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Venice Biennale Expands Its Scope

By SCOTT REYBURN MAY 8, 2015



The artist Jaume Plensa is showing "lou, olivia, duna, sanna II, laura III" at the Venice Biennale. Jonty Wilde

VENICE — The Venice Biennale, the grandest, most prestigious, most influential fixture in the art world calendar, has a sharper political edge this year. Okwui Enwezor, the Nigerian-born artistic director for the 56th edition, has set out his ideological stall by organizing a daily reading of Karl Marx's "Das Kapital" in the exhibition's Central Pavilion, for however long it takes to recite the entire text of the 1867 magnum opus, including footnotes.

"Capital is the great drama of our age," said Mr. Enwezor, director of the Haus der Kunst in Munich, in his trenchant introduction to this year's Biennale. "Today nothing looms larger in every sphere of experience, from the predations of the political economy to the rapacity of the financial industry."

The Biennale is trying to remind the billionaire collectors who park their yachts in Venice, and anyone else paying attention, that there is more to the world than the relentless market cycle of top-end art fairs, dealer shows and auctions.

The organizers' new schedule in itself points to a wider circumference. By opening to the public on May 9, the Biennale is now timed to coincide with the Expo 2015 fair in Milan. That's a full month ahead of its traditional position as a curtain-raiser for the capitalist splurges of the Art Basel fair in Switzerland and the June auctions in London.

Mr. Enwezor has exhorted participating artists to examine and articulate "the current disquiet of our time," and they have responded with a number of imaginative projects. Christoph Büchel, representing Iceland, has, for instance, turned the medieval church of Santa Maria della Misericordia into a mosque. The Brazilian artist Vik Muniz, satirizing nearby superyachts, has moored a 45 foot-long "paper" boat made out Italian newspapers reporting the deaths of migrants in the Mediterranean.

"In New York, everyone is distracted by the art market and the auction houses," said the American artist, Patricia Cronin, whose installation, "Shrine for Girls," is on view in the deconsecrated church of San Gallo, near the San Marco square. "Once you get into the international art world, political art is important."

Ms. Cronin's installation poignantly uses piles of clothes to commemorate three groups of what she calls "secular martyrs" — students kidnapped by Boko Haram in Africa, girls raped and lynched in India, and "fallen" women exploited by the Magdalene Laundries in the United States, Britain and Ireland — on the altars of Venice's smallest church. But, as ever at the Biennale, there are commercial considerations that flow unseen around the art like the tides that sway the foundations of Venice's historic palaces.

For Ms. Cronin, who isn't represented by a dealer, it is a way to pay for the project — as well as to make some money. She said "Shrine for Girls" cost about \$200,000 in all to realize, including a \$78,000 church rental fee and a \$22,000 charge from the Biennale for mounting a "collateral" project. About 65 percent of this sum has already been provided by the New York collectors Glenn and Amanda Fuhrman, and 19 other private donors, but further contributions are gratefully received.

"If you ask me, 'Would I sell this photograph and this pile of clothes?' I would say, 'Absolutely,'" Ms. Cronin said. The price? \$150,000 for each of the three shrines.

On the surface, nothing at the Venice Biennale is for sale. It is customary for major dealers such as David Zwirner and Hauser & Wirth to give parties in Venice to celebrate the inclusion of their artists in the Biennale's official presentations, but the galleries don't publicly promote specific works.

Still, it is generally recognized that most of the art on display at this seven-month event will be at some point discreetly available for purchase, if it hasn't already been acquired by a collector or a museum.

Galleries can be a little more candid about the Biennale's presentations.

"If we have a collector and they ask what the price is of a piece in this installation, we know the answer. Every work has a price," said Patrice Cotensin, a director of the Paris branch of the American and French dealership Galerie Lelong.

Lelong and the Richard Gray Gallery in Chicago and New York represent the widely exhibited Catalan artist Jaume Plensa, who is showing seven new sculptures at Andrea Palladio's island church of San Giorgio Maggiore. A monumental steel mesh portrait of a young girl's head occupies the nave of the 16th-century church, while a series of alabaster heads of five other girls can be viewed in the adjacent Manica Lunga building. The alabaster sculptures are priced at €315,000 each, or \$355,000, Mr. Cotensin said.

Simon Denny, 32, an artist who specializes in research-based projects, is showing at New Zealand's national pavilion. Mr. Denny's installation, "Secret Power," in the 16th century Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana, explores the visual culture of government intelligence organizations, and attracted many admirers. It is available for sale, but Galerie Buchholz in Cologne and Berlin — one of four dealers currently representing the New Zealander — said that it hadn't immediately been decided whether this piece should be sold as a single work or in parts.

This year's Biennale consists of two main components. First, there are (at the last count) 88 national presentations spread across the historic pavilions of the Giardini park, the traditional home of the Biennale since 1895; the Arsenale; and throughout the city of Venice itself.

Also within the Giardini and Arsenale, there is Mr. Enwezor's sprawling, Marx-infused exhibition, "All the World's Futures," which called on a global cast of 136 artists from 53 countries to "reflect on both the current 'state of things' and the 'appearance of things.'" This theme-defining presentation includes plenty of challenging videos and installations, but there are also rooms of paintings by on-trend names such as Glenn Ligon, Marlene Dumas, Kerry James Marshall and Ellen Gallagher that could be mistaken for commercial gallery shows.

The financial arrangements for these works from prominent dealers remain as opaque as Venetian canal water, but the contributing galleries would surely have appreciated seeing more collectors and their advisers at the VIP previews. The Biennale's new scheduling meant that Americans, for example, were faced with having to make two trips to Europe in the summer. Plenty chose not to. Eli Broad, whose 120,000-square-foot private museum in Los Angeles is due to open in the fall, and Don and Mera Rubell from Miami, were notable absentees.

Many of the collectors who did attend walked through the Giardini to the Romanian pavilion, where the Berlin-based painter Adrian Ghenie was showing 19 works dating from 2008-2015 in a presentation titled "Darwin's Room." Steeped in European history, blending abstraction with figuration, the rational with the irrational, Mr. Ghenie's paintings have recently sold for as much as \$2.4 million at auction.

But though the show included two new paintings, there were no works for sale in his Venice pavilion. Would-be buyers of Mr. Ghenie's latest paintings will have to wait until October, when he will have his first show with the Paris dealer Thaddaeus Ropac.

Mr. Ghenie, 37, is astutely aware of the pressures of the art market — auction and dealer sales were valued last year at an all-time high of €51 billion, according to a report published by the European Fine Art Foundation in March.

"The market is so crazy," said Mr. Ghenie, who creates about 15 paintings a year.

"It's frustrating to see people make so much money so quickly," he said. "I feel I'm being speculated. It's not me. It's the new art world."

"But I don't care," he said. "I'm keeping these two new works for myself."

Mr. Enwezor — and Marx — would approve.

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