



VENICE '09

When Worlds Elide

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IN THE BEGINNING, God created heaven and earth. While the vaporetto chuffs and struggles its way through the lagoon, I pull out a copy of the *New Yorker* and soon find myself considering an excerpt from Robert Crumb's new work, a comic-book version of the Bible. Here, at least, someone is concerned with the topic of world making. OK then: Eve looks like the woman Robert Crumb is always thinking about. Adam looks like an Argentinean soccer player from the '70s. God the Father is the usual mixture of Moondog and Walt Whitman. But the creation of heaven and earth is an abstract, though artistic, act: God has to make a decision. It's as George Spencer-Brown declared in *Laws of Form*, describing the beginning of any thought operation, any project: *Draw a distinction*. God and Crumb distinguish between white and black, light and darkness, and thus between day and night. Everything else happens of its own accord. The world is made; the material of its construction is a single difference—at least until the devil or some other no-goodnik invents narrative.

This might be what artistic director Daniel Birnbaum means by presenting this Biennale under the aegis of "making worlds," a phrase articulated in numerous languages in the exhibition's title. His aim, perhaps, is to show how a few formal materials can give rise to great complexity. You could then call this complexity a "world," although it isn't entirely clear why you would want to do that. In any case, such a formulation would offer another way to conceive of artistic production, apart from either the traditional idea of making an object or the (post)Conceptualist notion of an intellectual-discursive project. To be more precise (or as precise as the fleeting fantasies of my vaporetto cruise will allow), in the model of the world lies a concept of the artwork's genesis as a process that is shaped not only by intentions, plans, and parameters derived from artistic subjectivity but also by reception, and that is open to special access by contingency. Thus it could be that Birnbaum is hinting at a desire to curate a Biennale that would show how, from a single or a few decisions

about materials and rules, an entity emerges that could not have been predicted.

But instead of a de-dramatization of the individual artist's input ("Just draw a distinction . . .") and a concomitant emphasis on outcomes (" . . . and behold, abounding processes without end"), the formula for "Making Worlds" often seems to lend support to the opposite idea: It enlarges artistic subjectivity from the comparatively harmless Old European notion of expression to that of creation in the Old Testament sense, whereby, after the generative act, the Divine Father does not leave the world to itself but maintains a keen interest in propagation and lines of succession. This can be seen in the many positions in "Making Worlds" that are explicitly or implicitly credited with being the source of an influence that is only now coming to fruition. Here, the artist has not created a world with its own ontology, like a normal artist; he or she has created other artists, creatures in his or her own image, like a god—or like a professor at an art academy. This inversion of the anxiety of influence is a dominant strain in current stagings of art. Harold Bloom's trusty trope has given way to a desire *for* influence, which, in the absence of other discourses of legitimation, provides contemporary artists with pedigrees, with a family romance, with manners shaped by great fathers.

In recent years, fewer and fewer major exhibitions have been supported by conceptual abstractions or, for that matter, by curatorial arguments. Instead they have been supported by names—frequently names of forgotten or vanished persons who are being rediscovered and to whom curators can ascribe the version of current art that they want to ratify and advance. Numerous very different artists, including many considered *radical*, are available for this purpose. In "Making Worlds," in contrast to analogous discoveries at the last Documenta, they are by no means as unknown as, let's say, Charlotte Pošenenske was when presented extensively in Kassel two years ago. Rather, they are exemplars of coveted, legitimate practices. Blinky Palermo, Lygia Pape, Gordon Matta-Clark, Tony Conrad, Öyvind Fahlström, and the Gutai group are representatives of a historical legacy, standard-bearers of that still fundamental epoch, the 1960s and early '70s. But as it is increasingly presented today, this legacy is not about assertions and positions; it's about individual practices whose inviolability is put forward with great discursive intensity. These people are providing contemporary practice with a link to the rare substance of a radicality that is viewed above all as heroic, as idiosyncratic and personal. This was of course not their intention, but it is their current function in contemporary shows. To point this out is not to speak against their works: The author of these lines is also a wholehearted admirer of the above-named artists. But his admiration has to do with the material and the tools these artists contributed to conceptual work on artistic programs, as well as to the conceiving and understanding of drastic and severe aesthetic experience, either *volens* or entirely intentionally. It has less to do with their flamboyant individuality.

