

Inside the mind of the Venice Biennale

Director Robert Storr explains the thinking behind the latest edition of the world's most high-profile exhibition

By Franco Fanelli | From Features | Posted: 7.6.07

Robert Storr is the first American director of the Venice Biennale. The influential academic served for 12 years as senior curator in the department of painting and sculpture at the Museum of Modern Art in New York where he organised - exhibitions on Gerhard Richter and Robert Ryman, among many others. Since July 2006 he has been Dean of the School of Art at Yale. A popular choice to direct the Biennale among artists and critics, Storr has shifted the exhibition's gaze towards Africa and Turkey with both countries accorded their own pavilion for the first time. But Storr has not had an entirely smooth ride: the Biennale's managing director, Renato Quaglia, recently resigned in protest over alleged overspends and controversy has surrounded the Biennale's first African pavilion. On the eve of the Biennale opening, Professor Storr answered our questions.

The Art Newspaper: Your Venice Biennale aims to be, in your own words, "futurebound". In that respect, it seems that many older artists at your Biennale could be seen as models for future generations. How can this be reconciled with the work of many young artists today who seem distant from the utopianism of the avant-garde, almost to the point of parodying art?

Robert Storr: I am a realist. Or try to be. Which is to say I am sceptical of received opinion, grandiose rhetoric, and naive idealism. As an actual "68er" in politics and art I have been through that, hence in part my interest in people like Richter, Polke and Pettibon. But I am not a cynic, though I can sometimes appreciate the mordant, critical uses of what Peter Sloterdijk calls "cynical reason". I don't have much time for adolescent sarcasm in any form since it seems to me much like adolescent utopianism, minus the courage to dream and make mistakes. But as a realist I see no grounds whatsoever for simply dismissing abstract, minimal or conceptual art as modernist and hopelessly passé. On the contrary, it is the dialogue between artists working in that mode and younger ones borrowing from their ideas or vocabulary and pushing precedents in new directions that has been so interesting over the past decade and more. So far as my show is concerned, that means Félix González Torres in relation to Sol LeWitt and Robert Ryman—and, by the way, Ryman being anything but a traditional modernist utopian describes his materials and procedure-based paintings as "realist" which they are; Rosario Lopez Parra in relation to minimalist sculpture—the boxes in her photographs are empty workers' housing, not perfect cubes; and Marine Hugonnier in relation to Ellsworth Kelly, whose book *Form Line Color* she cuts up and collages into the front pages of a Palestinian newspaper. That gesture doesn't do away with what Kelly has done (and is doing—which is one of the reasons he is actually in the exhibition), but recontextualises and recasts one of the protean dimensions

of what he does.

Lazy satire is plentiful these days and lazy collectors can't get enough of it, but they will soon discover that it and the conversations around it go stale very quickly. Serious engagement with the work of earlier but still active generations that alters and expands our sense of the formal and conceptual ramifications of what they have achieved—and as Polke among others have demonstrated in relation to abstraction and minimalism, such engagement may include caustic satire but not be confined to it—is where the future of art lies, and has always done.

TAN: A current trend, that emerged in Europe mainly after the fall of ideologies in the 90s, focuses on social and political “denouncement”. Is this reflected in your show?

RS: Ideologies have not fallen, they have mutated and overrun us and endanger us as much as ever. What is it that Fernando Pessoa said? “One idea is born, another dies. Truth did not come and go error changed.” In the most basic ways in politics this has happened—the old “East/West” Cold War between “freedom” and “totalitarianism” has become an “East/West” hot war between “freedom” and “terror”. I watched the World Trade Center burn and fall from my neighbour's roof with my own eyes, and I have no illusions about the real threat of terrorism. But since I live in a part of Brooklyn where there is a large and diverse population from the Arab world, neither do I suffer from the fearful fantasy that every man with a skull cap and beard or woman with a headscarf is an actual or potential enemy. Meanwhile, I know for a certainty that the militarisation of civil society and the abandonment of international treaties on human rights and the abuse of prisoners in detention camps is not “freedom”.

