

Playing Cards, 1963
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REVIEWS SEPT. 04, 2013

55th Venice Biennale

VENICE,
at various venues

by Marcia E. Vetrocq



Mathias Poledna:
Imitation of Life, 2013,
35mm film, 3 minutes;
in the Austrian pavilion
at the Venice Biennale.

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Twenty years ago, "Cardinal Points of Art" was the theme of the 45th Venice Biennale, and the compass was its symbol. Countering the institution's western and northern bias, the program of curator Achille Bonito Oliva faced south and east, toward Africa, Asia and the emerging states of post-Soviet Europe. Compare the explorer's compass to the logo of the 55th Venice Biennale: a chalklike outline of the human head on a black ground, concentric circles in the brain's place, arrows shooting in and out. The logo is a perfect symbol of solitary inner processing, and it neatly complicates the utopian bombast of this year's theme, "The Encyclopedic Palace." The 150-plus artists chosen by visual arts director Massimiliano Gioni hail from the four points of the compass. But—as if to offset the sprawl, swagger and din of the global art world that has risen since 1993—Gioni has conceived the exhibition as a convocation of individuals: visionaries, misfits, mystics and obsessives. These artists are purveyors and surveyors of the imagination, possessed by creativity as much as they possess it, as likely to encounter horrors on their journeys inward as to conceive a new paradise.

Emblematic works of the last century—one by a *mittel-europäische* intellectual who studied dreams, the other by an Italian-American mechanic who dreamed them—introduce each of the show's venues. In the central pavilion of the Giardini is Carl Jung's *Red Book* (1914–30), an illustrated manuscript that records the pioneering psychologist's own hallucinations. In the Arsenale stands the Biennale's titular work, Marino Auriti's *Encyclopedic Palace of the World* (ca. 1950), an 11-foot-tall model for a 136-story building that would have occupied 16 blocks in Washington, D.C. Gioni seems

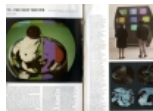
enchanted by Auriti's project for a comprehensive repository of human knowledge. Others might find its colossal classicism and coercive symmetry alarmingly reminiscent of the competition designs for Stalin's Palace of the Soviets. A more congenial if less recherché Arsenale opener might have been the *Book of Genesis Illustrated by R. Crumb* (2009), installed further along. The origination myth is told here in 207 ink drawings that cumulatively pose the question, who is the more feverishly driven creator, Crumb or God?

The show concludes with the 20 identical bronze bars of the late Walter De Maria's *Apollo's Ecstasy* (1990). The title refers to the (un-Dionysian) rapture of reason, the transport triggered by an experience of perfect harmony or measure. De Maria's floor piece materializes the exhibition's chief contention: the line between system and compulsion, discipline and delirium can be difficult to maintain. The 367 palm-size drawings in José Antonio Suárez Londoño's *Franz Kafka, Diarios II 1914-1923* (2000) arose from an inviolable morning ritual that finds Suárez Londoño reading until he is moved to create. The pages of Shinro Ohtake's 66 "Scrapbooks" (1977-2012) are layered with photos, drawings, clippings, tickets and paperback covers—an urgent mash-up that makes Schwitters seem a minimalist. Drawing and painting numerically ordered and repeated patterns on gridded supports is a practice shared by the Swiss telepathic healer Emma Kunz, who didn't set out to make "art," and the Angelena Channa Horwitz, whose marginalization was not for lack of trying to attract mainstream critical and curatorial attention.

A substantial number of the artists have been shown at New York's New Museum (where Gioni is associate director and director of exhibitions) and in projects sponsored by Milan's Fondazione Trussardi (where he is artistic director). One pertinent precedent is the Rosemarie Trockel exhibition (shown in New York in 2012), for which the artist included works by self-taught and little-known artists who have inspired her. Trockel and two of her choices, James Castle and Morton Bartlett, are represented in Venice. Nevertheless, the "Encyclopedic Palace" comes across as neither a readymade Rolodex show nor a Big Theme cooked up for the occasion, but rather an influential curator's channeling of his own romantic leanings. One effect—not bad at all—of Gioni's construction of art as a private reading of the world is to highlight the work shown elsewhere in the Biennale that makes the opposite case for collective action, local engagement and analytical circumspection in art-making.

