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Between Marxist Reveries, the Real World and the Actual Art: A View of the 56th Edition of the Venice Biennial

The 56th edition of the Venice Biennial for contemporary art opened in May 2015, bringing together an overwhelming number of art works from all over the world, in the frame of its three sections: the national pavilions, the international art exhibition, curated by Okwui Enwezor and the collateral projects.

Enwezor's curatorial proposal is openly political in intent. It is obvious, from his previous curatorial endeavors, as well as from the biennial's catalog text, that for him the era of the late capitalism (or whatever you want to call it) is not a time for art to play around with purely aesthetic issues or with idiosyncratic fantasies. He is concerned with the lamentable current state of the world, which

he summarizes quite compellingly: "the global landscape again lies shattered and in disarray, scarred by violent turmoil [...] Everywhere one turns new crisis, uncertainty, and deepening insecurity across all regions of the world seem to leap into view" (Enwezor 2015). Under such circumstances, nobody could blame the Nigerian born curator for being mostly interested in art that tackles these harsh political and social realities, as most of the works on included in the exhibition actually do. But overall conceptual coherence stops here, as the show he put together is riddled by conceptual contradictions.

Being titled "All The World's Futures", one would reasonably expect that the core exhibition of the 2015 biennial would be about the future, perhaps featuring art works involved with the topic of the future of humanity in one way or another, perhaps displaying works by young and / or emerging artists. However, neither of these is really the case. In fairness, "All the World's Despairs" or "All the World's Torments" would have been far more adequate titles. The exhibitions lays in front

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of its viewer many of the wounds of our present and our recent past, amassing art that is about violence of all sorts, about hate and death, about social inequities and private tragedies. In it, one will encounter countless weapons (from machetes to canons, from chainsaws to AK 47s), tragic deaths (of a guy called Ashes, of hunted whales, of flowers) and all the flavors of sorrow. Make no mistake about it: despite some serious downsides, this is an overall strong, emotionally engaging, challengingly uncomfortable exhibition. It's just that it is so for reasons other than some of those proposed by its curator (scrutinizing the future or meaningfully relating to a presupposed relevant Marxist line of thought, for example).

Looking over the artists' selection, one easily notices the prominent presence of superstars of contemporary art, who made history: Georg Baselitz, Bruce Nauman, Hans Haacke, Robert Smithson are relevant examples. Many others, such as Marlene Dumas, Thomas Hirschhorn, Chris Ofili, Abel Abdessemed, Victor Man, Isa Genzken, Wangechi Mutu are among the most accomplished artists who made it to international fame and market success during the recent decades; they can certainly be considered "usual suspects" for building a blockbuster show. Just one artist in the exhibition is younger than 35, which is a bit awkward for an endeavor that is supposedly gazing into the future.

It was stated that "Enwezor's main interest (at least where artist selection is concerned) clearly lies in expanding contemporary art's horizons beyond both established art-world centers and new flashpoints in emerging markets" (Forbes, 2015). This sounds nice, appraisable and in line with the professional credo of the man who curated the inclusive Documenta of 2002. However, in 2015, things are a bit more complicated; for example, there is a lot of "artistic emigration" that actually keeps the so-called established "art-world centers" lively, while the capitalist art market tends to have an increasingly global influence on how art is produced and perceived, whether we like it or not. Moreover, the result of this geographic expansion is not really spectacular, as there are very few "revelations" to meet the viewer. The Propeller Group and especially the Egyptian Inji Efflatoun, a skilled, vivid and refined painter, as well as a remarkable activist figure are among them.

Okwui Enwezor sees the capital as the main source of all contemporary social and political evil, therefore the exhibition he constructed is meant as a critique of it. However, it falls far short of its aim, as proven, among other things, by the very central piece in the show (by its curator's own statement): *Das Kapital Oratorio*. Centrally placed in the Giardini pavilion and directed by Isaac Julien, the program includes daily readings from Karl Marx's *Das Kapital*, which take place in an arena-like space designed by David Adjaye. This proposed key piece in the show is plagued by inefficacy and neutralized by the internal contradictions of the exhibition. On practical terms, I have serious doubts that many of the biennial visitors actually did spend a significant amount of time listening to the readings themselves. Further on, the work and the whole exhibition are in part based on the curator's belief that "some day it is es-

sentential to read *Capital* to the letter” (Enwezor 2015). Why does he believe that after decades and decades of interpretations of Marx’s oeuvre in fields ranging from political studies to art history, from philosophy to activism, the German author has not been read to the letter and far beyond, it’s rather a mystery. Moreover, in itself, an attempt to approach the capitalist economic and social order of the 21st century by means of Marxist teachings is probably as futile as attempting to circumscribe the postmodernist psyche(s) by using Freud’s psychoanalysis “to the letter”.

