49TH INTERNATIONAL BIENNALE OF VENICE 2001

The Plateau of Mankind: the framing statement for the first Biennale of the new millennium directs a 'global audience' to approach the maelstrom of art work on display as though they themselves were protagonists. In an act of democratic fusion - like a presage of the contemporary world - the separation between established and young artists, styles, media and geographical boundaries is disregarded. It is an impossible, almost utopian frame for a new humanity in all its guises.

As viewers on the platform/plateau we are also mirrored and implicated. We 'enter' an emphatic architecture - a protagonistic space with psychological impact, aesthetic and socio-cultural sense, and attempt to 'read' the program. Our bodily experience of space - the continuity and memory of this experience - informs consciousness, sensibilities and cultural identity.

The less Eurocentric emphasis of the central program exists in contrast to the politics of location and neo-nationalism displayed in the national pavilions. Many artists have reconfigured interiors and play against the modernist/ fascist overtones of facades to reflect upon cultural self-image. The architectural format and position of each pavilion reveals a history of socio-political consciousness and economic influence. This 'cultural geography' provides a space which acts in relation to the artwork as a kind of metatext - 'a space which enacts as it represents the world.'(1)

Outside the British Pavilion, Mark Wallinger has reversed the colours of the British Union flag to form the Irish and the facade is covered with its digital reproduction. The interior space is also mapped and coded. Movement from light to darkness with the reversal and mirroring of elements contributes to a playful sense of the ambiguities between appearance and reality, belief and faith. A lone white *Ecce Homo* stands small and bowed in greeting. Flanking the central foyer two projected video installations offer a metaphorical version of the Ascension. In *Angel* a blind man appears to be walking backwards on an escalator, his words also obscured. In *Threshold to the Kingdom* people emerge in slow motion through an airport arrivals gate to the stirring music by Allegri. An impregnable time machine like a metal vault in which you can see your distorted reflection is paired with a ghostly image of a unicorn which quotes George Stubbs' painting. Facing blindly in the direction of *Ecce Homo*, twelve abandoned easels are set in a semicircle, like twelve disciples. An object of memory, man is evidenced only in the various drawings.

Pierre Huyghie creates three physically disconnected spaces behind the unified facade of the French pavilion. It is a meeting place of sculpture and light, architecture and sound, history and proposition. Visual access across these spaces is determined by changes in lighting conditions in translucent glass panels. The central space is an interactive environment in which a gridded ceiling lights up like a primitive computer game. A video projection of a Japanese cartoon character walks through a landscape which alters according to changes heard on the soundtrack recording of Neil Armstrong's voice. Light travels along umbilical tendrils in a futuristic lamp which also offers a seat for viewing/travel. In contrast, in the other side room, a nostalgic video projection of models of apartment blocks with window lights switching on and off in patterns that seem to converse.

Robert Gober's enigmatic minimalist installation, *Excavation*, uses displaced spatial relations to create real and symbolic associations among material elements and archaic objects. There are six sculptures, three text-based prints, an artist's book and one photograph. At the entrance to the American pavilion, a bronze version of a square of styrene foam flotsam lies in the place of a monumental sculpture. Evacuated and white, the symmetrical interior space is dressed in grotesque urban remnants recreated in materials familiar to art (handmade replicas of plywood planks, newspaper clippings which speak of self mutilation and protest, the wax form of exhumed body parts with refuse and drain, a butter churn, a plunger, two half empty gin bottles, a set of steps leading down to a barred basement). The viewer reads the trauma, pathos and inadequacy of all these Duchampian symbols of everyday life in the archaeology of this contemporary site. The ordered formal disposition of objects in the space using repetition and inversion sets up resonances among multiple possible readings, frustrating the viewer's desire for closure.