That said, I have not set out to make a political Biennale. However, many of our leading artists are making work about the harsh and perilous state of things that we have been persuaded to accept as necessary, even normal, and that includes not only the wars that have been or are being fought but the forced migrations and unsuccessful integrations of large populations—from the countryside to city, from one country to another country, from one culture to another.

And there are many other such signs of the times in this show—troubling, often shameful ones. Jenny Holzer addresses the torture being committed in the name of “fighting for freedom”, Gabriele Basilico the decades long destruction of Beirut, Nangué and Titi the flight or attempted flight by Africans from poverty in their homelands to poverty in Europe, Adel Abdessemed deals with similar issues of frontiers and exile, and Morrinho has brought a “model” slum from the favelas of Rio de Janeiro to the Giardini in Venice where its improvised vernacular architecture will sprawl in sight of the official architecture of the national pavilions much as such slums fill in the gaps between concentrations of upper and middle-class housing in Brazilian cities, and much as they do in cities from Mexico to Mumbai.

In writing in the catalogue about Basilico's photos of Beirut, I have quoted Paul Eluard's poem "Guernica" which begins, "Watch them working/the builders of ruins/they black [Eluard meant Fascist] stupid and patient/they strive to be the only ones left on earth"—or words to that effect. Well the builders of ruins are hard at work around the world, but it is no longer so easy to define as fascist as in the 1930s—and unlike the 1930s they most likely will think of themselves as "freedom fighters" no matter what side of a particular war they are on. But whatever you call them, the ruination of our world is their goal, or a price they are willing to exact to achieve their goal. Art cannot stop that, as Picasso's Guernica showed, but it can make us see what the damage is and think about what is ahead of us if we fail to halt the labour of those who would destroy society and culture—or worse, join them in their zealous efforts to be the last people on earth.

TAN: How did you choose the young artists in your show? Did you intend to outline a dominant trend or present an international sampling instead?

RS: I am not much interesting in starting trends or catching the wave or merely keeping up or anticipating taste. Nowadays the work being done by artists is so diverse and widely dispersed that it is really futile to think in old-fashioned ways about the "mainstream" of art, or even, to take a more aggressive term, its main thrust. If, as I do, one thinks of art as being like a vast river delta with many channels of varying widths, depths and speeds, then the issue is not choosing only to go with the wide fast moving ones but also exploring the smaller, slower but sometime deeper ones, or ones that take off in a unusual and mysterious direction. Since there are many ways to map such a space but no way to cover it all, my strategy was to try and follow one current into the next in a way that gave some feel for the overall territory, paying attention to some but not all of its most interesting areas and corners, and in the process make one aware that there was more to be seen than just what I will try to show, and that re-entering this delta at any point or taking another direction would be worthwhile.

Obviously I am making judgments about where to look and what's most rewarding, but I am not trying to suggest that there is only one view, and that all the rest is secondary and should be ignored. Unless I guess wrong between what is shown in Venice, Münster and Kassel this summer, people with the time and stamina will [be] pretty well covering the territory of this delta, or at least [have] found some high ground from which they can survey sections they didn't get the chance to enter. But the metaphor is not accidental: water passing through a delta tends to [flow] in one main direction, but may double back and twist a great deal in the process. [Taking] a more direct route from point A to point B...is a leftover from positive ideas about art's development. But in reality—for the past 50 years at least—art meanders as much or more than it heads towards a clearly defined point on the horizon. Or so it seems to me. But even meandering is going someplace. Deltas are not stagnant.

TAN: What is emerging outside the main circuit of contemporary art?

RS: I just don't accept the idea that there is a main circuit of art any more, even though I live in New York, even though I know what you mean by those words. There are centres where a lot is published, where a lot of museums are concentrated and where there are a lot of galleries—the market towns—but important, influential art is being made everywhere now, and has been for a long time. Increasingly it is unnecessary for artists to live in art ghettos in one of two cities with the most action. Travel and the internet make it possible to work just about anywhere and still be connected—once you have broken the magic circle in your country or continent that is.

