



qualitalk

Information on Technology and Society

December 2019

Internet Version

ISSN 1615-9667

20. Volume

68. Edition

Printed Version

ISSN 1435-1641

25. Volume

84. Edition

The Biennale of Venezia is the „mother“ of all large international modern art exhibitions. With the exception of war periods in Europe it takes place once every two years, since 1895. For this year's Biennale, the 58th, curator Ralph Rugoff selected 79 artists, one third of them younger than 40 years old, and many hailing from Africa. Their nationalities were one of the distinctive criteria for selection, however it is also true that many of the selected ones do no longer reside in their home countries but had moved on to New York, Berlin, Paris and other places.

That the *national International* may live long is your writer's fervent wish for 2020.

Oliver Schuster

Theme:

May You Live In Interesting Times

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Acqua Alta, a flooding comparable to and beyond Venice's most damaging flooding in 1966, happened during the night from November 12th through November 13th. The water level in the lagoon rose to 1.87 m (about 6 ft 2 in.) above standard zero, 80 percent of the city were inundated.

Most affected were the owners of shops at the street level; they had to close, and once the water receded, dragged out their goods and equipment to the street to let it dry. The only ones doing a brisk sale were the vendors selling a kind of cheaply manufactured galoshes in gaudy colors.

Motto: May You Live In Interesting Times

Views and Impressions



la Biennale di Venezia

At the Documenta 6 in Kassel, in 1977, I encountered an exhibit of a quite large installation called „The Honeypump At The Workplace“ by Joseph Beuys; which for me was the first time I was faced to a new, completely different concept of art. Beuys' work consisted of pumps, drive shafts, transmissions connected to each other with tubings, hoses which all together transported pulsing honey through its closed circuit. The lubrication was done with margarine. This steadily working contraption was quite a challenge to the visitors to grasp the concept.

The question is whether the visitors of the 58th Biennale di Venezia have been challenged as much as those at the Documenta 6 trying to take in Joseph Beuys' work? Maybe the tizzy about the selection of Ralph Rugoff as the Biennale's curator had died down: There were relatively few visitors at the Biennale in November of last year, two weeks before its closure. Instead of contemplating the exhibits many of the visitors were just busy with taking „enhanced pictures“ of them storing them on their smartphones. I found this behavior so repulsive that I took out my camera only a few times; the pictures are rather taken at random. Also, in the Giardini section of the Biennale one could have visited pavilions of 28 different countries; I myself had a look at less than ten.

Visitors to the British pavilion visitors were supposed to queue up at the entrance; but there was no queue. The idea was to let no more than 15 people let into the pavilion at the same time, to have a look at the meager arrangements by Cathy Wilkes. The idea was

that Ms Wilkes considered the quiet also as part of her work. She received the newly created Maria-Lassnig Prize in 2017. Ms Wilkes' work avoids Maria Lassnig's brutal physicalness



Liu Wei »Devourment« mixed-media but nevertheless gives a disturbing and vulnerable impression.

Waiting in line to be admitted to some place is not my forte which is why I didn't follow the Israeli pavilion's invitation of „Be Patient — Be A Patient“. The artist Aya Ben Ron created an installation resembling an Israeli field hospital. I got up the few steps to the so-called hospital entrance and wanted to get in. But I was asked

to turn around and go down the steps, to pull a number and would have to wait till my number is called up which could take as much as an hour. WAITING — in one of the rooms of the „clinic“ all kept in the national colors white and blue — is part of the artwork.

Several of the pavilions I visited also featured video art: films and videos. They were in maxi-format but access to the darkened auditorium often hidden behind several curtains to keep the outside light out was tricky: Feeling your way in its darkness made you bump in the occasional obstacle in form of banks, seats, steps. No handrails, no fluorescent markings. That not more thought was given to the basic safety of spectators made the access often dangerous.

Furthermore, since the videos and films were shown in an endless loop there was no information given, e.g. in the form of subtitles or captions, telling the spectators what part of the video one was watching, or time indications how much longer the video is running. A simple notice outside of the auditorium might also have done the trick.

