

Exhibitions

54th Venice Biennale

various venues 4 June to 27 November

Given that there are too many artworks to see at the Venice Biennale and never enough time to see them, visitors may develop an acute form of Critical Attention Deficit Disorder. Symptoms may include an inability to stand in line or watch any film longer than two minutes, extreme impatience at bad signage and the absence of explanatory texts, not to mention a tendency towards sweeping generalisations and hasty dismissals. Christian Marclay's *The Clock*, 2010, a centrepiece for Bice Curiger's 'ILLUMInations', exhibition, should be prescribed to all CADD sufferers: not only can its film-bite format (a collage of film scenes featuring a clock or someone checking the time) be effortlessly and enjoyably consumed, but this 24-hour film also serves as a helpful real-time clock. *The Clock* is an exception, however, in the exhibition as a whole. If visitors can glide through 'ILLUMInations', it is not because the works are easy to 'get' but rather because the art seems to inhabit a smooth, unified space, somehow exempt from the frictions of reality. Neither Curiger's questions to every artist in the catalogue ('Is the art community a nation?' 'How many nations are inside you?') nor the work in 'ILLUMInations' succeed in offering a viable alternative model to the traditionally nationalist emphasis of the Biennale's pavilions. (The surprising inclusion of Tintoretto's or of lesser-known 'outsider' artists' paintings alongside new and established art world figures is of little help.) What emerges instead is a network of young, mobile, international artists who work in a shared language of expanded assemblage, painting and video that is at best light, intimate and intriguing and at worst self-referential, self-absorbed and vacuous. A loose form of sculptural assemblage accommodates different media – Haroon Mirza notably includes sound, but sculpture, painting, film and writing are key elements for others – as well as diverse identities and autobiographies: allusions to his African-American identity permeate Rashid Johnson's arrangements and constructions, while Nicholas Hlobo's huge, abject limpundulu vampire bird, made out of rubber, refers to a mythical creature in South Africa. The architectural dimension of many constructions, often using plinths and shelves, seems reinforced by the 'para-pavilions' commissioned by Curiger, which seem to introduce another layer of personal narrative, another step away from everyday life.

This tendency towards the creation of private worlds and private mythologies can also be found in some of the national pavilions in the Giardini. Installed after the artist's untimely death, the central church-like display of Christoph Schlingensiefel's work in the German pavilion includes, in fact, direct references to Joseph Beuys, famous for his active self-mythologisation through his assembled materials and performances. Entering Mike Nelson's labyrinthine transformation of the British pavilion transports visitors through a theme park of the artist's obsessions; this time,

these seem to intersect with a western fear of the 'oriental' other. By staging collective, open-ended, polyphonic projects, the Dutch and Danish pavilions certainly avoid the risk of inward-looking self-centredness, but Thomas Hirschhorn's installation at the Swiss pavilion engages with the issue more directly, opposing bewildering opacity to Curiger's ideal of an 'illuminating' art. Here Hirschhorn mobilises his recognisable vocabulary of sprawling, overwhelming constructions and harrowing images of violence to 'fight against transparency everywhere'. His *Crystal of Resistance*, cobbled together out of tinfoil, sticky tape and cotton buds, is as complex as it is removed from the slick, rarefied world of diamonds, liquid crystals and electronics.

With the notable exceptions of David Goldblatt's photographic projects in South Africa and Mohammed Borouissa's absorbing film of France-based North African men playing – and cheating at – poker, 'ILLUMInations' is surprisingly devoid of photography and video focusing on other people's personal lives. Nick Relph's interwoven images of tartans, Ellsworth Kelly and Comme Des Garçons founder Rei Kawakubo revel in surface effects; his British compatriots Nathaniel Mellors and Emily Wardill create for their part elaborately absurd scenarios from a dizzying variety of high and low art genres. Like Omer Fast's filmic work in 'ILLUMInations', Yael Bartana's contribution to the Polish pavilion actively blurs the boundaries between fact and fiction. Her film trilogy dramatises the ideals and practice of a group that calls for the return of over three million Jews to Poland. That we are left wondering whether the Jewish Renaissance Movement in Poland is a symbolic fiction conceived by the artist makes the films' effective fusion of various propaganda genres particularly questionable. That the last film in the trilogy stages the imagined funeral of the movement's leader (assassinated for his beliefs some time in the future) is even more problematic – especially for visitors on their way to or from the nearby Egyptian pavilion, which honours the tragic death of artist Ashmed Basiony. Basiony, who was killed during January's demonstrations in Cairo, was committed to the revolution, filming the events and writing about them on his Facebook page. Alongside this video, a film is shown of one of Basiony's performances, *30 Days of Running in Place*, 2010, in which the energy he spent running for one hour every day, clad in a transparent sensor-equipped plastic suit, was simultaneously digitally translated into a visual composition. Although I object to the seamless projection of both films together, with no distinction between his work and his life, this tribute to the artist in his national pavilion is a reminder of recent political events and a promise, perhaps, of the changes that Basiony was fighting for.