Gioni's theme is elastic in application, embracing the trancelike intimacy of Ellen Altfest's hyper-detailed paintings as well as the kinky voyeurism of Kohei Yoshiyuki's nocturnal photographs. The thoughtful distribution of works between and within the venues

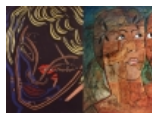
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almost conceals the show's underlying categories: the anonymous creator (Haitian vodou banners, Tantric paintings, pencil and ink *paños* by Chicano prison inmates, Shaker gift drawings), celebrated outsiders, autodidacts and seers (Hilma af Klint, Castle, Guo Fengyi, Kunz, Augustin Lesage, Friedrich Schröder-Sonnenstern, Anna Zemánková) and art stars who harness obsessive-compulsive behavior (John Bock, Ragnar Kjartansson, Paul McCarthy, Bruce Nauman, Ryan Trecartin).

Surrealism is invoked by Dorothea Tanning's paintings, the rock collection of the Surrealist apostate Roger Caillois and René Iché's 1950 "death" mask of the then-living Surrealist evangelist André Breton. Breton receives skeptical treatment from filmmaker Ed Atkins in *The Trick Brain* (2012). As the camera traverses the oceanic collection of art and curiosities in Breton's Paris apartment, a mesmerizing voiceover points out "the swollen relics of the patron saint of anthropocentrism and undergraduates . . . of atrophy and ruin . . . of stubborn hermits, owners of esoteric bookshops, those who can only play by ear . . . of broken conjurers and apocalyptic prophets." Breton is, in short, the patron saint of Gioni's artists, seen through a glass darkly. If Bretonian orthodoxy is challenged, the show readily accommodates adolescent sexuality (Evgenij Kozlov's erotic drawings), the persistence of memory (Andra Ursuta's models of her girlhood home in Romania) and dream imagery (Rossella Biscotti's recordings of the dreams of incarcerated women).



View of Shinichi Sawada's untitled sculptures, 2006-07; in "The Encyclopedic Palace" at the Venice Biennale.

Arguably, Borges rivals Breton as the exhibition's patron saint. Borges's *Book of Imaginary Beings* is the model for Christiana Soulou's bestiary (2013), 23 drawings of fantastic creatures who are cousins to a menagerie, also on view, carved around the turn of the last century by the American woodworker and sideshow entrepreneur Levi Fisher Ames. Jakub Julian Ziolkowski's paintings of monsters (2012-13) likewise claim Borgesian paternity, though Goya is in the family tree, too. And Borges himself admired the symbol-filled lecture drawings on blackboard of Rudolf Steiner—54 are in the central pavilion—whose esoteric diagrams inspired the Biennale logo.

About the only realm of expression that is underplayed in the mix is the overtly political. One exception is Bouchra Khalili's video *Speeches—Chapter 2: Words on Streets* (2013), which documents the experiences of immigrants in Genoa. More comfortably indirect is *Angola to Vietnam* (1989), Christopher Williams's photographs of Harvard's famous glass flower models by Leopold and Rudolf Blaschka. (Their glass sea creatures were in the Trockel show.)

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Williams shot only blooms that represented countries where Amnesty International had documented state-sponsored disappearances.

Angola, it turns out, having survived nearly three decades of ruinous civil war, made its Biennale debut this year and took the Golden Lion for best national pavilion. In the series "Found Not Taken" (2013), Luanda photographer Edson Chagas situates battered found objects in poised, serene compositions. A hymn to peace and its price, the pictures pointedly exclude the human figure. The civil war that still simmers in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Angola's neighbor, is the subject of Richard Mosse's 6-screen projection, *The Enclave* (2013), in the Irish pavilion. Shot last year (prior to a shaky peace accord) with military surveillance film that yields a magenta-rich, sci-fi palette, the work documents the violent play and deadly posturing of armed rebels.

