



VENICE '09

Play Grounds

LYNNE COOKE

A SIMPLE WHITE PORTICO flanked by a pair of tall palms frames a picture-perfect view of the ocean. With its pristine, stripped-down classicism, more deco than totalitarian, the facade of what was once the Padiglione Italia (newly dubbed the Palazzo delle Esposizioni), as beguilingly made over by John Baldessari, instantly conjures Venice—Venice Beach, that is. Since notions of displacement, projection, figuration, and absorption take priority in Daniel Birnbaum's exhibition over modernism's once-dominant paradigms—critical participation, presentness, literalness, and self-reflection—the veteran Angeleno's work (*Ocean and Sky [with Two Palm Trees]*, 2009) serves as the show's ideal point of entry.

In a characteristically clear and forthcoming statement outlining his curatorial approach, Birnbaum disavows any desire to implement a master plan for his contribution to the Fifty-third Venice Biennale. Welcoming the fact that the

phrase "Making Worlds" (to use the English bit of his, seemingly infinite, polyglot title), inevitably implies something slightly different each time it is translated, he discerns in such myriad inflections evidence of the notion that every artist fashions a singular vision through his or her practice. No additional thematic or ideological premises are articulated in his pluralistic platform, though he obviously has drawn a clear distinction between a biennial and a museum exhibition. (Moreover, in foregrounding process- and project-based exploratory work over finished product, his choice of the former had the collateral benefit of allowing him to sidestep market pressures.) The presumptive result, as suggested by the title to his catalogue essay, "We Are Many," would be closer to an assembly of Leibnizian monads—a heterogeneous array of singular individuals—than a collective ensemble of the kind that underpins any group show with an agenda (and most biennials today). Elsewhere in the catalogue, Birnbaum questions cultural theorist Sarat Maharaj about Paul Feyerabend's philosophy of science, which he suggests has some relevance for contemporary artistic practice. For Feyerabend, the logic of scientific discovery is less a matter of the rigorous application of a rational, universal method than a "haphazard, open-ended, hit-or-miss, patchwork" way of proceeding, ideally propelled forward by "unscripted" explorations of "conjectural models." The implication is that Feyerabend's anarchic methodology provides the perfect tool for visitors wishing to explore Birnbaum's show.

Perhaps fortuitously, such an approach is facilitated by the Palazzo delle Esposizioni's labyrinth of galleries—or, better, rooms—which range from large to small, rectangular to eccentrically shaped. A confusing array of spaces disposed over several levels, the venue is notoriously resistant to any rigorously choreographed itinerary. (Were it a museum, it would long ago have been radically redesigned to accommodate the axial layouts offering clear trajectories that have become the institutional norm.) Its very idiosyncrasies work to Birnbaum's advantage. Antithetical to any project based on a deterministic thesis, the floor plan prompts the kind of serendipitous interrelations, unexpected conjunctions, and wayward juxtapositions prioritized in Feyerabend's unscripted exploratory mode: Visitors constantly find themselves retracing their steps, wandering back and forth, disoriented by dark spaces used for film and video, retreating when caught in a cul de sac. A related curatorial approach informs the installation of some of the larger rooms; seen, for example, in the conjunction of Philippe Parreno's intermittently projected film *El Sueño de una cosa* (The Dream of a Thing), 2001–2002, with works by Blinky Palermo, André Cadere, and Wolfgang Tillmans and a suite of monochrome paintings by Sherrie Levine (*Meltdown [After Yves Klein]*, 1991). In its refusal of formulaic relationships, this kind of curatorial strategy can seem either arbitrary and willful or, conversely and more positively, provocatively intriguing. Caught constantly off



This page, left: John Baldessari, *Ocean and Sky (with Two Palm Trees)*, 2009, solvent-based ink-jet print on acrylic-based adhesive vinyl. Installation view, Palazzo delle Esposizioni, Giardini, Venice. Photo: Kate Lacey. Above: Wolfgang Tillmans, *Kepler/Venice Tables (detail)*, 2009, wood, glass, C-prints, photocopies, ink-jet prints, offset prints, Polaroid, paper, aluminum foil, 3' ½" x 13' 3½" x 8' 3¼". Palazzo delle Esposizioni, Giardini. Opposite page: View of Wolfgang Tillmans, *Venice Installation*, 2009, Palazzo delle Esposizioni, Giardini, Venice. Photo: Kate Lacey.



guard, alternately revisiting and discovering works anew, Birnbaum's visitors find their assumptions and expectations in tatters. How distinctive are the patterns and textures they discern amid the unruly web of possible relations depends in large part on their willingness to play, to hypothesize and conjecture.

