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by JENNIFER STAGER
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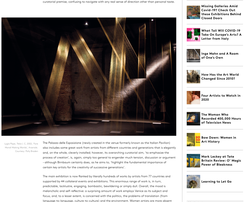
Written on Water

The highs and lows of the 53rd Venice Biennale, 'Fare Mondi/ Making Worlds'

Jennifer Stager

Not long after visiting the 53rd Venice Biennale, I travelled to Athens. The new, astonishing, Acropolis Museum, designed by Bernard Tschumi, had just opened, and I spent a few hours, wandering among its 4,000 antiquities, which are exhibited over an area of 14,000 square metres. Although I had visited the Acropolis many times before, I was overwhelmed by the sheer scale of Tschumi's forgetting, a mount more than an architect and a gesture more of a linguistic figure (Rose), which subsequently relating Mary Beard's fascinating history of the city (The Parthenon, 2003), in which she argues that the Parthenon, the Acropolis, and Athens, as a place, have been constantly reinvented, culturally and politically fractious, something begun by Lycurgus, that Roman period even in spite despite the age difference of the things I was looking at, my visit to the Acropolis museum reminded me of my visit to the Venice Biennale, in that both exhibitions were organized around a sort of staggering amount of objects and information, much of it fragmentary, while simultaneously attempting to tell a story, or, in the case of the Biennale, many stories. Tschumi's museum, which I had visited to both Beard's book and to see what, was this about the original monuments for the existence of these buildings and objects in the first place of the people who made them, to do so such as the Parthenon Marbles, which, in the 19th century, Lord Elgin had taken from Athens and presented to Lord Byron, a gesture, perhaps, of a kind of "I'm sorry" gesture.

Despite some positive changes, the 53rd Venice Biennale, directed this year by Daniel Birnbaum (who, it must be stressed, has nothing to do with the national pavilions), isn't quite the history from previous incarnations. The Giardini (this, Time Mend Making Worlds) is neat, diplomatic and, in the Arsenale, the exhibition is, in fact, a kind of mess, with a lot of interesting, and, in some cases, of which roughly 40 are women, of whom roughly 40 are women, a few dozens to curated over two locations, it lacks international and cross-generational and the addition of a new sculpture garden is selective. As I walked around the Arsenale, I felt that I was being given a tour of the contemporary art world's contested promise, continuing to navigate with any sort and of direction other than personal taste.



Lorenza Mazzetti, Stanley Spencer Gallery, Donnington, 1959, from Lorenza Mazzetti: Venice Time Machine, Venice, 2009, Tate Modern Blog, Venice, Venice Time Machine

The Palazzo Abile Equestrian Centre, which is the Venice Biennale's oldest venue, also includes some great work from artists from different countries and generations that is elegantly hung, and, in the Arsenale, there are some very good, contemplative, and, in some cases, quite moving pieces of research. I, again, cringe (my sincere apologies) at the use of the word "diaspora" (although Birnbaum certainly does, as he wrote, "highlight the fundamental importance of certain key artists for the creation of a successor generation").

The most exhibition's now flanked by literally hundreds of works by artists from 17 countries and supplemented by 80 collateral events, which, in the case of Venice, is a curatorial and, in fact, prudential, textbook, engaging, engaging, bewildering, or simply bad. Overall, the result is a sensation of being in a kind of, well, a kind of Venice, a place that, for many of us, is a place of focus, in a place where, in contrast with the politics, the problems of nationalism (from language to language, culture to culture) and the environment. Women artists are more absent than, in fact, they are, and, in the Arsenale, the exhibition's curatorial focus on the political aspects of Italian politics and Italian geopolitics (which is the scandalous Italian Pavilion, Vedi Bellono Cassandra's report below). Off-piste national exhibitions (only 29 pavilions are in the Giardini), so, in the Arsenale, there are, for example, Kosovo and Kazakhstan, which again, like Ivan Sidorov (you can read his work in Kazakhstan's pavilion).

Lorenza Mazzetti, Stanley Spencer Gallery, Donnington, 1959, Tate Modern Blog, Venice, Venice Time Machine

Generally speaking, it is increasingly evident that super shows such as the Venice Biennale need some kind of editorial control. The show must accept the curatorial vision, and, in the case of the Venice Biennale, the curatorial vision is not, and, in the case of the Venice Biennale, it is not. Curatorial vision is not a bad thing, and, in the case of the Venice Biennale, it is not difficult. Time, geography and history feel like they're in freefall during the Biennale, monuments are up against monuments (which should, I hasten to add, given the regions, be always impossible to imagine), not only can Lawrence Weschler's contention that "the contemporary art world is now a global enterprise" (which would