

In Conversation: Experience and Alterity at the 51st Venice Biennale

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This year's International Exhibition, the 51st in the history of the Venice Biennale, has been marked in advance by a series of innovations, most notably the appointment of two female directors; María de Corral and Rosa Martínez. In conjunction with the work of Robert Storr (as director of the 2005 symposium and the 2007 Biennale), this years exhibition forms part of period of 'reflection', intended to reassert Venice's central role in international artistic debate.¹ A certain rhetorical commitment to novelty and innovation is perhaps appropriate to the moment of speculation and anticipation prior to the launch. But even when it makes its grandest claims for the future, Venice always remains embedded in the past, with every gesture inviting analysis through reference to previous iterations. The scale and structure of biennial exhibition, as a whole, also ensures a certain cyclicity, extending beyond curatorial and artistic practice to the activities of previewing and reviewing. Previews (such as this one) necessarily make reference to press releases, but exhibition reviewers may also depend upon advance statements as they struggle to cope with an ever increasing expanse of themes, artists and venues.

The self-referential character of biennial discourse is enhanced by the fact that many of the prominent events are directed by freelance curators, linked by a social network. This year, for example, Maria de Corral's selection for the Biennale includes the work of Zwelethu Mthethwa, an artist who has featured in earlier exhibitions curated by Rosa Martinez. In an interview with Carlos Basualdo, Martinez explains that she first 'fell in love with Zwelethu thanks to a special issue of *Atlantica*, the magazine dedicated to the second Johannesburg Biennial'.² She could not attend the Johannesburg exhibition because it coincided with her work on the first Istanbul Biennial, but she exchanged catalogues and information with curators Okwui Enwezor and Octavio Zaya. Even when such direct exchange is absent, major biennial exhibitions tend to function in dialogue with each other, borrowing from (or explicitly rejecting) strategies employed across geographically dispersed but structurally comparable events. As a consequence of these factors, the biennial system can sometimes seem to resemble a loud, but essentially private, conversation, a characteristic that is accentuated by the various roundtable discussions that have evolved in print or public form over recent years.³ This conversationality has also become the

¹ See Marcia E. Vetrocq 'Venice Biennale makeover'. *Art in America*, October 2004: 35-36

² Rosa Martinez, interviewed by Carlos Basualdo, 'Launching Site', *Artforum International*, Summer 1999: 39.

³ See for example the panel discussion on 'Global Tendencies: Globalism and Large-scale Exhibition' *Artforum International*, November 2003: 152-167.

subject of curatorial practice, as in the case of the by-now-infamous ‘stations’ of the 50th International exhibition.

Some echoes of ‘Dreams and Conflicts’ may persist this year but the Biennale organisers have deliberately stressed a much narrower focus. Initial press statements framed de Corral’s ‘The Experience of Art’ as a retrospective. In contrast, ‘Always a Little Further’, curated by Martinez, was presented as an engagement with recent developments. As these projects have evolved, however, this distinction seems somewhat less fixed. Both exhibitions encompass the work of artists born in the 1950s, 60s and 70s, as well as that of practitioners no longer living (Agnes Martin, Francis Bacon, Juan Munoz and Philip Guston in ‘The Experience of Art’, Samuel Beckett, Semiha Berksoy and Leigh Bowery in ‘Always a Little Further’). The physical separation between two parallel exhibitions has also been complicated through the joint programming of ten installation in ‘common spaces’ such as the bookshops, cafeterias, and restrooms. As usual, distinctions between proper and interstitial spaces are difficult to sustain at the Biennale and boundaries are likely to be blurred. For example, Laura Belem’s *Escutura* (2001-2005), suggesting a play upon *escultura* (sculpture) and *escutar* (the act of listening), will be installed in a street passage at the Arsenale. Belem, an artist selected by Martinez, is also showing *Enamorados* (*Enamoured*, 2004-2005), composed of two boats signalling each other in one of the canals.