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ing figure. Wolfgang Tillmans's presentation comprises photographs that run the gamut of his wide-ranging practice, from monochromes to intimate views of casual domestic scenes, as well as several display tables. One set of these, *Kepler/Venice Tables*, 2009, includes an article on astronomy, from the March 3 edition

In substituting for the exercise of professional competence an engagement based on notions of play, Birnbaum couples pleasure with insight.

At the apex of this building, somewhere close to its center, is a generously proportioned, light-filled gallery. In its previous incarnation, this mezzanine was a necropolis, dedicated to the work of artists no longer with us; this time, it is given over to the work of a single liv-

of the *New York Times*, with the resonant heading *IN A LONELY COSMOS, A HUNT FOR WORLDS LIKE OURS*. The world envisioned in his own practice is complex and multilayered, shifting easily and topically from the microscopic and local to the abstract and vast, from the specific mechanics of photographic techniques to disarmingly informal and seemingly spontaneous ways of picturing, and displaying, whatever is at hand. Enormously influential over the past fifteen years for younger artists and audiences alike, Tillmans is, for Birnbaum, exemplary on several counts: his engagement with "his immediate social surroundings"; his "insistence on inventive, radical personal life styles and a new sexual politics [suggestive of] a different social order" if not of a "utopian ideal of togetherness"; and his use of the eye as a "subversive tool" to question social expectations, which, Birnbaum contends, is the "only notion of 'politics' that really matters in art." However grave the import of the *Times* article, the tone of its headline—more jaunty than existentially strained, more wry than fatalistic—is key. A marked avoidance of crisis-laden rhetoric is likewise apparent in the works presented by most other exhibitors in Birnbaum's show.

Perhaps not altogether comfortable with the unscripted, visitors to the "Palazzo" can often be observed huddled over maps as they try to figure out where they are or what they have missed. Once at the Arsenale's Corderie, however, they find themselves force-marched along an undeviating route in this vast shed originally designed for the making of rope. Since the sequence of encounters its footprint sets up is tightly scripted, this part of the exhibition proves far



become lodestars for younger generations, especially among those who work across performance, installation, and other hybrid, conceptually diverse modes. Though a playful spirit of improvisation, close to Birnbaum's heart, fuels many of their practices, the cumulative impact of their presence is to imbue the show with gravitas and a pertinence particularly striking in light of the practices and values foregrounded in the more prominent collateral shows on view elsewhere on the lagoon. Not surprisingly, works like Jonas's *Reading Dante II*, 2009, and Conrad's riveting solo performance in the Arsenale's Teatro Piccolo (*Snapping the Drone*, 2009) provided some of the show's most memorable moments.

Despite the timely contributions of such éminences grises, the promotional literature for this year's Biennale stresses youth, emphasizing in particular that Birnbaum is its youngest director to date. More significant, however, would seem

to be the fact that, as rector of the Städelschule, he oversees one of Europe's liveliest art schools, an institution heralded for its research-based creative experimentation. And yet he offers relatively little indication of where the forthcoming generation may be headed. Alongside a broad swath of Birnbaum's own generation—ranging from Rachel Harrison to Rachel Khedoori, from Simon Starling to Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster—is a smattering of artists of various ages and backgrounds, including some with high-profile trajectories of recent vintage. Notable in this respect are Guyton\Walker, Tomás Saraceno, and Nathalie Djurberg, who occupy prominent positions in a trio of galleries at the forefront of the Palazzo delle Esposizioni. Despite their current visibility elsewhere, their impact is strangely muted. Whereas both Djurberg and Saraceno fall prey to grandiose gestures of the kind that such a context encourages in the inexperienced and untried, Guyton\Walker prove to be unsettling interlopers. In so directly referencing the mass marketing of the commercial, everyday world that lies in wait not far beyond Baldessari's threshold, their contribution throws into relief just how hermetic are the worlds charted by many of their near neighbors.

