



VENICE '09

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**THE PUNTA DELLA DOGANA** is a protrusion of land that juts out at the southern entrance of Venice's Grand Canal. Its name, which means "Customs Point," refers to an earlier function of the spot: Serving as Venice's chief maritime portal, it was the location of the city's sea customs for four centuries. As a site historically given over to the task of deciding what may or may not enter, the Punta would provide any collector a powerful venue for putting his aesthetic criteria on display. The customs building is especially appropriate for François Pinault, the French billionaire whose private collection will be housed from now on in the newly renovated structure. Pinault arrived at his riches, after all, by controlling majority

shares in luxury-brand companies like Gucci, Yves Saint Laurent, and Château Latour—whose fortunes depend in part on the dutiful enforcement of anti-knockoff laws at border checks everywhere.

It is therefore fitting that the Punta's inaugural exhibition, "Mapping the Studio," explores the problem of entry: entry into an artist's work, and entry of work into a collection. A generous sampling of Pinault's holdings (more than sixty artists were shown), "Mapping the Studio" was expertly organized by Francesco Bonami and Pinault Collection curator Alison M. Gingeras, who installed the works so as to capitalize on Tadao Ando's celebrated renovation of the Punta building. Appropriately, the exhibition's title is borrowed from a piece that contemplates the porosity of art's architectural boundaries—Bruce Nauman's 2000 video installation that documents the nocturnal traffic of mice as they scurry into and out of his studio, undeterred by walls or screen doors.

Some works in the exhibition activate tropes of boundary marking on a number of levels simultaneously. Anyone approaching the Punta by boat from the south, for example, will be hailed by Charles Ray's *Boy with Frog*, 2009—an oversize nude child who raises a visibly uncomfortable frog with his right hand. Ray's piece operates as a perverse allegorical sculpture reminiscent of the Punta's famous *Fortuna* statue and even of the Statue of Liberty—both works that stand sentry at sites where all who approach are evaluated and judged.

The word at the Biennale was that the frog might represent the Frenchman Pinault himself, suggesting that Ray was playfully turning the tables on anyone who might sponsor his endeavors and then display them as trophies. Then again, for those not acquainted with the inside story, the boy—a dispassionate figure who evaluates the contours of his catch and appreciates the beauty of its suffering—might represent Pinault. Indeed, like Ray's languorous sadist, Pinault the collector seems to revel in what Thomas Mann called the "voluptuousness of doom," a certain admixture of Eros and Thanatos to which Venice is famously hospitable. A large number of works in the exhibition reveal an appetite for cunning depictions of death—the ultimate boundary and final judgment.

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*Fucking Hell*, 2008, by Jake and Dinos Chapman is exemplary in this respect. The brothers' large, glass-enclosed dioramas house a miniature Inferno through which mobs of toy-soldier-size figures throng and seethe from punishment to punishment. Viewers press their noses to these (sub)terraria to marvel at tiny heads on pikes, dainty pink pigs snuffing through offal, and itsy-bitsy Nazis biting into the flesh of exquisitely rendered victims. Maurizio Cattelan's suite of body bags sculpted in white marble is Apollonian by comparison.

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Matthew Day Jackson's *Skull Spectrum*, 2009—serially arranged geometricized skulls in a prism of bright colors—seems cheerful too.

Portions of the exhibition installed at the Palazzo Grassi—the collector's other contemporary art museum, a few vaporetto stops north—also trade in a sinister glamour. The atrium of the palazzo is dominated by the flashing lights and throbbing rhythms of Piotr Uklański's *Untitled (Dancing Nazis)*, 2008, which places a disco floor beside

head shots of Hollywood actors playing Nazis. A vague critical commentary lurks in the piece—people drawn to the jewel-toned panels of the floor are challenged to identify, or even identify *with*, evil and its portrayal. Meanwhile, the relentless hip-hop beats of the sound track occasionally mimic the fascistic rhythm of goose steps, as if to mock the racism associated with Third Reich ideology. The blaring music, though funky, colonizes the rest of the museum: Even works that do not provoke associations with the *Totentanz* (especially older pieces like Daniel Buren stripe paintings from 1966, as well as a terrific early film by Cindy Sherman) are invaded by the smirking sounds of Holocaust humor.

Works like these partake in the Venetian tradition of carnival but also lend the exhibition, generous as it is, a tinge of arrogance, as if this magnate were able to regard death as a mere plaything. Indeed, in many respects the collector's power is the exhibition's implicit focus. Both venues are packed with works that first appeared in other recent biennials, only to be scooped up and placed in Pinault's designer handbag: The utopian bell jars of Mike Kelley's *Kandors Full Set*, 2005–2009, and Kai Althoff's dark and dreamlike *Untitled* of 2007 were showstoppers at the recent Carnegie International. And one of the centerpieces at the Punta della Dogana is Sigmar Polke's "Axial Age" painting series, 2005–2007, majestically installed in a room of basilical proportions that is filled with the light necessary for the canvases to change continuously before the eyes, as they are intended to. These would be familiar to anyone at the last Biennale, where they served as a keystone, arguably, for Robert Storr's exhibition; here, their front-and-center placement speaks loudly of Pinault's ambition. Such is the character of this collector's taste: as sharp and penetrating as the tip of the Punta itself. □