complex present day matrix. The recent attempts by international cultural organizations to culturally group Pakistan with Afghanistan and Central Asian countries in some sort of Af-Pak configuration can only construct a new identity. In reality, Pakistan, which is linguistically, racially and historically invested in South Asia and its syncretic secular culture—that most contemporary artists subscribe to—shares much more with India and Bangladesh than its Western neighbors.

Ideally a show from Pakistan should have been showcased at Giardini where shows are held at permanent National Pavilions. Not only developed nations have exhibition spaces there but also smaller economies like Egypt and Syria that do not have large cultural budgets but value art as an integral part of its national culture. Other smaller countries like Azerbaijan, Turkey, Palestine, Republic of Gabon, among others, that do not have a permanent pavilion went to the trouble of hiring modest venues to project their art at the 53rd Venice Biennale.

Any independent space would have been transformed by the outstanding work from Pakistan, which not only has a growing number of globally acclaimed contemporary artists but several generations of artists who have laid the foundation of a robust art practice.

According to the reports circulating in the art community, Pakistan was invited by the Venice Biennale office, but the Pakistan Government declined its offer due to lack of funds. If this participation had been seen from the wider perspective of rehabilitating Pakistan's image abroad, then there could not have been a better offer than this to reach out to the people of Europe.

Without the financial and diplomatic support of the state, Pakistan cannot optimize on the resource of its talented artists and use it to project a unified and vibrant nation to counter the nay sayers in the global media.

From time to time when Pakistani artists are invited to be a part of initiatives like the 'East West Diwan' with its own objectives, Pakistan can expect to only have a presence but not national representation. For that the support of the state is crucial.

'Making Worlds'that everyone can take ownership of, is much too serious an objective to be taken up in only one international art show. It needs to be a movement. If several sequels are held through the next decade at the Venice Biennale, an invitation can be sent out to curators living in different parts of the world, particularly non-western, to present their perspective. These authentic voices of the often subordinated cultures will be a genuine step in the de-territorialization of culture. This change in philosophical paradigm can open the space for new aesthetic mappings that can further the consciousness brought about at the 53rd Venice Biennale and move closer to the objective defined by Daniel Birnbaum 'that this exhibition will create new spaces for art to unfold beyond the expectations of the dominant institutions and the mechanism of the art market.'⁶

Ahmed Mater Aseeri
Magnetism I
magnets
2008

NOTES

1. *Making Worlds Catalog*, 53rd International Exhibition, Venice Biennale, pg 174
2. *Making Worlds Catalog*, 53rd International Exhibition, Venice Biennale, pg 152
3. *Making Worlds, Participating Countries and Collateral Events, Catalog*, 53rd International Exhibition, Venice Biennale, pg 164
4. *Making Worlds Catalog*, 53rd International Exhibition, Venice Biennale, pg 134
5. *Making Worlds Catalog*, 53rd International Exhibition, Venice Biennale, 'Philosophical Geographies' by Sarat Maharaj, pg 277
6. *Making Worlds Catalog*, 53rd International Exhibition, Venice Biennale, 'We are Many' by Daniel Brinbaum, pg 185