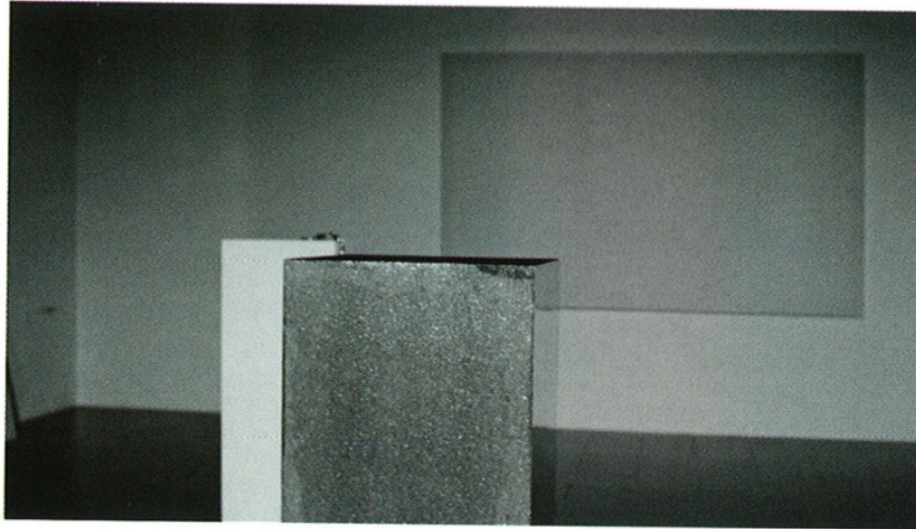
less conducive to Birnbaum's exploratory methodology. Opening dramatically with Lygia Pape's *Ttéia I, C*, 2002, an installation of golden shafts punctuating a dark space, the Arsenale's cavernous expanses are filled with environmental, scenographic, and quasi-architectural works. Countering Baldessari's idyllic vision with a range of more disturbing and disorienting perspectives, each nonetheless seems to revolve in its own orbit, as may be gauged by a comparison of the contributions from Moshekwa Langa, Ulla von Brandenburg, Paul Chan, Carsten Höller, and Haegue Yang (a graduate of Frankfurt's Städelschule whose work is also featured in the South Korean pavilion). The high level of professionalism in the overall installation of the Arsenale—no mean achievement in this financially strapped climate—is unprecedented, as is the evenness of the playing field: Nowhere does an artist who could not call on high-powered galleries for supplementary funding seem to have been disadvantaged. Through such ecumenical open-handedness, Birnbaum ensured that questions of representation (whether relating to ethnicity, gender, or nationality) would not inadvertently derail the agenda he proposed. Thus there has been little of the crude tallying of numbers prevalent in previous years, and nothing of the problematic dependence on private collections also evident in times past.

The selection of artists from an older generation is fundamental to the tenor of the overall presentation in the Arsenale as well as at the Palazzo delle Esposizioni: Works by Cadere, Tony Conrad, Öyvind Fahlström, Yona Friedman, Joan Jonas, Gordon Matta-Clark, Palermo, and Pape speak to one another across distances. For what their very different practices have in common is tantamount to an ethical dimension within their aesthetics—an economy and modesty of means deployed in resourceful, pragmatic ways that often, quite deliberately, placed their works at the margins rather than the center of the art market and institutional recognition. Usually first acknowledged by their peers rather than via mainstream channels, many of these figures have

Making worlds (unto themselves) is almost always the fate of artists in the national pavilions—whether these sites are located physically within or without the Giardini. The terms by which each country selects its representatives depend on its own set of protocols; consequently, past efforts to incorporate these autonomous entries under a broader collective endeavor have usually failed, impotent in the face of the sovereign control that each nation exerts on its minute piece of turf and, more important, in the face of the cultural politics that informs each country's curatorial agenda. Since the concerns of cultural administrators are sometimes more determined by reference to local than



