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Migrations between Memory and Spectacle

(National Pavilions in Venice)

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There has been many guidebooks to Venice since John Ruskin wrote *The Stones of Venice*. One of the most recent belongs to Tiziano Scarpa, who suggests an anthropological journey through his city in *Venice is a Fish*, while playing with the form of the city and an idea: this city "has navigated since time immemorial." In a continuously changing world, where there are few certainties and almost everything is a process, the journey is one of our most powerful metaphors to explain the times in which we live.

It's hard to know our goals, since the dreams of each traveller are different, and as numerous as all the travellers' places of origin. Every country carries with it dialectics between a tradition and a project for another reality, as happens with Venice in the months it spends dressed up for the art biennale. The national pavilions serve as an *imago mundi*, and every crew member carries aboard his or her own politics and history. In Venice, global and local discourses past and future interact in a splendid game of possibilities, frequently drawn together by factors like memory, the place of national demands and tied to dialectics close to real action in the world, or spectacle, given over to mere sensorial intoxication and occasionally seduced by technological advances.

There can be intermediate routes, perhaps such as the excessively formal and correct selection by Robert Storr, but that does not seem to be the case with the disappointing national pavilions in the Giardini. Nonetheless, there are things worth seeing amid so many forgettable works. Without a doubt, one of the most interesting projects is the life-archive of Sophie Calle, who also stars in the Italian Pavilion, though less successfully, due to an overwrought discourse with the death of her mother as its plot. Even so, the French Pavilion manages to keep up all the constants of its artwork while exhibiting a laudable choral perspective.

Another artist worth checking out is Félix González-Torres, a Cuban who took American citizenship, and who is disconcerting for his origin –in the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum– and for the critical stance he maintained during his life against his adoptive country. Another interesting initiative is that of Monika Sosnowska in Poland, who investigates space to transform it in such a way that her architectural solution goes beyond any functionality to propose a problematic inhabitation. Along these lines, Aernout Mik's installation in Holland also stands out as a disturbing environment that engages varied types of violence and migration.

But there aren't many more good things that can be said about the historical part of the Biennale, where countries show some identity marks that in these cases are created by memories that are fundamentally more individual than national. This obliges us more than ever to roam the streets of Venice in search of the works that could save this Biennale. In fact, it's the aimless stroll that brings us good surprises, even though among these we will not find a pavilion that, despite all the hype, is absent: India, with nothing new to be had from the last biennale, as is the case with Iran. Among the countries that have their own space for the first time, Lebanon stands out for its work in memory, with a collective that shows a decided resolve for rebirth, asking itself where to begin in a place so marred by conflict, which is

what ultimately unites this uneven exposition, whose most effective methods are interaction and a conscientious archive.

Nonetheless, Mexico boasts the pavilion that makes the most powerful debut, with Rafael Lozano-Hemmer. It's a very personal project that, nonetheless, perfectly serves the curators, Priamo Lozada and Bárbara Perea, to project the ambition of a country that's clearly booming one of the most attractive projects for its skilful use of new technologies focused on public interaction and a hypnotizing, intriguing projection of light and movement.

Along with Mexico, the Irish Pavilion is without a doubt one of the best, with the presence of Gerard Byrne, who has managed to plot the cartography of a recent past with subtle irony and calculated artifice, comprising, along with his North Irish neighbor Wille Doherty, an obligatory stop, with the three video installations by the later cultivating an atmosphere that delays the decision of other identities.

Beside Ireland and Mexico, there are more good works, like those of Normeda and Gediminas Urbonas in Lithuania, with a serious piece of investigation that takes us through the political changes around the Soviet Union via the claims of Villa Lituania in Rome. And before this work of thorough documentation, there are other projects that oscillate between absolutely formal experimentation and very recent history, where some young Scottish artists and the Australians Callum Morton and Susan Norrie get good marks, coinciding in the disturbing experience of violence and disaster, stimulating the imagination in the case of Morton and memory of the devastation in Java in the work of Norrie.

Among territorial claims we can not forget those of Italy, which struggles with little success to exalt its own with those monumental and dead leather trunks by Giuseppe Penone and, once again, the sarcasm for a society titillated by spectacle in the work of Francesco Vezzoli. In the collective pavilions, the curator Irma Arestizábal, despite the difficult necessity to give voice to many countries, each one with its peculiarities manages to reflect with subtlety on the word "territory" in the pavilion of the Italo-Latin American Institute. A meeting place with a well-travelled path that still has not been tread upon by projects such as *Paradiso perduto*, not that of Milton but rather of a community: the Gypsies, in perfect consonance with that idea of continuous migration and discourses without political frontiers, even though their symbolic capacity does come accompanied by a formal reflection of equal measure.

Having said that, within these movements that are bringing justice to history, the León de Oro prize for Malick Sidibé indicates a tendency that necessarily will go *in crescendo*, even though it doesn't exactly help that virtually all of the belated African Pavilion is comprised of works from the Sindika Dokolo Foundation, which entails a partial image of Africa that unfortunately privileges the view that Western artists have of it.

Artempo is another lost attempt in an infinite crossroads, a project that has turned the Fortuny Palace into a giant *Wunderkammer*, somewhere between ancient and modern, made up of over 300 works as varied as pre-Columbian terracotta statues and the torso of a Thai Buddha from the 8th or 9th century, along with works by Francis Bacon, Giorgio De Chirico, Tony Cragg, Marina Abramovic, El Anatsui, and Cai Guo-Qiang. In this particular exposition, pieces from different eras occasionally converse, although in most cases they get confused

in an exhibit without a chronology and whose best argument is the accumulation of works, as if responding to the desires of a compulsive collector.

Strewn about the Lagoon we also find classics such as Damien Hirst, Jan Fabre, Yasumasa Morimura, and Bill Viola, who go deeper into solutions that are well-known and, in most cases, lacking any special interest. Of all these folks, Joseph Kosuth has aroused the highest expectations with a luminous installation on the island of S. Lazaro degli Armeni, which sets out from the word "water" in order to finally merge with its context and re-think it.

And we cannot forget Thomas Demand, who has gone for two huge installations trained on our most recent memory, from Italy to the American intervention in Iraq, without falling back on well-worn discourses, and in which he also demonstrates a self-reflexive attitude by making evident his own creative process. And there could be many more obligatory stops, like the Grassi Palace or the Peggy Guggenheim Museum, which has changed its usual mood to discover the connections between the works of Joseph Beuys and Matthew Barney; not to mention the intervention of Botto & Bruno, which makes us jump to another, surprising dimension within the Florian, by creating another inhabitable place within the mythic Venetian café.

The limits evaporate, a maxim for those "migration addicts" that have been brought together by Biljana Cirio and Karin Gavassa, who experience current transformations setting out from Shanghai, in order to establish necessary thoughts: temporal, spatial, political, and aesthetic strategies revolving around a public sphere of migration that—as happens with many of these pieces—is not always clear. It's the danger of the fascination with migrations when one is conscious that no territory is endowed any longer with a full sense of existence. In light of that, many could return and tell the tale of the journey, although others will prefer a nomadism that irremediably gives itself over—as Claudio Magris notes—to "the unpredictability of the journey, the confusion and meanderings of the roads, the randomness of the stops, the uncertainty of the nights, the asymmetry of all routes taken," without a fixed port of destination, once one knows that the only thing that makes sense is the very condition of being a traveller.

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RAFAEL LOZANO-HEMMER *Frecuencia y volumen*. Mexican Pavilion. 52 Biennale de Venezia