Art Agency, Partners

Art Agency, Partners is a bespoke art advisory firm founded in 2014, and built upon decades of combined experience, to provide counsel to many of the world’s leading art collectors and institutions on collection assessment and development, estate planning, and innovative approaches to museum giving and growth.

May You Live in Interesting Times

Highlights of the 58th Venice Biennale

El Anatsui is one of the artists featured in Ghana’s first ever Venice Biennale pavilion, designed by architect David Adjaye. Ink Splash (Installation view at the Bass Museum of Art) (2010). Courtesy the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

By Louisa Buck

contemporary art correspondent
Live from the opening of the Biennale, our intrepid reporters review the best of the art on show so that you know what not to miss. C.B.

“Ghana Freedom”, Ghana Pavilion, Arsenale (11 May-24 November)

Eight African countries are represented at the Venice Biennale this year and among them is Ghana, which makes its biennale debut with a striking pavilion designed by British Ghanaian architect Sir David Adjaye. He took inspiration from the traditional earth houses of east Ghana and has used local earth to line six elegantly curved exhibition spaces, each of which houses one of six artists representing three generations of Ghanaian creativity.

There are shimmering sculptures by El Anatsui made from metal bottle tops and a powerfully pungent installation from Ibrahim Mahama incorporating the metal grilles used to smoke fish in Ghana’s coastal and riverside communities. Felicia Abban was Ghana’s first professional portraitist and is here showing both self-portraits as well as those of Ghanaian women in both Western and traditional African dress, while Lynette Yiadom-Boakye has made a powerful new series of figurative oil paintings. There is also a three-channel video installation by John Akomfrah and a video sculpture by Selasi Awusi Sosu. The pavilion will travel from Venice to Accra when the biennale closes. L.B.

Laure Prouvost, Deep See Blue Surrounding You / Vois ce Bleu Profond te Fondre, French Pavilion (11 May-24 November)

Clouds of vapor pour over the roof and pillars of the French Pavilion: the lagoon is creeping into the Giardini. A discreet, apparently ancient, sign says “ideally you would go deeper into the back of this building”. Follow the instructions and the path winds narrowly through foliage—with a glimpse of a young woman playing an eerie tune on a recorder—into the bowels of the pavilion.

It’s the start of a magical journey into an installation that mixes sculpture—the washed-up detritus of the deep sea on a glazed blue floor—performers and, at its core, a film which follows a motley troupe—a musician, dancers, a magician and a priest—on an odyssey from Paris to this very pavilion in Venice, via wild coasts and deep seas. It shifts from dark—the group singing to the spirits of drowned refugees—to light: the joy of breaking free of the earth. “Flying like birds, floating on the deep, we belong to no nation now,” they intoned, and the preview audience was enchanted. J.M.

**Stan Douglas, “May You Live in Interesting Times”, Arsenale and Giardini (11 May-24 November)**

Stan Douglas’s work often apes the conventions of documentary film and photography, often so closely it’s hard to tell fact and fiction apart. In the Arsenale show (what biennale director Ralph Rugoff calls “Proposition A”), Douglas is showing work that explores what he calls “speculative histories” – in this case a total power cut in New York City. In one large digital C-print, a group of young men and women systematically loot a store, in another a lone figure sits playing solitaire by candlelight.

In the Giardini (“Proposition B”), Douglas presents a new film, *Doppelgänger* (2019), which imagines two quantum-entangled universes. We follow a female astronaut and her parallel other in a story that overlaps, loops and diverges, raising questions about time, truth and chance. J.M.

**“Neither Nor—the Challenge to the Labyrinth”, Italian Pavilion, Arsenale (11 May-24 November)**

A pavilion situated at the very end of the Arsenale that has been laid out like a labyrinth could be the worst nightmare for weary biennale visitors. But the format of the Italian Pavilion provides an elegantly curated container which mixes together the work of three contrasting but complementary Italian artists.

Bodies and states of mind are the subject of Ancona-born, British-based Enrico David. His bizarre sculptural creatures made from bronze, wax, Jesmonite, rubber, hair and many other materials protrude from walls, hug floors and cluster in the chambers. Liliana Moro also uses many means to intervene directly with the labyrinthine setting in ways ranging from neon texts to the broadcasting of revolutionary songs, a foam rubber wall and an inverted street lamp.

The late Chiara Fumai was acclaimed for her lecture-performances that channeled feminism, radicalism and the occult, and
here her posthumous works include a recording of her repeated invocations to an ancient goddess which echoes through the pavilion. There is also a mural made to her specifications which contains the outlines of stalactites and cabalistic signs. In another wall piece an account of a fantastical BDSM encounter with Vito Acconci has been embroidered across the pages of Sacher-Masoch’s *Venus in Furs*. In this haunting maze, every twist and turn offers a strange new experience. **L.B.**

**“Martin Puryear: Liberty/Libertà”, US Pavilion (11 May-24 November)**

At a time when so many sculptors have embraced mass production and digital technology there is something meditative and refined in Martin Puryear’s beautifully crafted pieces in cedar, cast iron and bronze. The 77-year-old African-American artist has been fêted for decades in the US but is much less well known in Europe, enjoying his first London exhibition in 2017 at the independent space, Parasol Unit.

*For the US Pavilion* he presents eight sculptures, almost all new, themed loosely around the theme of “liberty”. Although many of his works have an apparently hermetic, minimalist aesthetic they refer obliquely to the world beyond. Among the highlights of the exhibition are *Aso Oke* (2019), reminiscent of Nigerian ceremonial headwear (in the 1960s Puryear travelled to Sierra Leone, where he studied traditional crafts) and *Tabernacle* (2019). This form is based on a 19th-century infantry forage cap, in the sheltered space inside there is a replica of a Civil War-era siege mortar with a mirrored sphere nestling inside. **J.M.**

**“May You Live in Interesting Times”, Michael Armitage, Arsenale and Giardini (11 May-24 November)**

The vividly colored, richly referential paintings of Michael Armitage, who lives and works between Nairobi and London, weave multiple narratives drawn from current news, art history, religion, folklore and his own experiences of Kenya, his country of birth. Armitage paints on traditional bark cloth from Uganda, which is stitched together to make large uneven surfaces pocked with dents and holes that then become elements in his compositions.

*The six new works* in the Arsenale section of director Ralph Rugoff’s exhibition are partly inspired by the staged political
rallies Armitage witnessed during the 2017 Kenyan general election. He was struck by the way in which the carnivalesque and the performative combined with political agitation, and the chaos and urgency of these events feeds into his complex dynamic arrangements of figures and forms. The origins of many of these figures can be found in the ink drawings of demonstrators on show in the Central Pavilion in the Giardini, which Armitage made on the spot or from film and documentary footage. These fluid, vivid works come directly from his sketchbooks and have never been seen publicly before. They stand as artworks in their own right as well as offering insight into his working processes. L.B.

Carol Bove, “May You Live in Interesting Times”, Arsenale and Giardini (11 May-24 November)

Carol Bove calls her works “collapsing sculptures”, and although they appear to refer to sculptures of a previous generation—Anthony Caro, Tony Smith, John Chamberlain—Rugoff says they “turn the conventions of modernism on its head”. In Venice she is showing a series of large-scale, crumpled tubes painted mustard yellow, fire-hydrant red and baby pink, which punctuate the spaces of the Giardini and the Arsenale.

Bove is one of a number of artists in the exhibition who play with media norms: her sculptures belie their weight, and formally hover between the factory-made and the found object. The candy colors and thick, matte paint transform their surfaces into an apparently dense, napped finish closer to velvet than the rough iron reality. J.M.

Cathy Wilkes, British Pavilion, Giardini (11 May-24 November)

A series of sculptural installations of Northern Irish-born, Glasgow-based Cathy Wilkes have transformed the British Pavilion into a sparse semi-domestic environment populated by mysterious personages. But it is not a happy home. There are small doll-like sculptural figures with blank faces and distended bellies, and a woman in a green dress who may or may not be their mother. On and around a tomb-like structure covered in gauze abject offerings—dried flowers, a dead cricket, a toilet roll—have been arranged with casual precision. In another room grimy tattered lace hangs from a table and there’s a disembodied hand in a washing-up bowl.