Biograf i den danske pavillon

Through a happy circumstance when I stepped into the Danish pavilion I happened to enter the auditorium just as Larissa Sansour HEIR-LOOM the science-fiction movie „In Vitro“ started and could watch it through the end. By the way, the Danish word for „film“, „movie“ is „biograf“ (literally: Life describing). Subtitles of this very dark black and white movie were in English. The



Alexandra Bircken
»Angie, 2019« Polyester

location appeared to be in the Middle East. A bewildered person sitting next to me asked me: „Are they talking in Danish?“ No, it certainly wasn't Danish but judging from the pronunciation it must have been Arabic.

Only at the end of this movie (duration: 85 mins) showing credits a short explanation was given: An ecological catastrophe destroyed the city of Bethlehem. Some of the inhabitants were able to flee underground. The scene of the movie plays in just one room, and one can follow the terse conversation between a dying old woman (Hiam Abbass) and her young caretaker (Maisa Abd Elhadi). One had to rather feel the conversation instead of following it (in original Arabic or the English subtitles). Whether the seedlings saved from the orchards will sprout again; whether the remembrance of life before the catastrophe might influence the growth of the sprouting trees? „In Vitro“ shows us a scenario of the aftermath of a cataclysm which could according to Greta Thunberg, the Swedish climate activist, happen in 20 to 50 years.

My Flashback: *I already could see Hiam Abbass play in the Israeli movie „Lemon Tree,“ released in 2008, as principal actress. The correlation are obvious between „In Vitro“ and „Lemon Tree“, a movie about a Palestinian widow who fights to preserve her lemon orchard while the Israeli authorities want to expropriate her land out of security concerns. An attorney takes her case all the way to the Israeli Supreme Court; it sides with the widow but for security reasons all trees have to be chopped down to a height of half a meter (about 20 inches) above ground.*

Né altra Né questa

La sfida al Labirinto: Inside the Italian Pavilion

To explore Venice resembles trying to find your path in a labyrinth. In the Arsenale one can continue this type of exploration. Since the 12th century this place continuously being added to had been the center of Venetian shipbuilding of world renown; with today's modern shipbuilding techniques it lost its original purpose. The vast wharf was close to being demolished; UNESCO's declaring the Arsenale a World Heritage Site saved it and since 1999 serves as one of the parts of the Biennale.

For the Italian pavilion the curator Milovan Farronato selected Liliانا Moro, Chiara Fumai and Enrice David; the motto being Né altra né questa – La sfida al labirinto (in rough translation: „Betwixt And Between — The Challenge Of The Labyrinth“). Farronato refers to a specific Italian background which closed to the uninitiated.

Walls of mirrors, false doors, blind alleys lead to a series of murals and spatial objects. Liliانا Moro put together a few pieces of cheap garden furniture under garish parasols. Next

to it, an old-fashioned loudspeaker used in the early to mid 19th century for blasting all kind of propaganda; in this case the song „Bella Ciao“ adapted by the Italian partisans during World War II times, and still sung to this day. In this contraption it says one can hear it in 15 different languages. I didn't listen to all of them; besides, the refrain is the same in all versions. But I wonder what visitors from let's say, Thailand Finland or Japan, just to name a few, must have thought of it suddenly hearing an Italian partisan song in their language.

As mentioned it still enjoys popularity, used in folk music performances or nostalgic song during leftist demonstrations. Lately, a grassroots movement demonstrating against



the Italian populist and head of the right-extremist party „Lega“, Matteo Salvini, has adopted that song as well. The demonstrators assemble in flash mob form, and a close up tightly; they therefore are called the „sardines“. At one of their demonstrations, on 14 December of last year, 100 000 participants rushed to the Piazza San Giovanni in Rome.

