

Making Worlds, or what's at *stake* in the 53rd Venice Biennale?



The theme, or indeed title, of this years Venice Biennale is “ Making Worlds”. A title chosen by Daniel Birnbaum and apparently inspired by North American philosopher Nelson Goodman’s *Ways of Worldmaking*. Goodman, who died in 1998, is linked to art in several directly important and vicarious ways. His *Languages of Art* (1976) together with Richard Wolflein’s *Art and Its Objects* (1968) and Ernst Gombrich’s *Art and Illusion* (1960) marks a syntagmatic or, sequential structural shift, in the analytic approach to artistic issues in Anglo-American philosophy. Goodman’s general approach to our cognitive relationship to the world, of which art is accordingly an essential component, succinctly suggests not the sovereignty of art, as separate from science and everyday experience, but the constellatory equivalence and conditioning possibility of its ends and means. Intending then from *Languages of Art* the beginning of a more general perspective of the arts as fundamental in their contribution to the construction or, “re-description”, of the realities and world(s) we live in.

Unfortunately the title of this years biennale is an apple that has fallen far from the tree. An apple, or perhaps more properly the seed of an apple, that never reached fruition. “Making Worlds” has been variably referred to as ‘about as close to naming an art show “Creative Things”’ as one can get, and otherwise as ‘comically forgettable’. On the occasion of this biennale, the title, or indeed any symbolic understanding of “World Making”, failed to entrench the objects and things it presented. The all too easy and comfortable consumability of the biennale and the *thingness* of the art on offer, are far from the revolutionary worldmaking implied in Goodman’s *cognitivism*: exemplifying nothing but bourgeois complacency and the un-trammelled autonomy of *art pour l’art*. It is not surprising, but simply shocking, that Daniel Birnbaum himself intended nothing but this un-trammelled lack of sagacity, “ the show does not try to illustrate a philosophy of art” he says, ultimately inclining critics such as Ben Davis to conclude “ its as if he has resolved to admit that the Venice Biennale is exactly what it is: summer entertainment for the smart set.”¹

In the instance and utterance of “Art as Entertainment” of “Making Worlds” as a means of “Making (more) Things”, one is compelled to describe this years biennale as positively decadent. This decadence is most inimical to Goodman’s philosophy - philosophy that suggests there isn’t just one all-embracing version of the world: multiple and incompatible versions are possible. As opposed to making ‘new worlds’ or ‘new ways of being-in-the-world’ the only *facticity* or, thing that one is riveted to on this occasion, is the hegemony of global capitalism. Even if Birnbaum had intended the *a priori* acceptance of globalisation as is suggested in the title, one would have hoped, at the very least, for a type of third way social democracy: art that displays an acceptance of capitalism’s hegemony but persistently fights for reform within its rules. Or at the most, one would have hoped for a type of “World Making” that undermines global capitalism altogether, not by directly attacking it but by refocussing the field of struggle on everyday practices, where one can ‘build a new world’ - exemplified *par excellence* by the Situationists².

The appropriation of Goodman’s aesthetic by Birnbaum is perhaps most clearly, albeit vicariously, presented in Nietzsche’s troubled perception of ‘creators’, and in his realisation that ultimately ‘ what things *are called* is incomparably more important than what they

¹ <http://www.artnet.com/magazineus/reviews/davis/daniel-birnbaum-venice-biennale>

² For an interesting contemporary project , and ‘intervention’ at the biennale see <http://www.swimmingcities.org>

are.’ (2006, P. 213) The alignment of Birnbaum’s biennale-making with Goodman’s *Ways of Worldmaking* displays nothing but a tenuous understanding of the latter’s philosophy, and a sort of laissez-faire relativism that lacks fundamental ethical consistency: let the art decide - the art will regulate itself. Apparently not, if the art in this year’s Venice Biennale is the best the contemporary art world has to proffer in the ways of “World Making” - it would seem that art in the contemporary world has become a victim of its own deterritorialization: devoid of the very means to construct a world because of its increasingly spectral nature.