That said Latin America is very interesting, and has been for over 90 years—modernism happened very early there, it is just that the museums and the market have been slow to take full account of what has been going on all along, and what is accelerating today. Africa is huge and diverse but activity is growing there, although the art infrastructure lags way behind. The same is true of India, and I had hoped to have an Indian Pavilion this year as we do with Turkey and with Africa.

The reality is that no one serious about contemporary art can afford to get stuck in one place or focus on one kind of work in several places. That makes paying attention strenuous and learning about new centres and new cultures a very important part of “looking”. And that is a good thing. I worked for a long time at MoMA and people now take it for granted that everybody always knew that Picasso and Matisse and Kandinsky were great, and they knew right away how to see what was there, and how to think about it. But that's entirely wrong. MoMA's greatness as an institution isn't just the art that it has but the educational effort it has made over decades on behalf of the general public as well as “the elite”—and, by the way, from the beginning MoMA accorded a big role to Latin American art along with that of Europe and the US. The challenge before us as individuals and as an art system is to focus even further and take in even more of all that is being done in the world and all that is worthy of serious consideration. There is a very great deal that is worthwhile, and, having spent the time I have travelling for the Biennale, I can tell you it is to be found everywhere from Bamako to Buenos Aires to Bombay to Beijing to Brussels—and, of course, Brooklyn.

TAN: What do you think of the rage for Chinese contemporary art?

RS: Manias are only interesting as social and cultural phenomena in the way that the content of an illusion is only interesting as a particular example of what it means to be deluded. I think the mania for Chinese art will last for a while because so much is invested in it economically and in terms of its symbolic importance in transitional politics within China and between China and the rest of the world. But like all waves—even tsunamis—it will pass. In the process there may be a lot of wreckage, and what worries me the most are the misspent talents of young and mid-career artists in China who quite reasonably want to ride that wave but may miscalculate the undertow.

Such thoughts and cautions aside, there is an enormous amount of activity in

China, to which I have had some exposure through exhibitions and studios in Shanghai and Beijing. There are only two Chinese artists in my show—one, well known, Yang Fudong, has a large presence throughout the Corderie, and another, Yang Zhenzhong, is featured in the Artiglierie, but that is because other exciting things I saw there didn't fit this particular framework. Research for a given exhibition may become the basis for the next exhibition, and I expect that a few of the Chinese artists not included in Venice will be in shows I organise in the near future.

TAN: The art system has changed radically in the last ten years and contemporary art has become incredibly popular. But a “mass avant-garde”? Isn't this a contradiction in terms?

RS: Yes it is. But “the avant-garde” is not a style or fashion label, it is a self-conscious attitude on the part of a certain sector of artists and art writers. (And at any time historically only a few of the best artists think of themselves in this way for any length of time if at all.) Earlier on you asked about the cynical stance of some contemporary artists and if there is anything they are doubtful of, it is that art can remake reality, which has been the view of most avant-gardes. For example, Luca Buvoli's piece, which opens the show in the Arsenale, is a bittersweet retrospective look at Futurism, complete with 3-D “cartoon” versions of Futurist graphics, interviews with Marinetti's elderly daughters and the reading of his manifesto by old men who have had strokes. I hope the general public will grasp that this work in part addresses the way that all fads and popular enthusiasms fail to live up to their claims or meet their predictions—and Marinetti is the classic case of an avant-garde artist who, via Fascism, connected with a mass audience.

TAN: The art calendar is tremendously crowded; every three months a biennale is taking place somewhere in the world. What are the risks of this?

RS: One of the things I thought of doing was to make a project based on commissioning someone to travel to all the biennales in the world between the last Biennale, curated by Rosa Martinez and Maria de Corral, and this one. It could have been very interesting to see what touches all the bases and what that would tell us about the system over all. But I didn't have the money, and it probably would have killed the person doing it, though maybe an artist with a strong masochistic streak will take it on.