Overall, it seems that both Arab and Latin American artists are the ones breathing fresh air into the closed world of this year's Biennale. While Maurizio Cattelan's taxidermied pigeons stand obediently still in 'ILLUMInations', real Venetian pigeons are uninvited guests at the Brazilian pavilion, where Artur Barrio's room-size installation of corn, fish-heads, coffee and words is as engaging as his late-1960s interventions under a repressive dictatorship which are documented next door. In the 'ILLUMInations' exhibition at the Giardini, Argentinean artist Amalia Pica projects a Venn diagram on the wall, explaining that her country's dictatorship had banned it from school curricula for its subversive potential to allow citizens to think critically.



Mike Nelson
Imposter 2011 detail

Thomas Hirschhorn
Crystal of Resistance 2011 detail

Christoph Schlingensief
A Church of Fear vs the Alien Within 2011 detail

At the Mexican pavilion, Melanie Smith & Rafael Ortega offer the chaotic spectacle of thousands of schoolchildren sitting in the Aztec Stadium and attempting – with uneven success – to compose with their individual placards a collective mosaic of iconic images. In contrast, movement in the US and Austrian pavilions is highly controlled: in Allora & Calzadilla's *Gloria*, athletic prowess is on proud (if parodic) display, while dancers perform enigmatic filmic scenarios in Markus Schinwald's disquieting choreography of the repressed. Meanwhile, the sheer silliness of Martín Sastre tangoing with a Barack Obama lookalike is a welcome amusement at the Arsenale (the tango, to the tune of the sentimental 'Since I don't have you' by Guns and Roses, is interspersed with headlines for real and imagined events in US/Latin-American relations).

The Latin American pavilion in which Sastre's *Tango with Obama*, 2009, is included is jam-packed with good and bad works, many of which refer to major events in the independence of Latin America over two centuries ago. Among the mass of films and photographs, two small display cases stand out. In one of them is displayed a 'fake' Golden Lion – a replica of the one awarded at the 2005 Biennale to Guatemalan artist Regina José Galindo (which she sold to pay her bills), the other showcases tooth fillings made out of Guatemalan gold, which were inserted in the artist's mouth in her home country and extracted by a dentist in Berlin in an embodied performance of the historical 'looting' of Latin America by Europe.

Another interesting work in the exhibition reveals the enduring potential of photographic documentation. In a parody of Taschen-style architectural photography, Salvadorian artist Walterio Iraheta explores the local 'Faraway Brother Style' – the nouveaux riches mini-castles financed by the 'faraway brothers', ie the relatives sending money over from the US. Elsewhere in the Biennale, this photo-documentary mode is used by Calvin Dondo to capture the displacement of Zimbabwean children adopted by German families through striking family portraits on view at the Zimbabwe pavilion. In yet another exhibition, Palestinian artist Taysir Batniji uses the same objective style to present 20 photographic panels of houses in Gaza that were destroyed in the 2008-09 Israeli attack. As well

as the showcased building, each panel includes a full description of the house and a reference number, as in the window of a real estate agent. (Noting in the advertisement the number of inhabitants that each building can house, readers cannot but wonder what has happened to them.) 'The Future of A Promise', in which Batniji's work is included, is a small but excellent exhibition of contemporary art in the Arab world. Emily Jacir's small, circular, baggage conveyor belt suggests forced immobility, while Mounir Fatmi disrupts an arrangement of 22 Arab League flags: two brooms have become the masts of the Tunisian and Egyptian flags, used for a spot of spring cleaning. Close by, Ahmed Mater spells out, with plastic cap-gun disks and great irony, the mythical 'cowboy code': ten all-American, boy-scout-style commandments, emphasising patriotism, honesty and honour.

'An artist who cannot speak English is no artist.' This banner by Croatian artist Mladen Stilinović is quoted in one of the wall texts for the Central Asia pavilion's exhibition, aptly titled 'Lingua Franca'. If one of the questions Curiger asks the artists in the catalogue is 'what language will the future speak?', the Central Asian pavilion curators and artists are well aware of the more urgent and specific stakes in choosing to speak today's *lingua franca* of political and commercial power. And if 'ILLUMInations' seems to promote an international idiom of mobile practices, other exhibitions and non-US/western European pavilions at the Biennale present us with myriad, more or less successful, attempts to make other voices heard. Few works in the Iraqi pavilion, for example, display the sophistication that allows the aforementioned pieces by Batniji, Fatmi, Ahmed or Jacir to employ Euro-American formal and social vocabularies to their advantage. At the same time, however, it is difficult to imagine a productive understanding between a Palestinian or Iraqi artist and the Icelandic duo Ólafur Ólafsson & Libia Castro, who humorously proclaim, in response to European citizens' increased loss of power in their countries: 'Your country does not exist.' ■

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