The pavilion has been specially adapted so that all the spaces are bathed in a natural but sallow light. Wilkes has also made pale abstract paintings, washed-out landscapes and muted scenes of mountains, all of which add to the low-key but charged atmosphere. Although Wilkes never offers any explanations there is a strong sense of both mourning something that has passed and anticipating something ominous yet to come—rather like the current state of Britain. L.B.

“Baselitz—Academy”, Gallerie dell’Accademia (8 May-8 September)
Georg Baselitz, born Hans-Georg Kern, remembers being bused, as a 17-year-old schoolboy, 60km from his East German home town of Deutschbaselitz, near Kamenz (from which the painter later took his name) to Dresden to welcome back its famous old master collection. It had spent a decade in exile in the Soviet Union after the Second World War, returning in 1955. The works had a profound effect on him, as did the six-month residency he won in 1965 as a young artist to study in Florence. “Baselitz — Academy” refers to that period and shows the impact of the works he encountered there by Parmigianino, Pontormo and the sculptor Francesco Pianta (best known in Venice for the walnut panels in the Scuola Grande di San Rocco).

Shortly after, Baselitz produced his “Helden” (“Heroes”) series, woodcuts and paintings of solitary figures in gloomy landscapes. The show includes several of these, his first radical “upside-down” portraits from 1969, as well as his floating “Negativ-Bilder” (“Negative Pictures”) of 2004-2012, which allude to these works. Sculpted wooden figures are dotted throughout: Baselitz showed the first of these in 1980 at the Venice Biennale, the decade he broke through to international fame. J.M.

“Alberto Burri: La pittura, irriducibile presenza”, Fondazione Giorgio Cini, Isola di San Giorgio Maggiore (10 May-28 July)
Three great “paintings” made of stitched, pasted, distressed jute dominate the first gallery of the Cini Foundation’s homage to the Italian artist Alberto Burri (1915-1995). Many of Burri’s greatest works are in his own museum, the Fondazione Palazzo Albizzini Collezione Burri in his native Città di Castello, Umbria. It’s rare that they are loaned—until now. Bruno Corà, the Burri foundation’s president, has mounted the first exhibition of the artist at the Venice Biennale since 1983 (it is supported by Tornabuoni Art gallery). It starts with Burri’s early “Catrami” (“Tars”) from 1948 and finishes with his late “Cellotex” series: huge black works made from insulating board shown against black walls.

The three large “Sacchi” works—jute sacks collaged on canvas—date from 1952, the first year Burri showed in Venice. Corà argues that these pictures were to have a profound influence on American artist Robert Rauschenberg, who saw them in Burri’s Rome studio in 1953. “Many artists—Picasso, the Dadaists—have used materials as metaphors, as stories, always relating to something else,” Corà says. “But Burri is without metaphor, the tar is the black, the pumice is the grey, the sacks are brown. The thing is the thing.” J.M.

“Le Pelle—Luc Tuymans”, Palazzo Grassi (until 6 January 2020)
Luc Tuymans’s **stunning exhibition** “La Pelle” fills the Palazzo Grassi with more than 80 paintings dating from the 1980s to the present. The title comes from a 1949 novel by the Italian writer Curzio Malaparte set in a tumultuous Naples at the end of the Second World War when, as Tuymans has remarked, “Europe was in chaos just like today”. Fascism and the Second World War are a consistent theme of the exhibition, along with more recent conflicts and horrors, but these spare, restrained works always hint at hidden trauma rather than depicting specific incidents.

The centerpiece is a giant floor mosaic, made especially for the palazzo’s grand atrium, which depicts a seemingly innocuous cluster of pine trees in a composition divided into vertical strips. However, it is based on a small 1986 painting Tuymans made of a wartime forced labor camp in Germany and the lines refer to how the prisoners cut their drawings into strips to avoid detection. Even when he is working on a grand scale, Tuymans remains the master of the loaded understatement. **L.B.**
Venice by Vaporetto

Your guide to city’s best art

A vaporetto in the Ventian lagoon, on the Gran Canal

By 📰 Antonio Homem

Sonnabend Gallery

Published 9 May 2019 in Must See

Antonio Homem started working at the Sonnabend Gallery in Paris in September 1968. He worked in close association with Michael and Ileana Sonnabend, almost as a son—and was formally adopted by them in the 1980s. They used to spend all holidays—Christmas, Easter and the summer—in Venice, where they had an apartment. The city remained very central in their lives. At present, an important part of the Sonnabend collection is on a long term loan to the Museum of Ca’ Pesaro in Venice. Antonio is, we think, the best guide to Venice we know. Here is an interactive map so that you can follow his route. C.B.

Sant’Alvise
The vaporetto is a wonderful way to see Venice, but those that cruise the Canal Grande are generally very crowded and the churches along the route are all very well known. Less familiar are those one can reach by traveling along the Giudecca Canal and on the Fondamente Nove. You can start at the Sant’Alvise stop in Cannaregio, which is near the church of the same name. Here you will see three spectacular Tiepolo paintings The Flagellation, The Crowning With Thorns, and The Ascent to Calvary (1737-40) that are as excessive as a Cecil B DeMille epic.

**Orto**

Take the vaporetto east (lines 4, 5 or 22) from Sant’Alvise to the next stop, Orto, named after the nearby Madonna dell’Orto church. This is the burial place of the great Venetian artist Tintoretto. One of his most famous paintings, the Presentation of the Virgin in the Temple (1550-53) is there as well as two enormous works on either side of the altar, The Last Judgement (1560-62) and The Adoration of the Golden Calf (1546).
The next stop, Fondamente Nove, is close to Santa Maria Assunta, the Church of the Jesuits (I Gesuiti), which has an extraordinary interior of marble intarsia. It also has one of the best late paintings by Titian (who lived in this area), The Martyrdom of Saint Lawrence (1558).

Not far from here is a wonderful small Renaissance church, Santa Maria dei Miracoli, next to the large Basilica dei Santi Giovanni e Paolo—a real museum of Venetian sculpture that has a great Giovanni Bellini polyptych, St Vincent Ferrer, St Christopher and St Sebastian (1475-80) and a chapel decorated by Veronese.

Next to the church you can see one of the most famous equestrian monuments, a statue of a Venetian 15th-century captain-general, Bartolomeo Colleoni, Leonardo da Vinci’s teacher who was executed between 1480-88 by Verrocchio.

Celestia and San Zaccaria

If you take the vaporetto from here, you can stop at Celestia and visit the church of San Francesco della Vigna, which has a facade by Palladio. Inside, there is a small chapel frescoed by Tiepolo as well as Madonna and Child Enthroned (c1455) by Antonio da Negroponte. I have never seen any other painting by da Negroponte but this work alone is enough of a reason to admire him.

Before catching the vaporetto at San Zaccaria to Giudecca you should visit the church after which the stop is named. It has one of the most beautiful altarpieces by Giovanni Bellini (1505). Another nearby church is Santa Maria della Pietà where Vivaldi was the music master. It boasts a ceiling by Tiepolo replete with a full orchestra of angels. (Something of a detour from here would be the church of San Giovanni in Bragora, which is much less known but has a marvellous Baptism of Christ by Cima da Conegliano over the altar.)

Giudecca

The first stop across the Giudecca Canal is next to the magnificent San Giorgio Maggiore. The church is by Palladio and its facade is his improvement on the one at San Francesco della Vigna. Inside there are three of the last paintings by Tintoretto, The Last Supper, The Gathering of Manna and a Deposition (1592-94). Next door is the Cini Foundation, where the refectory is by Palladio and the staircase leading to the library by Baldassare Longhena, the architect of Santa Maria della Salute.
Two stops west is Il Redentore, the last church built by Palladio. Its facade is a further development of that of San Giorgio Maggiore.

