

Maeve Connolly, 'Plateau of Humankind: The 49th Venice Biennale', *CIRCA* 97, Autumn 2001: 50-51.

The theme of the 49th Biennale at Venice is *Platea dell'umanità, Plateau of Humankind, Plateau der Menschheit, Plateau de l'humanité*. Refigured as a 'plateau', the exhibition is, according to curator Harald Szeemann, a "place which one looks at and from which one will be seen, a place in which the public onlooker is the protagonist and the measure of things, a place of encounter between artist, work and spectator".¹ But through the transformation of linguistic difference into a brand name, Szeemann inadvertently calls attention to both the imperialist origins of the Biennale itself and the limits of his own utopian project.

In the introduction to the exhibition catalogue, critic and philosopher Bazon Brock suggests that a wide range of artistic practices (from Beuys to Benetton advertising campaigns) lead the way towards this "plateau of friendship".² But, he suggests, "religious wars (Northern Ireland), wars of nationality (Basque), cultural wars (Ex-Yugoslavia)" will remain until "dogmatic conviction" is given up in favour of friendship. The plateau is therefore reserved for those whose have abandoned excessive conviction, and the particularities of cultural or political difference.³

If Szeemann's approach to the 1999 Biennale was characterised by disruption of established classifications and divisions, the 'plateau' of 2001 is based upon a less focused expansion of these classifications, articulated in various ways. Two newly refurbished venues have been opened at the Arsanale complex, a sixteenth century munitions factory built around a harbour, and these are used to house large scale projects by established artists such as Richard Serra and Ilya and Emilia Kabakov.⁴ Poetry and 'net.art' are represented within the Biennale for the first time and the work of non-Western curators is also recognised, through a parallel exhibition of conceptualism in contemporary African, *Authentic/Ex-centric*, selected by Salah M. Hassan and Olu Oguibe.

But there is little evidence, within the selection and staging of the Aperto, of any attempt to facilitate Szeemann's ideal 'encounter between artist, work and spectator'. Instead the self-contained video installations and bland photographic displays suggest either a well-funded graduate exhibition or a professional trade fair. This positioning of the spectator

as prospective buyer lends weight to otherwise flimsy critiques of spectacle culture, such as Mathew Laurent's situationist projects or Francesco Vitalli's meditation on kitsch and consumption featuring the aging movie star 'Verushka'. This context also serves to foreground, and to problematise, the aesthetic strategies employed by art activists in the service of political or social change. The appropriation of the language of advertising, in an anti-discrimination poster campaign by *Museum in Progress*, proves less effective, for example, than Guatemalan artist's A1-53167's documentation of ephemeral street markings as protest gestures.

The selection in the Arsanale does signal an attempt to explore the current intersection between art and film practice, in that it includes works by filmmakers such as Atom Egoyan (working in collaboration with Julião Sarmiento) and Chantal Akerman, Marin Karmitz's 1966 film of Samuel Beckett's *Comedie (Play)* and video installations by Stan Douglas and Bill Viola and music video 'auteur' Chris Cunningham. The literal obscurity of Douglas's *La Detroit* (1999-2000), a 'noir' detective story filmed entirely at night without the benefit of dramatic lighting, is intensified by its siting and parallels can be drawn between the abandoned building at the centre of the narrative and the disused industrial space of the Arsanale. Akerman's *Woman Sitting After Killing* (2001), which centres on a fragment from her film *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai de Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975), provides a critical and historical context for this intersection of art and film and effects a critique of much of the video work on display.

The international selection at the Italian Pavilion emphasises painting and sculpture, rather than new media, and it also provides the site for Szeemann's 'Platform of Thought', an ahistorical installation of naïve, religious and figurative sculpture. References to popular memory or mythology, often in the form of appropriations from science or science fiction, continue throughout much of the recent work on display, including paintings and drawings by Manuel Ocampo, Neo Rauch and Keith Tyson. A more ambiguous examination of myth and spirituality is evident in Cristina Garcia Rodero's photographs of religious ritual. But this work, like Lucinda Devlin's clinical documentation of execution instruments is somewhat undermined by its location. Devlin's photographs are displayed in a circular chamber, surrounding a spectacularly lit sculpture by Marisa Merz, contributing to a religious atmosphere that is at odds with Devlin's studied objectivity.

In sharp contrast to the Aperto, a number of complex and critically engaging projects have been staged in the charged architectural sites of the Giardini and in the temporary spaces that are used to house national selections throughout the city. Several of the buildings in the Giardini have been altered, in order to accommodate specially constructed installations, which require limited or regulated entry and lengthy queues, particularly outside the German, Canadian, American, French and Austrian pavilion, serve to ensure continued speculation and hype around the most inaccessible works.

For those that are too lazy to queue, a quick-time movie of *The Paradise Institute*, the prize-winning cinematic installation by Canadians Janet Cardiff and George Bures-Miller, is available to view on the web. Unfortunately, the audio capabilities of Realplayer cannot quite capture the full texture of Cardiff and Bures-Miller's signature soundscape. Nor is it possible to take a similar virtual tour through the reconstructed rooms of Gregor Schneider's *Dead House* (1985-2001) inside the German Pavilion, images of which were exhibited at the Douglas Hyde Gallery last October.

There is no set path through Pierre Huyghe's installation, staged in the three rooms of the French Pavilion, and the links between each space are emphasised by the use of 'Priva-lite' glass, programmed to switch between opacity and transparency in time with the projection sequences. One of the most technologically complex installations in the Biennale, Huyghe's project was realised through collaboration with his own chosen commissioners, 'Le Consortium'.

