

Interview by Katya Degot with Maria Hlavajova

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1. What is your impression of the main project, especially in comparison with two previous editions?

Actually I only had a brief moment to walk through the main Biennale exhibition; that was because the project I organized in the Roma Pavilion consisted of a program of three full days of testimonies being delivered (and recorded) during the Biennale preview period (1–3 June 2011). It was a situation that called for full concentration and presence in the Pavilion, and was necessary because that was the process through which the exhibition in fact came to being. After the preview was over, I used the little time remaining to see the main project, but to be honest—and especially compared to what I experienced in the Roma Pavilion—I felt as if I had been transported into the past. Bice Curiger’s exhibition was a safe, formalist, Western-art-driven exercise; and while I do understand that curating such a project is a thankless task no matter what one does, if leading a contemporary viewer into a “sculpture park” or showing paintings by Tintoretto in this context (no matter their beauty and historical significance) are the most radical gestures one can arrive at today, than I believe we find ourselves in rather serious trouble. It might sound harsh, but I cannot but fear that what the current show shares with the two previous editions is that it won’t be remembered.

2. How do you see national pavilions in the context of the main project? Which one was your favourite? Which one was a disappointment? What did you want to do in your own project?

I understand that Curiger attempted to create a link between the main project and the pavilions by posing five questions to the participating artists. These were pondering the issues of nation and nationality in a rather problematic way, given the time and age we live in. Yet, somewhat unsurprisingly, it did not influence the national presentations and only created but a formal link in the sense that some of the answers of participating artists appeared in the Biennale catalogue. Thus I think one needs to look at the pavilions individually, irrespective the main project. Now, I take exception to the cynicism about our own field that has come to define our way of talking about the global projects like this one, and I feel that we need to try to find a way to navigate through the overblown spectacle and predictable gestures embalmed in money and nationalist ideologies that the project of the Venice Biennale necessarily inclines towards. I found the German Pavilion to be of critical importance here. I’ve been following Christoph Schlingensiefel’s work since early 1990s and have always found it compelling. Like many times before, here his work offered a rupture in the business as usual—it affected a sudden break in the rote rhythm of art consumption, instead putting forth an atmosphere of encountering art both poetically and politically. I had a powerful experience of becoming an inhabitant of Schlingensiefel’s ideas in that space, and I felt both humbled and inspired by its emancipatory ethos. I thought that the group exhibition in the Danish Pavilion was also rather interesting if not challenging, but that said, I have my doubts about how the format of a generic international show, however well done, functions in this context.

If I felt disappointed by something, then it was not by any individual pavilion—I've grown accustomed to the fact that most of the Biennale offerings tend to be mediocre. What was disappointing, however, was that we have not found ways to politicize ourselves differently. Most of the reports and reviews from Venice signaled something like an unprecedented liaison between art and politics. But the truth is that it is about time we recognize that war, poverty, globalization, etc. are themes that have become absolutely commonplace in contemporary art and certainly at global biennials, and that in most cases they in fact—despite perhaps the original intentions and critique that these projects encompass—function as propaganda for neoliberalism and its ability to incorporate this very critique. I feel we need to invest ourselves in finding ways to move beyond art being either mere product or propaganda, of which I find that the Venice Biennale is the global example par excellence.

The project of the Roma Pavilion for me was an opportunity to experiment in this direction. Of course, the first and foremost impetus behind this initiative is that of emancipation. With the exception of the First Roma Pavilion in 2007, there has been no Roma artist presented in any of the international exhibitions or the national pavilions in the Biennale's history. The Roma Pavilion's strength, I believe, lies in both an enormously interesting network of individual artists living across Europe, who work from within their Roma subjectivities—not only are they Roma, but Roma issues are their point of departure and an important theme—but also in the fact that in the context of the national representations in Venice it is per definition an extra-national pavilion, belonging to no single nation. I think this opens up a whole new field of possibilities for us to think otherwise about art and its potentials in the world of today and tomorrow. The collaborations that made up the Roma Pavilion project worked outside both the market economy and the nation-state in the traditional sense, and so with some of the most remarkable Roma artists and thinkers we at least tried to imagine what art beyond the product/propaganda conventions of our time could possibly be.

Simply put, the Roma Pavilion in Venice was built as a site for artistic experimentation and generosity, a space for art, thinking, and action proposed against the harsh political realities all around us. It was envisioned as an exhibition that came to life in the course of the Biennale preview days through a series of testimonies—art works, performances, lectures, conversations, and readings by artists, thinkers, and activists of both Roma and non-Roma origin. The contributors bore witness to injustices and hardships faced by the Roma people as well as shared experiences of solidarity, overcoming discrimination and adversity, a commitment to activism and the fight for human rights, as well as, of course, artistic achievements. Those testimonies were filmed and gradually added to the exhibition in the Palazzo Zorzi (UNESCO Venice Office), the foundation of which was comprised of art works and exhibition architecture (conceptually based on an (unrealized) design for a “nomadic settlement” for a Roma community from the 1950s by Dutch artist Constant), in place from the beginning of the preview days. The filmed testimonies as well as information about the exhibited works and other materials can also be accessed via what we are calling the project's ‘Digital Venue’—www.callthewitness.net.

3. What is your general impression of Venice biennial and its opening days this year, and of its dynamics lately?

You know, I think it's easy to add to the avalanche of complaints about the Biennale's marriage with all the evils of this world—spectacle, commercial speculation, nationalist

ideologies at their worst, not to mention the oligarchs and celebrities on their yachts. Who does not know this? What is fundamentally new about these observations? Despite it all I still think that the Venice Biennale is a platform that can provide visibility to things kept invisible by the dominant consensus. That is why I believe it is worthwhile insisting on creating a space within it for the expression of those urgent things we find necessary to be articulated, indeed within such a prestigious and high-stakes context. I do not have any other answer but to say that I think we need to remain committed to this possibility and to persevere in carving out a space within which we might preserve the crucial right to narrate from various perspectives, and the complimentary right to be heard.

4. Did you have a chance to see the Russian pavilion and/or other Russian exhibitions in Venice? What is your opinion?

I made it a priority to see the Russian Pavilion, particularly because of my respect for Boris Groy's work and our numerous collaborations and talks over the years, on topics from the return of religion to the post-communist condition and how it bears on what I've taken to calling the 'former West. I found it to be one of the most relevant spaces to delve into within the context of this year's Biennale. Not unlike in the German Pavilion, here too one found an opportunity to break with the conventions of Biennale art viewing, and engage with both the historical work, as well as the installation made for that occasion, in a qualitatively different way. To think of "empty action" and "empty zones" from the conceptual tradition of the 1970s around Monastyrski and Collective Actions is something that I found relevant to the question as to what and how things might need to be undone in the system we are so critical of yet vehemently take part in today—and that is of course something we discussed earlier. The notion of an intangible event emptied of rules and control, however momentary and short-lived—this undertaking of creating a small niche that is both meaningless and meaningful at the same time—is something I think we can certainly learn from in our present moment. As much as such gestures might have appeared silly and futile to the Communist ideologists, the very impossibility to control it meant that on some level it had a potential to shift things and thus influence the ideological setup. There is surely a lesson we can draw from being reminded of that.