**Zattere and San Basilio**

From Il Redentore vaporetto stop catch the 2 back across the canal to Zattere, where you will find the church of the Gesuati (Santa Maria del Rosario), which has another Tiepolo ceiling. San Basilio, next to the port, is the final stop, near the church of San Sebastiano, where Veronese is buried. Almost the whole interior of the church was painted by him, including paintings and frescoes, the sacristy, the upper choir and the doors of the organ.

*This article was originally published 9 May 2017, and updated for this edition of the Biennale*
Looking Back on the Biennale

The best of Venice past


By Robert Storr
Visitors to the Venice Biennale hope for those special moments when art can change the way we see the world. Here, our contributors choose some of their standout moments from previous Biennales. C.B.

**Gerhard Richter, German Pavilion, 36th Biennale, 1972**

In the installation of the series *48 Portraits* (1971-72) in Venice in 1972, Gerhard put his painting of Kafka in the middle, shown-full-frontal, with all the flanking portraits appearing to gradually turn their heads from him. The installation was unique to that situation and hasn't been done in the same way since.

This was Gerhard's breakout show in an international sense. It came around ten years after the photo paintings and confirmed that he was a major master. This was a period in which the validity of painting was being questioned and Gerhard was one of the few artists who stuck to his guns, determined to express himself in paint. This show changed a lot of people's ideas about Richter. R.S.

**Lothar Baumgarten, German Pavilion, 41st Biennale, 1984**

I remember walking around the grounds of this Biennale before it opened, without permission, and coming into the German pavilion, where there were these names on the floor. In the middle of the installation, which was beautiful, somebody had left a black umbrella. That seemed to me to be a spontaneous, Magrittean effect that I thought was brilliant. Baumgarten remains under-appreciated—his work is interesting and complicated and, while he has had moments of attention, he deserves more. R.S.
At the 1986 Biennale, Sigmar Polke was awarded the Golden Lion for his unusually innovative and impressive ensemble in the German pavilion. During the previous winter Polke had recorded his impressions of the empty pavilion with still and movie cameras to gain inspiration for the Athanor project. The overall realization involved atmospheric, meteorological, cosmic and psychological dimensions, thus inviting the viewer to discover and explore a wide range of phenomena without stipulating apodictic, formal, answers.

At the porticus, visitors were received by the painting *Haende (vorm Gesicht)* (1896), which showed a group of men hiding their eyes behind their hands, which could be interpreted in different ways. The ensemble in the central hall, which included a large iron meteorite and a rock crystal on the floor, also consisted of a large abstract mural in the pavilion’s apsis that would shift its hue from a light blue to pink depending on the weather in the lagoon and the time of the day. A group of tall so-called “Spiegelbilder” (mirror paintings) done in artificial resin, silver leafs and dry pigments seemed to immerse the viewer (since 1987, these have been permanently installed at the Museum Abteiberg, Moenchengladbach). Polke’s references to art history and German history included a painting series with variations on Dürer’s curlicues (now at the Pinakothek der Moderne, Munich). A colorful painting that referenced Pieter Bruegel the Elder’s Netherlandish Proverbs (1559), showing two dogs fighting for a bone, set a contrast.

Unconventionally, a raster painting, depicting a faceless German policeman, was hung
outside on the pavilion’s facade. Four large monochrome “Farbtafeln” (color charts), painted with long forgotten pure pigments, had partially poisonous properties. A silk cloth painted with Tyrian purple—the most expensive color dye historically—and canvases painted with silver compounds or with Indigo, completed the astonishing ensemble. **M.T.**

**Jasper Johns, American Pavilion, 43rd Biennale, 1988**

This exhibition, “Jasper Johns: Work Since 1974”, was important. It later came back to the Philadelphia Museum, which sponsored the exhibition, and in many ways, the installation seemed almost more planned for the museum than the pavilion.

Johns has had an up and down career outside the US, and he’s been relatively little seen in Europe over the past 30 years. He’s not a presence there as much as New Yorkers might expect. An exhibition at the Royal Academy in 2017 was his first major retrospective in London (“Jasper Johns: Something Resembling Truth”), and was an occasion to rediscover someone who hovers in the uncanny space between “name brand” ubiquity and relative obscurity in terms of specific works. **R.S.**

**Jenny Holzer, American Pavilion, 44th Biennale, 1990**

In 1990, Holzer represented the US and created one of the most striking exhibitions I’ve ever seen. She filled the walls with electronic signs that ran with a never-ending parade of her texts and truisms in different languages. She also carved her texts into marble tiled floors, sarcophagi and benches. In a very short space of time, Holzer had achieved an art world trifecta: an exhibition at Dia (“Jenny Holzer: Laments”, 1989-90), at the American pavilion in Venice, as well as a remarkable solo show at the Guggenheim in New York (“Jenny Holzer: Untitled (Selections From Truisms, Inflammatory Essays, The Living Series, The Survival Series, Under a Rock, Laments and Child Text)”, 1989). **A.S.**
Hans Haacke, German Pavilion, 45th Biennale, 1993

In a work that echoed Caspar David Friedrich’s painting *The Wreck of Hope* (1823-24), Haacke took up the massive marble floor tiles of the German pavilion, stacking and breaking them so that when you came into the space, you had to walk over teeter-tottering fragments that resembled ice floes. Aside from the sight of them, the tiles clacked and wobbled, so there were sonic and kinetic effects as well. This pavilion was, after all, designed in 1938 to reflect the grandeur and permanence of the Third Reich, a grandeur Haacke parodied and, to some degree, ruined. He also put a huge Deutsche Mark at the front of the pavilion’s exterior, just above the door, symbolizing the mercantile nature of the new Germany.

There have been so many great installations in the German pavilion since the 1970s, but Hans Haacke stands out as one of the greatest national pavilions ever at Venice because what he did was so simple and radical—and incredibly potent. He took a sledgehammer to the perfect marble of the fascist floor so that what remained appeared as though in flux.

Haacke is certainly the most significant political artist to have been working since the late 1960s. Taking on his own national roots in this international exhibition had a power and sculptural presence that remains one of the most memorable works of art I can ever remember seeing. **R.S. and A.S.**

Louise Bourgeois, American Pavilion, 45th Biennale, 1993

The highlight of this show was a series of cells made in the early 1990s, which remain one of the most important bodies of work that the artist created in her 80-year career—and she made great and profound art in every decade. So much of Bourgeois’ work is focused, in a great variety of sculptures and drawings, on the childhood trauma of capturing her father in deception of her mother by having a secret relationship with their nanny.

She spent decade upon decade re-examining the same trauma and these cells are the places in which she lays the pain to rest by re-enacting and re-staging the iconography and imagery associated with the traumas and putting them in cages—as though they were no longer part of her present life but something of the past, boxed in. After this—not un-coincidentally—she moved the narrative of her life forwards by cycling back through various decades of her adulthood, and making sculptures out of the physical materials of her life, incorporating dresses she wore as a young woman, and going on
to make sculptures out of the linens that remained in her closest and represent her as an aging woman.

This Venice exhibition was an exquisite and pivotal point in the life of an artist whose primary narrative was built around childhood that she retold from a thousand different and highly inventive perspectives. It would set her on a course of coming to grips with the different phases of her life, including aging and dying. A.S.

Pipilotti Rist, Swiss Pavilion, 47th Biennale, 1997

The first time we had seen the work of this magically inventive artist was in 1997 when her work *Ever is Over All* (1997) was displayed in the Arsenale as part of the central thematic show. The video shows a woman wandering down a city street in a way that makes her seem like a lighthearted modern-day Dorothy in ruby-red shoes. She skips down the street holding a long object that looks like a flower but has the presence of a club, which she uses to smash the windows of the cars she passes.

