The 2015 Venice Biennale

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In 2015 the Venice Biennale weathered not only blazing sun, thick fog and occasional flooding; it also weathered a critical storm: an atypical number of negative reviews filed by art critics in the heat of May and June. Yet by the time the Biennale closed, total visitor numbers reached over half a million (up from 475,000 in 2013), thirty-one percent of these students and young people. This review will examine the staying power of both the exhibition and its critics’ objections, six months on. Which of them lasted the course?

Going to the Biennale in November is like seeing a friend nearing the end of a marathon. They’re still going strong, but have slowed down and look gaunt. There is a grace and a lack of pretence, along with a pride in having survived. With the glamorous parties long over, the Biennale belongs to the Venetians, families and friends slipping in before the show ends. The paint is peeling in places, some technology no longer works, a few escalators remain permanently out of order. But in this weathered state the art still says what it did earlier – perhaps, indeed, it does so more clearly.

The theme chosen by this year’s curator, the New York-based Okwui Enwezor, was ‘All the World’s Futures’. Sounding like a truncated phrase from Shakespeare, the title suggests comprehensiveness: a singular, shared world; a variety of visions, possibilities and fates. But there are other futures to consider too; those traded on commodity markets by brokers and traders barely connected to the world at all. A concern with global capitalism is one of the exhibition’s distinguishing characteristics, running through it in a number of ways.

That such biennales function within a global art market, and attract the attention of plutocrats from around the planet, is normally passed over without much mention. Enwezor’s approach, though, places world capitalism and awareness of global markets at centre stage, heightening the contradictions of the situation. However, despite an emphasis on the diversity of voices, the futures it presents look fairly similar – bleak, violent, decayed. The ending of days. This is a presentation of futures curated with an emphasis towards chaos.

The stage is set before you enter the main building in the Giardini, previously the Italian pavilion but now used to house one of the biennale’s two international shows (the other is in part of the Arsenale). A neon piece by Glenn Ligon flashes ‘Blues, Blood, Bruise’ on the building’s pediment; long black drapes by Oscar Murillo trail down between the columns of the facade. It is as if someone had taken a giant magic marker and drawn between each column – teenage vandalism, but here more like a shroud. At the bottom, where the fabric gathered against the stone steps, it was scuffed and worn, like the tips of old shoes. I was reminded of the agit-prop theatre of my North American childhood, of how keenly we were meant to feel the problems of the world, how pressing the desire for change, how difficult that proposition proved. It was almost nostalgic.

Stepping past the didactic text of the curatorial statement at the building’s entrance (‘these projects... will preoccupy the time and thinking of the public’, emphasis added), the first rotunda is devoted to the late Italian artist Fabio Mauri. This room usually sets the tone for the rest of the exhibition, and this year it started rather literally at the end: around the walls was Mauri’s Finis series, with the word scratched or scribbled in each drawing. It also contained a tall ladder that led nowhere, its top step inscribed with ‘THE END’, and a four-foot wall of suitcases, a reference to the holocaust.

Thus Enwezor laid out his concerns – history, in this case European; the centrality of text; capitalism; forced migration; and a hint of dark prophecy. The choice of an Italian artist concerned with Fascism and the Holocaust is a deliberate link of geography and history to the situation of today; the suitcases also bring to mind the migrants dying in their attempts to cross the Mediterranean. All of this reference and text in a sombre palette, with no release, no imaginative leaps. There is no figure at the top of the stairs, no one to fall – or just possibly to fly.

Behind this rotunda is another, new and larger space, built by the British architect David Adjaye (who designed the British pavilion for Chris Ofili’s work in 2003). This new performance venue housed Enwezor’s central staged provocation – a live, reading of Das Kapital from start to finish. Directed by Isaac Julien and carried out by professional actors, it continued until the last day of the Biennale. Describing it as the ‘core’ of the reading/performance series, and placing it at the heart of the building, Enwezor showed genuine courage – not afraid to be thought dull or old-fashioned by critics, who mostly disapproved, and doubling his commitment to the importance of text and to historical debates on global capitalism that are today as relevant as ever.