This choice of site is perhaps in keeping with the broader themes of ‘Always a Little Further’, concerning Venice’s history as ‘the epicentre, the privileged context for the confluence of artists coming from different geopolitical and cultural contexts’.⁴ Martinez emphasises that the Biennale offers an opportunity to ‘analyse the concept of internationality and to redraw the contemporary topographies of alterity’, and she deliberately invokes a pedagogical model of curatorship. She aims ‘to reduce the background noise, to assign value and to organise syntax and discourses’, perhaps suggesting an oblique critique of ‘Dreams and Conflicts’ in 2003. De Corral, in contrast, claims the language of personal experience and pleasure (although this may be a quirk of translation); she emphasises that she would be ‘pleased’ if the exhibition were experienced as a ‘process’ rather than a finished story. Noting that her project does not attempt to represent ‘all countries or continents’, she suggests that an explicitly personal selection is the appropriate response to the current context of artistic production and reception, marked by multiplicity rather than a ‘dominant artistic doctrine or formal style’.

Both curators place a certain faith in the Biennale as a space in which diverse practices can coexist, but it is difficult to judge how this rhetoric with translate into practice in ways that might

⁴ For press releases issued by Martinez and de Corral in relation to their respective exhibitions see <http://www.labienale.org/en/>

distinguish the 51st exhibition from its predecessors. One possible area of emphasis might be the exploration of *intersubjectivity*, in terms of its relation to aesthetic experience. Martinez's project seems to be particularly concerned with processes of exchange and dialogue at work within the sphere of production. Her selection includes the Guerrilla Girls, the Blue Noses, and The Centre of Attention, Jennifer Allora & Guillermo Calzadilla and Christoph Büchel & Gianni Motti, highlighting both the subversive quality of collaboration, and the intersection of the personal and political. An exploration of the interpersonal, and the intersubjective, is also suggested by de Corral's selection, but principally in relation to spectatorship. Her selection includes works by Eija Liisa-Ahtila, Willie Doherty and Stan Douglas, three artists noted for the construction of complex moving image installations, exploring explorations of questions of narrativity and subjectivity.

One possible way of approaching the parallel projects outlined by Martinez and de Corral might be through reference to the model of art practice as conversation, suggested by the writings of Jean Fisher. In her contribution to the catalogue of the 2nd Johannesburg Biennale, Fisher examines the relationship between multiculturalism and practice. She argues that, while issues of cultural difference and identity relate to the 'domain of the art system' rather than being proper to art itself, they still necessitate 'attentiveness to the relation between self and other'.⁵ She explores this process in more depth in a subsequent text entitled 'Conversation Pieces' and argues that the concept of aesthetic experience has been usefully re-conceptualised within the spheres of linguistics and semiotics.⁶ She notes that all 'experience', aesthetic or otherwise, may be pre-empted by a development that takes place in human infancy – the gradual shift from the 'babble of nature' into discourse. This locates the concept of 'experience' in the difference between the sign system and the enactment of language, and plays upon the double meaning of the word, suggesting both familiarity and that which arises as a new event.

Fisher identifies a parallel between this linguistic model and de Certeau's concept of 'non-discursive practice', as something that is not conscious of itself and so not necessarily assumable to the sign system. She suggests that such forms of 'non-discursivity' might encompass' the kind of ethico-poetic art practice that refuses to offer up a familiar pre-packaged 'experience' but shimmers in the space of the as-yet-to-be-narrated'.⁷ She proposes Gabriel Orozco's work, echoing the 'playful' character of early linguistic experience, as emblematic of this latter practice. Fisher also calls attention to less overtly playful explorations of intersubjectivity, highlighting the exploration of alterity and the everyday in Willie Doherty's work. She suggests that Doherty's

⁵ Jean Fisher, 'The Work Between Us' (1997), *Vampire in the Text: Narratives of Contemporary Art*, London: Institute of International Visual Arts (inIVA), 2003: 269

⁶ Jean Fisher, (1999/2000), *Vampire in the Text: Narratives of Contemporary Art*, London: Institute of International Visual Arts (inIVA), 2003: 270-276.

⁷ Jean Fisher, 'Conversation Pieces', 273-274.

practice engages with an ethics of reception, collapsing the binaries of self and other while at the same time invoking a mode of experience that is non-discursive.

Doherty will show *Non-Specific Threat* (2003), a piece that engages very directly with these issues, at Venice. It is interesting to note that both Doherty and Orozco have been selected by de Corral, given the fact that questions of alterity seem to be more directly relevant to the project that has been outlined by Martinez. This underscores that fact that, while the two directors have identified distinct areas of interest, their projects intersect at many levels. Hopefully, ‘The Experience of Art - Always a Little Further’ will offer an opportunity to trace a continuity of concerns from spectatorship to collaborative production, attending to the multiple overlapping ways in which relations between self and other are mediated.

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