In 2005, she represented Switzerland at the Biennale, projecting a video, *Homo Sapiens Sapiens*, onto the entire ceiling of the San Stae church (which she had filmed at Inhotim, the museum I helped to create in Brazil). The four-channel film conjured a hypnotic trance, with images of women within nature, of exotic fruits and plants that burst forth. There was such deep sensuality to the work that it was actually shut down before the Biennale closed: after a group of 45 Catholics lodged a complaint with the Pope, the parish priest closed the show on the grounds that showing naked bodies was unacceptable inside a church. A.S.

Marina Abramović, Italian Pavilion, 47th Biennale, 1997
This was a fantastic show. Marina sat in a pile of fresh, or relatively fresh, beef bones that she scrubbed clean over the course of several days while delivering a monologue surrounded by screens projecting images of her parents. They had been high-ranking heroes of Tito’s resistance to Germany in the Second World War, so Marina grew up as a princess of the nomenklatura of Yugoslavia.

Of course the meat that clung to the bones rotted during the performance—so they stank, adding a visceral aspect to the largely historical piece and linking it at a gut level to the ongoing war in former Yugoslavia. R.S.

Maurizio Cattelan, Italian Pavilion, 47th Biennale, 1997
Nobody who saw it could ever forget that amazing sculptural installation where art was wedded with architecture by Maurizio Cattelan, placing his pigeons all over the rafters of what used to be called Italian pavilion (Turisti, 1997).

Yet the piece that most stands out for me was a work in the Arsenale (Mother, 1999) in which a living fakir lay on the ground in a deep meditative state, with his eyes closed and his hands in a praying position. With the exception of his head and hands, his entire body was covered in sand. Cropped in the ground in this way, the man almost had a death presence. The amazing part of Mother was that it was a live scene, but read like a static sculpture because of the nature of the fakir’s contemplation. It had a presence that was incredibly sculptural but at the same time created a bizarre reversal in the viewer: here we were, looking at someone in the sort of meditative state that art viewers strive for. A.S.
Cai Guo-Qiang, Chinese Pavilion, 48th Biennale, 1999


The first time I ever saw Cai Guo-Qiang’s art was when he did an installation in the first Chinese pavilion in 1999. He created a series of sculptures that seemed to be in the language of Socialist Realism, in a style that mirrored the kind of official Communist art that we’ve always thought of as anti-contemporary, made in opposition to the avant-garde. But Cai deconstructed that trope in an inventive way, by disassembling and reassembling the figures to create groups that formed a sculptural history painting. The artist was on site making the work, which turned the installation into an ever-evolving live panorama, so there was a sense of constant of transformation and development. **A.S.**

Shirin Neshat, Iranian Pavilion, 48th Biennale, 1999
There are certain occasions during a Venice Biennale in which you see a piece of art that defines a moment in such an extraordinary way that, without even knowing the artist, you recognize that you’re in the face of something significant. Those special instances are what we crave most in biennials—work that changes your thinking about what contemporary art is. Shirin Neshat was known to us through her over-painted photographs, but _Turbulent_ (1998) is by far her most renowned video work. It consists of two screens. On one, a man is singing in prayer. On the other, a female figure is singing too, in the most extraordinary way.

It was the first time that I remember, as a Western viewer, looking at a figure from the Islamic world dressed in the kind of attire that is often looked upon as oppressive in the West and using it as permission for total freedom. What the woman was singing was so amazingly transformational; her voice and the relationship of her hands to the microphone was almost sexual—and yet she was in traditional garb that seemed otherwise to reinforce the roles of a culture. But she was able to find abundant woman-ness in that in the same way that Robert Ryman finds endlessness in white. A.S.

**Pierre Huyghe, French Pavilion, 49th Biennale, 2001**
This was the first major installation of the Anlee project: Pierre teamed up with Philippe Parreno to buy a Japanese anime character, and Pierre made a series of videos. This was probably his breakout exhibition and it was an innovative thing to do in terms of video—going to mainstream anime production and taking from it something to would be reprogrammed and given a life of its own. R.S.

Marlene Dumas, Fondazione Bevilacqua La Masa/Palazzetto Tito, 2003
Often, some of the best art in Venice is in satellite exhibitions that are not officially a part of the Biennale. One of the locations for some of the most consistently exquisite exhibitions is the Fondazione Bevilacqua la Masa/Palazzetto Tito. Certainly one of the most memorable shows I’ve seen there was of works by Marlene Dumas, which focused on smaller scale paintings that trod a thin line between death and oppression and sexual exaltation. A single painting called Death of the Author (2003) remains one of her greatest paintings. A.S.

**Kiki Smith, Fondazione Querini Stampalia, 2005**
Another off-site exhibition, this installation by Kiki Smith was at the Querini Stampalia—a historic palazzo that, every two years, invites a contemporary artist to create work within it. Smith placed her art throughout this domestic space, which is part-house and part-museum. She tapped into that to make powerful sculptures that turned the building itself into a sculptural presence. A.S.

“Think With the Senses, Feel With the Mind: Art in the Present Tense”, 52nd Biennale, 2007
Kara Walker, still from *...calling to me from the angry surface of some grey and threatening sea. I was transported.* (2007) © Kara Walker. Courtesy Sikkema Jenkins & Co., New York

It’s hard to pick a favorite from the Biennale I organized in 2007. Chéri Samba was in the Italian pavilion, which was the first time an African painter was at the centre of the exhibition rather than a sideshow. In that context, he was flanked by Richter, Kelly and Anselmo.

Kara Walker did wonderful videos for her installation (see above) and there were several animations, notably by Steve McQueen and Tabaimo. Sigmar Polke painted a huge cycle of canvases that François Pinault bought and installed in his museum on the Punta della Dogana. Sophie Calle made a tender installation with a tape of her mother’s death. There was too much to choose just one—or even a dozen. R.S.

**David Altmejd, Canadian Pavilion, 52nd Biennale, 2007**
David Altmejd was still quite a young artist when he represented Canada in 2007. The national pavilion is an oddball kind of space in that feels a bit like a tree house. Altmejd completely transformed it so that one no longer had a sense of the architecture, turning it instead into a sculptural space by utilizing mirrored walls and surfaces, as he often does. It was memorable to see how his sculptures resided in this space—in a way, borrowing language from a funhouse hall of mirrors and applying it to a particular and unique piece of architecture to create the visionary, experiential and figurative work that he makes. A.S.

Monika Sosnowska, Polish Pavilion, 52nd Biennale, 2007
One of the more interesting artists to have emerged in the past few decades, Sosnowska was representing her native Poland in 2007 and filled the entire building with a sculpture that looked like it had been smashed, folded and wedged in order to fit the space. It consisted of the metal armature of the exterior structure of workers’ housing in Poland, turning the remnants of the Communist era into one of the great monumental sculptures of recent decades. A.S.

**Bruce Nauman, American Pavilion, 53rd Biennale, 2009**

This was essentially a mini retrospective of key works by Nauman, combined with new installations. It was an amazing way to look at the life and work of one of the most influential artists of the post-war period. A.S.

**Charles Ray, Boy With Frog (2008), opening of the Punta della Dogana, 2009**
This work was made in the manner of the historic sculptures that populate the city but depicts a very contemporary boy holding a frog. There’s something so ordinary about this boy who is nonetheless shown in such an eternal way, and something so American about his stance, suggesting the literature of Mark Twain. It was commissioned by François Pinault for the opening of his museum on the Punta della Dogana at the 2009 Biennale. The work is almost anti-Classical because of the boy’s casual position, while being very Classical in its white cast polyurethane that suggests carved marble sculpture. The boy is depicted larger than a man, so is truly monumental.

Situated in one of the most prominent and visible points in the city of Venice, Boy With Frog integrated a very contemporary reinvention of the classical language of sculpture in a city that is otherwise a museum of the glories of the past. Yet, after objections by city authorities, the statue was removed in 2013 and replaced with a reproduction of an historic lamp-post.

A.S.

Fondazione Prada, opening exhibition, 2011
When the Prada Foundation opened in Venice in 2011, it staged an exhibition curated by Germano Celant of great works from the collection (“Fondazione Prada. Ca’ Corner della Regina”). The many thematic rooms displayed were extraordinarily thoughtful and beautiful. The depth in which Prada has collected great artists such as Lucio Fontana is impressive, and the installation included unprecedented juxtapositions that somehow made perfect sense.