Speaking to the crisis in his own country, Stefanos Tsivopoulos has mounted a display about exchange systems, from cowrie shells to bitcoins, in the Greek pavilion. His three-part *History Zero* (2013), shot in Athens, slowly reveals the transactions that connect protagonists unknown to one another: an African man who scavenges for metal, a jaded artist who hunts for inspiration through the screen of his iPad and an elderly collector who makes—and trashes—origami flowers using her hoard of large-denomination euro notes. The woman may be succumbing to Alzheimer's, but she also embodies the ancient, cultivated yet hopelessly disoriented and unproductive society that Greece has become.

Akram Zaatari's installation in the Lebanese pavilion feels no less timely, if more elegiac. The film *Letter to a Refusing Pilot* (2013) weaves Zaatari's memories of the local "myth" of an Israeli pilot who disobeyed an order to bomb a school (the artist's father was its director) during the 1982 invasion of Lebanon with Zaatari's reflections on his recent discovery that the childhood story is true. Blending new footage, documents, diaries and family photographs, the film pays tribute to conscience while underlining the complexity of individual identity: the refusing Israeli airman was a Lebanese Jew.

In the Slovenian pavilion, Jasmina Cibic examines how the expression of national identity changes with official ideology. *Fruits of Our Land* (2013), one of two videos, is a reenactment of a 1958 meeting at which a commission debated which art should represent Slovenian culture in the socialist republic's new assembly building. Cibic—who may have been the subject of a comparable debate about her own selection for Venice—has brought along a sample of the paintings that decorate the assembly today: anodyne, homely still lifes. Her pavilion re-do incorporates replicas of the assembly's

architectural details, and every surface is covered with wallpaper showing a beetle native to Slovenia that was discovered in the 1930s and named *Anophthalmus hitleri* in honor of that decade's admired political thinker.

How to represent a distressed nation to outsiders—that is the concern of "Welcome to Iraq." The show's title is not ironic: hospitality, resilience, ingenuity and humor are on display. The 11-artist pavilion is integrated into an apartment, where visitors are invited to linger over tea, watch films and read. The apartment owner's art has been replaced by Abdul Raheem Yassir's political cartoons (2003-13) and Bassim Al-Shaker's paintings of peasant life (2010-13), which are as politically encoded as Courbet's. Using corrugated cardboard, WAMI (Yaseen Wami and Hashim Taeeh) made the supplemental, wish-fulfilling furnishings and appliances that are in such short supply back home.

Not every pavilion trades in national specifics. Holland hosts a two-decade survey of Mark Manders's sculpture, an authoritative essay on materials, scale and the fragmented body in art. Ali Kazma's video series "Resistance" (2013), projected in the Turkish pavilion, surveys the means (bodybuilding, surgery, *kinbaku*, ink, genetic engineering, cryonics) by which people around the world alter, ornament and preserve the corporeal self. In the U.S. pavilion, Sarah Sze commits ordinary objects to intricate constructions that radiate, spiral, lunge and spin. The pieces allude to scientific research, nature and the creative process, but seem to be principally about their own successful realization.

A sour note on the subject of national representation is struck by Alfredo Jaar, who nevertheless did not decline to represent Chile this year. Jaar's resin model of the Giardini and its 28 pavilions rises from a water-filled tank every three minutes and then sinks back into the murky depths. Gimmicky and tone-deaf with respect to Venice's real environmental vulnerability, the contraption is a bilious fantasy of a "purge" (Jaar's word) that will eradicate the colonial anachronism of the pavilion system.

Three minutes also marks the running time of Mathias Poledna's Disney-style animation in the Austrian pavilion, shown along with some of the 5,000 hand-drawn renderings made for the woodland fantasy. A brown donkey, sporting a white sailor suit and gloves, busts some Fred Astaire moves while singing the 1930s popular song "I've Got a Feeling You're Fooling." (One line is the suddenly punning "I've got a feeling it's all a frame.") The work is called *Imitation of Life*, which is hardly the purview of cartoons but is the title of Fannie Hurst's 1934 novel (twice filmed by Hollywood) about the light-skinned daughter of a black cook who, in an act of

"fooling," passes for white. Animation, Hollywood, Depression-era melodrama, escapist entertainment and race—but for circumstances of real estate, I'd say the L.A.-based Poledna has created one of the best U.S. pavilions in years.

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