

Art in America

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SEPTEMBER 1993

**LEE BONTECOU,
JOSEPH BEUYS,
LOUISE FISHMAN**

**THE '93 BIENNALE &
DUCHAMP IN VENICE**

**CRITIC'S DIARY:
MAYDAY IN NEW YORK**

**IMAGE WARS AT
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constructions of Akira Kanayama's Footprints, 56, black enamel on vinyl, dimensions variable and overhead) Sadamasa Motonaga's Miza (Water), 56, strips of transparent vinyl with colored water; from "Passagio a Oriente" installed in the gardens of the Biennale. Photo Laurent Lecat.

Identity Crisis

Two years short of its centenary, the Venice Biennale struggles with government scandals, international politics and curatorial pretensions as it searches for a new rationale.

BY MARCIA E. VETROCCO

Even before the 1990 Venice Biennale closed, observers were hazarding predictions about its successor: it would be delayed a year to line up with the odd-numbered centenary of 1995, Achille Bonito Oliva would be appointed the next visual arts director, and the next edition of this mammoth exhibition would be steered by some comprehensive vision of contemporary culture responding to, if not wholly deflecting, the accusation that an international art show conceived in the chauvinistic image of a 19th-century trade fair is at best irrelevant, at worst pernicious, at the end of the 20th century. With some modification, the forecast came true for the 1993 Biennale (June 13-Oct. 10).

Unforeseen, however, were the government corruption scandals that have utterly traumatized Italy, and the ethnic conflicts which are savaging central and eastern Europe. The essential domestic political lesson of 1993 is that the troubled administration of the Biennale is an expression of the Italian multiparty spoils system which now is drawing its last breath. The essential geography lesson is that Venice lies less than 350 miles from Sarajevo. These considerations shadowed the performance of Bonito Oliva, lent a particular air of gravity to the best work in the national pavilions, made a sensible viewer additionally impatient with the puerile ephemera which flooded the young artists' Aperto section, and opened the door for some of the smaller associated exhibitions to advance thoughtful propositions about the power of individual expression.

The ambition to cover the whole world of art in one mother-of-all-shows is as arrogant in its way as was the old imperialistic preoccupation with the idea of the superiority of European art.

political support, respectively Socialist and Christian Democrat, is the precise reverse of that of their predecessors. Giovanni Carandente and Paolo Portoghesi, and observers smelled yet another trade-off between the two powerful parties most profoundly disgraced by the ongoing kickback investigations. Insiders speculated that the collapse of his political support would cost Bonito Oliva the visual art chief's usual second term, in this case leadership of the prestigious 1995 centennial.

The political resentment encircling the Biennale boiled over one last time in a nasty confrontation when the art publisher Giancarlo Politi and exhibition authorities. In outright defiance of the exclusive contract awarded to Marsilio to publish one gargantuan, two-volume catalogue for the entire Biennale, Politi produced his own separate and bilingual Aperto catalogue, and sold it along with *Flash Art* and the newly invented *Flash Art Daily*, a tabloid which was published during the five days of the opening events with all the self-importance of a clandestine opposition newspaper. When his sales tables were roused from the Biennale grounds and the unauthorized catalogue ordered out of circulation, Politi responded with cries of censorship and of cronyism between the Biennale bureaucracy and the owner of Marsilio. Cesare De Michelis, the brother of the former Socialist foreign minister Gianni De Michelis, who is under investigation for corruption. As one Italian artist put it with a mixture of hope and conviction, "This is the last Biennale of the regime."

Undeterred by the glitches in his selection and while still in an interim capacity, Bonito Oliva was ready in the fall of 1992 with a detailed outline for an aggressive program. He affected a kind of "auteur" status, presenting himself as the sole designer of a master plan which included 10 exhibitions beyond the national pavilions. He placed himself at the top of an elaborate organizational pyramid which channeled the energies of dozens of scholars and critics. Each exhibition was to be realized by an operative committee, an international team whose leader had to be called "coordinator" or "director" because Bonito Oliva was the Biennale's "curatore unico." The grunt work was delegated to executive committees, largely made up of students from an ad hoc curatorial school jointly sponsored by the Biennale and the Magasin of the Centre National d'Art Contemporain in Grenoble.