The one that stood out the most for me was by the staircase, where a two-panel Brice Marden monochromatic painting (Blunder, 1969) was hung opposite a Domenico Gnoli representational painting from the 1960s (Red Hair on Blue Dress, 1969). There was a level of curatorial intelligence that underscored that this collection embodied the highest standards. A.S.

Mike Nelson, British Pavilion, 54th Biennale, 2011
Mike Nelson took the British pavilion, whose architecture is so embedded in the minds of the visitors, and which has so defined the selection of artists placed within it, and completely blasted it apart. He created a series of environments, deconstructing the building in such a way that you did not recognize the interior. He built instead a very elaborate network of intimate environments that made you feel like you were in another part of the world, wandering into functional spaces that had been temporarily emptied of their occupants.

Not only was the language of these spaces more of the Turkish bazaar that the British aristocracy, it was such an experience to move through it—you had to crawl through spaces, doorways were hidden, climb up ladders into nooks and crannies and attic spaces—that the work rethought the notion of a British pavilion at a biennale. It was a journey of discovery and often discomfort, which gave glimpses into immigrant cultures that have been flowing into Europe for the past few decades.

It resulted in an amazing experience that was second only to the remarkable sculpture by Gregor Schneider that resided in the German Pavilion in 2001 (for which he won the Golden Lion). In Totes Haus u r (Dead House u r), Schneider disassembled his childhood home and reconstructed it to create passageways and spaces in the interstices between rooms and floors that led nowhere. Schneider presented the whole as an anti-monumental sculpture. A.S.

Massimiliano Gioni curated one of the most memorable multiple artist exhibitions of recent years. He combined contemporary artists with historical ones, insider artists with outsider artists, combining in his display the work of people trained to make art with work made in therapeutic psychiatric environments, as well as visionary pictures by mystics and people who could see auras. It was an entire vision of the creative mind, whether high art as we know it or life lived in different ways. A.S.

*This article was originally published 9 May 2017, and updated for this edition of the Biennale*
La Belle Époque

The resurgence of Postwar Italian art

Lucio Fontana, Concetto Spaziale, Attesa (1967). Courtesy Robilant + Voena

By Jane Morris

writer and editor
The Venice Biennale—which opened to VIPs this week and opens to the public on Saturday—is an international, rather than strictly Italian, affair (there are just two Italian artists in Ralph Rugoff’s central show “May You Live in Interesting Times” until 24 November). From its first edition in 1895, the founding principle of the world’s first art biennial was clear: to place Italy at the heart of the international art world.

By the decades following the Second World War this dream was being realized. Italy’s economy and cultural scene was booming. Film-makers including Federico Fellini, based in Rome’s Cinecittà studios, fashion houses like Pucci, Valentino and Fendi, as well as designers such as Gio Ponti and Ettore Sottsass put Italy on the contemporary cultural map—as did its artists. “The unexpected Belle Époque”, writer Italo Calvino called it in 1961.

The unexpected Belle Époque

Scores of artists, including Alberto Burri, Pietro Consagra and Afro (Basaldella), were showing in Europe and the US. Thanks to the biennale, which had a bustling sales office until 1968, they had the added boost of the world’s biggest critical and commercial art platform. Even America, the dominant economic and cultural power (which was helping to fund Italy’s economic revival through the Marshall Plan) was charmed.

This was the Italy of Roman Holiday (1953) and La Dolce Vita (1960). Peggy Guggenheim settled in Venice in 1949. Philip Guston, Cy Twombly and Robert Rauschenberg worked in Rome. Painter Piero Dorazio recalled that “Americans were no longer going to Paris. In the 1950s, Rome was full of artists”.

Today, though, many of these artists are relatively obscure. In this article we tell you which you need to know about and explain why they were overshadowed by their mostly American contemporaries.

A complex picture

The immediate post-war Italian art scene was complicated. “It’s a story of a lot of individuals,” says Daniella Luxembourg, co-founder of Luxembourg & Dayan gallery, and a specialist in this period. “Even when they called themselves movements, they didn’t think like that and many had nothing to do with any of the others.”

The strong regional identities of most Italians at that time were another factor, says Luca Massimo Barbero, the Director of Venice’s Cini Foundation and Associate Curator of the Peggy Guggenheim Collection. “In 1961, the Italian state was just 100 years old,” he says. “It’s not just north and south, it’s Emilio Vedova in Venice, Burri in Rome, Fontana in Milan—cities have their own personalities,” he says. To confuse matters further, artists often associated with one group shifted to another as their work changed—sometimes radically.

There are also individual reasons the artists’ international reputations dwindled. Burri founded his own museum in 1978 in his home town of Città di Castello to house his own work—thus removing many of the best pieces from international circulation. Paolo Scheggi and Piero Manzoni both died young, which often impacts long-term reputation. Mimmo Rotella’s lifestyle was louche (Playboy magazine called him “erotically advanced” and he spent five months in prison on drugs charges). Mario Schifano had another career as a film-maker and some-time rock star.
But there are some common factors. As today, Italy had a strong domestic market—private collectors included the powerful Agnelli family and industrialist Gianni Mattioli (part of whose collection was famously barred from export by the Italian government in 1973). In addition to the interest of other European collectors—and the raft of new post-war museums of contemporary art being built across the continent—"You didn’t have to go to the US to have success and a market," Barbero says.

A lack of interest by the government, academics and museum staff ("who didn’t believe enough in Italian contemporary art", according to Barbero) also hindered the spread of the art beyond Italy. "We didn’t translate important texts in English, we didn’t promote encyclopedic shows abroad."

Meanwhile, by the 1960s, American artists were in the ascendant: Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, Andy Warhol, Donald Judd and Rauschenberg were some of the artists whose work was filling museums from Düsseldorf to Denver. "Italy suffered the same problem as other European post-war movements," Luxembourg says. "It’s to do with the social and political effects of the Second World War, perceptions of what is important and the fact that the art market moved to America."

Then, in 1968—at the height of anti-capitalist strikes and riots across Europe, and under pressure from radical students and artists in Italy—the Venice Biennale closed its sales office. "After Rauschenberg won the Golden Lion [for painting in 1964], the perspective changed," Barbero says. "Little by little, overseas collectors [and museums] decided that contemporaneity was American."
Little by little, overseas collectors decided that contemporaneity was American

Another important factor, says Michele Casamonti, co-director of the London, Paris, Italian and Swiss-based Tornabuoni Art (and son of the influential collector-dealer Roberto Casamonti), is that the government’s strict heritage export laws misunderstood contemporary art. “Italy is the only country in the world where the state can block the export of a work, if it is of exceptional quality, without any obligation to buy the work [for a museum, as in France and the UK],” he says. “It’s right to protect the heritage, but it’s not the same for Baroque painting, which needs to be seen in its original context—for example, a church. Post-war Italian art needs to be shown in international collections, in the context of the other great artists of the 20th-century.”

Recently though, in August 2017, the Italian government made the decision to relax its stringent art export regulations, only applying the rules now to works by dead artists created 70 or more years ago (rather than the previous 50—though not the 100 that auctioneers and dealers had lobbied for). This could liberalize the supply of work by post-war artists: according to a report published by market research group ArtTactic last month, international sales of Italian art at Sotheby’s, Christie’s and Phillips increased 5.6% to $183.9m in 2018, up from $174m in 2017—despite fewer lots being offered.

Renewed interest

The curatorial lack of attention spanned decades and only began to change recently: the Guggenheim’s 2015-16 “Alberto Burri: The Trauma of Painting” was the first institutional show of his work in New York in more than 35 years, while the Met Breuer’s “Lucio Fontana: On the Threshold”, which finished in April, was the first for 40. The first major show in Los Angeles for 20 years of Piero Manzoni was organized by Hauser & Wirth, a commercial gallery while a comprehensive exhibition of his work was organized at Gagosian by the curator Germano Celant in January this year.

