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## INTERNATIONAL NEWS

## Show and Tell

TIM GRIFFIN TALKS WITH CURATOR ROBERT STORR ABOUT THE 52ND VENICE BIENNALE

Oscar Muñoz, *Proyecto de memoria* (Memorial Project), 2004-2005, stills from five color videos, each 7 minutes 30 seconds.

NAMED “THINK WITH THE SENSES, Feel with the Mind: Art in the Present Tense,” the fifty-second Venice Biennale opens on June 10, organized for the first time by an American curator, Robert Storr. *Artforum* editor Tim Griffin spoke with Storr by phone in mid-April, immediately after the names of the artists featured in this iteration of the Biennale were made public.

**TIM GRIFFIN:** So let's start just with your title. Why take up the question of the body versus the mind as an organizing principle right now?

**ROBERT STORR:** The antiaesthetic argument and its permutations—the general impulse to separate critical faculties from sensuality and other kinds of apperception—have been a big problem since the early 1980s. Yet the notion that an art that is intensely sensual is somehow inherently anti-intellectual remains surprisingly prevalent. But for me the idea that one isn't thinking while learning the world through the senses is

absurd. Many of the artists I have consistently had in mind for this show make such a position untenable. Take Bruce Nauman. If you hear Nauman yell at you in a husky voice in a small room, the experience is at once emotional, sensual, and conceptual. If you seriously consider how Gerhard Richter paints, and what he paints, you have to use all your capacities at once. So, too, it's very clear that one can't deal with the work of Felix Gonzalez-Torres without a theoretical or political grounding; disconnecting the physical, perceptual qualities of his candy pieces, or his curtains, or his photos from analysis and critique is literally senseless. That is to say, meaningless.

**TG:** Would you, then, describe this Biennale as a kind of corrective to debates of the '80s and '90s?

**RS:** The show constitutes a proposition about art. By focusing on the conceptual component of what we sense, and on the sensual component of what we think, I'm

suggesting that these categories are indissolubly linked. In this connection I should add, though, that the whole beauty debate of the '90s—the reaction against theory-related work that was presented as the advocacy of beauty—was a very conservative enterprise. For one thing, the sensual world is not necessarily a beautiful world, and pleasuring the public has never been a requirement of modern art. Sensing doesn't always mean enjoying, and no doubt some of the work in this Biennale will displease people. In retrospect, of course, these problems may seem like intramural art-world squabbles, and so for the general viewer who is not necessarily involved in such arguments, I just hope the show proposes a way of approaching art that invites them to engage it on all its complex levels.

**TG:** You've said elsewhere that you didn't look to create art-historical touchstones for this show. And yet the artists you mention—Nauman, Richter—are clearly

of some historical stature and set a tone. **RS:** I've been asked a lot about why so many older artists are in the show. My first answer is that they are not included for valedictory reasons but because they represent attitudes that are relevant today, and that the history behind those attitudes is part of what's important; indeed, we seem to have an extraordinary number of older artists who still set the pace for much of what goes on in the world. They aren't just “old masters.” **TG:** I assume this pertains to your subtitle, “Art in the Present Tense.” You've made much of the term *present* in this regard, as opposed to *zeitgeist*.

**RS:** I'm suspicious of the latter term, whereas “present” is a more open concept, less focused on catching the next wave. The present allows for any number of different things going on at the same time. I've also included some older works by artists of various ages that are for different reasons newly resonant today. In any case, I wanted to make sure that the artists in the show were, so to speak, active in one another's time and space, or were the creators of one another's present. I've also included a number of midcareer artists, which in today's art scene is the hardest thing in the art world to be: You can be a grand old man or woman or you can be a hotshot kid, but a midcareer artist? To say nothing of a midcareer female artist. So Nalini Malani is here, as are Jenny Holzer, Susan Rothenberg, and Elizabeth Murray. And

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the last two are rarely shown in Europe, no matter how familiar they are to Americans. **TG:** To take a step back, what precisely do you mean when you mention histories behind attitudes?

**RS:** In that regard, I'm talking about artists who have their own histories, of course, but also ones who at the same time offer specific insight into what is



Yto Barrada, *The Smugglers (Steps 1 to 9)*, 2006, nine color photographs, 57 1/2 x 44" overall.

going on in the world right now. Take León Ferrari, an artist in his eighties from Argentina, who made politically activist art during his country's dictatorship. His work is interesting to think of in light of another artist in the show, Oscar Muñoz, from Colombia. For the Biennale, Muñoz has made videos of himself painting faces on stone with water, but the faces he paints evaporate almost as rapidly as he does them. So by the time he has finished one it is already disappearing—an oblique but clear reference to the casualties of his country's drug wars; the work also speaks to disappearances throughout Latin America. As it

happens, Ferrari's son was among those disappeared by the generals in Argentina, so what is the past for him is in a sense the present for Muñoz.

