

A Whole New World? On the 53rd Venice Biennale

by Ceci Moss



Image: Aleksandra Mir, VENEZIA (all places contain all others), 2009

“Making Worlds”, the theme for this year’s [53rd International Art Exhibition](#) curated by Daniel Birnbaum, argues that art should be seen as a form of “world making” and taken seriously as such. His accompanying essay in the catalog holds a distinctively transcendent ring to it, one that calls out for a universal solidarity through art, in stating, “Perhaps art can be one way out of a world ruled by leveling impulses and dull sameness. Can each artwork be a principle of hope and an intriguing plan for escape? Behind the immediate surface we are many - together and individually, through the multiplicity of imaginative worlds we hold within.” Given the very real worlds of national and political ambitions on the table in the Biennale’s pavilions, not to mention the surreal economic and class component to these sorts of events, Birnbaum’s curatorial statement, which suggests that art is autonomous from these factors, seemed like floral hyperbole in comparison. Why would the U.S. Pavilion be the only country to extend their Bruce Nauman exhibition to three locations across the city? And why would the United Arab Emirates Pavilion feature numerous models of large-scale cultural projects proposed for Abu Dhabi? The world’s fair mentality is here for the long run, that is to be sure. The strongest projects I viewed, in both the main exhibition and the pavilions, were able to eek out a space, certainly not a “world”, with a degree of critical distance and integrity away from the Biennale circus.

Venice is one of the few cities in the world to completely rely on boats for delivery, transportation, garbage disposal, and every other municipal need you can think of. The

upkeep of the city is expensive due to this fact, thus the only economy to quite literally keep the town afloat is tourism. Judging from the multiple skyscraper-sized cruise boats I saw pull in daily, and the hundreds upon hundreds of tourists who packed the city's narrow passageways, it seems that this industry is alive and well. Two art works in the main exhibition dealt directly with Venice's transition from an historic city to a Las Vegas-style destination with a sense of humor. For *VENEZIA (all places contain all others)* (2009), [Aleksandra Mir](#) printed a million postcards featuring the typical design and typeface found on a Venetian postcard except the artist switched out the images for other locales around the world near bodies of water, therefore *VENEZIA* is emblazed across picturesque images of white water rafting or an iced-over lake in the forest. Visitors were encouraged to take the deceptive postcards and use them, further circulating these fake mementos. The segment of the title, "all places contain all others" emphasizes the interchangeability of the Kodak moment, implying perhaps that the authenticity of these images is not so important after all. [Miranda July's](#) *Eleven Heavy Things* (2009) in the sculpture park of the Arsenale similarly played with the snapshot or memento, where viewers were invited to take pictures with her eleven sculptures installed on small grassy knolls. Words were inscribed on the sheeny white fiberglass blocks in July's signature handwriting with statements such as, "We don't know each other, we're hugging for the picture, when we're done I'll walk away quickly. It's almost over." in *Eleven Heavy Things - Pedestal for Strangers* or "This is my little girl. She is brave and clever and funny. She will have none of the problems that I have. Her heart will never be broken. She will never be humiliated. Self-doubt will not devour her dreams" in *Eleven Heavy Things - Pedestal for a Daughter*. Cartoonish wig-like shapes with cut out silhouettes for posing lightened up these candid declarations, and most of the visitors opted to snap photos with the whimsical blobs. Both *VENEZIA (all places contain all others)* and *Eleven Heavy Things* acknowledged the spectacle that is the Biennale and its relationship to the larger visual ecosystem of the city's tourist industry, and folded this into their conceptual framework. Far from an attempt to forge a new world or new reality, Mir and July responded to their immediate environs with wit and candor.

img_2000-2.jpg

Image: Miranda July, Eleven Heavy Things, 2009

I jokingly described the Venice Biennale as the art world's [Epcot Center](#) recently, but the comparison is in actuality quite accurate, as the pavilion organizational structure is not all that different from the "[World Showcase](#)". With this in mind, artists who dealt with the challenges of the countries they were asked to represent sans a national agenda or the obligatory pomp and circumstance were a reprieve from the barrage of buzzwords and meaningless press release-ready calls for criticality, new visions, new conversations, redefinitions, etc. [Teresa Margolles](#), whose exhibition at [the Mexican Pavilion](#) *What Else Could We Talk About?* (2009) was one such example. For the last two decades, the artist has brought to light the bureaucracy and protocol that has arisen in order to process the dead in Mexico City's morgues, many of whom are casualties of police corruption, gang violence, drug wars, and poverty. Her work is an attempt to create a memorial and a

space of contemplation for the cyclical violence that has prematurely ended these lives by using the material traces left behind- the water used to wash corpses, the blood stained rags from the clean up of a scene of an execution, and the shards of glass embedded in the skin of a victim of a drive-by shooting. The exhibition was staged in the crumbling, dilapidated sixteenth century Palazzo Rota Ivancich in the Castello district, whose uneven floorboards, peeling baroque wallpaper, and rusted light fixtures recalled an aristocracy that had long since vacated the premises. The interior was left exactly as is, and each day the floors were washed with water containing blood from damp rags used to mop up crime scenes after the official forensic work was complete. These same rags were hung up and hydrated on the ground floor of the building, and the pools of water collected underneath were then used in the next day's cleaning. The interdependence between Mexico's drug wars and a globalized economy were brought to the fore by the artist's intervention in the Giardini grounds a week before the opening. Margolles hung fabric infused with the blood of executed people from drug-related crimes in the northern border of Mexico on the entrance of the United States Pavilion, signaling the U.S.'s inextricable ties to the Mexican drug trade and resulting violence. [Zoran Todorović's](#) *WARMTH* (2009) in [the Serbian Pavilion](#) also derives material from the human body in an effort to call attention to the institutional and societal regulations which have become inscribed on the body. Mats woven from human hair, collected from army barracks and hair salons, were piled up around the gallery space, and videos depicting their assemblage were projected on the wall above. The title - *WARMTH* - evokes the instinctive need that is negotiated when hair is taken and given away, either for aesthetic or regulatory reasons. Margolles and Todorovic's investigations of the fate of the human body vis-à-vis biopolitical control underscore the fact that artists often do not have the privilege to make worlds, but must create in the worlds made for them.