In the context of a Biennale exhibition that, apart from its ambiguous motto, presents itself as conceptless and argument-free, such artists compensate with their names and with their "radicality" for the absence of curatorial theses—and of contemporary radicality. "Radicality" relates to the decisions of today's exhibition makers the way an influence-hero from the '60s might relate to a young contemporary artist's practice: It inspires, stimulates, and above all ennoble the endeavors that take place under its rubric, thus segregating its adherents from less attractive, less heroic constellations. It is no longer possible to conceive of "radicality" as having any real relationship to the radicality of the '60s; the



Opposite page: View of "Making Worlds," 2009, Palazzo delle Esposizioni, Venice. Öyvind Fahlström, *Dr. Schweitzer's Last Mission*, 1964–66. Photo: Kate Lacey. This page: View of "Making Worlds," 2009, Palazzo delle Esposizioni, Venice. Tony Conrad, "Yellow Movies," 1972–73.

former is at best merely a fetishization of the latter. This lazy, personalized idea of radicality has led to the illusion—however productive—of a natural link between good looks and a righteous cause. By propagating the related illusion that the old rules (and thus the old ways of breaking them) still apply, it also holds at bay the question of whether a new relationship between decisions

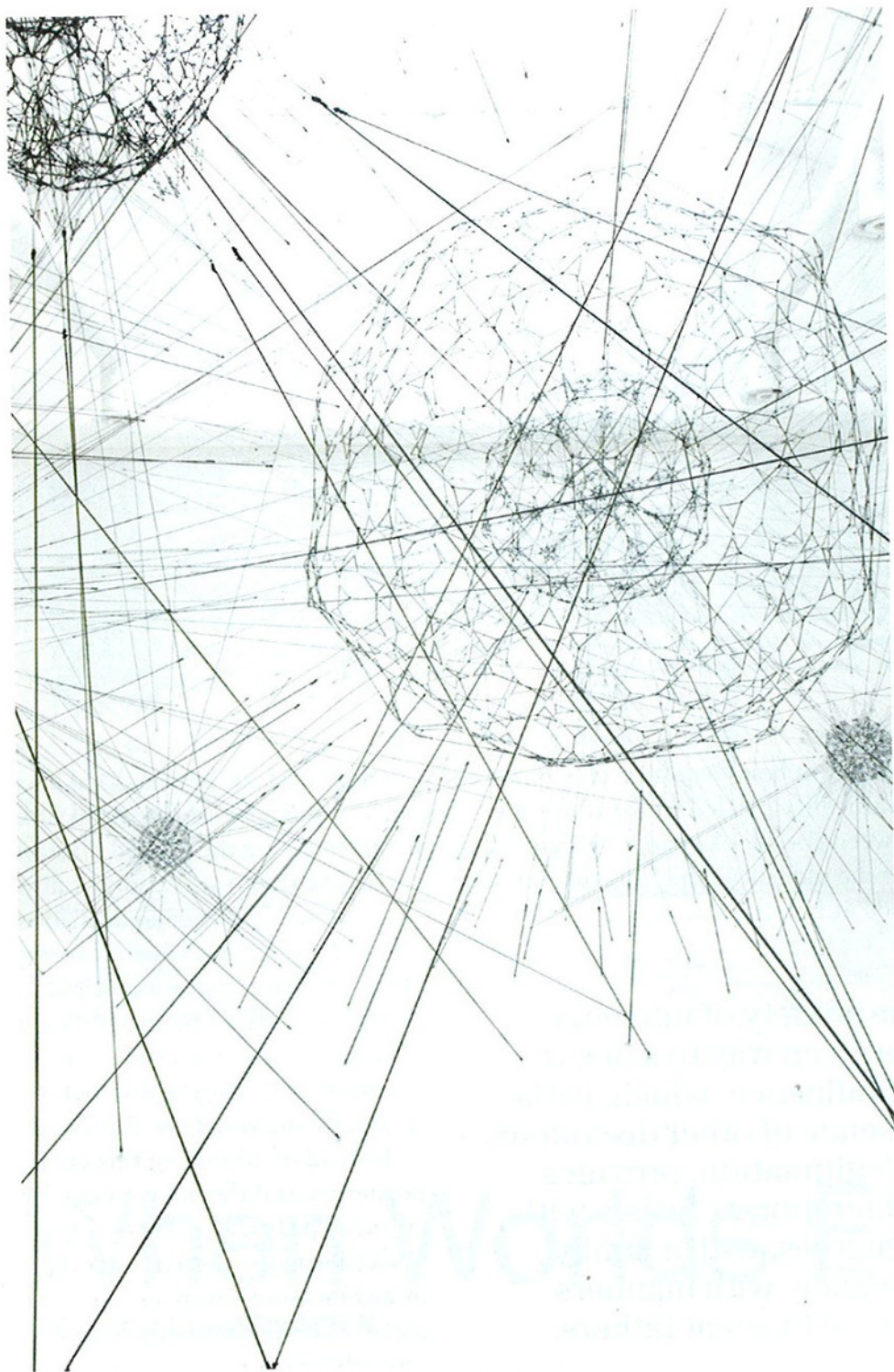
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about form and about content, about references to the world and to the self, needs to be laboriously developed—or whether such an ambition, which anyhow is awfully taxing, should simply be dismissed.