Opposite page, clockwise from top: Nathalie Djurberg, *Experimentet*, 2009, Claymation, video, mixed media. Installation view, Palazzo delle Esposizioni, Giardini, Venice. Photo: Kate Lacey. Blinky Palermo, *Himmelsrichtungen (Directions of the Sky)*, 1976/2009, acrylic, glass, steel. Installation view, Palazzo delle Esposizioni, Giardini, Venice. Photo: Kate Lacey. Tony Conrad, *Snapping the Drone*, 2009. Performance view, Teatro Piccolo, Arsenale, June 3, 2009. Photo: Natasa Vasiljevic. This page, from top: Dorit Margreiter, *Pavilion*, 2009, still from a black-and-white film in 35 mm, 8 minutes. Austrian pavilion, Venice. Roman Ondák, *Loop*, 2009, mixed media. Installation view, Czech Republic and Slovak Republic pavilion, Venice. Photo: Kate Lacey.



best, a parasitic coda at worst. An elegiac meditation created through a slow rhythm of tightly focused shots and lingering sounds, McQueen's film *Giardini*, 2009, initially probes the desolate park's rampant vegetation, wreathed in a mournful penumbra. Toward the end, the film lapses into a more conventional narrative involving two protagonists who briefly emerge from the gloom to embrace in a cryptic gesture that shifts the whole tenor of the piece. As the natural world veers between the roles of protagonist and backdrop, a strangely unresolvable tension ensues that becomes the work's true subject. Also fascinated by the Giardini's sprawling vegetation, Ondák literally invited it into the Czech Republic and Slovak Republic pavilion (*Loop*, 2009). So seamless was the local flora's integration that the pavilion, in an uncanny reversal, took on the role of the

interloper, a recent arrival momentarily set down in the bucolic landscape. Disrupting the normative relations binding nature and culture, Ondák deftly foregrounds the function of display, its historical origins, and the overlay of leisure, learning, and consumption inherent in cultural tourism.

Echoing Ondák's historical concerns, American-pavilion curator Carlos Basualdo offers a fascinating overview of some of the key moments in the evolution of the Giardini in his essay published in the catalogue for "Bruce Nauman: Topological Gardens" (the tripartite show that was the United States' official entry). According to Basualdo, however, from their inception (1805–14) the Giardini proved an insignificant adjunct to the city; only with the inauguration of the Biennale in 1895 did they find their *raison d'être*: display. Even now, he

to global matters, presentations can end up seeming provincial; others ignore the potential offered by the Biennale's high-profile platform to engage current discourse and thereby generate a shared context and productive dialogue. If, for example, this year's French and Australian selections (Claude Lévêque and Shaun Gladwell, respectively) seem completely off base, the Germans, Danes, and Nordic countries, by contrast, engage in an unprecedented détente: The Germans invited Liam Gillick, a British-born US resident, into their midst, while, in an impressive display of collegiality, the Scandinavian duo Elmgreen & Dragset created a "transnational neighborhood" around the Nordic and Danish pavilions, involving an international roster of artists (*The Collectors*, 2009).

Unexpectedly, it is from the national pavilions that a shared thematic begins to emerge, an engagement with location—that is, with the Giardini off-hours and off-season. This subject variously provides a springboard for works by Steve McQueen (British pavilion), Dorit Margreiter (Austrian), Roman Ondák (Czech/Slovak), Yang, and Elmgreen & Dragset (as well as Gonzalez-Foerster in the Palazzo delle Esposizioni and on the grounds of the Arsenale). Moreover, by addressing the conditions that prevail in the dormant months between Biennales, these works ground their projects in a set of specificities relating to site, albeit at moments local or otherwise distant. They thus counter displacement with immediacy, infusing a welcome degree of literalness into the conjectural and hypothetical, as well as undercutting absorption with a self-reflective criticality. Margreiter's black-and-white film *Pavilion*, 2009, an homage to Josef Hoffmann's elegant building, accrues affect by depicting the architectural masterpiece isolated in its wintry domain. Yet however deferential its studied relation to Hoffmann's purist modernist spaces, Margreiter's work, as she makes clear, will inevitably prove supplementary, a graceful commentary at