The concerns Enwezor brought to the fore in his show, as well as the favoured art forms – lots of video and film, work that is figurative and often documentary, very little abstraction – were similar to those of Documenta 11, in Kassel, Germany, which he curated in 2002. There Enwezor shook things up by appointing six co-curators and holding discussion platforms at cities around the world, from St Lucia to Lagos. His goal, he said, was to situate contemporary art ‘within the global public sphere’. The show was criticised in some quarters for being grey and impossible to completely experience. Out of 500 works by 123 artists, nearly forty percent were videos or films. Most of the works, no matter what their form, commented on historical and political contexts. It brought many immigrant artists entry into a mainstream global event for the first time, and increased the market for political art with a documentary inflection.

Given Enwezor’s track record, one thing can be said with certainty about the adverse critical response to his Venice Biennale: no one should have been surprised. And if Enwezor was true to form so was the criticism, much of which was similar to what has been said before.

A significant strand of complaint centred on the experience of viewing the show. The word repeatedly used was ‘glum’: ‘more like a glum trudge than the usual exhilarating adventure’; ‘morose’; ‘glum and upsetting’; ‘grim’. There was also, as at Documenta 11, much discussion of the limited pallet, prompting me to wonder when the time will come that someone of African descent is not expected to deliver at least a little bit of colour. Separate from this, but still related to the physical experience of walking through the exhibitions, was criticism of the large number of artists (though there were a few less than in 2013), which one critic noted was simply ‘too many artists to get to grips with’. Another depicted Enwezor as including ‘everything that interests him, with no thought to what the viewer can absorb’.

This glumness arose from both the overall tone of the art selected and the content. Although a Biennale is big enough to provide exceptions to any proposed rule, the palette was muted, often monochromatic, favouring black and white to an extent that threatened to dull the eye. Colour appeared either in the national pavilions (Sarah Lucas’s Dorothea Tanningesque body parts in a marigold yellow interior; Chiharu Shiota’s red string crossing and recrossing the Japanese pavilion, holding constellations of old keys) or in rare moments, such as Chris Ofili’s beautiful and subtle paintings displayed in their own space, with a special painted backdrop, in the Arsenale.

There were artists concerned with disappearance and erasure, others with death and pain. Instances of joy and beauty were rare. One was the glorious light and glass piece assembled by Kutlug Ataman out of small portraits of everyone who knew or were helped by the philanthropist Sakip Sabanci. The shimmering, stained-glass effect of the faces, like brilliantly coloured tiles, was a visual treasure and a rare delight in an otherwise straight faced show. Another instance of beauty – in the body of Ashes, the young man who was the subject of Steve McQueen’s video piece in the Arsenale – was to be found only in the context of loss. Camille Norment’s sound piece in the Nordic pavilion used ethereal female
voices within a building ruptured by large panes of shattered glass. Some of the haunting sounds were made by the glass itself, beauty amidst breakage.

Kutlug Ataman, *The Portrait Of Sakip Sabanci*, 2014. 9,216 LCD panels, configured in 144 modules of 64 LCD panels each. 56th International Art Exhibition - la Biennale di Venezia, All the World’s Futures. Photo by Isabella Balena, Alessandra Chemollo. Courtesy: la Biennale di Venezia.

If removal and absence were ever present, so – in a fittingly dialectical way – was productive labour. McQueen’s piece pays careful attention to the hands of the men building Ashes’s monument in the graveyard. Harun Farocki and Antje Ehmann’s monumental video project, *Labour in a Single Shot*, showed human hands and bodies at work in a wide range of settings, from music lessons to bakeries to low-tech building sites.

Reminders of the practice of slavery within capitalism were present in both the Giardini and the Arsenale. A set of African-American work songs, performed in the same auditorium as the staged readings of Marx, leaked into adjacent galleries at a low hum – a reminder of the forced labour, from slavery and share-cropping to prison chain-gangs, that underlay American and European prosperity in previous centuries. The virtuosic live performance by Jason Moran, supported by his inventive recorded score, also evoked the beauty of the musical tradition that emerged from that painful toil. The words of the final song of the set resonate with the desires of immigrants flooding into Europe today: ‘I will work; I’d rather work; please, help me, if you can; I will work.’