**TG:** Did one artist lead you to the next in your research, or did you begin with a core group?

**RS:** I started with a nucleus of about a dozen people. Gonzalez-Torres was one of them, because he has been enormously important to my thinking. Now, when he was announced as the American representative, I hadn't approached anybody yet about his inclusion in the Arsenale. So I sat on it for a while, before realizing that this actually was one way

to establish a clear link to the pavilions—which is always an issue in Venice. In fact, there are two other instances of this doubling in the Giardini, between the national pavilions and the international show I am responsible for: Guillermo Kuitca, from Argentina; and Sophie Calle from France, whom I had had on my mental list from the start, since she often uses Conceptual and literary models to elegantly mask what are, in fact, fairly raw emotional situations. Her work here is no exception. It focuses on a video of her dying mother. Initially she was really unsure about doing this piece for the Biennale but finally decided she would. Mortality and time factor into the show in many ways. Yang Zhenzhong is another artist, who will have a large video project where people—young, old, sick, healthy—simply say a sentence, "I will die."

**TG:** And when it comes to establishing such themes, how are you envisioning the actual interaction of works in the galleries?

**RS:** That's very hard to determine. I've never done a show in a space that is this engulfing, or where I've learned specific things about the space this late in the process—for example, that we can't install a work somewhere because the doors are too small to move the work in, or the wiring can't sustain the load. But I can adapt, because the show is not an argument, and the works are not meant to articulate a linear chain of ideas—that is, compose a theoretical *parcours* as is sometime done. I don't want installations to be too insistently topical. I want you to notice something—a theme, an image, a way of working—think about it, go on to something else, and then bump into a related piece a little while later. The show is meant to present a series of correspondences and correlations, of echoes.

**TG:** An example?

**RS:** A Yang Fudong video sequence will be spaced out in five distinct viewing spaces running the full length of the Arsenale. You will come upon one, see the whole thing, and then walk some distance before you encounter the next one. I'm sure his narrative will occasionally resonate with other things in adjacent spaces, but on its own it will be like reading a book over the course of a day: You listen to the radio, you cook in the kitchen, and you pick up your book again. You'll find this kind of refrain structure as well in a decade-old work by

an Algerian artist named Adel Abdessemed, who has made a sign that says EXILE instead of EXIT. This will appear in different places throughout the show.

**TG:** Actually, to segue from the question of exiles to that of nationality in your own selection process, you've said before that you didn't want to pay attention to countries too closely—"bean counting," you've called it. And yet you are the first American curator of the Biennale, which perhaps makes the matter a risky one to set aside.

**RS:** Well, there are a relatively large number of Americans, although that's not where I started. In fact, I was self-consciously trying not to have too many Americans in the show. At the same time, I think it's worth complicating the idea. Louise Bourgeois resides in America, as do Luca Buvoli, Angelo Filomeno, and Emily Jacir. The last will present a project she's made about a Palestinian intellectual who translated the Arabian Nights into Italian, but who was involved in the massacre of Israeli athletes at the Munich Olympics and for that was assassinated by the Mossad. Is Jacir an American or a Palestinian artist, and should either identification really determine how the work is read or judged?

**TG:** Looking at some of your selections, I have wondered if you've given less attention to artists' nationalities than to borders—or more accurately, to questions of immigration and emigration.

**RS:** Well, Yto Barrada's photographs deal with people at the margins of Moroccan society, and Eyoung Nguangé and Faustia Titi's comic *An Eternity in Tangier* describes the fate of West Africans trying to reach Europe. Meanwhile, Rosemary Laing has made a series of photographs on camps in Australia where boat people coming from Indonesia, hoping to find a new home, are interred by the Australian government—with no hope ever of getting out unless they agree to deportation. And Francis Alÿs is trying to build a bridge of boats across the Mediterranean to engage with the issue of migration between the continents.

**TG:** You've attempted to do that yourself with a pavilion for art from Africa, around which there's been some debate. How did the pavilion come about?

**RS:** In the past there have been projects from Africa, with the most recent ones mounted by the Forum for African Art



Yang Fudong, *Intellectuals in a Bamboo Forest, Part III*, 2006, still from a black-and-white film in 35 mm transferred to video, 53 minutes.

in Venice, but all have been presented in outlying spaces and were difficult for many people to find. I thought it was time to bring exhibitions of this kind—which had, so to speak, been outside the city walls of the Biennale—inside them. I tried to make this possible for India and Turkey as well, though in the end India did not work out. In part, my thinking was influenced by a heated discussion at the Museum of Modern Art during Okwui Enwezor's "Short Century" at P.S. 1, where several speakers made it clear that most curators and critics of African art have virtually no opportunities in the West. With this in mind, I decided that rather than having the Biennale designate a curator, we needed to have an open call for proposals that would be judged by a jury of knowledgeable and reputable individuals in the field, and so I asked Meskerem Assegued, Ekow Eshun, Lyle Ashton Harris, Kellie Jones, and Bisi Silva to assume that responsibility. They settled on a proposal by Fernando Alvim and Simon Njami that features the Sindika Dokolo Collection of Contemporary Art. It just seemed the best proposal to them. And at the jury's recommendation, the curators are working on creating an educational component that will open the doors to still more art professionals from Africa.

