

Five Days at the International Art Biennale in Venice

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Abstract: Seeing *La Biennale di Venezia* is a celebration in itself. This major contemporary art event has a long history that speaks on the importance of strategic thinking and the cultural dimension of a city's leaders. Because the “lagoon city” had such visionary people. At the end of the 19th century, in 1893, at the initiative of a group of Venetian intellectuals, led by the mayor of the time, Riccardo Selvatico, an administrative resolution was launched to “establish a national biennial art exhibition”. Two years later (1895), the first edition of this event dedicated to visual arts took place. Over time, the Venice Biennale branched out, accumulating new and new sections: music, theatre, cinematography, architecture and dance.

Keywords: Biennale; Venice; the Other.

Starting from the topic suggested in the title of the conference, “the model of the Other”, I have chosen to present a study visit that I carried out this summer at the Biennial in Venice. Being there every other year is itself a celebration. This major event of contemporary art has a long history which reveals the importance of strategic thinking and the cultural dimension of those who manage a city, as Venice did benefit from such visionary people. At the end of the 19th century, in 1893, due to the initiative of a group of Venetian intellectuals led by the mayor, Riccardo Selvatico, an administrative resolution of “instituting a national biennial art exhibition” was launched. Two years later (1895), the first edition of this event initially dedicated to visual arts took place. In the meanwhile, the Venice Biennial has branched out, accumulating several new sections: music, theatre, cinematography, architecture, dance.

An eclectic mélange of artistic projects from all over the world, the Biennial generates a dialogue in the world contemporary art every year; at the same time, it is an important meeting platform for all those involved in the contemporary artistic discourse: artists, curators, collectors, cultural operators and, evidently, consumers of art. The participation of Romania in this manifestation, starting no later than 1907, is also worth mentioning. Since 1938, Romania has had its own pavilion in the Giardini della Biennale.

In order to clarify my need, as a practitioner of theatre, to experience the artistic event of the Venice art galleries *live*, I have to make a reference to my professional past. In 2011, thanks to the “Alien Ties”¹ performance project carried out by the visual artist Dan Acostioaei (a project that won the “Fostering Artistic Practices” contest organized by the Romanian Institute of Culture and Humanistic Research, Venice), I got in contact for the first time with this event. It fortunately coincided with the degree in theatre directing that I obtained in the same year. Dan Acostioaei’s project applied practices inspired from the *invisible theatre* and *forum theatre*, theatrical species developed by Augusto Boal and Panagiotis Assimakopoulos. Thus, different public places from Venice became stages of a performance observed by unaware tourists passing-by, who involuntarily came to be performers within the project.

My performance participation from 2011 gave me an active need to come back to Venice as often as I could. The deeper and deeper interdisciplinarity of arts has amplified this desire. I, thus, followed the tendency of offering a theatrical feature to visual art practices, the same way in which some artists appeal to the means of the stage to deliver their message: lighting, sound effects, performers in act, etc. The other way around, I have noticed an amplification of the codification of the theatrical product, a more and more evident conceptualization of the staging in contemporary theatre.

In 2019, I returned to Venice as a visitor, which gave me the detachment necessary to objectively observe the artistic phenomenon that I was attending. Eight years before, I had experienced the state of a performer, but now, during my second visit at the ‘centrum’ of contemporary art, I truly discovered the amplitude and subtleness of the manifestation, along with a certain voluptuousness of art consumption. The visit to the Venetian biennial became, for me, a form of documenting creative thinking. By adopting the course of Performance Techniques from the Master’s Programme given by the Iași Faculty of Theatre, I felt the need to seek, along with the practices of performance art, to constantly connect to the pulse of contemporary art.

Thus, following a pandemic blockage which robbed the event of the cadence of uneven years, the month of July found me in the exhibition pavilions of Venice. I believe it is important to mention that I traveled with the intention of observing parts of the sections dedicated to performance arts. I was directly interested in the earliest and, otherwise, main artistic direction of the manifestation: contemporary visual arts. The curator of this year’s Biennial, Cecilia Alemani, the manager of the public art programme for High

¹ Cf. <https://www.icr.ro/pagini/alien-ties-de-dan-acostioaei-un-proiect-romanesc-performativ-pe-strazile-venetiei>

Line Park, New York, chose a topic which raised controversy among art critics: “The Milk of Dreams”². The title is taken from a book of tales authored by the surrealist artist Leonora Carrington. At the same time, I felt, through this unacted caption, reverberations of the Shakespearean line of Prospero from *The Tempest*: “We are such stuff as dreams are made on”.

As usual, the two main exhibition spaces, Arsenale and Giardini, were supplemented by a vast infrastructure of buildings from the whole of the lagoon. It is overwhelming to find out that, all the while of the Biennial, Venice breathes differently, gains a new pulse and seems to structurally reconfigure. This year, more than in 2019³, I could observe this seductive transformation of the city. The combination between the new media and technologies, as a part of the modern instruments of visual expression, and the architectural styles of the Venetian buildings, are provocative and raise controversy. It is a type of a very unusual dialogue, which consumes a conflictuality generating profound existential questions, implications of art still insufficiently explored, evolving terminologies, unpredictable hybridizations and resemantizations of the creative act.