Bonito Oliva planned to revamp the Biennale's two principal sections, the national pavilions in the gardens of Castello at the city's far eastern end, and the Aperto section, located a brief stroll to the west in the Corderie dell'Arsenale. Each participating country would be asked to modulate the traditional nationalism of its selection process, while the curatorial

teamwork and consensus which in the past produced a single, sprawling Aperto exhibition would be supplanted by an organization of 13 people individually responsible for curating separate, thematically defined subsections. The governing theme for the entire Biennale would be "The Cardinal Points of Art," which Bonito Oliva explained as a reference to the four points of the compass, to the contemporary artistic experience of nomadism, and to the fluid and searching movements of creative energies. The new Biennale was to celebrate border crossings and cross-influences, to displace nationalism and even internationalism with "transnationalism." In an interdisciplinary or, to use Bonito Oliva's preferred prefix, "transdisciplinary" spirit, the program would be particularly open to film, theater, video and performance.

Sadly but perhaps inevitably, a bloated and unfocused Biennale issued from this too-elastic program, which yielded anything but a set of governing criteria. "The Cardinal Points of Art" became, in Bushspeak, "A Thousand Points of Art." The intrepid viewer was left to excavate his or her own version of an art exhibition from the surfeit of entries. The fact is that the few shows of any lasting value are either those which have little or nothing to do with the hypertrophic theme, or those which center on creative personalities so potent that not even the Biennale can sink them. In the first category are two satellite exhibitions which did not figure in the original program. The Fondazione Bevilacqua La Masa is presenting refreshing and unfamiliar work by 15 young artists of the Veneto region in "Deterritoriale." The standouts include a mixed-media installation by Costantino Ciervo, in which the Italian postverist sensibility encounters the electronic age; Daniele Bianchi's paintings, which capture and knowingly overstate the spirit of the 18th-century sublime landscape; and Mariateresa Sartori's mixed-medium "portraits," in which loosely defined yet insistent silhouettes emerge through the pallor of smooth surfaces. Zerynthia, a private Rome-based association promoting contemporary art, has organized "Viaggio verso Citera" ("A Journey towards Cythera") in the Ca' Vendramin Calergi, the winter seat of the municipal casino. Eighteen mature and maturing artists submitted earlier pieces or developed new works, all in response to the site, to one another's work, and to the enduring poetic image of the voyage. The sculptures of Reinhard Mucha, Ettore Spalletti and Haim Steinbach became downright romantic once they were transported from the art gallery to the eerie vacancy of the polished and frescoed gaming palace. Only here are Rodney Graham's "collector's editions" of James Bond novels witty and not merely clever, and the tricks of Marco Bagnoli's mirrored installation create a mesmerizing exercise in deception.

In the second category—artists strong enough to beat the Biennale—are Francis Bacon, John Cage and Peter Greenaway. The Francis Bacon retrospective, housed in the Museo Correr, suffers from inevitable redundancy after the recent Lugano retrospective. But it is redeemed precisely by its modesty—just 33 works from 1945 to 1988—and by offering an opportunity to see seven monumental triptychs in close proximity. The tribute to John Cage—organized by Alanna Heiss, Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, Ludovico Pratesi and Angela

Vettese—does more than any other part of the Biennale to give heart and soul to Bonito Oliva's woodenly didactic themes of transnationality and interdisciplinarity. It is also unabashedly sentimental in its evocation of a free and generous imagination. The show is divided between the Guggenheim Collection, which is exhibiting a long suite of works on paper by Cage from 1990 to the Giudecca, where Cage memorabilia is accompanied by art works and documents from collaborators and colleagues. Of the many objects which establish the long and mutually appreciative relationship between Cage and Italy, none is quirrier than the mural-sized photo of Cage's 1959 appearance on a now-legendary quiz show "Lascia o raddoppia" with young Cage, with a jaw that Dick Tracy would stand beside Mike Buongiorno. His suave host, an icon of Italian television. The two dark-skinned men calmly survey a table laden with the applicable Ping-Pong balls and other paraphernalia soon to be used in a new Cage composition.

The Peter Greenaway exhibition, "Water, Water," achieves splendid autonomy in the Palazzo Fortuny, though officially it is part of the

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