In March, Bernard Blistène, the director of the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris, said that he is working on a Burri show, the first monograph of a post-war Italian artist in the French institution’s history. Nonetheless, Tim Marlow, the Artistic Director of London’s Royal Academy, says: “Not so long ago, I mentioned Burri to two British curators, who have gone on to be directors of distinguished institutions, and they had no idea what I was talking about.”

Luxembourg says: “Great exhibitions, especially in museums, really make a difference. But they are only as good as the willingness of the crowd to accept them. To capture the zeitgeist, you need a great curator and public with the thirst to see the show.” Now, finally, it appears as though both museums and the market are primed for a reassessment of the early Italian post-war period.

The Major Movements
Spazialismo

Lucio Fontana (1899-1968) is now the most famous of the post-war artists. A major survey of his work, which recently closed at the Met Breuer in New York (and is traveling to the Guggenheim Bilbao (17 May-29 September)), was the first major survey in four decades but found mixed reviews. Critics felt its rather academic curatorial approach made the groundbreaking nature of the work—and its passion—appear somewhat rigid, stifling its impact.

Collezione Prada, Milan. Courtesy Robilant + Voena
© Fondazione Lucio Fontana, Bilbao, 2019

A radical pioneer, Fontana experimented with ceramics, architectural environments, and with punching and slashing holes in paintings and sculptures. Revered now, he was initially considered “too revolutionary and conceptual; too complex” in both Italy and America, Barbero says.

Fontana launched the Spazialismo movement in 1947, which wanted artists to embrace science and technology, and exhibited at the Italian Art Informel exhibitions in the 1950s. Since the 1990s his market—particularly for the “Concetto Spaziale, La Fine Di Dio” (oval, punched) and "Attese" (slashed) canvases—has risen sharply. In 2015 a 1964 Fino Di Dio made $29.2m at Christie’s in New York, while a 1965 Attese made $16.4m the same year (est $15m-$20m) at Sotheby’s.

The "Fontana effect" is also evident in the influence he exerted on many younger (and lesser) artists, and the appreciation of their work. For instance, prices for the architectural, shaped canvases of Scheggi and Agostino Bonalumi—both regular visitors to Fontana’s Milan studio—have risen notably in recent years. Bonalumi’s Bianco (1966) made £625,000 ($1m) at Sotheby’s London in 2014 (est £300,000-£400,000), while a €1.6m ($1.8m) record was set for Scheggi’s Intersuperficie Curva Bianca(1969) at Sotheby’s Milan in 2015 (est. €400,000-€600,000). Fontana was also a major influence on the Minimalist and kinetic groups Gruppo T and Gruppo N, including artists such as Gianni Colombo and Alberto Biasi.
Art Informel

Visitors to Venice this summer should take in the major museum survey of Burri at the Cini Foundation (“Burri la pittura, irriducibile presenza”, until 28 July), curated by Bruno Corà of the Fondazione Palazzo Albizzini Collezione Burri—the museum founded by the artist—and sponsored by Tornabuoni Art.

The Cini Foundation’s Luca Massimo Barbero says the artist “was much more famous in the US than Fontana in the 1950s”. Nonetheless, Burri slipped from view and has been little understood, especially in the US, until the excellent Guggenheim exhibition in 2015-16. Now, Europeans will get the chance to see his work back in his native Italy.

Burri was a prolific artist who experimented with non-traditional materials: sacks, tar, burnt plastic and wood, and the industrial insulating board Celotex. Early on he was associated with Art Informel, a term created by the French critic Michel Tapié, linking artists including Willem de Kooning, Jean Dubuffet and Pierre Soulages.

They were all searching for a new image of ‘informel’

In Italy, Informel took its own divergent forms. Burri’s friend, Ettore Colla made works of iron referencing locks and traps. In Venice, Afro and Emilio Vedova made expressive paintings. Both of these artists are beginning to find renewed interest: Afro had a show at London’s Tornabuoni gallery last October, while the German painter Georg Baselitz is curating an exhibition of Vedova’s work at the late artist’s foundation during this year’s Venice Biennale, “Emilio Vedova di/by Georg Baselitz” until 11 November. Nonetheless, says Allan Schwartzman, co-founder of Art Agency Partners, “these artists will likely always be appreciated more with the regional context of postwar Italian art than of the broader sweep of important postwar art.”

“Burri, Consagra, Afro, Vedova, Fontana—they were all searching for a new image of ‘informel’,” Barbero says. “But put them in a room together and it’s hard to see a (common) project.”

Burri's market has grown since 2009, and, says it is destined to rise still further, Schwartzman says—depending on supply. Burri remains a crucial figure for the late 1960s-1970s Arte Povera artists, including Giovanni Anselmo, Luciano Fabro, Jannis Kounellis and Mario Merz.

Forma 1
Pietro Consagra (1920-2005) was known for his “two-dimensional sculptures”—flat pieces of metal arranged into rhythmic, standing forms. He was a founding member of the Forma 1 group in 1946-47—an aesthetically disparate group of Marxist-leaning, non-figurative artists including Piero Dorazio and Carla Accardi, united by their formal admiration for Futurism and Paris-based artists Brancusi, Picasso and Giacometti.

Consagra initially worked in muscular materials like bronze, iron and charred-edge wood, reminiscent of Burri. But—inspired by Rauschenberg’s 1964 Venice Biennale exhibition—he later embraced Pop-inspired, candy-colored cut-out iron sheets that appear to “dance” in the air. Consagra showed regularly in New York throughout the 1950s and 1960s: works were bought by the Museum of Modern Art and Guggenheim museums. In subsequent years, however, his solo exhibitions were almost all in Italy. “Consagra played a key role in post-war Italian sculpture,” says Benedict Tomlinson, a Director of European gallery Robilant + Voena, which staged a show in London last year (“Pietro Consagra: Frontal Sculpture 1947-1967”). “And, like Fontana’s ceramic sculptures, his work is still comparatively affordable.” Last year, Ferro trasparente bianco V (1966), made £152,500 ($201,960), almost three times its upper estimate, at Phillips London.

Monochrome and Minimalism

Piero Manzoni (1933-1963) has high name recognition, but only had his first New York show in 2009, organized by the famous Italian curator Germano Celant at Gagosian Gallery. The New York Times critic Holland Cotter wrote that “in the US... Manzoni’s work has been a mystery, fuzzily grasped and seldom seen”.

Despite his early death, Manzoni’s market continues to rise: in 2018 he was the third top-selling Italian artist by value at auction (behind Fontana and Rudolf Stingel). While students at art schools like his conceptual jokes (such as the Socle du Monde (1961) and “Merda d’Artista” (1961), 90 separate cans supposedly of “artist’s shit”, Manzoni was a major force in monochrome and Minimalism. In 1959 he set up the gallery and journal Azimut/h, with his close collaborator Enrico Castellani.
Manzoni was part of the Düsseldorf-based Zero group, as were fellow Italians Fontana, Colombo, Dadamaino (Edwarda Emilia Maino), Dorazio and Francesco Lo Savio. All these artists, and Manzoni, were included in the Guggenheim New York’s “ZERO: Countdown to Tomorrow, 1950s-60s” (2014-2015).

Prior to that, market attention had been focused on the group following the 2010 “Zero” sale of works from the prestigious Lenz Schönberg Collection at Sotheby’s London—the auction was a great success, despite this being a slightly wobbly moment for the general art market (of the 47 lots, 46 sold, many for prices four or five times their estimates, for a total of £23m ($36.4million) against an estimate in excess of £11.5m).

Since then, there have been more notable records, including the $6m spent on one of Castellani’s white shaped canvases, Superficie Bianca (1967) at Sotheby’s in London in 2014—almost three times its high estimate. “The widening of interest for Zero builds upon the solidity and history of the market for Fontana and Manzoni,” Schwartzman says.

