



Ancient city, modern art

Venice's slow pace helps you appreciate what's on offer at its world-renowned Biennale.

EVERY SECOND YEAR (THE ODD ONES), Venice, the ancient city of gondolas, transforms itself into "Venice, the city of contemporary art". The Venice Biennale (www.labiennale.org) is the oldest, biggest and most high-profile international art event of its kind. Between June and November it consumes the city and turns it into the destination of choice for art makers and art lovers alike.

Thousands of huge banners attest to the fact that every square centimetre available is being used for art.

Experiencing the festival for the first time can be daunting, even petrifying. The plethora of exhibitions, happenings, discussions (not to mention the components of architecture, theatre, film, music and dance) create a dizzying sense of chaos: there is simply too much to choose from; too little time.

The bottle-neck effect is exacerbated by the Venetian pace: it's a slow city. Venice happens at around 6km per hour – the speed of a brisk walk or water-bus ride. Here, letting go of the frenetic urgency of having to see it all seems to be a prerequisite for joy – it is, in any case, physically and emotionally impossible, even if you go for a month. So if you have to rush, go ahead, but realise that nobody is going to rush along or make your rushing easier.

An alternative is to succumb to Venice and to allow her to slow you down. Appreciating art, after all, takes time. This old, beautiful and contained city really is the perfect place for the festival. The ancient structures and exotic nature of Europe's precarious gem create the perfect foil for the modern, often avant-garde, art on offer. And besides, everything is always just a short walk away.

It is once this feeling of trust and calm is achieved that the intrinsic order becomes apparent. The chaos is an illusion. The festival has been done many times before. The whole thing is well organised and a quite "sorted" sort of affair.

Logistics

THE VENICE BIENNALE HAS THREE OFFICIAL COMPONENTS: the main international show, the national pavilions and the sanctioned exhibitions (of which there were 44 this year).

The Swede Daniel Birnbaum was appointed artistic director for the 53rd international exhibition. The

theme, "Fare Mondi/Making Worlds/Hacer Mundos", suggests the artist's capacity to conceive of new realities and create new worlds. For the main show, Birnbaum selected the work of 84 artists and groups.

National participation has been one of the key building blocks since the beginning. The Giardini (or city gardens) have been used for the Biennale since the inception of the fair in 1895, and it is in the Giardini that the permanent national exhibition halls or "pavilions" are found. Countries nominate representatives and compete for attention and some prizes. This is why the Venice Biennial is considered by some to be the Olympics of art. (For Biennale 2009, South Africa was invited back, but for us, this year, it was an official "no show". Who knows? Who knows?)

And then there is the rest: innumerable private initiatives abound outside the parameters of what is considered official. One of these is the effort of the Sandri brothers of the SMAC gallery in Stellenbosch. They staged, at huge personal cost, an exhibition featuring the works of Johann Louw, Kay Hassan and Wayne Barker.

Entrance to events at the two official venues requires a ticket, which gives one access to all the shows for two days. Most other art events are free.

National impressions

THIS IS TRULY AN INTERNATIONAL EVENT. AND yet, at the national pavilions an inadvertent display of certain national characteristics kept making itself apparent.

The screening of Steve McQueen's much-mentioned film *Giardini* at the British Pavilion was a rather orderly affair. A big sign outside explained it all: "The film is 30 minutes long, timed entry only. Bookings only on the day at the British Pavilion. Thank you for your patience." (www.britishcouncil.org/venicebiennale)

To understand the anomaly, it helps to know how everyone else does it: doors are always open (where darkness is desired, thick black curtains provide protection), entrances and exits are ungoverned, unguarded (well, mostly) and participation is unsolicited and unregulated. In the words of filmmaker Fiona Tan (*Disorient*, at the Dutch Pavilion): "I tend to just sort of approach it as >>>

>> a sort of free offer from my side. If you want to sit down and take the time, go ahead. It's up to you, though." (www.theartnewspaper.tv/content.php?vid=635)

The American Pavilion, with Bruce Nauman's *Vices and Virtues*, was the only exhibition I visited where guards were so obviously present that I initially thought them to be part of the exhibit – human “props” of sorts. They glared suspiciously at anyone with a camera (that is everyone) and pointed to signs proclaiming “NO PHOTOGRAPHS”. A “please don't touch” attitude pervades. (www.naumaninvenice.org)

For the collaborative shows at the Danish and Nordic Pavilions, the curators, Michael Elmgreen and Ingar Dragset, set out to be noticed in that rather aloof, cool way that cold-climate people seem to be the masters of. The exhibition, *The Collectors*, is introduced to the visitor with a creepily real-looking model of a man floating face down in a ridiculously shallow pool in front of the exquisitely beautiful, modernist Nordic pavilion. This one got lots of press. See it at www.danish-nordic-pavilions.com.

Inclusive and exclusive

FIONA TAN'S *DISORIENT* AT THE DUTCH Pavilion is a firm favourite with many (www.fionatanvenice.nl). Tan, the daughter of a Chinese-Indonesian father and Scottish-Australian mother, was born in Indonesia and grew up in Australia. Primarily interested in hybrid identities, she explores the way camera images “affect and inform the internal pictures we have of ourselves, of others and of the world around us”, to quote from her press release.

In *Disorient* she juxtaposes excerpts from the travel diary of Marco Polo, a 13th-Century Venetian

merchant, with contemporary video images she shot along the 24 000km route he described in *Il Milioni*. I loved it.

My least favourite? Irish artist Liam Gillick's *How are you going to behave? A kitchen cat speaks*, at the German Pavilion (www.deutscher-pavillon.com). The German Pavilion is one of the biggest permanent national exhibition spaces in the gardens. Its history is steeped in Hitler's ego.

The rather archaic and obsolete system of national pavilions has come under attack for many years. Germany, probably more than almost any other European country, has experienced the dark underbelly of nationalism. Perhaps this is why the Germans decided to use a non-German artist to represent them. But Liam Gillick?

Gillick rolled an enormous, perfectly crafted, bland cabinet that runs continuously through the length of the different rooms. At the far end is positioned on top.

“Bad” were the first words to flash through my mind. It reeked of the type of effort deliberately to exclude; to separate “us” (those who speak the specific language game they play) from the other 99.9999 percent.

Content, bored.” That was my second reaction. The exhibition comes with a video of a cat talking. No explanations, please! I gave the artist a kick in “not getting it”. Only one given me greater pleasure: feeling that the artist (in Gillick's term) it deserves.

The exhibition is on until November 22. Go if you can.

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At the Venice Biennale's Dutch Pavilion, Fiona Tan re-created the interior of a 13th-Century merchant's warehouse as a setting to show her film *Disorient*. In the film, Tan juxtaposes Marco Polo's description of the East with footage she shot of the places he describes, in order to explore the often conflicting and contradictory relationship between what we hear and what we see.

COURTESY FIONA TAN AND FRITH STREET GALLERY