The central piece is *Atari Light* (1999), a large-scale version of the retro video game Pong, which offers interactivity but seems to withhold control. In the adjoining room *One Million Kingdoms* (2001) follows AnnLee, the digital character that Huyghe has licensed from an animation company, as she journeys across a computer-generated landscape, a real-time graphic representation of the audio track. The video projection in the third room, *Les Grandes Ensembles* (2001), depicts a 'conversation' between concrete tower blocks, recalling the musical sequences from Spielberg's *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*. These three works map a transition from analogue to digital media and suggest an endless expansion of image technologies.

The artefacts under consideration in Robert Gober's project for the American Pavilion are leftovers from an earlier era of consumer society; fragments torn from newspapers or objects washed up on the beach. Gober's disjointed series of replicas disturbs the symmetry of the Pavilion's neo-classical architecture, foregrounding the contradictions in American identity. The exhibition is filled with references to traumatic memory, including an unexpected installation of steps (in a city without basements), which lead down to a locked cellar door.

Outside the Giardini, many of the national exhibitions are held in churches. The Brazilian participation in the Biennale, for example, includes an exhibition of Baroque carvings of male and female saints with black skin. These statues are installed in the San Giacomo dall'Orto church, where they compete with, and work to disrupt, European representations. Several other site-specific projects explore the place of the church within the social fabric of the city. In *Canale Visuale* Swiss artists Norbert Möslang and Andy Guhl transform the motion of the water at a nearby vaporetto stop into a real-time sound installation, amplified within the San Stae Church. These watery reverberations are processed almost beyond recognition, pointing to the displacement of both church and canal as primary networks of communication.

At the Scuola San Pasquale, the site for this year's Irish Pavilion, Siobhán Hapaska takes the concept of faith as a starting point. Her film *Mayday* (2001), produced on 16mm but shown on a plasma screen, is silent but for the periodic jingle of sleigh-bells and is viewed from under a canopy of inverted Christmas trees. The narrative centres on the activities of a wealthy Dublin couple, engaged in the performance of an ambiguous ritual that takes them from the forests of Wicklow to Sandymount beach, with the Pigeon House stacks in the distance. This fusion of performance art with physical therapy strikes a comic note but as an exploration of Celtic Tiger anxieties the work seems to fall short of its target.

Grace Weir's installation, featuring elements from *Around Now*, her recent exhibition at the RHA, explores a different set of belief systems. The provision of portable headphones invites the spectator to reconsider the representation of cloudscapes, while listening to a discourse on Einstein's theory of relativity. The critique of spectacle is,

however, softened by the persistence of an atmospheric ambient soundtrack, which remains audible throughout the space.

At the Church of San Lio Latvia is represented by two film works set in the city of Riga, which is celebrating its 800 anniversary. Both films take Mozart's *The Magic Flute*, performed by the Latvian National Opera, as a starting point. Despite the avowedly nationalistic character of this project, these works are anything but celebratory in their exploration of Riga's architecture and history. *Riga's Magic Flute* (2001), a collaboration between theatre director Viesturs Kairišs and designer Ilmārs Blumbergs, stages an episode from the opera within a pauper's graveyard, among unmarked graves. In *Papagena* (2001), documentary and fiction filmmaker Laila Pakalniņa sympathetically records the diverse reactions of Riga citizens, photographed in the suburbs of the city, as they listen to an excerpt on headphones. Together, these films suggest an expanded model of site-specificity and public art.

R., by Portuguese artist João Penalva, also revolves around a musical composition, Wagner's *Mastersingers of Nuremberg*. In a series of video works Penalva uses the narrative of the opera, the experiences of Wagner (who worked and died in Venice) and the journals of his lover Cosima, where Wagner is always referred to as 'R', to explore the relationship between romantic desire and artistic achievement. A collection of documents displayed in the adjoining rooms provides an historical context for Portuguese participation in nationalistic events such as the Eurovision Song Contest and the context of the Biennale hints at the excesses of national pride.⁵

Venice is also host to a number of independent curatorial projects, such as Vuk Ćosić's museum to alternative technologies, the *Temporary Autonomous Pavilion*, and Mike Nelson's *The Deliverance and the Patience*, located within a disused brewery on the island of Giudecca. A successful journey through the many different connecting passages within Nelson's labyrinth leads to one of Venice's many tempting but inaccessible private gardens. The only way to leave this oasis, however, is to retrace one's steps through the maze or to find a new route. *The Deliverance and the Patience* are the names of seventeenth century galleon ships that were built to transport settlers to Virginia after the failure of their Utopian community in Bermuda. But Nelson's construction also lends itself to interpretation as a miniature dystopian version of the Biennale, complete with its own

prosaic 'Plateau' in the form of a hidden upper level, from which it is possible to observe the progress of others.

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¹ Harald Szeemann, 'The timeless, grand narration of human existence in its time', *La Biennale di Venezia*, Electa, 2001: XVII.

² Bazon Brock, 'The Plateau of Friendship – Critique of Truth!', *La Biennale di Venezia*, Electa, 2001: XIV.

³ Debora J. Meijers interrogates Szeemann's curatorial philosophy and practice in "The Museum and the 'Ahistorical' Exhibition", *Thinking About Exhibitions*, Ed. Reesa Greenberg, Bruce W. Ferguson, Sandy Nairne, London: Routledge, 1996.

⁴ See www.biennale24.com for video documentation of the Kabakov's project in the Arsanale.

⁵ In 1934 two infamous Wagner fans (Hitler and Mussolini) toured the Biennale, an event that was referenced in Hans Haacke's 1993 installation for the German Pavilion.