Instead of admitting this crisis, people act as if the main model for cultural-political events like the Venice Biennale—hegemonic events by any measure—were in fact "radicality," or the uncompromising attitude that one associates with good radical names from forty

years ago. The means by which this idea is supposed to work is the image of the seed that has come to fruition, the motif of the *longue durée*. As Birnbaum suggests in a June 2 interview in the Berlin *Tageszeitung*, the seed of the radicality of old—for example of Gordon Matta-Clark, whose early, surprisingly verdant drawings are on view in the Palazzo delle Esposizioni—comes to fruition in the relational participation art of Rirkrit Tiravanija, whose functioning bookstore is also in the palazzo. Indeed, Tiravanija's reception of Matta-Clark, says Birnbaum, even transforms Matta-Clark's own work.

If this all seems somewhat vague, another interview, with the magazine *Monopol*, finds Birnbaum similarly circling around the idea of the political artist: Wolfgang Tillmans is a good one because he is interested in alternative forms of living together and simultaneously is interested in the formal. He thus fulfills the criterion of the political artist who is "not superficial," who knows that the monochrome painted surface can also be considered in relation to industrially prefabricated coloration. You could surely just leave it at that, even if the single most



This page: Tomás Saraceno, *Galaxies forming along filaments, like droplets along the strands of a spider's web*, 2009, elastic ropes, dimensions variable. Installation view, Arsenale, Venice. Photo: Kate Lacey. Opposite page, from top: Miranda July, *Eleven Heavy Things—Pedestals for Guilty Ones*, 2009, fiberglass panel, steel, urethane paint. Installation view, Giardini, Venice. Photo: Kate Lacey. Chu Yun, *Constellation No. 3*, 2009, mixed media. Installation view, Arsenale, Venice.

critical question remains open: Namely, how are these two interests of Tillmans's mutually mediated? Does the "nonsuperficialness" consist in the nonmediation of formal and political interests? Such an approach would be directly opposed to that of the radical role models this show puts forward. Birnbaum draws a more general connection between "not superficial" contemporary artists and their radical precursors. Fahlström, too, is important, because he was an eminent political artist but never just illustrated arguments in a "propagandistic" way.