Then, there is the serious issue of the actual show being at odds with basic Marxism in more ways than one. How can this exhibition be a serious critique of capitalism, when it displays works by artists that are monumentally successful in the arena of the shameless, capitalist art market?! How can spectacularly beautiful and obscenely expensive paintings by Baselitz really articulate an anti-capitalist critique? Isn’t it problematic to relate to such a critique the production and persona of a market golden boy like Oscar Murillo? Similar questions could go on and on, eventually leading also to conclusions such as this: “That Isaac Julien, Marxist orator, also previewed a Venice commission from Rolls Royce motor company *during* the Biennale is so tone-deaf it’s almost comical” (Archey 2015). It is, of course, true that exhibitions had been, for a long time now, “conceived interpretations of the works selected that may offer a variety of perspectives to the viewer” (Tomiuc 2015, 11), but blatant contradictions between the conceptual claims and the actual content are still plain and simple incoherence (or hypocrisy), not an invitation to hermeneutical pluralism.

Enwezor’s ambitions to build a broad and inclusive exhibition, equally in terms of geographic distribution and artistic media have been fulfilled at the price of overcrowding the show, which includes 136 artists from 53 countries. There is simply too much art to get your mind around, even for the large venues that were used: the central pavilion in the Giardini can get suffocating and the rather linear, sometimes monotone array of art works in the Arsenale is fatiguing. As Roberta Smith puts it, “at times it feels as if Mr. Enwezor has included everything that interested him, with no thought to what the viewer can actually absorb” (Smith 2015).

Nevertheless, some segments of the exhibition prove beyond any doubt that Enwezor is a curator with a profound understanding of theatricality, who knows how to use spectacular staging in order to maximize the expressive power of the art works at hand, without annihilating their individuality. Baroque is the word one could rightfully use to describe the spirit of the display, which, when at its best, is spectacular, dynamic, rhetoric and persuasive, compellingly engaging the viewer at an emotional level, rather than trying to address his or her intellect. These features are plain to see especially at the beginning of the viewer’s itinerary through each of the two parts of the exhibition. The central pavilion in the Giardini welcomes the visitor with Oscar Murillo’s black flags, huge pieces of cloth hung on the façade like giant shrouds, above which Glenn Ligon’s neon lights utter the words “blues, blood, bruise” (a work that is risky resemblant to Nauman’s neon sculptures, though). The “welcoming hall” of the

Arsenale's Corderie spectacularly sets the gloomy tone of the respective part of the exhibition, pairing some of Bruce Nauman's most poignant ever neon sculptures (such as "Life, Death, Love, Hate, Pleasure, Pain" or "Raw War") with Adel Abdessemed's visually impressive installation "Nymphéas (Water Lilies)", consisting in several clusters of machetes placed all over the floor, alluding to brutal violence, yet bearing a sort of a resemblance to painters' brushes and being overall maybe just a bit to aesthetically pleasing to be truly menacing.

All in all, the show includes some mediocre art, much decent art and some great art. The mentioned Nauman's neon works certainly fall under the last category, functioning as rather laconic, powerful and straightforward metaphors, in which the banality, glossiness and cheapness of the medium are flawlessly exploited. Once asked about the relation between his "Raw War" pieces and the anti-Vietnam war movement, Nauman declared that "certainly there are political feelings present in them, but nothing more specific than that" (Morgan 2002, 295); this lack of specificity allows his neon metaphors to uncannily strive towards universality. Likewise reminding one of that incredibly fertile era of the sixties and seventies, when the thing called contemporary art was forged, Robert Smithson's "Dead Tree" and his drawings / projects still retain a sense of vividness and urgency. Moreover, they fully benefit from a parallax effect (Foster 2011, xii): as our world is increasingly plagued by reckless destruction of nature, their ecologist allusions become all the more meaningful. Isa Genzken's "Realized and Unrealised Outdoor Projects", a series of small, mostly white architectural models are impressive especially due to the witty combination of critique, fantasy and playfulness they deploy. They are really mock-monuments (a building grows an ear, another one is adorned with a lonely red rose), playfully caricaturizing the contemporary architectural and (art) institutional hybris.

Georg Baselitz's series "Fällt von der Wand nicht" is composed of eight paintings presenting the upside down figure of a young man. Masterfully painted, possessing a sort of surreal and somewhat religious quality, the works are stark reminders of the human frailty and its paradoxical heroism. (The works were bought by French über-collector Charles Pinault; meanwhile, a bit further down the Gran Canal, the Marxist litany went on as planned). Several of the delicately, exquisitely refined works of Victor Man use as visual reference (religious) works of the Italian Renaissance, and seem to suggest that the Romanian artist is aiming at restoring the spiritual value of painting, in an attempt that is both acknowledged as hopeless and assumed as heroic. His "corner" in the Giardini pavilion demonstrates that Man compellingly and elegantly practices "a conceptual, intellectual painting, but through and as pure *pictoriality*" (Ghiu 2014, 42).

Like most of Steve McQueen's art, "Ashes" is "abrasive and elegiac" (Searle 2014). The video installation is a touching and simple story of a beautiful young man from Grenada, murdered over some drugs he'd found, shortly after being casually filmed by the artist in 2002. In 2014, McQueen went back to Grenada, documented his friends'

memories of him and the construction of a decent grave for Ashes. A victim among millions, he is extracted from oblivion, somewhat arbitrarily “immortalized” by the power of art, becoming an unassumingly tragic character. A dramatic atmosphere, pervaded by a Romanticist spirit and tapping into the rhetoric of the sublime, is offered by “Vertigo Sea”, the three screens film installation by John Akomfrah, born in Ghana and a major figure of the so-called British Black cinema. It is a visually arresting and emotionally engaging work about men daringly confronting majestic, whirling seas in order to reach their rather gruesome goal of killing magnificent whales.