In any case the system by itself doesn't make artists overproduce; it is also the responsibility of an artist not to say “yes” to every invitation, or even every tenth invitation. Overall it is good that the increased number of biennials mean that more people in more places—especially those with few museums or galleries—will be able to participate in the dialogue of art in their time, and be able to judge contemporary art for themselves, even if it must often be judged severely. The greatest danger I see is that biennials will be created without -adequate backing and that art and artists will be exploited by bureaucrats who claim to “love” art or support culture but in fact expect someone else to pay for it, which may mean dealers and collectors (running the risk that biennials turn

into fairs or vanity promotion) or the artists themselves (which very few artists can or will do, and which means that poor artists, young artists and so on will be left out or ripped off).

The truth is that these worst-case scenarios are happening now. As the Swiss economist Bruno Frey argued at the symposium I organised for the Biennale in 2005, cultural events cannot be approached like self-sustaining, bottom-line businesses. If so, they will go broke or be replaced by sports events. Consequently culture must be subsidised by the host city or institution; and while money is made from tourism, from job creation, as well as other aspects of these events, the fundamental economic benefit (and justification) of biennials has to do with the quality of life of that city, with education, with the reputation the city earns for being a cultural centre, with the kinds of people it attracts as citizens, with those who decide to stay in the city rather than leave for another one—a big issue in Venice—and other important but indirect forms of social “profit” from social and cultural investment. And Frey argued from a capitalist perspective!

It is short-sighted business to think that the way that biennials should work is that you put a dollar or a euro in and then at the end take that dollar or euro out plus another one or two more. That isn't sound, long term economics, it's more like leveraged buy-outs where the assets of a once-strong company are sold off for a quick return and it will kill the goose that lays the golden egg wherever such thinking gets the upper hand.

TAN: Another contradiction: Why, when there is a lot of talk about globalisation, does the demand for national pavilions at the Venice Biennale increase for every edition?

RS: I have very mixed feelings about the idea of “national culture”—just think of the artistic and political crimes committed in the name of cultural nationalism during the 19th and 20th centuries! And just think of how quickly even harmless forms of nationalism date—the architectural styles of the Biennale pavilions tell that story very clearly. However, artistic self-definition and self-determination has been very important to many major artists and to their communities. In the 19th century the break up of the Austro-Hungarian Empire produced a wave of nationalism of this largely affirmative kind, in the 20th century it was the end of colonialism.

But the reality is that most artists think of their work in an explicitly international framework—which is not of course the same thing as a homogenising global one. And many artists come from mixed backgrounds, or have moved from their country of origin to another country. In this exhibition that is true of a lot of artists—Adel Abdessemed was born in Algeria but lives in France as does Philippe Parreno; Yto Barrada was born in France but lives in Morocco; Marine Hugonnier was born in France but works in England; Tatiana Trouvé's parents were Senegalese and Italian and she was born in Italy but she lives and works in Paris. And that is just the “French” contingent of the show. And quite a few artists address exile, expatriation and relocation in their work.

So the very problems with thinking of art in essentially national terms have been a subject of art. What is certain is that looking at a show like this and counting heads by country as if one is doing a sociological poll is not a very enlightening way to approach the question.

TAN: What are the roles and aims of the Venice Biennale today?

RS: The Biennale and all its many off-shoots around the world have many motivating and conditioning forces—nationalism, civic pride, tourism and much else besides. The reason that they exist, or at least the reason that many like me work in this form of exhibition, is that it sets the stage for a self-selecting audience composed of many subgroups—school children, students, those who follow contemporary art closely, those who normally follow it from a distance, the curious, the suspicious, art lovers and art haters, and of course artists. It is a place where work enters into dialogue with other work, people with other people. Biennales are forums where images come before words unless the image is a word. They are as near as we get most of the time to a democratic space for contemporary art—though of course we should try hard to lower the barriers to full public involvement. They are not made for the art world but to help art enter the world—at least that's why I want to make them.