TG: And what about the pavilions for India and Turkey?

RS: Given the amount of creative ferment, both are parts of the world that should be represented regardless; if you want to know about contemporary art, you have to know what's going on in these places. As I said, India couldn't happen, but Turkey is in, with the artists Aydan Murtezaoglu and Hüseyin Bahrj Alptekin, commissioned by Vasif Kortun, who curated the last Istanbul Biennial. And this inclusion is important, I think, not only since the art scene is active there but because of the country's candidacy for the European Union, which has produced cultural and national tensions both in Europe and in Turkey. Until now, the only other Islamic country with space in the core of the Biennale has been Egypt. If the Biennale is going to be

thought of as a genuinely international exhibition, there should be more.

TG: After considering these projects commissioned by other curators, I'm tempted again to bring our conversation back to you and, more particularly, to your long personal history with a number of the artists here, whether that's Nauman, Robert Ryman, Murray, or Richter. I don't know if it's an irrelevant question given that it's new work they're putting forward. . . .

RS: In most cases, they're doing new work. For instance, Richter has made one of his few big series of works in recent years, and dedicated it to John Cage. But I think that the idea of the show as being composed of the "usual suspects" in terms of my previous ones is pretty exaggerated, given that of the ninety-plus people involved only a dozen or so have been featured in my earlier exhibitions. I bet that most people would be hard-pressed to identify a far greater number of the names of those included unless they had spent the time traveling that I have. Anyway, I've selected these "familiar" artists because they have meant a great deal to me, and because they've had a major impact on the way I think. So if I'm going to deal with certain issues, isn't it natural that they come to mind? I mean, when I invited Sol LeWitt and told

him the title of the show, he was very pleased; he said it voiced the way he thought about art in part because it precluded the kinds of bifurcation or compartmentalization of practices and attitudes he felt some people had imposed on Conceptual art despite the things he had said. After all, one of the first of his *Sentences on Conceptual Art* states that Conceptual artists are mystics who leap to conclusions that formalists could not reach by rational means.

TG: I'm curious to hear you say more about Richter's returning to Cage.

RS: Originally, there was going to be a component in the show specifically devoted to Cage's influence on visual art, but for a host of reasons it wasn't possible to do. There's always a lot of talk about Marcel Duchamp, but actually Cage had as much impact on postwar art and, in some ways, maybe more. And since one of the things I had wanted to do was focus on an American verb—that is, an approach to thinking and making—rather than highlight American nouns, or styles, Cage's effect on multiple media, in multiple registers, absolutely everywhere seemed the right touchstone. His importance has been enormous, and the shift away from expressionist modes toward concept-driven ones owes as much to him as to anyone, and yet at the same time his whole emphasis was on direct experience of phenomena.

TG: This is a bit of a leap, but with your emphasis on rereading, on correspondences, and on experience, perhaps you're seeking to establish a different relationship between art and language at this moment.

RS: I'm not sure about that. Although the question does make me think of the marvelous piece in the show by Mario Garcia Torres about Conceptual art as practiced at Nova Scotia College of Arts and Crafts in the '70s. The example he deals with consists of a class remembering a shared project and agreeing never to reveal it to anyone else or to write it down, so the project would exist only in the minds of the people participating in the group. But, of course, memory betrays them.

TG: And how does that work appear here?

RS: It's essentially composed of slide projections of a series of scenes in and around Halifax with text explaining the story and Torres's failed attempt to crack the secret of the project. It's a wonderful

kind of young artist's reimagining of a previous era and a previous avant-garde.

But to return to your point about language, I just think that often we labor under untenable generalizations about art. For me, showing comes before telling. There is this wonderful quote from Wittgenstein, where he basically says that the only verbal declarations that can be considered truthful are those which are subject to verification. Nevertheless, he continues, there are certain meaningful things obviously excluded from that category since ethics, religion, and aesthetics are not verifiable—but you can *show* them. Nauman is a very good example of this. His work is full of paradoxes, and frequently they are specifically about ethics and aesthetics—that is to say, about things that are not philosophical in the positivist sense at all. He creates spaces, images, and objects—including linguistic objects—that are deliberately enigmatic and contradictory, which make no sense logically but do make sense when the

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senses take over. Nauman's text pieces may be spoken, yet much of the time what you're paying attention to is not the sentence per se, but the sound of his voice, its affect and intensity and where you're standing in relation to the source of that sound.

TG: You did say that you don't want to make an "argument."

RS: Correspondences are what interest me as a way of conveying experience to other people. I am using the word somewhat the way Baudelaire did, to signify associative ways of understanding, ways that have to do with slippages and allusions as opposed to argument—although, being a true Baudelairean, I also believe as he did that art criticism (and curatorship and frequently art itself) must not only be poetic, but also passionate, partial, and political. It's a terrible cliché to say one wants art to be "thought provoking," but good art is—only bad art is not. □

*The 52nd Venice Biennale runs from June 10–Nov. 21. TIM GRIFFIN IS EDITOR OF ARTFORUM.*