In the Arsenale, the photographs of Keith Calhoun and Chandra McCormick show the slave-like labour gangs of prisoners in Louisiana with a deeply uncomfortable timelessness. The banging of broken doors against the floor of a ruined church are like the beating rhythms to a work song in Theaster Gates’s video, part of his moving installation *Gone Are the Days of Shelter and Martyr*. The piece also reuses bits from the church – a plaster saint, a large bell, organ pipes laid out like a xylophone – to reflect on the loss of holy spaces in Chicago’s poor and black neighbourhoods.
Strikingly absent were the many images of labour by brilliant photographers working on the African continent – the sugarcane worker series by the South African Zwelethu Mthethwa and the outdoor butcher series by Nigerian James Iroha Uchechukwu. Instead one has the predictable grandeur of Andreas Gursky. His image of a teeming trading floor opposite the empty landscape around an outlet store provides a powerful vision of capitalism. But a richer photographic variety would have been welcome.

While the Biennale included the work of a generous number of women artists – thirty-three percent – its analysis of capitalism ignored the role of gender. Unpaid home labour and suppressed wages, genderised consumption and commodified female bodies went unexamined, despite the amount of artistic work created around them. Wangechi Mutu’s striking three-screen video of an African woman bearing the burdens of the world on her head, struggling to walk up an increasingly barren hill, came close. Petra Bauer collected prints and group portraits from Swedish socialist women’s clubs in the early twentieth-century. Somewhere, a video showed a girl lying on a bed, reading Das Kapital. And that was all.

But deficiencies in the main show are often made good by work presented in satellite shows. While not directly considering capitalism, two pieces took on gender and globalisation. One, in the church of San Georgio, was the giant mesh head of a girl. Modelled from scans of several girls, sculptor Juame Plensa worked to create a head that was racially ambiguous, a response to globalisation. It was light yet strong, luminous and thoughtful. A girl that was not being used to represent an ideal – not standing in for innocence, grace or beauty (often linked to race) – but simply being herself.

The church of San Gallo housed a very different piece: Shrine for Girls by Patricia Cronin. Her girls were not figures but memories, represented by mounds of clothing piled on three stone altars. Bright saris for those recently killed in India, hijabs for those abducted by Boko Haram in Nigeria, and dull aprons for girls in forced labour in Europe and the US. While the subject is urgent and the memorial...
moving, something was missing. The clothes were too clean and looked as if they had never been worn, never wrapped around a real girl. The loss felt was not for a particular life, but once again girls as a group, a category, a cause.

Visually, this Biennale emphasised the literal and direct, rather than the playful and mocking. Many critics found the exhibitions ‘lacking in wit’ (not the first time such a jibe has been levelled at followers of Marx). Yet there was wit around. If some critics missed it, it may have been because it was to be found not in the figurative or the gestural but largely in the use of text and sound.

In Sonia Boyce’s video Exquisite Cacaphony, three performance artists play with language and sound, layering Dada, Scat and musical tracks with anarchic wit and energy. Jason Moran recreated two famous ballrooms of NYC. Gilded but confined, his installations suggest the claustrophobic atmosphere for the jazz musicians who played there, and the racial segregation that made them enter through back doors to the establishments where they were feted. At various intervals, a live performance by a jazz trio took place, gathering a crowd who stayed at a respectful distance.

Sometimes wit arrives with the unexpected. The Polish pavilion presented Halka/Haiti by C T Jasper and Joanna Malinowska, a film of a Polish opera being performed in the Haitian village Cazale, where descendants of Polish soldiers who deserted Napoleon’s army and joined the Haitian cause still live. Presented in high definition on a long screen, one soon notices the persistent presence of a tethered goat, attentive throughout.

The Raqs Media Collective placed heroic statues with missing limbs and heads, inscribed with text from George Orwell’s Shooting an Elephant, throughout the Giardini. Their wide black bases were often turned into benches by weary visitors, unaware of the inscriptions above them.