Drawing is quite abundantly displayed in this year’s exhibition, not necessarily with impressive results. Rirkrit Tiravanija’s “Demonstration Drawings” are redundantly numerous, provide a sensation of urgency and global uproar, yet somehow lack real meaningfulness. The “extravagantly vicious imaginary killing machines” (Smith 2015) of Abu Bakarr Mansaray, a self-taught artist born in Sierra Leone and leaving in Netherlands look like mixes of surrealist fantasies and technical drawings. While they are quite overt and uncanny evocations of violence and of human cruelty and they are not lacking wit, the works seem though to be the product of a rather unilateral imagination. Probably the most remarkable works dealing with drawing are those of the Argentinian Eduardo Basualdo, who blends drawing, sculpture, ingenuity and a good command of staging skills to produce eerie, somewhat poetical objects.

As far as the national pavilions are concerned, this year’s biennial once again presents the visitor with a huge amount of art (no less than 89 national representations), with a dazzling diversity of artistic media (although many of the pavilions aimed to become wholesome installations of some sort), and with a vast spectrum of “moods” (from political seriousness to painterly joyfulness, from historical reflexivity to aesthetic aloofness). Nevertheless, there are very few, if any, jaw-dropping national exhibitions (the whole concept of which is, in our times, certainly a bit anachronistic). There is really no “glorious” pavilion, nothing in the 2015 biennial that really matches Elmgreen and Dragset’s Danish and Nordic Pavilions of 2009, Schligensief’s German pavilion of 2011 or Jaar’s Chilean pavilion of 2013; still, there are several good, earnest shows to be found.

Much of the art displayed in the pavilions is decent, unsurprising and crowd pleasing: the catchy and presumably clever installations, the common and rather benign political statements made via art and a lot of artsy, sometimes gadgety playing around with personal memories, archives, individual/group identities or the corny beauty of banal objects. It’s not necessarily bad art; it’s just rarely exhilarating and truly challenging and it often reminds of what Saltz called the “mannered International School of Silly Art” (Saltz 2011).

The Armenian pavilion, winner of the Golden Lion, is aimed at commemorating the 1915 genocide, features works by artists of the Armenian diaspora and is hosted by the Armenian monastery on the island of San Lazzaro. The displayed art works are certainly uneven in terms of quality; however, the curatorial effort is almost flawless, the

contemporary pieces being remarkably well integrated within their downright beautiful, culturally and spiritually rich location. Joan Jonas represents the United States with an immersive and enigmatic exhibition. Expressionistic drawings and ambiguous videos revolve around the motifs of the animal and the child, creating an environment dominated by an uncanny atmosphere, both paradisiacal and disquieting. In the Australian pavilion, Fiona Hall presents the apocalyptic image of a world on the brink of destruction, disarray and death. Baroque meets surrealism, irony meets parody, critique verges on hysteria in this dizzying, monumental memento mori, an inventory of the ways in which the mankind can express its madness, aggressiveness and cruelty. The Romanian pavilion proposes a straightforward painting exhibition, a quite refreshing and bold gesture in the context. Adrian Ghenie, mostly discussed for being a rising art market star, proves to be a remarkably gifted and complex painter: postmodern in his anecdotic, unsystematic, yet with an insightful approach of history, negligently versatile in his use of the paint and unambiguous in his aspiration towards sensuous beauty. On the main waterfront route from Arsenale to Giardini, in a temporary glass box, Ukraine presents "Hope!", the best of the politically driven (and empowered, in its case) pavilions in the biennial. Works like Anna Zvyagintseva's cage made of ropes or Open Group's video streaming about the agonizingly awaited return of young men from the army reveal the ordeal of a country deeply troubled by conflict with admirable concision and compelling sharpness.

If the many boring national exhibitions don't really provide incitement for critical scrutiny, some of those who are definitely disappointing actually deserve some attention. Such is the case of the U.K. pavilion, where YBA star Sarah Lucas marches in search of perversity, only to stumble into gratuitous grotesque. Her fragmentary figures with cigarettes butts sticking out of their posteriors and vaginas are redundant, while the genitalia sculptures are lifelessly shiny. The Japanese pavilion, hosting the work of Chiharu Shiota, is the "wow, it's so nice!" pavilion of the year, with its boats, numerous old keys and red strings hanging from the ceiling. It is rather beautiful and sort of charming, which makes its corny shallowness more irritating. Finally, Céleste Boursier-Mougenot's environment in the French pavilion is site-specific in a strange way. After all, the moving trees, the soothing sounds and the comfortable surrounding steps are just another art gimmick; but, in the art overcrowded and exhausting Giardini, one has to be grateful for being offered the opportunity to actually feel like breathing deep and taking a nap.

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