

think
with the
senses

feel
with the
mind

art in the present tense

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Epiphanies happen but do not last. One of the functions of art is to preserve such moments of revelation in order that we may savour and study their many dimensions, as James Joyce demonstrated. The history of art is a fabric of epiphanies woven by many hands; the present tense of art is the outer edge of that work in progress. At any point in the process that edge may be ragged and uneven, and the pattern in formation disturbing and hard to discern, reflecting the difficulty of making art in troubled times. We are living in just such times. Rather than trim the edges or reweave loose strands to neatener them up, this exhibition focuses on areas of current art activity that hint at what emerging patterns might be without presuming to map or foreshadow them in their entirety.

The exhibition is predicated on a simple proposition. As in all such situations, resistance created by surrounding complexities will either enrich or undo the intention behind that proposition, according to the appetites and inclinations of those who come to see it. A word at the start, therefore, about the ideal viewer for which it has been made: there is none. Biennials are not mounted for what the writer Stendhal called the 'happy few', which, in his terms, signified an elite circle of those with whom he shared not only social background and cultural assumptions but a particular sensibility as well. Nor do they exist so that the art world – professionals and hangers-on – can gather like conventioners. Rather, biennials are the places where a multiplicity of art worlds meet in the presence of a vast, varied and – contrary to what commentators across the political spectrum have said – avid and unpredictable public. They are a point of convergence where diverse perspectives intersect or overlap and where contrasting experiences of reality and different expectations of art are intensified, sharpened and made more meaningful.

If art seeks an audience without knowing who that audience will be, individual members of it must, likewise, contend with a high level of uncertainty about what they will find once they venture past the exhibition's threshold – and about what company they will keep while making their discoveries. Such exhibitions are not for people who experience uncertainty as an ordeal. Indeed, those for whom doubt, inquisitiveness and effortful self-questioning are exceptional or unbearable should spare themselves the disorientation and discomfort of a situation where precisely these states of mind and spirit

are required. Moreover, looking at, and thinking about, contemporary art demands appetite and a tolerance for things that may cause irritation as much, or more than, they do taste. After all, taste is basically conservative in nature and formed after the fact of exposure. As the poet Ezra Pound pointed out long ago, those who reject the new on the grounds that the moderns lack the ambition of the old masters conveniently side-step the question of their own lack of ambition as members of the art public and as active contributors to art's meaning. So, if not knowing right away what to think or say when confronted by the new – even in small concentrations – is threatening to anyone, he or she should assiduously avoid biennials, where the concentrations are high. Art is not a warm scented bath for the somnolent, nor an armchair for the tired businessman, as Henri Matisse – one of the greatest moderns – once said, even as the tired businessmen of his era called him a 'fauve', or wild beast.

Nor are biennials for people in a hurry, although breaking the public of its habit of rapidly consuming images, rather than fully registering them at a pace dictated by the medium and the uses made of it by the artist, may be hard to achieve. Yet, we who make exhibitions must still proceed on the faith that this is still possible. For, if the Situationist writer Guy Debord was right to fear the besotting effects of the spectacle, anyone attempting to arrange an encounter between the general public and contemporary art must nevertheless operate on the conviction that the viewer would ultimately prefer to be engaged rather than enthralled. This exhibition takes that latent preference as a given.

As daunting and disquieting as some art may prove to be to certain segments of the public, the primary imponderable that the visitor to a biennial such as this must confront is an internal, rather than external, multiplicity of aspects. There is much in the history of Western art and ideas that militates against this happening. From Plato onward, philosophers have divided and compartmentalised human consciousness more or less explicitly, more or less judgmentally, pitting one faculty against another: mind versus body, reason versus unreason, thought versus feeling, critically versus intuition, the intellect versus the senses and the conceptual versus the perceptual. At best, such abstract dichotomies have served to sharpen our understanding of the different capacities we bring to the

task of comprehending the world and making our place in it. At worst, they have set up false hierarchies that cause us to mistrust or disparage one for the sake of another – or many for the sake of a handful – thus depriving us of the use of some of the means at our disposal for apprehending and transforming reality.