In his self same passage on *creators* Nietzsche goes on to express the philological genealogy of ‘world making’, or what in the end might amount to the spectrality or otherworldliness of our own reality. ‘The reputation, name, and appearance, the usual measure and weight of a thing’ he suggests, is originally ‘almost always wrong, and arbitrary, thrown over things like a dress, altogether foreign to their nature and even to their skin - all this grows from generation to generation, merely because people believe in it, until it gradually grows to be part of the thing and turns into its very body.’ (in Ansell and Pearson eds., 2006, p. 213) Thus what at first we apprehend as mere appearance becomes in the end the invariable essence as such. Nietzsche suggests that it would be ridiculous to assume that in knowing this all we need do is point to the origin, to the superable inertia of facts, and this veil of delusion will come crashing down. He insists that we can destroy this so-called *reality* only as ‘creators’, and this is subsidized by the fact that it is sufficient enough to create new names, estimations and probabilities in order to create in the end new “things”. It was the a priori “thingness” of this biennale that utterly disappointed. It is as if the names, estimations and probabilities: the would-be art, had ran off ahead of itself trying to dodge the inertia of the biennale’s own format. Fate, it would seem, is not without a sense of irony, and the ‘creator’ of the contemporary world finds its principle place - its unparalleled canniness - amongst the miniatures and masks of *Calle Del Fabbri* and *Ruga Vecchia Sant Giovanni*.

A primary thesis in *Ways of Worldmaking* suggests that art is as serious, and is to be taken no less rigorously than the sciences; that as a mode of discovery, and creation and expansion of knowledge that the philosophy of art should be conceived as an integral part of metaphysics and epistemology. In this regard the poorly conceived *worldmaking* at this year’s biennale is largely inexplicable, but it would seem to reflect or embody a wider percept - equally lacking in substance or corporeality - that we have moved beyond the post-modern ‘end of history’ narratives (apropos of Fukuyama and Baudrillard) toward an idea, or thinking, of beginning. The lack of any real ability to think this beginning - does not mean that there is less ‘wankery’ (as one critic has suggested) but rather less palpability: less ability to plumb the intellectual depths of the biennale and to apply the potential of this artistic reservoir practically, and solemnly, to the socio-political reality of 2009. For Claire Bishop, who aligns herself with Jacques Ranciere, the aesthetic is, and must be, inextricably bound up with the ability to think this contradiction. The productive contradiction of art’s relationship to social change is, she notes, ‘characterized precisely by that tension between faith in art’s autonomy and belief in art as inextricably bound to the promise of a better world to come.’ (in Gere & Corris, 2008, p.4) But what if art has lost its ameliorative promise? What if it has been lost through a lack of political and historical agency: a lack of belief in the very idea or possibility of ‘world’ making? What are we to make of art that does not embody this promise? Could art still be ‘alive’ in spite of it?

From Hegel to Danto, from Adorno to Kuspit, to the latest appendage in a long literary lineage apropos of Schwarma (2006) the business of declaring art 'dead' is not a novel enterprise, and is inexorably linked to the death of God and to an increasingly secularised subjectivity. Where Nietzsche once noted that art raises its head when religions relax their hold, taking over many feelings and moods engendered by it, laying them to its heart and becoming itself more deeper, more full of soul, more capable of transmitting exultation and enthusiasm, Kuspit would have cause to surmise: that although for Nietzsche art was the last ditch defense, in postmodernity - the sense of futility in the nihilistic disavowal of immortality becomes explicit - art is less and less an act of faith, it is less and less the ability to think the impossible; ultimately proving nothing more than the preferred way of marking time amongst the intellectual and commercial cognoscenti. (Kuspit, 2004, p.159 -160) (Nietzsche, 1996, p. 81) Eventually leading Kuspit to conclude that art is actually dead: that postmodernism is nothing but the corpse of art; Neo-Expressionism nothing but the corpse of Expressionism, Neo-Abstraction nothing but the corpse of Abstraction, Neo-Conceptualism - the corpse of Conceptualism, and so on, and so forth; all corpses, ingenious, hyperactive..but nonetheless corpses..all 'going through the motions of life in the dance of death.' (Kuspit, 2004, p. 159)