By making use of technology, the artists from the Biennial achieved absolutely fascinating spatial reconversions. Although, in performance arts, people talk about fluid spaces, character spaces that interact with the actors and influence the action, in the Venetian Biennial, we, the spectators, became, one by one, performers engaged in an active dialogue with the innovative exhibition suggestions. After two years of isolation and absence, the reconnection with art and with the aesthetic achieved an inevitable theatrical dimension. I myself discovered that I was not just simply observing the works exhibited, but, on the contrary, I was chasing stories, activating receivers ready to detect the dramatic conflict preceding each work. The associations inherent with theatre gave flavor to the interaction. Thus, I had revelations at every step. Chromatic and structural extravagances and intensities, the cult of effects and of hallucinating combinations of techniques and methods, ardent and provocative topics englobed an obvious “theatrical symptomatic”.

The performance appetite of visual artists is seductive. The theatrical feature of the works exposed has, as far as I am concerned, two major dimensions: on the one hand, it unintentionally insinuates, as an effect of a conceptual contamination; on the other hand, it is an imposition necessary for the message transmitted. The selection of the artists featured certain names which were noticed promptly. The Romanian Andra Ursuța⁴ showed a sculptural installation containing hybrid, uncertain beings, constructed with

² <https://curatorial.ro/arta/bienala-de-arta-de-la-venetia-2022-the-milk-of-dreams/>

³ <https://uap.ro/arrivederci-bienalei-de-arta-de-la-venetia-editia-2019/>

⁴ <https://www.labiennale.org/en/art/2022/milk-dreams/andra-ursu%C5%A3a>

the aid of moulds of her own body. Delcy Morelos⁵, from Colombia, proposed an ambient installation made of aromatic clays and spices from the Amazonian geographic space. The Polish artist Joana Piotrowska⁶ exhibited photographs through which she wanted to discuss the topic of the anxiety and intimate states of the being. Marguerite Humeau⁷, France, proposed a biomorphic sculpture placed at the border between engineering, medicine and paleontology. The American Lynn Hershman Leeson⁸ exhibited photographic portraits of apparently real people, but which had been fully created out of codes generated by artificial intelligence systems. Diego Marcon⁹, Italy, came with a video installation bordering the grotesque, on topics such as the alterity of the family and of the individual, or the artificiality of life. The German artist Wu Tsang¹⁰ brought an immersive video installation, placed on the exterior, next to the Arsenale dock, an introspection into the aquatic world as seen from the perspective of a whale. This sample of visual refinement was fully integrated into the historical space which hosted it.

In the central pavilion, the choreographic part *Encyclopedia of Relations* would recurrently play, under the coordination of Alexandra Pitirici¹¹. Unfortunately, the performance was too long for the marathon pace of the visiting circuit. Therefore, the work was “condemned” to a fragmentary, incomplete view.

In the collateral Exhibitions, I noticed the presence of Anish Kapoor¹² at the Gallerie dell’Accademia and Palazzo Manfrin, an extraordinary show of sculptural force which had a paradoxical advantage: its theatrical feature. The installation works could serve, in terms of scenography, each of the great Shakespearean tragedies. Anselm Kiefer¹³ exhibited, at Palazzo Ducale, a pictorial installation of large dimensions, a mixture of force and beauty: enormous panels, which covered the walls and the works of cultural heritage of the permanent museum, spoke precisely of the tumultuous history of this spectacular edifice. Bruce Nauman¹⁴ occupied the whole space of Punta della Dogana, the building itself being an excellent plea for reconversions of museum architecture and design. The performance frame and the sound exploration were the two major dimensions of this installation.

⁵ <https://www.labiennale.org/en/art/2022/milk-dreams/delcy-morelos>

⁶ <https://www.labiennale.org/en/art/2022/milk-dreams/joanna-piotrowska>

⁷ <https://www.labiennale.org/en/art/2022/milk-dreams/marguerite-humeau>

⁸ <https://www.labiennale.org/en/art/2022/milk-dreams/lynn-hershman-leeson>

⁹ <https://www.labiennale.org/en/art/2022/milk-dreams/diego-marcon>

¹⁰ <https://www.labiennale.org/en/art/2022/milk-dreams/wu-tsang>

¹¹ <https://www.labiennale.org/it/arte/2022/il-latte-dei-sogni/alexandra-pirici>

¹² <https://www.lissongallery.com/studio/anish-kapoor-in-venice>

¹³ <https://www.viennaartweek.at/en/anselm-kiefers-inferno-in-the-palazzo-ducale/>