But he did. That is precisely what is fascinating about Fahlström. He in fact illustrated arguments—the quite plain basic truisms of anti-imperialism—with the utmost directness. Maybe for him the differentiation between ruling and oppressed was as productive, and yielded as much visual complexity, as the dif-

ferentiation of primordial form, of day and night, was for God the Father and other demiurges. Their darkness/light is his imperialist/anti-imperialist. His visual diversity corresponds to the world's ethically and morally mixed throng; his methodology is not dissimilar to those of creators who draw strictly formal distinctions. His works, including the ones exhibited here in the Palazzo delle Esposizioni, are so fascinating precisely because they attempt something totally impossible: They show the content of political propositions. Each artistic decision has recognizably not been made on traditional artistic grounds, or out of obligation to media, formats, audience. Partly unintentionally, Fahlström demonstrates how visual content from simple communicative contexts, like maps and street signs, and propositions from pragmatically different situations, including argument, rhetoric, discussion, and normativity, cannot be translated into decontextualized gallery objects—without denouncing either the gallery object per se or the necessity of propaganda and of simple, situation-specific communication. In this radicality, he arrives at a sublime clarity of distinction. He does a service to the political and the artistic by allowing them to become discernible: not as opposites but as distinct *pragmata*, like *langue* and *parole*, that cannot simply be translated into each other.

However, the beauty of his work really consists in the total working through of a fundamental problem: in his case, the relationship of art and politics. He shares this thoroughness with Conrad, Matta-Clark, the Gutai artists, and Palermo, all of whom were preoccupied by fundamental problems of the arts. It could be said that the unity of each of these artists' projects gives them a quality of closure, which is evidently another meaning of "world" in the discourse of the exhibition. But it is critical to understand that ultimately, in their cases (as opposed to those of today's happy relationalists), there is no peace in this unity: Media and objects are challenged to their fullest extent, are applied to one another with the greatest intensity, in order, finally, to become neither equivalent nor harmonious. The effect of the impossibility of exchange—cornerstone of all aesthetic resistance to the logic of capitalism—can be realized only when there has been no a priori rejection of the mediation between content and formal interests, no premature celebration of one's own cognitive dissonances. In the best room of the palazzo, where Tony Conrad's "Yellow Movies," 1972–73, are hung, the works' misreading as minimalist painting is successfully prevented: They are films; they will never be concluded; they will not form a complete world that one can enter into, leaving all other worlds behind. But the experience of the works as movies, not worlds, is possible only if one aligns oneself with the program, if one accepts that these jaundiced color fields bordered in black are films, as the artist intends them to be understood, and if one does not instead see them as occasions for postmodern irony or for the enjoyment of color or formal austerity.

Understanding "world" above all as a synonym for closure, for the self-contained cosmos of an individual fantasy in which the viewer is invited to take part, is of course the most obvious implication of the Biennale's title. In many cases in Birnbaum's exhibition, the intended "world" is identical with a space, from Tobias Rehberger's award-winning palazzo cafeteria prettification to Tomás Saraceno's giant web of elastic rope. In these cases, "world" means "this space is completely determined by this artistic work; beyond this space, there will be no trace of this work." The magic of the secret hideout behind the door is once again on offer. This strategy could be called *immersion*, in the expanded sense of the word, since it is not merely a question of *immanence*: Though it uses internal references to unfold an abundance of sensation and information, it is based neither on site nor on medium, but on the equating of the site's architecture and its boundaries with the boundaries of the work.

This is not insignificant, since immersion is one of the dominant strategies that the contemporary culture industry shares with the visual arts. What in



contemporary art can be designated in terms of the immersion aesthetic is most often the reactionary vestige of an old aesthetic of the sublime: It stages the astonishment that results from radical exposure to an extreme experience, or at least to its simulacrum—at this Biennale, mostly through the totality of an installation. Tate Modern’s Turbine Hall and its many accomplishments exemplify this symptom. A room such as, in the palazzo, Nathalie Djurberg’s fairytale dungeon stuffed with flower sculptures and screens showing kinky stop-motion animations combines this appeal to childlike astonishment—slightly ironized for good measure—with the fulfillment of the reactionary critic’s desire for a “sensual” art, which one read about so often in the past decade. Harmlessly tasteless adventures with drastic color and form merge with the preferred method of eliciting smirking assent: the trivializingly taboo-breaking erotic narrative.