Barca Nostra

Stepping out of one of the halls of the Arsenale, I looked at the large basin Darsena Nuovissima of the wharf. And there under the radiant blue sky I saw a ship heaved halfway up by a giant crane at the edge of the basin. Looking closer the vessel obvi-

»Apart together« Mirror View
– same place, different time
at Arsenale, Photo-Montage.



ously was a shipwreck. The crane had a big plaque with its technical data etc. It said the hydraulic crane for very heavy equipment was manufactured by the English company ARMSTRONG MITCHELL and delivered in 1883. It was operated by steam and is said to be the last one of its kind; lifting capacity was 160 (metric) tons. Also, the public is asked to make donations, in the mid seven figures, to get it again operational.

Right next to the crane with its vessel one can relax at a simple fast food place. A pleasant place to rest after a longish walk through the halls of the Arsenal? Sipping your coffee and having a snack while looking at crane, ship and the large basin? Idyllic, you might say? Well, not exactly: one could call the vessel a giant coffin: it was recovered from the seafloor after it had a collision with a large Portuguese freighter, about 200 km (62 miles) south of the Italian island of Lampedusa, on 18 April 2015. On board of the vessel, later named „Barca Nostra“ („Our Ship“), were an unknown number of migrants; the estimate is between 700 and 1100. The number of saved people were just 28.

Italian Prime Minister at that time was Matteo Renzi had the sunken vessel salvaged and brought to the Italian Navy base „Marina Militare di Melilli“, also serving as a NATO base near Syracuse, Sicily, at a cost of close to 10 million Euro (around that time approximately 11 million US Dollars). To get into the body of the vessel, one large hole was cut out; about 300

*) *Crane by Armstrong, Mitchell & Co. from Elswick near Newcastle-on-Tyne: Original publication: Industrie-Kultur 14 (2008), Nr. 45 (Ausgabe 4), S. 9-10*



bodies were recovered and buried in various cemeteries in Sicily.

The conceptual artist Christoph Büchel wanted the salvaged vessel to be exhibited at the Biennale di Venezia. Despite loud protests from Italian politicians and misgivings of the art world the wreck remained exhibited at the Arsenale until the closing of the Biennale. Christoph Büchel has prohibited that any information about the

Christoph Büchel
»Barca Nostra, 2018-19«
Shipwreck



scheduled to attend the conference, therefore scientists of 36 nationalities died, among them 18 from Canada, 8 each from the USA and Italy, 5 from Germany, 3 from Austria. The identities of the victims on that flight were of course known, in contrast to the passengers on board of „Barca Nostra“ whose identity will never be known. This type of Boeing aircraft involved in the crash were eventually grounded, while unseaworthy boats and vessels still try to carry migrants across the Mediterranean Sea.

Building Bridges

Lorenzo Quinn created six large sculptures of folded hands, among them also his own, not very far away from the wreck of the „Barca Nostra“. His largest sculpture so far is „Building Bridges“: it has a width of 20 m (65.6 ft) and is 15 m (50 ft) high. The hands are said to represent wisdom, hope, support, faith, friendship and love. Couldn't it be also that hands are stretched out to people who need help? □

Lorenzo Quinn
»Building Bridges« 2019
Glasfaser-Polyester

vessel and its cargo be published.

„Barca Nostra“ is the property of the town Augusta and supposed to be returned there, and put up as a memorial in the Giardino della Memoria di Augusta. It also should serve as a memorial to Professor Sebastiano Tusa, an underwater archaeologist, who died on board of Ethiopian Airlines flight 302, a Boeing 737-MAX-8, on 10 March 2019; all people aboard perished. Professor Tusa was travelling to Kenya, to participate at a UNESCO conference. A great number of passengers were

Impressum



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Edition: December 2019
Published four times a year.

Pictures: by the author, if not stated otherwise.

.ISSN 1615-9667 [Internet]
ISSN 1435-1641 [Print]

German edition of **qualitalk**:
www.chris-schuth.de/qtalk_84.pdf

German-English translation by
Dr. Dieter von Jettmar, Vienna (Austria)
www.chris-schuth.de/qtalk_84_en.pdf

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