The simple proposition upon which the 52nd Venice Biennale is based, then, is: no matter how successful philosophers and Ideologues have been at persuading people that these categories are not just useful working hypotheses but are inherently or historically true, the manifold challenges to understanding that reality poses, as well as the actual flux of experience, far exceed the power of systems, theories and definitions to contain them. The imagination is the catch basin into which this overflow spills, and it cuts the channels that reconnect formerly segregated parts of consciousness while flooding and replenishing the whole of it like a fertile river delta.

But, while this exhibition is grounded in the conviction that art is now, as it has always been, the means by which people are made aware of it and by which they put all of their being to work do not assume that an enduring wholeness is the result, or that art is a magical solution for the conflicts in our nature or among our diverse cultures and societies. That is the domain of philosophy, psychology, and politics. Yet, to make sense of things in a given moment or circumstance is to grasp simultaneously their full complexity intellectually, perceptually and emotionally. But it does not mean that our grasp will hold for long, or even much more than the instant in which we awaken to the fact that such fleeting concentration of our powers is nevertheless within our reach.

Mindful of the risks of overwhelming viewers in ways that will shut down the receptivity of even the most determined among them, care has been taken to keep the number of artists and works in the exhibition within reasonable limits so that seeing the whole of it can be done in a few days without utterly exhausting the eye and mind. Granted there is much 'time-based' art in it, but to the extent possible the exhibition has been laid out to accommodate the inevitable density of video, film and slide and digital work. For example, all five parts of Yang Fudong's work in this exhibition are laid out in the spatial equivalent of a narrative sequence, like chapters in a book, so

that they can be absorbed one by one with time in between to reflect on each.

Needless to say, installation art such as that of Luca Buvoli and Ilya & Emilia Kabakov requires time as well, since it is by moving through an environment slowly enough to notice the tell-tale elements arranged by the artist that viewers compose their own individual readings of its content. In addition, this exhibition has been structured to encourage re-reading and correlating such works, as viewers thread their way back through the show on the way out. In this regard, the placement of the environments by Buvoli and the Kabakovs is anything but accidental.

Buvoli, a relatively young artist, looks back on the heroic future of Futurism from the humbling, inconclusive and, in many respects, nostalgia-drenched present. He uses interviews he conducted with the daughters of the avant-garde poet, theoretician and agitator Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, who in 1910 hurled his Futurist Manifesto from atop the Campanile in Piazza San Marco down onto the crowds of Venice – most cherished, in its antiquity, of Italian cities – and also recordings of the text of that manifesto read for him by aphasic old men who could almost have been Marinetti's coevals, as well as two- and three-dimensional paraphrases of the movement's bombastic slogans.

In this way, the Arsenale component of the International Art Exhibition begins with a retrospective meditation on Italy's historic dream of unfettered modernity. It is of course significant that the Padiglione Italia in the Giardini, where the other half of the international exhibition takes place, is itself a monument to the conflation of Italy's modernist and Fascist aspirations. The two halves do not divide the material thematically, or by medium, generation, origin or importance but, rather, constitute a single multifaceted entity. Thus, the pavilion's streamlined neoclassical facade and immense signage simultaneously contrast and resonate with the more dynamic contours and letters of Buvoli's reinterpretation of Futurism (unlike Hitler and Stalin, Mussolini always balanced State patronage between artistic progressives and conservatives), even as the text inscribed by Lawrence Weiner on the front of the pavilion introduces an altogether different typographic tension and aesthetic paradigm in which

subtle material and linguistic slippage, rather than grandiose pronouncements and symbols of permanence, are the essence.