**Italian Pop**

Domenico “Mimmo” Rotella (1918-2006) “remains the most significant un-rediscovered, and undervalued Italian artist of this period”, says Schwartzman. After a creative crisis in the early 1950s, Rotella began to experiment in Rome, tearing down posters from its pock-marked walls to make layered “décollages”. While Italian critics initially related him to Art Informel, he found much closer allegiance with the Nouveau Realisme of Yves Klein and fellow poster-collagist, the French artist Raymond
Hains. One of the challenges of the Rotella market is the proliferation of fakes and pre-dated works, but the market and scholarship should be able to sort through.

**Rotella remains the most undervalued Italian artist of this period**

In 1961 and 1962 Rotella was shown in “The Art of Assemblage” at MoMa in New York, and “New Realists” at the Sidney Janis Gallery. He later became associated with what Barbero calls “Italian Imagists” (a Roman counter to Pop). Founded by Mario Schifano (1934-1998), La Scuola di Piazza del Popolo included artists Tano Festa, Franco Angeli and Mario Ceroli, as well as Pino Pascali of the later Arte Povera group (this article has not focused on the latter group, but it is worth noting that despite their broader name recognition, the scholarship and markets for giants such as Mario Merz, Giulio Paolini, Kounellis, and Anselmo are ripe for reevaluation. Even with the great Boetti retrospective at the Tate in 2012 and the Met’s 2017 Marisa Merz retrospective, most Arte Povera remains fairly invisible.)

“Schifano comes out of the language of Pop and Minimalism, and is very significant and under-appreciated outside of Italy—and has been for many decades,” Schwartzman says. “His work relates to the problem of painting. When he paints a Coca-Cola label in the early 1960s it has a different meaning to Warhol doing it; it’s closer to the Capitalist Realist work of artists such as Sigmar Polke and Gerhard Richter.”

**Post-war Italian art shows during the Venice Biennale**

**Fondazione Giorgio Cini**

“Burri la pittura, irriducibile presenza”

(10 May- 28 July)

**Magazzino del Sale**

“Emilio Vedova di/by Georg Baselitz”

(until 11 November)

**Fondazione Prada**

“Jannis Kounellis”

(11 May-24 November)

**Palazzo Cavanis**

“Pino Pascali”

(9 May-24 November)

**Combo Venezia**

“The Piedmont Pavilion”

8 May-20 July

Celebrating Piedmontese artists, many centered on Turin, including Michelangelo Pistoletto, Carol Rama and Carlo Mollino.
Avoiding the Crowds

An alternative Venice

By Amy Cappellazzo

Co-founder of Art Agency, Partners; Executive Vice President, Chairman, Fine Art Division

Published 9 May 2019 in Must See

Original Sin

Nobody except its caretakers can enter the largest private garden in Venice, the “Garden of Eden” on Giudecca, a property that the artist Friedensreich Hundertwasser instructed be left to nature when he died in 2000.

The previous owners of the villa and its hidden garden were legendary horticulturists—from the Englishman, Frederic Eden, who bought it in 1884 and turned it into a paradise of pine, pomegranate and magnolia trees, to the Greek princess who planted other Mediterranean flowers and plants.

Now, the Hundertwasser Foundation owns the garden and, in accordance with the artist’s wishes, won’t allow anyone in. Gliding past it in a boat, I’m always reminded of what a siren call Venice has been to the eccentric.

Geopolitics
Every Biennale, countries that weren’t given a pavilion in the Giardini, such as Iraq and Portugal, stage their own separate national pavilions, often in far-flung places around the city. The list of countries with permanent pavilions is a reminder that the Biennale has long been about geopolitics, and Italy’s history of emigration in the post-war years, as well as its need for natural resources from abroad.

History reveals itself through the buildings: the Israeli pavilion dates back to 1952—just four years after it was founded as a nation, a testimony to Italy’s quick acceptance of Israel as a state. Egypt was given a pavilion in that same year, a post-war balm for Italy’s longstanding trading partner with whom relations had become strained under Mussolini. Russia’s pavilion was founded in 1914, just three years before the Bolshevik Revolution and some years has sat empty due to lack of submission or political issues (Russia didn’t show between 1938-54 or 1978-80). This year, Venezuela opted to postpone the opening of its Oscar Sotillo-curated pavilion after a political crisis at home.

Most curious, perhaps, is the German pavilion, which was rebuilt to reflect the authoritarian aesthetics of the Third Reich in 1938. People commonly misattribute this to the infamous Nazi architect Albert Speer but it was actually the work of Ernst Haiger. The architecture remains, although artists are constantly refashioning the pavilion, convulsing against the country’s modern history and its relationship to national identity.

**Girl’s Best Friend(s)**
Besides featuring the outstanding collection of one of the greatest modern art patrons of the 20th century in the grandiose Venier dei Leoni Palace by the Grand Canal, The Peggy Guggenheim Collection also stands out for being the sole museum in the world with its creator, and pets, buried inside it.

Following a fatal stroke in 1979, Peggy Guggenheim was cremated, and her ashes were buried in the palazzo’s garden alongside her beloved lifetime companions—her fourteen Lhasa Apsos. Cappuccino, Pegeen, Peacock, Toro, Foglia, Madam Butterfly, Baby, Emily, White Angel, Sir Herbert, Sable, Gypsy, Hong Kong and Cellida rest alongside their devoted owner, with their year of birth and death lovingly engraved on a marble tombstone.

Social housing

Urban planning fact: after the Second World War, the Italian government worried about the declining population of Venice and so built housing projects. Amidst such Renaissance splendor, it’s always fascinating to see the Modernist “case popolari” in parts of Venice such as Giudecca and Mazzorbo, a small island adjoining Burano (which is itself one of the most colorful places in Venice—the houses are painted in various bright colors).

From leprosy to enlightenment
It’s a special experience to visit the small island of San Lazzaro degli Armeni. Formerly a leper colony, San Lazzaro was gifted by a Venetian Doge to an Armenian monk called Mekhitar fleeing persecution in Constantinople. He arrived in 1717 with 20 followers and founded a monastery dedicated to the Armenian people. Napoleon—of all people—would later safeguard the island by designating it an academic institution, thanks to its incredible library.

**Tombs of the West**

One of the great experiences during the Biennale is a trip to the Cini Foundation on San Giorgio Maggiore. I like being on that island and in this building, which is now a non-profit cultural institution. This year, the Cini Foundation, in collaboration with the Fondazione Burri, is hosting a retrospective dedicated to Italian post-war artist Alberto Burri. Furthermore, the Faurschou Foundation is staging *Entropy* there, a group exhibition featuring seven internationally recognized Chinese contemporary artists: He An, Liu Wei, Yang Fudong, Zhao Zhao, Sun Xun, Yu Ji, and Chen Tinazhuo. It’s worth taking the time to visit the foundation’s libraries while you’re there—they’re vast and magical. It’s like visiting the sacred tombs of the West.

**Marooned dead**
A really interesting excursion is to Isola di San Michele, an island dedicated to the dead. It’s very beautiful and strange. If you visit on a Sunday morning, you’ll see old Italian ladies bringing flowers to the deceased. Among the graves are those of Igor Stravinsky, Sergei Diaghilev and Ezra Pound. Perverse irony has it that opposite the cemetery, one can see the hospital across the water.

**Escaping the heat**

If you ever catch a Biennale during a heat wave, you’ll need to escape, since the Italian idea of air-conditioning is the equivalent to standing in front of an open refrigerator. There’s a beautiful secluded beach called Murazzi on the Lido, which is heavenly. The only people I ever see out there are the few dealers I know who are keen swimmers. It’s just far enough out for the sea to start looking a little clean again.

**Prosecco in the Piazza**
Alongside the water, close to the Rialto Bridge, are two of my favorite places to sip prosecco—Osteria Bancogiro and Naranzaria (which is Venetian dialect for orange vendor). Near a particularly beautiful piazza that’s set back from the water, they’re especially airy for Venice.