Although the centrality of text is striking, it is not new. In the 2013 Biennale, ‘The Encyclopedic Palace’, the international exhibition also began with a text – Karl Jung’s ‘Red Book’. But that was a book filled with visual images, displayed for close examination. Enwezor’s choices are more literal and
didactic; his interests more materialist than imagistic. It is as if the key value of an artwork, for him, is semantic – that is, what its inclusion represents. He is a powerful and skilled player at bringing artists previously on the periphery into the centre. And the Venice Biennale is an old, established centre, at the heart of the contemporary art scene and market.

As someone who visited Enwezor’s first major curatorial work, the 1997 Johannesburg Biennale, I was impressed by the premise of the Belgian pavilion in Venice. Breaking with its usual practice of solo or duo shows by Belgian artists, it presented work by invited artists from many continents and included – for the first time – artists from Africa. In the centre of the main room was a new video work by Vincent Meessen, which revisited the largely unknown role of Congolese intellectuals within the Situationist International. It contained a remark by a Congolese artist, referred to as Oracle, which offered one of the best summations of the postcolonial politics of the Biennale: ‘The Belgians colonised the Congo, but they [in Europe] were colonised by capitalism.’

In its refusal to play by national boundaries, its attention to micro-histories and mutual influences with the context of global capitalism and its insistence on multiple modernities, the Belgian pavilion was very close in spirit to Enwezor’s Johannesburg project – where ‘many modernities’ was a guiding catch phrase (as it was two years earlier during the Africa 95 exhibition series in London). Enwezor eliminated all of the national pavilions and the large central show, replacing them with six linked exhibitions and seven co-curators across a season which included a film festival, public art and educational programmes. The theme was predictably broad – trade routes, their history and geography – and the emphasis on conceptual art, new technologies (CD-Roms, internet art, videos) and diasporic discourse. A powerful local criticism was that the emphasis on international conceptual art and installations did not address the pressing issues of identity and nation-building that South Africa faced. Another issue was, as always, the cost. But while it was criticised for not being relevant enough, it was not denigrated for being too glum or grey.
On that occasion, Enwezor decreed that art ‘is not about resolving issues or making the world a better place. It’s about a new way of looking at the world’. Twenty years on, is there a new way of looking at the world in his Venice Biennale?

I think not. Enwezor’s concern with the past is not passé – but neither is it novel. He and others have worked through it in other settings, and this was a continuation of that work. This was also a very traditional biennale in its application of patronage; Enwezor used it to bring into the global contemporary art market a number of artists previously excluded, many of them of African descent. Of the 136 artists he included, eighty-eight were in the Biennale for the first time. Yet this was not a stage for new voices, but an amplification of known voices, enhancing the careers and establishing a global position for mature artists previously considered outsiders, whether by race, geography or postcolonial divisions. John Akomfrah, whose extraordinary film *Vertigo Sea* was in the privileged position of being the final piece in the curated show at the Giardini, had his first solo show at the Lisson Gallery in London in February 2016. Sonia Boyce is now leading a three-year multi-partner research project into Black British artists’ contributions to art and modernism in the UK. These are not emerging artists by any sense of the term; but the commissioned works created for the Biennale, and the enhancement conferred by participation in the Biennale, is another step in the move towards the centre, opening up the art elite to greater diversity.

As most critics acknowledged, the preoccupation with current chaos – wars, migration, global capitalism, environmental and human degradation – was not a simple curatorial imposition: it reflected artists’ concerns. Whether the form of reflection Enwezor favours – literal representation, without subtlety or metaphor; records rather than transformations – lend themselves to good or lasting art is a fair question. His approach is undoubtedly narrow in some respects; a limited selection of futures were on offer. But if a curator’s task is to put forward a vision, then his labour was productive. And perhaps in the late days of November, with skies of white and grey rather than postcard blue, his intensity showed the institution of the Venice biennale in a sombre but timely light.
Enwezor’s mining of the past to confront the future is not in itself ‘a new way of looking at the world’. But it is, perhaps, a new way of looking at the Venice Biennale – as a repository of history rather than harbinger of the new. As the Oracle in Meessen’s film proclaims: ‘History is made in reverse; the past is full of becoming.’

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