Back at the Arsenale, near the end of the International Art Exhibition's long trajectory, comes the room created by the Kabakovs. It, too, speaks of lost utopias but portrays them in miniature as the ruins of past civilisations existing between the physical world we know firsthand and the metaphysical one that utopias attempt to bring down to earth. Without specifically evoking it on this occasion, as they have on so many others, the Kabakovs' frame of reference centres on the Soviet paradigm, amid whose banal, oppressive, jerry-built and perpetually deferred realisation they came of age, and whose ironic archaeologists they have become. Revolutionary socialism on the left was the ideological counter-term, but also the separated twin of revolutionary fascism on the right (Mussolini's transformation from syndicalist to strongman subsumes the link), and much of the history of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was written in the differing types of euphoria they inspired and the calamities that the duel between them produced. In the interlocking structures of the Arsenale, the parenthesis that Buvoli's architectonic whirlwind of words, sounds, and images opens at the door to the Corderie is, in effect, closed in the Artiglierie by the walk-in landscape of collapsed ideals the Kabakovs have created. While the mirroring sculptural nimbus rises above the wreckage encompassed by their panorama, it serves as a reminder that, however cruelly disillusionment descends, utopia still hovers in the air.

It is a long walk from one end of the Arsenale to the other, and much else lies between the Buvoli and the Kabakov, so perhaps it is too much to ask that viewers immediately recall the former when they finally encounter the latter. Certainly, no surprise examination will be administered upon arrival at the second, nor will any bonus be awarded for guessing the connection between them, that connection being circumstantial, in any case, and in no way anticipated by the artists themselves. The logic of exhibitions is that of subliminally perceived and intuitively assessed intervals and reprises, of harmony, dissonance and echo or, as the lyric Symbolist and first great critic of modern art Charles Baudelaire described his associative poetics, a pattern of

'correspondences'. Yet the intrusive elements that appear to interfere with, or postpone, apprehension of a larger design may be the intersections of other – sometimes contrary, sometimes complementary – elements that may ultimately enhance it in unforeseeable ways.

For instance, a considerable portion of the space in the Arsenale is given over to works that directly address recent or ongoing conflicts in the world, notably tensions in the Middle East, in the Balkans and in Latin America. Examples include the photographs taken by Pavel Wolberg of the territorial struggles of the various religious, cultural, and political communities in Israel and Palestine – walls erected to reinforce the boundaries ostensibly separating Arabs and Jews, battles between Jewish settlers and the Israeli forces that are charged to relocate them – or the uncanny pictures by Tomer Ganihar of the life-sized dolls with ghastly wounds used in Israeli hospitals to rehearse the emergency treatment of victims of violence. Or there is Gabriele Basilico's long-term photographic documentation of the erosion of Beirut by bullets and shells during the almost ceaseless war and civil war that have beset Lebanon. In them, a city virtually devoid of human presence shows its wounds, where construction processes are reversed and architecture undone by those whom the Surrealist poet Paul Eluard once called 'the builders of ruins'. And, at the point where ideology mandates the destruction of actual or imagined adversaries and quite possibly self-destruction as well, a historical thread running from Buvoli to Kabakov crosses that of current events. In the installation that the Palestinian artist Emily Jacir has devoted to the life and death of a well known member of the intellectual and artistic community of Rome – who 30 years ago embarked on a translation of the whole of *The Arabian Nights* into Italian and who, as depicted in Steven Spielberg's film *Munich*, was killed by Israeli agents in retaliation for his role in preparing the attack on Israeli athletes at 1972 Olympics – one witnesses the strands of creative vision, national identity and political action tied into an excruciating knot.