Another dominant strategy that art shares with the culture industry is that of pseudoparticipation. This encompasses the so-called prosumer, or professional consumer, and partakes of the permanent animation of audiences on the Internet and in other consumer-culture contexts under the neoliberal regime of unfocused attention. With its remaindered Situationist vocabulary, pseudoparticipation often even considers itself the present-day continuation of radicality. What artists who make this kind of work completely fail to notice is that the apparently permanent collapse of the validity of forms is possibly the most important challenge facing contemporary art—the trick is knowing what doesn’t work anymore because it doesn’t mean the same thing or have the same effect it once did. In “Making Worlds,” the palest vestige of the pseudoparticipatory model is surely Miranda July’s outdoor installation *Eleven Heavy Things*, 2009—nightmare of smirking cuteness; purgatory of putative lightness; apotheosis of harmlessness—which invites the audience to pose and to be photographed on top of pedestals with funny inscriptions. As someone near me astutely said: “Erwin Wurm for the even poorer.” But this same work was extolled in the press, evidently *because* it successfully liquidates any difference between an artistic demand and the general program of entertainment.

On the other end of the spectrum, a highly reflexive and stimulating discussion is initiated by Falke Pisano in the Arsenale: Her installation *Silent Element (Figures of Speech) II*, 2009, made from formalized and seemingly prefabricated sculptural elements and written statements placed outside and inside the constructions, opens up many avenues for reflection on how contact between a sculpture’s field of validity and a subject’s embodied aesthetic experiences brings about a mutually constitutive relation. This diagnostic enabling of the reception process is the opposite of the concealment of reception as a physical and intellectual activity—its replacement being the participating, playing, childlike post-subject or the stupid spectacularism of “astonishment.” Ideally, an exhibition would not be silent about the blatant antagonism of positions as opposed

as July’s and Pisano’s. The notion that all works are worlds not only strengthens the idea of their closure; it also insinuates that one could no more compare them than one could bring Jupiter and Betelgeuse—or different cultures, in the mind of the cultural essentialist—into argumentative relation.

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However, the model of the participatory avoidance of a position through adherence to the regime of fun-culture is clearly on the wane at this Biennale, and, despite the (palpably subdued) participation of

several of its delegates (e.g., Carsten Höller), is not as strongly represented in “Making Worlds” as at most recent international roundups. That said, one does often encounter a variant: Mr. Spock art. According to its principle, the artist presents the audience first with an amazing riddle and then with a calculated solution, notable for its lack of ambiguity, which will make everyone say,



“F-A-A-A-Scinating!” Chu Yun’s *Constellation No. 3*, 2009, in the Arsenale is a case in point. You enter a dark room (a world!) where scattered lights are twinkling (stars! a universe!), which your eyes, growing accustomed to the darkness, quickly perceive as household appliances and their various indicators. F-A-A-A-Scinating! The funnier side of this same principle is shown in Tim Noble and Sue Webster’s 2006 work *Metal Fucking Rats* at the collateral event “Distortion”: Here, an amorphous heap of scrap metal is lit from behind in such a way as to cast on the wall the shadow of, indeed, two fucking rats. Hans-Peter Feldmann and Paul Chan, in the somewhat more demure context of “Making Worlds,” also deliver sexual shadow play with more or less Spockish *aha* effects. While Feldmann, in what is, for him, an incredibly saccharine manner, simply wants to recall obsolete forms of entertainment and “enchant” the viewer with selections from his toy collection, Chan, in *Sade for Sade’s Sake*, 2009, achieves a persuasively complex and thoroughly elaborated meditation on sexuality and classification, organic and mechanical systems, productive exertions and empty ones.