Doris Drescher from Luxemburg works within the existing structure of the Venetian palazzo Ca'del Duca. She conveys her sense of *Casa Mia* in a delicate installation of rooms using cotton thread, colour coding, textural video images playing on monitors, assembled objects and minimal decor. These are not signs of a monumental narrative, rather they are like invitations to linger and peruse. The specificity of everyday objects may be read like an inventory within the praxis of the miniature. A network of knots and cotton thread strung between objects and mapping the space is reminiscent of Marcel Duchamp's installation of *A Mile of String*. It is as though the viewer apprehends a surreal dimension of the house - a destroyed intimacy. Traces and personal reflections written small in pencil on surfaces invite the viewer to unlock, unravel and explore the space, using all senses and especially memories.

Gregor Schnedier also explores the relationship between three-dimensional spaces that you can bodily inhabit and imagined states of mind. His *Great House of Death* is the space of memory. Through an ongoing project of transformation of his parent's tenement (begun in 1985) he creates a claustrophobic labyrinth of rooms within rooms, lowered ceilings, corridors and doors to nowhere. The previously unseen network of rooms and their contents were transported to Venice from the D*ead House* in Germany. Individual rooms which have been purchased for collections have also been recreated (doubled) to exist in a different time and space. Entering these spaces is sometimes difficult, you need to crawl and climb, there is often no turning back and it is hard to keep a sense of where you have been. The rooms are abandoned and stained with evidence of their previous use - strategies of survival. Some have a stagnant odour and water pools in the lower bunkers. Schneider deconstructs the monumental marble space of the German pavilion to expose the linings. The vacated spaces and in-between states conjure a slightly apprehended sense of an isolated and claustrophobic existence.

Large-scale video installations exist in a hybrid zone between unknown and inhabited space. Images are linked to the architectural space and the viewer is often able to 'enter' the work casting their shadow on the screen or standing within the image. Some are projected onto textural surfaces of walls or floors, some extend across several levels or are exhibited with objects or still images. Sculptural questions of material, colour, position, occupation in space movement and duration apply. The loop creates a synthesis without narrative thread and is often registered in real time or slowed even further. A sense of detachment pervades the experience of this medium and the audience chooses their own level of exposure or rapport. Many pieces directly concern the perceptive body and question the limits of corporeality within shifting conceptions of space/time.

In *Flex*, Chris Cunningham speeds sections of film of a fight and sexual confrontation between man and woman with edits that create abrupt spatial shifts and periods of stasis. *Oracle* by Minette Vari presents a naked female endlessly devouring and choking on the history of South Africa seen in images. Bill Viola transforms the image of a man and a woman into an evanescent larvae - a distorted bisection and reflection of one another - in a slow and disquieting metamorphosis like a silent scream. His *Quintet of the Unseen* shows a silent contemporary portrait of grief presented in a slow moving tableaux which is read much like a religious painting. Video works by Ene-Liis Semper are displayed in a space (also represented on screen) in which the artist, on her knees, has licked the entire surface of the floor on which the viewer is now standing.

In a sculptural use of projection, entitled *Close*, Atom Egoyan and Juliao Sarmento create an elongated and compressed space for the cinematic experience. The viewer is forced to stand in a narrow corridor pressed tight to the projected image on the wall in a spatial slippage which is difficult to read. The image - close up shots of toenail cuttings falling into the waiting open mouth of another person - conveys an abstracted sense of obscure erotic desire. A woman's voice addresses the viewer and speaks about stories, childhood fears, lucky charms, animals and torture.

On exhibition there are 230 works by 130 artists or groups. Thirty-three National pavilions in the Gardens are augmented by a multitude of rented sites throughout the city which have been transformed into exhibition spaces. It would seem that these countries have 'fallen off the plateau' or are at the least fringe dwellers. In this postcolonial epoch and age of global nomadism, borders are not transgressed so easily, and our supposedly outmoded concepts of space, time and place linger as familiar residues.

The Biennale runs from 10 June to 4 November 2001. For more information try www.labiennale.org or www.biennale24.com

(1) A. Powell, 'Forgotten Zones: A Matiere for an Architecture', Fin de Siecle, and the twenty-first century, Architectures of Melbourne, RMIT, 1993, p. 107.

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