Parallel interweaving occurs in the work of Tomoko Yoneda, a Japanese artist who has photographed Beirut 'as seen' by a sniper of the Christian militias, a view of Sarajevo 'as seen' by a Serbian sniper, or the mined frontier between North and South Korea 'as ignored' by people waiting at a bus stop. The

basis of Yoneda's entire project is to show the flashpoints of global politics in their everyday guises, forcing viewers to imagine war in the otherwise ordinary places it has taken place and, thereby, coming to an understanding of how suddenly its ravages are visited on seemingly peaceful scenes and how arbitrary the demarcations between one side and the other can be. The Italian artist Paolo Canevari has also ventured into the locus of foreign wars. His video shows a boy dribbling a football in a vacant lot – again, the most ordinary of sights – but his playing field is, in fact, the bombed-out core of the former headquarters of the Serbian Army of Radko Mladic and Slobodan Milosovic, and the ball he skillfully manoeuvres is cast in the shape of a skull of the kind that might still be found under the rubble. For his part, Zoran Naskovski's piece collages news-media footage of war as seen on Serbian television and re-circulates it through the internet, thereby not only offering another 'ground zero' perspective on the fighting but expanding the continuum of contemporary media appropriation and transformation to the relatively un-policed zones of the internet.

While Canevari's image of youthful dexterity amid the blasted seat of delusional power sinks in, think also of the innocent, whimsical grace of the skateboarders in the Australian Shaun Gladwell's videos on view in the Giardini. And not so innocent are the games of grown men who re-enact the wars of other eras, as seen in the pictures taken of them by the British artist Neil Hamon. What is it that dictates their choices of period, uniform and token allegiance – nineteenth or twentieth century, infantryman, officer, medic, German, Russian, American or Serbian – and what is such play? Is it the therapeutic sublimation of drives toward voluntary regimentation and violence or their sinister anticipation?

And what do we make of fears that come true in ways that could not have been anticipated but whose symbolic forms are fundamentally and forever altered by unexpected correlations. Charles Gaines's *Airplanecrashclock* (1997) falls literally and, in metaphoric terms, horribly into just that category. The piece models a few square blocks of mid-town Manhattan near Philip Johnson's post-modern 'Chippendale' skyscraper, formerly owned by ATT and now the American headquarters of Sony. Close to a model of this building, an airliner is held aloft by a pole that regularly plunges the craft earthward when

it vanishes into a trapdoor in the sculpture that closes with a hatch and on which the crash impact and debris are depicted. Anxiety about air safety and urban vulnerability thus converge, and the compound disaster Gaines has imagined reveals itself 'like clockwork'. Gaines's recent drawings of explosions evince the same sense of doom, but the airliner assault on the World Trade Center in 2001 has obviously complicated the work's connotations, potentially eliding accidental terrors with deliberate terrorism. Naturally, when he made the work in 1997, Gaines could not have conceived of such an event actually happening, nor should the piece become a prisoner of the connection. But inasmuch as his original purpose would seem to have been to confront the viewer with a prosaic concretisation of an objective possibility and subjective dread, the gap of ten years between then and now has added meanings and dimensions to his mechanical catastrophe.

Insofar as this exhibition features *Art in the Present Tense* as its secondary premise and subtitle, the inclusion of Gaines's piece is one of several cases where things made a decade or more before have been selected because of their changed, renewed, or increased actuality, in other words, their re-conjugation in the current context. Adel Abdessemed's neon *Exil* (1995) appears in the show for much the same reasons. Placed at various doors throughout the Arsenal and the Padiglione Italia like the 'exit' sign it mimics, this concise but devastating verbal substitution announces the passage from home to alienation and emblematises the dilemma of growing populations who, owing to dire economic, social or political conditions, are obliged to abandon their native lands and search for safe haven among strangers. Only a fraction of those who attempt to make an escape are able to do so, while many more fail or briefly succeed only to be rejected by the countries in which they had hoped to find refuge; after that they are condemned to be stateless nomads or, worse, are returned to the dangers they sought to leave behind. In comic-book format, Eyoum Nguangue's and Faustin Titi's *Une Eternité à Tanger* tells of just such a failed crossing from Africa to Europe, and the bitter story is rendered with sober realism by clearly contoured and detailed drawings that bring what might in less engaged hands have been compromised by the exoticism to which the Franco-Belgian style of clean-line *bande dessinée* has so often fallen prey. Yet no one who has read Hergé's arch-colonialist adventure *Tintin in the Congo*