In one of my favorite works, and one of the high points of “Making Worlds,” Simon Starling reprises the good old Conceptualist joke about the box that contains the sounds, or more generally the history, of its own making. (Similar

projects can be found all over Venice, with perhaps the most elegant being Dorit Margreiter’s architectural portrait of the Austrian pavilion, screened where it was filmed.) Starling’s 2006 film installation *Wilhelm Noack oHG* involves an old Berlin metal-processing company. A metal sculpture, like a spiral staircase made of rods, supports the film, which is physically wrapped around the sculpture as if around the spools of a projector and which documents its making and the history of the company. Here, though one again responds with a “F-A-A-A-Scinating,” albeit a more slowly enunciated one, there is not simply a single point but rather an organizing principle that orders an abundance of internal references. That the company is located in Berlin is surely no coincidence: Every other artist’s biography in this Biennale, not only in “Making Worlds” but throughout the national pavilions, reads “lives in x and Berlin.” Despite the city’s agglomeration of artists’ positions—which resembles the agglomeration of artists’ positions at a biennial—in Berlin, too, nothing is produced that meaningfully deals with the city, as was the case in earlier epochs in New York or Paris. *How Berlin stole the idea of postmodern art*. In Berlin, too, people live in pavilions that are designated “worlds” and don’t know much about one another, unless they occasionally stop by “The Building,” the “3,” or the



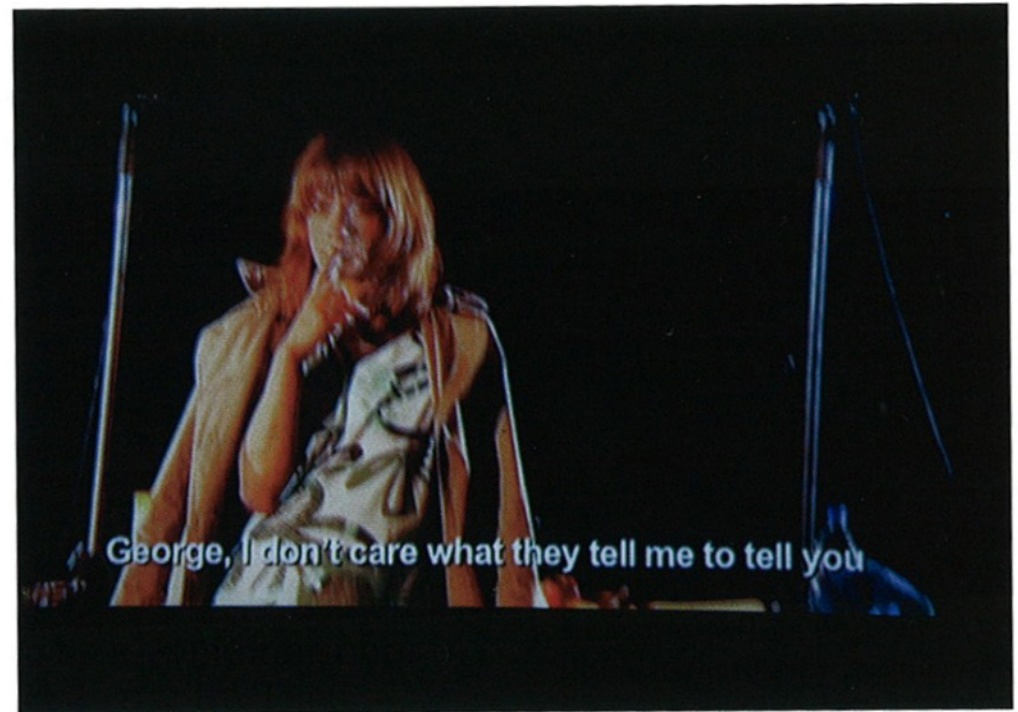
“Montagspraxis” at b_books. Berlin, as the international city of the art industry, is as much the backdrop of production as Venice is the backdrop of presentation. There is hardly any work from Berlin that takes this situation into account.