Image: Teresa Margolles, What Else Could We Talk About?, 2009.

The consequences of economic and political pressures come up again in the themes of

dislocation and migration found in the work of [Katarina Zdjelar](#), shown alongside Todorović in the Serbian Pavilion, and Krzysztof Wodiczko's *Goście/Guests* (2009) at [the Polish Pavilion](#). Zdjelar, who immigrated to the Netherlands a few years ago, deals with the inconsistencies and difficulties in translation and language acquisition. Her single channel video *The Perfect Sound* (2009) follows a speech therapist and a client, as the client attempts to eliminate his accent and pronounce “perfect” English. The words register as nonsense after the student struggles through multiple rounds of repetition. This attempt to learn a language correctly illustrates the painstaking efforts made toward assimilation, which is assumed to open up more opportunity. [Krzysztof Wodiczko's](#) *Goście/Guests* also touches on the experience of immigrants. The full room video installation presents the illusion that the spectator is viewing a scene on the other side of a misted window. In these vignettes, the face and details of the characters remain obscured as they discuss their problems with residency status or visas on cell phones or in casual conversation. Just as the identity of the subjects remains hidden from the viewer, the spectator feels as if they are indiscernible from the subjects, secretly eavesdropping on their conversations. This two-way partition highlights the in-between spaces occupied by illegal or somewhat legal immigrants as they attempt to work and make their lives in foreign countries.

accent 27.jpg

Image: Katarina Zdjelar, The Perfect Sound, 2009 (Still)

wodiczko_11.jpg

Image: Krzysztof Wodiczko, Goście/Guests, 2009 (Courtesy of the artist, Profile Foundation and Zachęta National Gallery of Art, Warsaw)

While the “Making Worlds” theme clearly had some problem areas, [the Internet Pavilion](#), a collateral event to the Biennale this year, was also guilty of making its own sweeping statements. Organized by [Miltos Manetas](#), artist and co-founder of [Neen](#), and curated by Jan Aman, the pavilion was housed in the S.A.L.E docks space on Dorsoduro and included both online and offline projects by a host of artists, such as [Petra Cortright](#), [Martijn Hendriks](#), [Harm van den Dorpel](#), [Sinem Erkas](#), [Elna Frederick](#), [Parker Ito](#), [Oliver Laric](#), [Guthrie Lonergan](#), [Pascual Sisto](#), [Aleksandra Domanovic](#), [Scott Kildall](#), [Nathaniel Stern](#), [Christian Wassmann](#), [Miltos Manetas](#), [Rafael Rozendaal](#), and [AIDS 3-D](#). Claiming that the Internet, “...is a different territory from the existing pavilions” and “...is not defined by physical or geographical borders, nationalities, or a specific language” the pavilion was intended as a location to spotlight a new development. The language used in [the press release](#), to me, recalled the utopian rhetoric of the early days of artistic experimentation online. It struck me as naïve to view the internet as an independent, borderless entity entirely separate from our divided world. Further, I found it odd to frame the internet as a territory, when it’s clearly a tool and a medium. The installation itself was a disappointment, especially for those artists in the “[New Wave](#)” portion of the exhibition. Christian Wassmann’s sculpture *Pages* was the first thing visible to outsiders coming into the space, and from the entryway, it was difficult to see the four screens set up to project “New Wave” in the far back. Once situated in

front of the screens, the works were projected without titling, or the ability for viewers to scroll to a main menu, thus there was no way to read the artist names, titles or dates for the works, so they remained anonymous. Given that these artists are doing some of the most compelling work in the field today, this was an enormous letdown. More attention, care and thought could've been devoted to the presentation of each artist's project. The other pavilions provided printed materials and wall text to accompany their exhibitions, whereas the Internet Pavilion gave no further information on the artists, only a quick chance to write down the url, which wasn't enough to take away. Moreover, I wondered if there should even be an Internet Pavilion at all. It reminded me of the New Media Lounges that popped up at various institutions in the late 1990s, and I don't see the need now for this separation. Judging from various conversations I had throughout the week, the general consensus was that "Making Worlds" featured more electronic and video work than any previous biennale, and no doubt, this tendency will continue as even more artists utilize these mediums.



Image: Christian Wassmann, Pages, 2009 (Installation at the Internet Pavilion)



Image: Guthrie Lonergan, Floor Warp 2, 2008 (at the Internet Pavilion)

Both the curatorial premises for “Making Worlds” and the Internet Pavilion trumpeted new worlds and new ground, when they should have focused more squarely on the worlds we already inhabit. Perhaps this rhetoric, better suited for an exhibition at the National Air and Space Museum, is a result of the formality of the Venice Biennale and the aforementioned Epcot Center approach. These limitations would surely prevent a curator from staging an event as malleable as [Manifesta](#), which has had the license to change location, adapt and experiment with different formats. That said, Birnbaum did succeed in presenting an extremely wide-ranging group of artists, and practically every medium for artistic expression had a place in the exhibition. Maybe that’s the best hope for something as entrenched as the Venice Biennale? Maybe so.