**Garden of Freedom**

Venice offers visitors creative ways to get involved and support the local community. Guests can purchase souvenirs and products cultivated in the ancient garden of the Women's Prison of the Giudecca. The women prisoners adopt organic agricultural methods to produce some forty types of fruits, flowers, vegetables and wild herbs. Products can be bought every Thursday morning at the stand on Fondamenta del Carcere, directly from the same women who grow them.

The Giudecca jail also has a cosmetics laboratory, where female prisoners produce skincare products (under the supervision of a chemist) from the herbs they grow in their organic garden, using traditional and organic methods. Their brand, Rio Terà dei Pensieri, offers four different lines—The Natural Line, The Organic Line, The Traditional Product Line, The BtoB Line for Hotels. These are sold seasonally in a small kiosk in Campo Santo Stefano and can be found in selected stores, hotels and spas. The Bauer Hotel always has the best selection of them in every room.
*This article was originally published 9 May 2017, and updated for this edition of the Biennale
When Painting Was Painting

Meanwhile, back in New York


By Allan Schwartzman

publisher of In Other Words, co-founder of AAP & chairman of Sotheby’s Global Fine Arts

Published 9 May 2019 in Allan's Intro

To the rescue: the glorious de Kooning exhibition currently on view at Mnuchin Gallery ("De Kooning: Five Decades", 19 April-15 June). Precisely and lovingly selected, the exhibition spans the 50 years of the artist's maturity, with drawings, paintings on paper and canvases that exemplify some of the greatest achievements in Modern art, when there were battles worth waging, and painting was painting.

Every work, every section and every mark is bursting with exhilaration and brilliance. The curatorial taste of this exhibition also shows the amazing range of palette that made de Kooning one of the most daring colorists of the 20th century.
De Kooning fought with the canvas, probing every inch of it with a nimble brush and complex layering. He vanquished demons: his own and those of painting in general—particularly the long shadow of Cubism and its revolutionary approach to pictorial space (which, while defining the spatial challenges of post-Renaissance painting, also identified a radical new way of thinking that would take nearly half a century to transcend).

One could distinguish many of the great artists of Modern art as warriors or lovers, those whose strength comes through struggle and those whose greatest expression is nurtured through freedom—the difference between Picasso and Matisse. At first, de Kooning was a fighter, for he had a fight worth waging. Once he’d vanquished the demons, out came the lover, a pastoralist. One of the great lessons of five decades of de Kooning is that the exhibition tells an epic story of an artistic battle with a happy ending (of sorts)—the warrior finding his freedom.

I am not sure who in recent decades is sounding an artistic battle cry, one worth fighting. Many have sought to—lots of painting in the 1980s showed us that. Indeed, today’s most urgent artistic battles are not within the formal language of painting, but rather are focused on the self and the wider culture, and are being explored through content, narrative, identity, voice—and the frame of who gets heard. These are broader societal issues; may painting find glorious urgent purpose in this post-spatial period.
Collecting the Biennale

An ephemeral pursuit

We build libraries for people all over the world, but probably the most fun project we do is to beg, borrow or steal to help build an archive of the Venice Biennale for the Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute. These efforts will culminate in July of this year, when The Clark premieres the exhibition "Art’s Biggest Stage: Collecting the Venice Biennale, 2007-2019" (on view until October 2019).

Around 10 or so years ago, the Clark library director and chief librarian, Susan Roeper, and Terri Boccia, the acquisitions librarian and special projects officer, approached me with a challenge. They had a lot of material relating to the Venice Biennale because Sterling Clark—who founded the institute—used to go regularly. Nowadays, though, the things they want tend to disappear before they can be saved—books, posters, ephemera that’s given away free at the vernissage. They wanted to know if I could help.

I did have one solution but I didn’t think they would go along with it. I suggested that they send someone to the vernissage to find the things they wanted. But I had no idea what it would cost and who could predict what the outcome might be? I couldn’t imagine a librarian would be mad enough to say yes to that.

How wrong I was. They rather bravely said: “Well, what can it cost? You’ll go, right? Let’s just do it!” So, we worked out the parameters. Basically I was to use my initiative. The idea was to get as much material as possible on the artists that governments had sent to represent their countries in the national pavilions and at collateral events. There are a lot of first appearances in Venice and it’s quite nice to keep some of that material. I said I would try to grab what I could.
It is the most tremendous fun. I visit every pavilion and related event, and get to see inside palazzi that are not normally open.

As soon as I land in Venice, I head to a working neighborhood—there are still a few left—and find a hardware store where I buy wheeled shopping trolley bags. Then I traipse around the biennale collecting everything I can find, which I bring back to my hotel room to photograph and list before packing and shipping it all off to the Clark.

I walk miles. I’ve been disorientated in dark rooms visiting video installations; deafened in sound installations; I’ve had a couple of climbing ordeals, such as the giant bamboo structure Big Bambú behind the Guggenheim in 2011 by the American artists Doug and Mike Starn, or Gregor Schneider’s Totes Haus u r in the German pavilion the same year (the latter drew blood and cost me a pair of trousers, but I didn’t charge the Clark for that, of course).

I find books that we can’t get elsewhere as well as the little things that get thrown away or overlooked—press releases, posters, postcards, lists and biographies of artists. There used to be lots of CD-ROMs, whereas now we get memory sticks. I’ve collected wristbands, invites, stickers and badges. I once got a roll of incredibly chic wallpaper as part of Jasmina Cibic’s exhibit in the Slovenian pavilion in 2013 and I wish I had got another roll for my bathroom, but it was very heavy. From the Greek pavilion in 2015, which featured the work of Maria Papadimitriou, I got a metal artist’s sheep’s bell—like a cowbell, but much smaller.

I’ve found the most extraordinary tote bags. The best was perhaps in 2009, when Elmgreen & Dragset did an installation called The Collectors at both the Danish and the Nordic pavilions. Instead of a catalogue they had produced what they called a “bag-agogue concept”, which was a very smart tote bag full of goodies created by the artists.
Thomas Heneage was tasked with collecting books, posters, ephemera that’s given away free at the vernissage.

By that stage I was carrying approximately 24 tote bags so staggered back to the hotel. As I placed them on the floor, a salami rolled out of one of them. The question was: which one? It turned out to be from a famous salumeria selected by Maurizio Cattelan as part of the bag-alogue concept for the first 500 bags. I texted the Clark to ask if they wanted a salami selected by Cattelan. I got the answer immediately: “Absolutely!”

How to ship the thing, was the question. I could not send it back with the books through customs—that would have been a nightmare, and of course we had to do it legally. So the Clark applied to the US Department of Agriculture to have the salami registered as art. Guess what the department said? “No way.”

So, the fridge in my shop in London is currently an outpost of the Clark Institute and I welcome anyone to come and look at this decaying salami. It’s now rather disgusting. When Maurizio was asked about it, he said we should just buy a new one.

One of the great things about the project is that it gives us wonderful snapshots of changes in the art world—the collection is formed without a view on quality or judgment. We collect simply to document. You see certain themes emerging every year—I suspect this year will be about migration.

I have seen some disastrous things, as artists try to catch the public’s attention in appalling ways. But I have also seen some wonderful things such as Christian Marclay’s *The Clock*, which won the Golden Lion in 2011 or the Ghanaian artist El Anatsui’s sublime, shimmering bottle-top wall-hanging (2007) and watching Urs Fischer’s huge wax replica of Giambologna’s *Rape of the Sabine Women* (1583), in which he had embedded candle wicks, dramatically melting, in 2011 was irresistible.

The collection may well be the only institution in America to have some of the items we’ve documented. Last edition, for example, I walked into the Iranian pavilion and told the director what we were doing. He said: “For an American museum, I would like them to have everything from my country. You can have anything you want.” I reckon the Clark will be the only place in America to have such stuff.

*Interview by Charlotte Burns*
*This article was originally published 9 May 2017, and updated for this edition of the Biennale
Looking Far and Wide

“Our Mars mission did not find any signs of life—we only ran into an art fair and two or three biennials.”

By Pablo Helguera
artist
Published 9 May 2019 in Cartoons