¹⁴ <https://artsupp.com/en/venice/exhibitions/bruce-nauman-punta-della-dogana>

As for the national pavilions of Giardini, it is difficult to make general observations. One of the best pavilions, in my opinion, was that of Belgium, with the project *The Nature of the Game*¹⁵. The space of the gallery was occupied mostly by projection surfaces and screens on which children's games from various parts of the world were shown simultaneously. The anthropological and universal approach to the dynamics of the game was revealed as an instrument of interacting with the world, and also as a way of countering isolation. The idea of activating the space as a work material is found in the German Pavilion, where Maria Eichhorn uncovered the walls and the floor of the structure so as to reveal the "history of the gallery"¹⁶, from the Bavarian Pavilion to the extension from the Nazi period (1938) and to the recent renovations. Ukraine presented an installation by Pavlo Makov, *The Fountain of Exhaustion*¹⁷, having, as a central element, the vital liquid which makes the relation between several recipients possible. I have translated this fountain as a metaphor of the links from our bodies, as an expression of the post-pandemic relation between the individual and the urban landscape, and also as a cry towards the likes of a man caught in the middle of an absurd belligerence.

By far, the pavilion of Denmark¹⁸ has impressed me the most. Here, the space transformed into a dramatic scenography – a mixture of realism and hyperrealism – in which a female centaur gave birth to a child, while the male centaur hanged himself in the nearby stable. Impeccably done, the two inert bodies gave you the impression that they could move in any moment, leaving you breathless. A remarkable presence was that of the Rome Pavilion, which hosted Eugen Raportoru's project, curated by Iliana Schileru. The installation, *The Abduction from the Seraglio*¹⁹ – an evocation of Mozart's work – gained a different resonance when regarded under the subjective lens of the artist's childhood. It is a direct reference to the wall carpet representing a key element of the Romani culture. Serbia presented Vladimir Nikolić's project, *Walking with Water*²⁰, a spectacular installation composed of two immense video projections: ample surfaces of water, either wild (a panorama of the ocean) or domestic (an Olympic swimming pool). In relation with the human, this installation generated subjective means of liaison.

¹⁵ <https://www.e-flux.com/announcements/457499/francis-alsthe-nature-of-the-game/>

¹⁶ <https://www.artnews.com/art-news/news/maria-eichhorn-german-pavilion-review-1234625925/>

¹⁷ <https://ukrainianpavilion.org/>

¹⁸ <https://www.labiennale.org/en/art/2022/denmark>

¹⁹ <https://propagarta.ro/imagini-video/expozitia-lui-eugen-raportoru-de-la-venetia/>

²⁰ <https://msub.org.rs/walking-with-waterthe-republic-of-serbia-pavilion-at-the-59th-international-art-exhibition-la-biennale-di-venezia-2022/?lang=en>

With the aid of Zineb Sedira, an artist of Algerian origins, we managed to enter the French pavilion, a reality specific to cinematography. The scenographic installation *Dreams Have No Titles*²¹ evoked the atmosphere of a movie set in which the artist inserted autobiographical narrations, fictional situations and documentary infusions, with the help of décor elements, video projection and sound. South Korea came with a high-tech project carried out by Yunchul Kim. *Gyre*²²; the installation built by him seemed to pertain to an extraterrestrial civilization whose extremely sophisticated machinery, once captured by the humans, became the unquestionable proof of the existence of life in outer space.

The participation of Romania in this edition has brought a reiteration of the success that the film *Touch Me Not*, by Adina Pintilie, had enjoyed in Berlin, in 2018, where it was awarded The Golden Bear. The cinematographic installation *You Are Another Me – A Cathedral of the Body*²³, carried out by the above mentioned director and curated by Cosmin Costinaş and Viktor Neumann, was devised as a multiplex space populated by video projections. From the screens, we were observed and talked to by people belonging to the LGBTQIA+ community, while they were exploring their own bodies or those of their partners. Adina Pintilie's research gave me the sensation of an intervention meant to moderate the enhanced polemic that the Romanian society is having on the topic. Thus, I watched sequences of great visual intensity about corporality in a game of intimacies, of seeking the self, of questioning corporal identity.

During both the visit and afterwards, when I returned to Romania, I read several comments questioning the quality of the curatorial selection from the 2022 Venice Biennial. It is difficult to define in decisive terms a phenomenon of such amplitude. What I know for sure is that I returned from this trip with an informational baggage hardly accessible under different circumstances, and also with a self-reflection tendency which assures, for a while, the objectiveness of the relation with the self. The unprecedented dynamics and versatility of the forms of artistic expression and the dialogue raised between them brings promises and high expectations from the future editions of the biennial.

(Translated by Andi Sîşîiac)

²¹ <https://www.artnews.com/art-news/news/zineb-sedira-french-pavilion-venice-biennale-1234625781/>

²² <https://www.labiennale.org/en/art/2022/korea-republic>

²³ <https://revistaarta.ro/ro/tu-esti-un-alt-eu-o-catedrala-a-corpului-un-proiect-de-adina-pintilie/>

Webography

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