argues, for most of their existence—that is, during the long intervals between these art shows—they remain in a state of glum suspension, their wild and uninviting appearance rebuffing all but the most lost and solitary of tourists. This aura of alienated displacement has proved fertile for younger artists struggling to make a meaningful contribution to an event that seems curiously irrelevant to the bulk of the tourists who fuel Venice’s economy and sociality. And nowhere is this better evoked than in Gonzalez-Foerster’s video projection *De Novo*, 2009, a poignant account of her attempts to respond on five different occasions over some twenty years to invitations to this show. Alternately rueful and haunting, her saga ends in a remote, abandoned garden, a site previously unclaimed by Biennale artists (*Untitled [Il Giardino dei Finzi Contini]*, 2009). Inaccessible and off-limits, the arrestingly beautiful location—in which the artist appears to have made no physical intervention—seems to belong to a world and time apart, far from most other sites frequented by hordes of visitors.

In the highly trafficked Giardini, so physically congested are the grounds by the plethora of historic pavilions that there are few opportunities to construct additional ones: Newcomers must look off-site for temporary quarters.¹ Among these, the Mexican pavilion is presenting Teresa Margolles’s raw and affecting installation “¿De qué otra cosa podríamos hablar?” (What Else Could We Talk About?) in the decaying sixteenth-century Palazzo Rota Ivancich. Central to her project are a number of large sheets of cloth soaked with blood and other bodily fluids from victims of drug-related murders, plus a flag, *Bandera*, 2009, similarly soaked with blood, which hangs from the facade. Margolles’s work takes as its point of departure the rapidly escalating violence in Mexico. The exhibition’s address is clearly twofold: to the artist’s compatriots, traumatized by a situation in which the forces of law and order have increasingly lost control and legitimacy; and, more broadly, to the Biennale, its organizers, participants, and audiences. For a government to support a project foregrounding issues that call into question its own authority and credibility and tarnish its image abroad, impacting its markets, cultural exchanges, and tourism, is remarkable. Although certain aspects of the instal-

lation verge on the too-literal, Margolles’s work at its best is inextricably woven into the very fabric of the site, so that it not only literally contaminates the context but punctures the indifference of the most seasoned and the most casual onlooker alike. Typical of many of the buildings rented as temporary national headquarters whose status as part of Italy’s cultural patrimony protects them against violation, this venue could not be physically altered. Nonetheless, Margolles’s work will leave material residues that cannot be fully expunged: In a daily action titled *Cleaning*, 2009, the palazzo’s floors are mopped with water tainted by victims’ blood that will seep into the floors; following a storm, the rain-soaked flag will leach blood into the street and canal below. Equally indelible will be the mnemonic traces, for her confrontational rhetoric inexorably implicates in its problematic discourse each and every visitor to this once grand, now decrepit venue, hung with ghastly relics.

While Margolles’s project depends overtly on its actual site, it trades implicitly on that site’s geographic and psychological distance from the Giardini: Posed from outside the Biennale’s physical if not cultural precincts, her question plays with the protocols of official discourse. A quite different set of concerns prompted the organizers of “Bruce Nauman: Topological Gardens” to extend its reach from the United States pavilion, located within the grounds of the Giardini, to two additional sites closer to the historic center of the city: the Università Iuav di Venezia at Tolentini and the Università Ca’ Foscari. Orchestrated around a trio of distinct thematic threads—heads and hands, sound and space, fountains and neons—this retrospective exhibition encompasses the full four-decade span of Nauman’s career. Since each venue houses work from every period of the New Mexico-based artist’s production and represents all three organizing strands, the exhibition gives the impression of being a museum show shoehorned into a set of physically limited spaces. At the Ca’ Foscari, sound spills disruptively from one room into neighboring sites, interrupting and adulterating the sculptures within. At the Iuav, the three-channel video projection *End of the World*, 1996, an unusually lyrical piece featuring three musicians playing steel guitars, has little relation to the adjacent works, which eloquently play off the academic precincts. Linked by the *Pink and Yellow Light Corridor (Variable Lights)*, 1972, set functionally into one side of the cloister, audio pieces from the late ’60s and early ’70s variously instruct “Get out of my mind, get out of this room” or reveal sounds of someone unseen, restlessly pacing, jumping, rolling around, somewhere nearby but off-limits. At the US pavilion, the placement of the gorgeously remade *Vices and Virtues*,