Elmgreen & Dragset, who are also closely connected with Berlin, are certainly no exception to this rule. The duo did up the Danish and Nordic pavilions with a gigantic, densely jocular double installation, a narrative sequence frozen into a *tableau vivant*, sans *vivant*. Narrative is the third dominant strategy (after immersion and participation) that guides artistic precision into an ironically sanctioned stream of the culture industry, and to which there seems to be no alternative. This installation, which presents a luxuriously queer hedonistic-collector lifestyle so as to portray it, in an allegorically funny way, as a not particularly disturbing memento mori, is the other great attraction in the Giardini (along with Roman Ondák’s horticultural intervention in the Czech and Slovak pavilion, which Mr. Spock would have enjoyed). Surely one could glean a reference to the present here. To the present crisis? Well, maybe, but for me what leaped to the fore was rather a story about how you can’t sell good art to collectors these days. As long as the bourgeoisie are under pressure from leftist- or Protestant-imposed guilt, they buy reflexive art. But after becoming as hedonistic as the artists themselves, they only want art to be a swimming pool or pornography. Then they drown in the former.

Another narrative, but a recursive one, was actually my favorite work: Keren Cytter’s untitled 2009 film on view at the Arsenale. In her rhythmic dialogue, reminiscent of Minimalist music, Cytter relates a backstage drama inspired by John Cassavetes’s *Opening Night*, casting actors (such as Bernhard Schütz and Caroline Peters) who in fact represent a specific Berlin aesthetic and its achievements. These achievements have nothing to do with global gallery art, but rather with the advanced theater of the city, and particularly with the director René Pollesch and the Volksbühne at Rosa-Luxemburg-Platz. Cytter approaches the symptoms of Pollesch’s postdramatic art and its performers as an outsider

and without reference to their history, but she is one of the few who grasp the specific cultural historical moment of the Berlin bohemia bubble and its advanced discussion of the performative, which she compresses into a loop of considerable conceptual density. This is less the making of worlds than the correct reading of them.

Another strength of Cytter’s piece is this sound track of fast staccato dialogue, which makes the work’s paradoxical temporality—it’s a drama that is also drama’s contradiction, a loop—aesthetically comprehensible. In recent years, one of the most productive as well as the most comical stumbling blocks for the long-routinized process of exhibition programming has been the task of installing sound, which has effectively undermined that lame dichotomy: “correspondences” in white boxes and



isolation in black ones. This time, at the central sites of the Biennale, there is very little sound—it is limited to ambient jingling from the Djurberg installation at the palazzo and a despicable soprano saxophone that wafts from the “Berlusconi pavilion,” the unutterably reactionary abomination of an attempt at an Italian pavilion in the Arsenale compound. In turn, there is plenty to hear at almost all the collateral shows and pavilions scattered throughout the city. And finally, in a small upholstered booth at the Palestinian pavilion, there is a stunning dub-ish sound collage, *Ramallah Syndrome*, 2009, by Sandi Hilal and Alessandro Petti. Of all the closed-off worlds, this is the one I wanted to linger in the longest.

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But I had to get back into the high summer heat of the Giudecca anyway. And after I had spent some time in the cooling atmosphere of the Welsh pavilion, of all places (where John Cale scours the ruins of his childhood on five screens before veering into a ludicrous but touching denunciation of American torture practices), naturally my critique of the “Making Worlds” slogan and its curatorial results got relativized. By analogy to publications, the Venice Biennale is

probably more like *Vogue* than an experimental journal. Can you blame the one for not being the other? Just as *Vogue*, in a supreme tautology, puts out something it calls the Fashion Issue, so “Making Worlds” has simply adopted the structure of the other, individual presentations in the events and pavilions, thereby declaring as its principle *the banal jointure of nation-states and artworks*. One ought to be able to ask of artworks that they be organized differently than nation-states and stop functioning as their branding campaigns, and above all that they enable other experiences besides confirming the functioning of the sense organs. □

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Translated from German by Elizabeth Tucker.

Opposite page: Elmgreen & Dragset, *The Collectors*, 2009, mixed media. Installation view, Nordic pavilion, Venice. This page, from top: Keren Cytter, *Untitled*, 2009, still from a color video, 10 minutes. Arsenale. Elmgreen & Dragset, *The Collectors*, 2009, mixed media. Installation view, Nordic pavilion, Venice.

