

# ENTROPY IN VENICE

by Jerry Saltz



The "magical floating mall" of Venice



Venice Biennale curator Daniel Birnbaum  
Photo by Giorgio Zucchiatti



Façade of the Palazzo del Esposizioni, with work by John Baldessari



Nathalie Djurberg installation in "Making Worlds"

Venice is the perfect place for a phase of art to die. No other city on earth embraces entropy quite like this magical floating mall. There are now more than 100 biennales around the world (most of them put together by the same 25 celebrity curators, drawing from the same pool of 100 or so artists); Venice is often called "the most important" of them. The main show of the 53rd Venice Biennale, June 7-Nov. 22, 2009, is the work of Daniel Birnbaum, a well-respected 46-year-old Swedish critic and curator. His "Making Worlds," held in the Palazzo delle Esposizioni delle Biennale and in the magnificent Arsenale, attains an enervating inertia of exhibitions and brings us to a terminal state of what we'll call "the curator problem."

Birnbaum's show, containing the work of 90-plus artists, doesn't offend or go off the rails. Rather, it looks pretty much the way these sorts of big international group shows and cattle calls now look; it includes the artists that these sorts of shows now include. It's full of the reflexive conceptualism that artists everywhere now produce because other artists everywhere produce it (and because curators curate it). Almost all of this art comments on art, institutions or modernism. Basically, curators seem to love video, text, explanations, things that are "about" something, art that references Warhol or Prince, or that makes sense; they seem to hate painting, things that don't make sense or that involve overt materiality, physicality, color or strangeness.

Any critic who says this, of course, is accused of conservatism, of wishing for a return to painting. I'm not for or against video -- or any medium or style, for that matter. Nor am I wishing for a return to painting, which can never come back because it never went away. (That said, it's hard to imagine anything more conservative today than an institutional critique. That sort of work is the establishment.) My beef is with the experience that "Making Worlds" produces. It's just another esthetically familiar feedback cycle: impersonal, administratively adept, highly professionalized, formally generic, mildly gregarious, esthetically familiar, totally knowing, cookie-cutter. It is time we broke out of that enervated loop.

There are, I hasten to add, good works in Birnbaum's show. Nathalie Djurberg's crazy Claymation videos show women clawing each other to pieces. Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster's moody





Simon Starling installation in "Making Worlds"



François Pinault's new Punta della Dogana center of contemporary art



Charles Ray  
Boy with Frog  
2009  
Punta della Dogana



Works by Cindy Sherman and Jeff Koons at the new Punta della Dogana

filmic rumination is about her previous appearances in this storied show, and Simon Starling has made a film that's about the making of itself. (There's a lot of film about film in Venice.) John Baldessari's lovely listless, gigantic photographic ocean mural on the façade of the exhibition pavilion is the perfect metaphor for an exhibition and an art world at sea. "Making Worlds" is further evidence, if any is necessary, that curators need to take more chances, work outside their comfort zones, stop defaulting to the same answers and issues, try their hand at smaller shows, and stop trying to be so intellectually clever. Birnbaum's show is merely a flat rerun of numerous exhibitions of Relational Esthetics with some history and new relational estheticians thrown in. By trying to do too much, he ends up doing very little.

The stasis confirmed in Birnbaum's show is exponentially amplified by two truly horrendous exhibitions produced by the French luxury-goods magnate and owner of Christie's, billionaire art-collector François Pinault. Under the aegis of two otherwise capable curators, Alison Gingeras (whose husband, Piotr Uklanski, has a huge installation here) and Francesco Bonami, giant swaths of Pinault's enormous contemporary art collection have been installed in the ornate 18th-century Palazzo Grassi on the Grand Canal and in the even older Punta della Dogana.

Just as curators love art that critiques institutions, megamoguls love art that critiques them. (The week after the biennale opened, the Basel Art Fair featured much art that critiqued art fairs.) Most of Pinault's art is about the market, and is made by market darlings: Richard Prince, Mike Kelley, Rudolf Stingel, Marlene Dumas, Luc Tuymans, Takashi Murakami. Everything here looks dried up and checked out. Good art looks dead; bad art looks dead. Even Jeff Koons looks like he is making work that has no reason to be on this earth. It's hard to say if the grandiosity of the settings, the shallowness of the taste, or the art itself made this show look so bad, but it is impossible to visit these two spaces without thinking that a phase of art is over and that it is time for art to start again.

Not all of what I saw was so arid. A number of pieces and shows were electric. On the way into the Bruce Nauman survey at the U.S. pavilion, I thought, "Do we really need another retrospective of a 1970s heavyweight?" I left agreeing with curator Linda Norden, who commented that Nauman "still registers and rumbles -- he's like Dylan." Another added, "It doesn't matter what he does, because he did it all first." After Nauman, the best overall show in town -- because it lets audiences piece things together rather than spelling everything out -- is "In-Finitum," at the Palazzo Fortuny. This amazing walk-in *wunderkammer*, about infinity and unfinishedness, is an exercise of total curatorial independence. It lumps together contemporary art, Modernism, Khmer pottery,





Takashi Murakami's *The Emergence of God and the Reversal of Fate* (detail), in "Mapping the Studio" at Palazzo Grassi



Richard Prince art car outside the Palazzo Grassi



Peter Greenaway with his replica of Veronese's *Wedding at Cana*



**Ragnar Kjartansson**  
*The End - Venice*  
2009  
Commissioned by the Center for Icelandic Art  
Courtesy of the artist, Luhring Augustine and i8 Gallery  
Photo by Rafael Pinho

Neolithic sculpture, makeup pallets from ancient Egypt, and centuries-old Inuit snow goggles made of caribou bone. Equally mind-boggling is Peter Greenaway's multiscreened filmic best-art-history-lesson-ever, for which he placed a full-scale replica of Paolo Veronese's staggering *The Wedding at Cana* back in the location for which it was painted. (One of the world's greatest paintings, it was appropriated by Napoleon in 1797, and it's still in the Louvre today.)

Iceland's representative, Ragnar Kjartansson, has built an off-site painting studio, where he keeps painting the same Speedo-wearing male model. It sounds trite, and as a critique of painting it's silly, but Kjartansson told me he really wants to learn how to paint, and his combination of classic relational esthetics and classic painting bears fruit. Speaking of which, at the tip of the Dogana is Charles Ray's extraordinary *Boy with Frog*. Seeing this boy coming to grips with otherness, life outside himself, and the world as he stands naked before us, frog in hand, is as uncanny and moving as it is revelatory. Ray seems to be saying, "Modern art is over, so I'm retrieving familiar forms and techniques to make something old new again."

The most moving moment I had at the Biennale, however, came in the last minutes of my last day at the show. Just before closing time, as guards herded stragglers toward the entrance from the far end of the Arsenal where I was, three marvelous-looking vessels cobbled together from urban detritus motored past Mike Boucher's wonderful sunken suburban house, and into the small lagoon. A band played a haunting song, a woman sang, a girl swung on a swing. The boats are the work of the artist Swoon. I'm told that Swoon wasn't even invited to the show. She and her gypsy friends simply entered of their own accord and did what they wanted to do. Like the best work here, Swoon's work doesn't come out of academic critique; it comes from necessity and vision. These are the perfect tools for making things as old as time new again -- including an art world turned dangerously into itself.

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