1983–88/2009, around its perimeter is brilliant; also inspired is the siting in the back window of Nauman's signature early piece—the iconic *The True Artist Helps the World by Revealing Mystic Truths (Window or Wall Sign)*, 1967. Yet the selection elsewhere in the building is incoherent and overhung.

Nauman's ability to play superbly by the rules of any kind of game is beyond question. Why then did the American commissioners feel the need to skew the playing field in Venice by greatly extending the reach of the US contribution?

is fundamentally at odds with the type of games that depend on formalized rules and protocols. While not bound by the strictures that pertain to participation in games like the Olympics, participation in the Biennale, and like events, at the national level is premised on a shared set of guidelines as well as on adherence to unspoken conventions, pacts, and customs. Nauman's ability to play superbly by the rules of any kind of game is beyond question.² Why then did the American commissioners feel the need to skew the playing field in Venice by greatly extending the reach of the US contribution?

According to the catalogue contributors, it was only by expanding beyond the confines of the American pavilion that Nauman's work could fully engage with the public and private spaces of Venice. Moreover, only by "allowing the audience to use its experience of the city to relate to Nauman's work," Basualdo writes, could the exhibition "question the ideological foundations of the national pavilions [*sic*] that frame it." The wish to deploy Nauman's art in an ideologically driven curatorial gambit designed to critique the political foundations that structure the Biennale is ironic—at the very least. For elsewhere in his text, Basualdo remarks that on two previous occasions the US contribution extended beyond the borders of its pavilion. On each occasion, he notes, an American artist took the major prize: Robert Rauschenberg in 1964 and Jenny Holzer in 1990. As if responding on cue to what could be seen as a further

Nauman is one of the most revered and influential artists working today; his being chosen as the American representative, while well overdue, aroused enormous anticipation. His new work *Days*, 2009, and its Italian counterpart, *Giorni*, 2009, would in themselves have made a memorable contribution to the event at large.

The notion of unscripted and unstructured play (which, as children, we first experience in the form of games) that Birnbaum evokes in formulating his approach

manifestation of American cultural might, this year's jury again awarded the Golden Lion to the US pavilion. On both international and national levels, cultural politics are as pivotal to Margolles's project as her explicit subject matter. Albeit in totally different terms, something similar seems to have fueled the American agenda.

Obviously, power plays endemic to cultural politics are never far below the surface of this, and many other, biennials; not at issue, however, is the pertinence of Nauman's work to current practice. The remarkably broad span of his oeuvre straddles the two poles around which contemporary art revolves: an often solipsistic, introverted making of conjectural models or propositions—worlds (emblematic of which is *The True Artist Helps the World by Revealing Mystic Truths*); and a more overtly engaged stance, charged with menace, both physical and psychological, as found in *South America Triangle*, 1981 (not shown in Venice).³ Cleaving to one of these directions, Birnbaum's genial Biennale meanders around positions whose coordinates lie somewhere between the melancholy fog of Venice off-season and the photogenic glow of Venice Beach's shoreline. What the Fifty-third International Art Exhibition doesn't venture to chart is the place of those whose modes of making are more activist and engaged and whose worlds are collectivist in structure as well as spirit. □

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For notes, see page 316.



Opposite page, from top: Steve McQueen, *Giardini*, 2009, still from a color film in 35 mm transferred to video, 30 minutes. British pavilion, Venice. View of Teresa Margolles, "*¿De qué otra cosa podríamos hablar?*" (*What Else Could We Talk About?*), 2009, Mexican pavilion, Venice. *Cleaning*, 2009. This page: View of "Bruce Nauman: *Topological Gardens*," 2009, Università Iuav di Venezia at Tolentini, Venice. *Days*, 2009. Photo: Kate Lacey.