Looking around this years Venice Biennale, from the various pavilions to the Arsenale, one wonders whether contemporary art is at all 'alive' as it dangles there - in bits of string and "things" - or, if it is in fact nothing but the re- 'vamped' corpse of postmodernism. Marx once famously compared capitalism to a vampire: to that which keeps coming back, keeps rising up, even after it is supposed to have died. One hesitates here, before asking the following question, perhaps because of the obvious overshoot that the word 'contemporary' expresses - that it is indeed, if nothing else 'living', and not only that: it is 'living at the same time as something else'. Is art in the contemporary world not also analogous to a vampire: to something not quite 'alive', and not quite dead - something undead? If 'alive' here appeals to the ability of a practice to create its own object, it appeals to art in the contemporary world then - whose fundamental disposition, or mode of being-in-the-world, is that of worldmaking *a priori* - to create not the "thing", for in time that would come: but the names, estimations or probabilities of a world better than this one. But here, all one can find is "things" - possible-things, plausible-things, and sellable-things above all else. Either 'making worlds' as a means of 'making maximum consumability' within target markets, or a cacaphony of concepts from the 'informational aesthete' that all fall short of "re-describing" the very world we live in: a lot of 'look what I know' that fails to "re-describe" the very word 'world' itself. All that these artists have proffered in the way of worldmaking are 'conceptual mummies'; nothing actual has escaped their hands alive.³

For Maurice Blanchot there is a difference between death and dying - la 'mort' and la 'mourir'. If death is that thing which can be affirmed in a tragic act or final breath, dying is conversely a movement of 'absenting' of 'neutral drifting': *flanerie*, and now 'nomadism' *par excellence*. Art in modernity does not know how to die, it has effectively survived its own

³ This an appropriation of a Nietzschean sentiment concerning Philosophers in which he states 'All philosophers have handled for milenia have been conceptual mummies; nothing actual has escaped their hands alive.' One finds an almost identical metaphor in Kazimir Malevich, in an assertion on painters, he says ' In attempting to reproduce the living form, they reproduced its dead image in the picture...Everything was taken alive and pinned quivering to the canvas, like insects in a collection.' See Zupancic's *The Shortest Shadow* pp. 3 -10 for a comparison of both: Zupancic, Alenka (2003) *The Shortest Shadow: Nietzsche's Philosophy Of The Two*, Cambridge, London: The MIT Press.

suicide. It exists in the words of Blanchot, as the ‘incessant imminence whereby life lasts desiring’. (in Holland ed., 1995, p.187) The paradox of this trajectory is correlative to that singular moment of kicking away the chair and hanging oneself, what the suicide feels is not a freedom-toward-death but the rope that rivets them: tying them tighter and tighter to the existence they longed to leave. Art is dying when it loses its ability to think contradiction. It is dying when it no longer has the ability to promise a better world to come. That art would ever want to live without its ameliorative promise - I gravely doubt - and thus one must surmise, that all other instances of death by deliberation are defunct in the face of this one - art’s *dedoublement* - in which ‘economic rationalism’ governs the suicide and rope all at once.

Prior to the Biennale’s opening Birnbaum had suggested a sort of mission statement in an interview, ‘the main idea ‘ he said, ‘is to make visible the moment we are in now’⁴. If he has indeed been successful in achieving this objective, then we must conclude that the moment we are in ‘now’ not only offers us no clear concept of the palpable world, but also no clear concept of a future one. It would seem that this moment ‘now’ does not offer us a shareable world either. This ‘now’ is the ‘now’ of the academy, it is the ‘now’ of the rich, of the ‘smart set’, of the aesthetes.

Walking through Venice from the *Giardini*, along the pier with its yachts and ‘party’ boats - amidst the vulgar trappings of wealth: the prosecco, the grandeur, the pomposity - I felt strangely unhinged upon finding a woman’s gaze on me. A working-class woman in her fifties, her face worn and her eyes tired. I looked back, searching, seeking acknowledgment. A feeling had crept over me hinged somewhere between horror and delight, and then a realisation that yes - I had found *reality*. But her eyes, her soul, were not saying the same: we shared nothing but sun, not even gravity. I struggled with this, struggled to tell her that I wasn’t really that different - that her and me were the same - that all this wealth and debauchery, all the superfluous activity and chat, all the art for art’s sake: just wasn’t me; but her gaze was impenetrable. As was my world from where she sat.

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⁴ <http://online.wsj.com/article/sb124413473497085509.html>

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Images

Krzysztof Wodiczko, 'Guests'. The Polish Pavillion at the 53rd Venice Art Biennale.